
Friendship and Identity: A Study of Relationship between Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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ABSTRACT: *Toni Morrison's Sula is a study of racism, segregation, feminism, identity seeking, protest and reaction. A novel primarily focusing on female characters as the protagonist, it is also a story of friendship between two characters from unprivileged backgrounds starting from the formative years of their lives. Nel and Sula are quite the opposite in characteristics but share mutual affection and dependency in a racist, patriarchal society where they are neither 'white nor male'. They take care of each other and help each other in their own ways, and thus their friendship becomes the source of their empowerment and marks their presence in the world in the early stages of their lives. They get separated because of their contrasting ideologies, lifestyles and interests, but they are indeed the 'other self' of each other and complement each other to create their own identities.*

KEY WORDS: friendship. identity, marriage. race, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

The Novel *Sula* (1973) mainly revolves around black female characters. The novel starts with the background information about the formation of the setting, a place named "Bottom" in Ohio, which is primarily a black community and deals with some events in the lives of the central characters and the community from 1919 to 1965. The Peace family has three principal female characters: Sula, the protagonist of the novel; Eva, the grandmother of Sula who was deserted in her youth by her husband with three little children and allegedly cut off her leg under a train to attain insurance money by which she has built a house and provided for the family; Hannah, the mother of Sula who had a reputation for having numbers of affairs but not for getting emotionally attached in any of those affairs. On the other hand, in the Wright family, Helene Wright is a conservative and controlling person whose mother was a prostitute, but she had rare contact with her as her grandmother brought her up. She is very strict about the upbringing of her daughter Nel in her early years. Though they have contrasting upbringings in female-dominated families, Nel Wright and Sula Peace form their friendship at the beginning of their adolescence. As both are black and female, they feel that they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and in a backward society like "Bottom" in the first half of the 20th century, opportunities and freedom are limited for them. In this paper, I will explore the friendship between Sula and Nel, their antithetical characteristics and mutual dependencies. This paper will examine the friendship as a means of creating and recreating identity against the backdrop of society.

The Beginning of the Friendship: Teenage Years

The friendship between Nel and Sula is formed not because they have similarities but because their opposite character traits complement each other. During their teenage, Nel is more consistent in her behaviour, whereas Sula fluctuates. Nel provides solidity, while Sula is a carefree person who quickly shifts through different emotions. But regardless of their differences, they become comfort zones for each other: "Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality" (Morrison 53).

One of the many reasons for the development of Nel and Sula's friendship is the lack of the presence of a compassionate maternal figure in their lives. Both of them are distant from their mothers. While Nel's mother makes her life difficult with tight parenting, the relationship between Hannah and Sula is never easy. Sula once overhears Hannah saying, "I do love Sula but I don't like her" (57). They are important to each other for filling up this vacuum in their adolescence. At the beginning of adolescence, people look for mental support and in the case of Nel and Sula, "They found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (52). Their friendship grows naturally and without much thought, and they are always available for each other's protection. When four Irish newcomers block them at a quiet road, Sula fights back with her knife, cutting the top of her own finger and keeps saying, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (54-55). Sula and Nel have started to discover their world together, and "Joined in mutual admiration they watched each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement" (55). They observe things minutely:

"from one-eyed chickens high-stepping in their penned yards to Mr. Buckland Reed's gold teeth, from the sound of sheets flapping in the wind to the labels on Tar Baby's wine bottles. And they had no priorities. They could be distracted from watching a fight with mean razors by the glorious smell of hot tar being poured by roadmen two hundred yards away" (55).

Puberty brings changes in body and mind, makes a person confused and raises a lot of questions about identity. It makes one aware of his/her sexual orientation and introduces a person to new territories about which he/she was previously unknown. At the age of twelve, Sula and Nel begin to explore the opposite sex, and they embark on this new adventure together. Morrison says, The new theme they were now discovering was men.... And the boys. The beautiful, beautiful boys who dotted the landscape like jewels, split the air with their shouts in the field, and thickened the river with their shining wet backs..... It was in that summer, the summer of their twelfth year, the summer of the beautiful black boys, that they became skittish, frightened and bold--all at the same time. (56)

Chicken Little's death is a crucial turning point in Nel and Sula's lives. The kid slips from Sula's hand and falls into the river. This incident has a deeper impact on the choices of lifestyles for both of them in future though in opposite directions. Sula starts travelling and spends her 20s in different towns while Nel chooses a passive domestic life. Right after the accident, when Sula bursts into tears, it is Nel who is there to comfort her but Nel is not willing to share the guilt by asserting that she has played no part in the accident and is a mere onlooker. While Sula is guilt-ridden and cries,

Nel tries to convince herself that “she had done nothing” (65). In the funeral, they maintain distance and do not look at each other or talk. This incident marks the beginning of the distance between them which becomes severe because of some other events in years to come.

Sula’s Return and the Breach in the Friendship:

The reunion between Nel and Sula after Sula’s return to Medallion is amicable at the beginning. In their conversation, Sula expresses her suspicion about Eva’s motive and wants to get rid of her from the house. She, as usual, panics at taking a big decision and turns to Nel, who has been there for her to help with any issue. Sula offers to hand over all her checks in Nel’s name as she thinks Nel is better in monetary affairs. Nel rejects the offer by saying that people would think she is plotting to embezzle Peace women’s money. This discussion clearly shows the level of trust and comfort that is shared between these two ladies. Sula turns to Nel for a tricky decision, and she is ready to make Nel the nominee for all her money though they haven’t had any contact for ten years. But everything is changed later when Nel finds out that Sula and Jude, Nel’s husband had sex. Jude deserts Nel and their children, and she is left heartbroken at the betrayal of the two of her dearest people. She feels like she is in an endless circle of sorrows which doesn’t recede:

Hunched down in the small bright room Nel waited. Waited for the oldest cry. A scream not for others, not in sympathy for a burnt child, or a dead father, but a deeply personal cry for one's own pain. A loud, strident: "Why me?" She waited. The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl. But it did not come. (Morrison 108)

Sula fails to understand the concept of possessiveness and can’t think that sleeping with Jude can cause trouble in her friendship with Nel. As she is from a family where women rules, and marriage does not play much significant part, she does not understand the significance of a husband in a married woman’s life. She always thought she and Nel have the special bond which transcends the social code and structure. But this is not the case, and her self-realisation reveals, “She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing” (109).

The main cause of the damage to the friendship is their “conflicting modes of moral perception” (Gillespie & Kubitschek 84). Sula learns to take care of herself and takes responsibility for her own actions in ten years and thus becomes confident about her own activities. In these years, Nel learns to take care of her husband and her children and becomes a little oblivious about herself. She identifies herself with her family, and thus it comes to her as a shock. When Jude deserts her, she feels insecure and loses her confidence because in these years, she forgets to express herself. There is limited scope for women in Bottom to express their individualism, and the existence of self is dependent on its relation to the entire community.

Seeking Identity in the Society

In this novel, Morrison essentially does not try to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong. Sula is a carefree force but a 'Pariah' in society who breaks the moral codes of the society. She sleeps with a variety of men, including white men, which is a terrible crime, according to the community. While Sula sleeps even with the husband of her best friend, Nel sticks to her duty which society has determined her to do as a housewife. But in the novel, no one is portrayed as a hero or a villain, or a good or a bad character; rather their contrasting characters provide different perspectives of looking into life. Nel asks "I was good to you, Sula, why don't that matter?" (Morrison 144). But Sula replies "About who was good, How you know it was you?" ... "I mean maybe it wasn't you, Maybe it was me" (146). While Nel accuses Sula of taking away Jude, Sula replies- "What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him" (145). So, they view one incident from different perspectives, and it does not necessarily mean one is good and another is bad. It is a kind of opposite to what W.E.B DuBois argues in the essay titled "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), which was followed by many later black writers. DuBois urges black writers to portray the best side of the black community rather than the negative side to avoid stereotyping of the whole community by the others.

Sula's status as a 'Pariah' and her reputation of being an evil one indirectly help the society to keep its shape. Everyone is scared of this particular woman and starts to look after his/her dear ones with more attention which keeps the society in harmony until her death. Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (Morrison 117)

Society views Sula's sleeping with white men as a crime because "this is a sin against the belief that black men "own" black women, that a women's sexuality is not her own to control" (Reddy 39). Though Hannah and Eva also break some of the society's role, neither of them challenges societal structure in the way Sula does. Sula wants to create her own identity rather than being prone to male authority. She asserts, "I don't want to make somebody else, I want to make myself" (92). Nel abides by the gender role set by society, contrasting Sula, who is a radical and wants to lead her life in her own terms. While Nel says, "You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't", Sula replies, "Then I really would act like what you call a man. Everyman I ever know left his children" (142-143).

Sula does not want to play the submissive role of 'a coloured woman' rather wants to experience her life. She says, "I know what every coloured woman in this country is doing ... "Dying just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those red woods. I sure did live in this world" (143). Sula is somehow trapped at the wrong place at the wrong time. In a community like Bottom, she does not have many options to express herself, but she is also not ready to accept her role as a woman of colour. Nel compromises her identity and shapes herself in the role of a wife, mother and caregiver for which Sula is not ready.

Marriage and Sexuality

Marriage is also a reason for the difference in thought between these two characters. In the earlier days, Nel is also conscious of her own identity. Viewing her own image in the mirror, she claims, "I'm not her daughter, I'm not Nel, I'm me" (26). After the marriage to Jude, Nel switches to her wifely role and can't see her identity separated from Jude. She tries to build her character according to society's definition of a good woman. Sula's family doesn't have a permanent presence of an influential male member, and the women are by no means a single man's woman. Her mother, "Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (42). In the case of Nel, though her grandmother was a sex worker, she had a rigid upbringing in the hand of her mother Helene, who herself was raised religiously by her own grandmother, Cecile. These differences in family background and upbringing are also responsible for their later choices in lifestyle.

Nel's sexuality is mainly for the gratification of her husband Jude rather than her own self. When she loses Jude, she feels "her thighs are empty and dead and it was Sula who had taken the life away from them" (110). In the case of Sula, all the satisfaction is for her own self and "unlike Nel's, it is not attached to anything outside herself" (Mcdowell, 83). Sex for Sula is "the creation of a special kind of Joy" (Morrison 123). Sex is not a surrender to someone or satisfying other, rather, it is for fulfilling herself. As it is quoted in the novel, "And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power" (123).

Sula's sexuality is sensory and a means of exploring self and reaching self-intimacy rather than being available for someone else. "...the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" (123). Nel is afraid of change as she says, "Hell ain't things lasting forever, Hell is change" (108). She goes to very little change in terms of character traits or discovery about herself, whereas for Sula, "The real hell of Hell is that it is forever" (107).

Shared Identity Between Nel and Sula

Nel has distanced herself from Chicken Little's unfortunate death for the next forty-two years until she visits old Eva Peace in her hospital in 1965. Eva asks:

"Tell me how you killed that little boy." (168)

In the course of the conversation, Nel says:

"I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula." (168)

Eva replies: "You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched." (168)

The conversation makes Nel realise that she did not only see the child drowning but rather watched it eagerly. She did not feel bad during the incident instead had a good feeling. Thus, she should be equally guilty as Sula for the incident. Her inner consciousness tells us:

...What did old Eva mean by you watched? How could she help seeing it? She was right there. But Eva didn't say see, she said watch. "I did not watch it. I just saw it." But it was there anyway, as it had always been, the old feeling and the old question. The good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped. She hadn't wondered about that in years. "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall? (168)

Her inner reaction to Chicken Little's death can be compared to Sula's response when her mother, Hannah was burning. According to Eva, "...Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested." (78)

Alison R. Coleman tries to discuss the novel from three approaches: the black feminist lesbian theory, an African aesthetic analysis, and a psychoanalytic analysis. She also wants to see these two characters as "halves of a single personality" (145). She thinks Nel and Sula as 'superego' and 'id' respectively and together they create the 'ego':

I believe that Sula and Nel complement or rather complete each other. I prefer to view them as two halves of a personality that combine to form a whole psyche. In other words, Sula and Nel represent two parts of a psychological self: individually or apart, Nel is the super-ego or the conscience, and Sula is the id or the pleasure and unconscious desire of the psyche; together they form the ego, the balance between the superego and the id, and what is usually considered to be a single identity. (151)

Nel and Sula are definitely intimate. Hortense J. Spillers comments on their closeness as- "Nel and Sula are more than girls together. They sustain the loss of innocence and its subsequent responsibilities with a degree of tormented passion seldom allowed even to lovers" (44). While Nel leaves her at the deathbed after their argument, Sula recalls their time "when they were two throat and one eye" (Morrison 147) means both of them once had the same vision.

In adolescence, they create their personalities together. While Nel marries Jude, Sula finds herself empty in the mirror where both of them belonged together earlier and thus goes out to seek her new identity. Sula's sex with Jude can be viewed as an attempt to connect "with the other part of herself, Nel, by possessing something which Nel also possessed" (Coleman 154) rather than a betrayal. Karen F. Stein argues this novel is a 'black woman's epic' and says, "As doubles, they complement each other and, combined, make up a complete picture of a hero" (148). Nel's marriage to Jude leaves the friendship severed and leaves Sula as an outsider. Nel and Sula, with all the similarities and differences, can be viewed as two parts of the same identity. With all their arguments, they are the most sought person for each other, as Eva points out: "Just alike. Both of you. Never was any difference between you" (Morrison 169). The last comments of both Sula and Nel are messages to their absent other. When Sula dies, her last thinking is "Wait'll I tell Nel." (149) After the meeting with Eva, twenty-five years after Sula's death, Nel also realises that Sula is her other self. Her concluding lines in the novel are:

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” (174)

CONCLUSION

Through her mourning at the graveyard, Nel actually connects with their former ‘self’ and continues the journey which they have embarked upon in their childhood. When Nel says “we were girls together” she means the shared identity by using ‘was’ instead of ‘were’ (174). Although they are different in many contexts, from physical appearance to personality, they are also connected and complementing. The friendship with all the differences between the participants does not depend only on the physical presence but goes way beyond the physical demise of Sula.

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