

***Sula*: The Formation and Reconstruction of Black Women's Identity**

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Abstract: Morrison has portrayed a series of strong and courageous black women full of vitality with her profound theme and superb artistry, such as *Sula*, which is an early work of hers. Under the social environment full of race, gender, and class discrimination, they pursue or choose their own ideal identities and lifestyles, and reap different destinies and endings. This paper analyzes the identity problem of black women in *Sula* through the black women's perspective in terms of the background, storyline, main characters, and behaviors of the novel, aiming to reveal the plight and oppression suffered by the black women, as well as praising their pursuit of freedom and equality and their unyielding spirit. Thus, it helps readers to re-understand this work from a new perspective.

Keywords: Racial discrimination; Black women; Feminism; Identity reconstruction

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1. Introduction

Morrison holds an irreplaceable position in American literature as the first and only Black female Nobel laureate. Her novels expose the harms of racial oppression, sexism, and class exploitation, focusing especially on Black women's tragic fate. She strives to reconstruct their distorted identities, preserve Black traditions, and affirm her pride in Black culture and womanhood.

Published in 1973, *Sula* breaks stereotypes of Black women in Western literature. Centered on the rebellious, self-seeking protagonist Sula, and set amid the civil rights and women's liberation movements, the novel reflects Black women's lives, addressing racism, sexism, relationships, and sisterhood.

A landmark work exploring friendship, betrayal, identity, community, race, and gender, *Sula* subverts traditional portrayals and pioneers Black women's literature. Despite early controversy, it earned high acclaim as a 20th-century masterpiece, with Morrison's distinctive narrative and profound insight creating a powerful epic of Black women.

2. Toni Morrison's thought of black feminism

Black feminism originates from Western feminism, which emphasizes the importance of overcoming oppression but ignores the discrimination against black people, especially Black women. Through her works, Morrison is committed to describing the lives of black women, and she is most concerned with the tragic fate of African American women.

Morrison argues that Black women occupy a dual “other” position in American society, suffering racial oppression from white dominance and gender subjugation within the Black community, making their survival arduous. She stresses their need to pursue self-identity by rejecting white cultural values and restrictive internal ideologies.

She champions sisterhood among Black women as a vital force against oppression, exemplified by Heed and Christine's reconciliation in *Love*, which embodies unity and mutual support. Morrison also views preserving Black cultural traditions—such as music, oral history, folktales, and myths—as essential for resistance and self-preservation, enabling Black women to voice their identities through writing.

While centering Black women's struggles, she explores harmonious Black gender relations, urging Black men and women to unite against racism rather than internalize oppression, as reflected in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison further examines the profound psychological trauma of slavery, racism, and sexism on Black women.

3. The challenges faced by black women

In *Sula*, Black women are both racially discriminated against and oppressed by a patriarchal society. Traditional attitudes view them as subordinate to men, and marriage becomes a bondage for them. Although Sula's resistance is considered a rebellion, it provides a new direction for black women's self-liberation.

3.1. Racial and gender oppression

The story takes place in the early 20th century in the United States. Under the pressure of white cultural hegemony, Black people tend to adapt themselves to white norms and values. As is observed by Strinati, “Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically by means of the institutions of civil society, which is characterized by the mature liberal democracy. These institutions include education, family, church, mass media, popular culture and so on”^[1]. On the one hand, racial discrimination made them regarded as inferior beings; on the other hand, gender discrimination further limited their development opportunities.

The novel also portrays a great deal of gender inequality and oppression in the family, marriage, and society. Black women are often subordinate in marriage, their economic and emotional needs are ignored, and they even become targets of male violence. Under long-term oppression, many Black women gradually lose their self-knowledge and even become subordinate to the male-dominated society.

In Western philosophical discourse, women are constructed as inferior to men and occupy a marginalized social position. As Kate Millet states, “Fostered by cultural media, the female image, high and low, then and now, is the marginal and degrading existence, and one outside the human condition—which is defined as the prerogative of man, the male”^[2]. In this novel, even though women in the black community play important roles in the family, the oppression of patriarchy is still present. For example, although Eva, as the female head of the family, supports the family financially, she still clings to the traditional concepts of the black community. She teaches women to love their husbands and favors men when it comes to family matters. This concept is a reflection of a patriarchal society at the family level. The constraints of these traditional roles make it difficult for women to realize their

self-worth, and even gradually “self-alienate” mentally, becoming “the weakest of the weak.”

As a typical character who rebels against the patriarchal society, Sula’s behavior is not in line with the traditional concepts of the community. She rejects marriage and pursues independence of body and mind. But she is regarded as a “heretic” by the community. Her behavior is not only misunderstood and isolated by the community but also labeled as “evil”, which reflects the patriarchal society’s suppression of women’s sense of independence.

3.2. Psychological and emotional trauma

The pain inflicted upon women by society is primarily manifested in social marginalization, betrayal, and estrangement within interpersonal relationships.

In this social context, the survival of Black women is epitomized by the “underclass” community. Black women in the community are deprived of opportunities for economic independence, and their lives are confined to the narrow space of the family and the community. Most of them work in low-paying, low-skilled jobs, such as domestic service and factory labor. Moreover, Black women also face cultural marginalization. The dominant culture in white society views Black women as “other” and reinforces this stereotype through the media, education, and other channels. Black women’s cultural identity is ignored, and their voices are silenced.

The emotional wounds of interpersonal relationships primarily revolve around the story of Sula and Nel.

As a Black woman who pursues freedom and independence, Sula’s behavior not only challenges traditional morality and social norms but also triggers isolation and betrayal from those around her. Instead of assuming the traditional roles of compliant daughter, dutiful wife, and affectionate mother, she chooses to be rebellious. But Nel is gentle and traditional. Under the guidance of the traditional mother, Nel becomes one of “some eight or ten girls”^[3].

Sula has an affair with Nel’s husband, an act that is not only a betrayal of her marriage but also a serious shock to her friendship. The incident leads to a complete breakdown of the friendship, with Nel feeling angry and disappointed at Sula’s betrayal, and Sula being viewed by the community as “sin incarnate.”

Morrison reveals the contradiction between tradition and modernity in the black community through Sula’s story. Sula’s isolation and death are not only a personal tragedy, but also a reflection of the whole community’s powerlessness in the face of change.

3.3. Loss of identity

Throughout the novel, traditional gender concepts bind black women, profoundly affecting their identity and life choices. Under patriarchal culture, a woman’s proper place is undoubtedly within the family, where her most important roles are those of an obedient wife and a caring mother, and domestic duties become her primary responsibility. As Simone de Beauvoir has ever emphasized, “woman has always been man’s dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality”^[4]. Over time, women gradually lost their identity.

Nel is a representative of the traditional Black woman who longs for stability and recognition through marriage. Throughout her marriage, Nel devotes herself entirely to serving Jude and upholding his masculine ego, thereby suppressing her own desires and forfeiting her sense of self.

However, life after marriage does not turn out as she had hoped, and Jude’s departure leaves her completely lost. Nel loses her independence in the marriage; her value is limited to her family role.

Traditional notions of gender and the constraints of family roles make Black women emotionally dependent

on men, which in turn leads to a loss of self-identity and alienation from the community.

4. The path to liberation and identity formation

In *Sula*, the path to freedom and identity formation for Black women is full of challenges and exploration. Sisterhood and community support are important sources of strength that can help them resist oppression while avoiding the loss of cultural roots through excessive isolation.

4.1. Female bonding and solidarity

In the novel, Sula and Nel's friendship not only serves as an important support for them as they grow up, but also has a positive impact on Black women.

Sula's rebellious spirit and quest for freedom, and Nel's desire to live a traditional life, are reflected in this friendship. Despite their personalities and choices being very different, their friendship allows them to understand and support each other. After Sula's death, Nel finally realizes that Sula's spirit of defiance and her quest for freedom are a profound resistance to patriarchal society.

Through this friendship, Morrison shows how Black women can find a balance between tradition and modernity, the individual and the collective. Although the two are eventually estranged by their divergent life choices, their friendship still provides an example of self-identity for Black women.

4.2. Reconstruction of identity through self-pursuit

Black women in the United States have lost themselves under sexism and racial oppression, and have learned to examine their own female identity and status.

From an early age, Sula inherits a consciousness of her identity as a Black, non-normative woman from her mother and grandmother. This awareness awakens her spirit of resistance, and she strives to transform her predicament through deliberate acts of subversion.

In her quest for love, Sula rejects the world's stereotypical definitions of romantic relationships. She engages in relationships with different men, not seeking a marriage destination, but to feel loved and to be loved in each emotional experience, and to explore her own needs in the emotional world. In her career pursuits, Sula also shows remarkable courage. Although she is a black woman and comes from a poor neighborhood, she does not limit herself.

Through this series of self-pursuits, Sula gradually gets rid of all the constraints of the past and finds her true self. She is no longer the Black woman defined by the community's traditional concepts and social prejudices but becomes an independent, confident, and brave individual.

In Sula's company, Nel explores her own freedom and identity, experiencing the thrill of being a fully realized individual during her adolescence. She is thus able to embrace a life beyond the constraints of traditional values and social norms. After experiencing a failed marriage and broken friendship, Nel embarks on a difficult and profound journey of self-seeking.

Nel first set her sights on learning new skills. She used her spare time to attend various training courses, from basic computer operations to practical vocational skills. In addition to upgrading her skills, Nel is also actively involved in community activities. She participates in volunteer activities organized by the community to help poor and disadvantaged families in the community.

With the deepening of self-pursuits, Nel completely get rid of her past self that depended on others and lost herself. She becomes an independent, self-confident, and valuable woman.

4.3. Redefinition of black womanhood

The life experiences of Sula and Nel have completely subverted the image of Black women in the traditional concept, giving a new connotation and value to the identity of Black women, and becoming a benchmark for Black women's advancement in the new era.

Mary Helen Washington expresses her view of the relationship between self-identity and community: Selfhood is not defined negatively as separateness from others, nor is it defined narrowly by the individual dyad—the child and its mother—but on the large scale as the ability to recognize one's continuity with the larger community^[5]. The stories of Sula and Nel have been widely disseminated and have caused strong reactions among the black female community. Their experiences have inspired more Black women to bravely break through the traditional constraints and pursue their dreams.

“Women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression... We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood”^[6]. Sula and Nel redefined the identity of Black women, showing the world that Black women are no longer passive victims, but active creators, who can write their own wonderful lives by their own strength.

4.4. The role of cultural and personal awakening

The awakening of Black women's consciousness in the black community depicted in *Sula* is a gradual and powerful process that profoundly changes Black women's perceptions of themselves and the world around them and pushes them to fight relentlessly for equality and freedom.

At first, this awakening took place in small ways. Women in the community began to question the traditional gender division of labor. Over time, Black women's awakening developed further. They begin to have a clearer understanding of the patriarchal structures of oppression within their communities.

In their pursuit of self, they have found their place and value in the community. At the same time, they contributed to the prosperity and development of the community through their efforts. This integration not only allows them to find a sense of belonging but also brings new vitality and hope to the community, making it an important example of Black women's quest for liberation and identity formation.

5. Conclusion

This thesis is centered on the lens of black feminism, which is used to analyze the formation and reconstruction of black women's identity. From the experiences of black female characters such as Sula and Nel, the challenges faced by black women can be seen.

Being influenced by Sula, the Black women in the community have all awakened to their self-awareness. They strive to pursue their own goals and ultimately embark on the journey of rebuilding their identities.

Through this thesis, the author has developed a more in-depth understanding of the author Toni Morrison as an author, her great works, and the significant influence of her black feminist thought. It also helps readers gain a deeper insight into the tragic fate of black women. Female characters in this novel are not only a mirror of history but also a manifestation and demonstration of the great power of black women.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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