

# A Critical Examination of Toni Morrison's *Sula* from Psychological Perspective

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## Abstract

*The article investigates the connection between sexuality, repression, and power. This study explores how power influences sexuality, forming specific discourses, while also examining how sexuality produces power. The scholar applies Foucauldian discourse in interpreting Toni Morrison's novel Sula in order to examine sexuality and repression. It also explores the impact of power and sexuality within the Bottom community and the behaviors of the characters. In this book, there are characters that battle for the cause of justice. The novel has a repressive theme illustrating the conflicts of its characters. The woman utilizes sexual behavior to assert power and challenge male dominance. The way the characters engage in sexual activities reflects the society they are a part of. It provides insight into the African American community's struggle against racism and sexism. In this manner, power influences everything just as it shapes the novel. The research paper has been written based on both primary and secondary materials from both electronic and print sources. The writing is analytical and critical in terms of theme discussion and theory application. Since the research has been based on the qualitative research design, the dialogues among the characters of the novel have been the basis of analysis.*

**Keywords:** Power, sexuality, repression, African literature, dominance

## Introduction

*Sula* explores various facets of women's challenges and their interactions with each other. The patriarchal system controls, oppresses, and takes advantage of women. Sula, the main character, defies the limitations imposed by the black community on black women. Individuals establish structure in the community. The established structure is passed down through successive generations. In Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973), there is a persistent imbalance in power distribution between males and females. The novel is rooted in a repressive theme that showcases conflicts among characters. Sexuality is a key factor in these conflicts due to repression, becoming a significant issue. The characters in the novel are used to showcase sexuality and contribute to the theme of repression. Morrison employs various elements of sexuality to demonstrate how the social environment impacts the characters' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Uneven power distribution leads to suppression in the characters' actions.

## Literature Review

*Sula* a successful novel by Toni Morrison has generated a huge amount of criticism from numerous critics since its publication in 1973. The novel has been viewed from different perspectives. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia writes, "The struggle between sexes having been explored in *Sula* [...] racism and sexism, although equally oppressive [...]" (89). The female members are doubly marginalized because of the racism and sexism in the African-American community. In *Sula* Morrison tries to depict the exploited female members of the Afro-American community. Sexual exploitation is focused in the novel by novelist though racial exploitation cannot be denied as a factor. The novel has not incorporated the values of Black aesthetic. Madhu Dubey writes:

... black community presented in the novel is moored to the oppressive past and is, therefore problematic from a Black Aesthetic standpoint. When we are first introduced to the Bottom neighbourhood, in the beginning of the novel, it has already become a thing of the past. [...] In fact, racial and economic oppression appear to be the necessary conditions for the existence of a distinctive black folk culture. (81)

The female characters of the novel are striving to create their 'self' by freeing themselves from the established patriarchal norms. Eva Peace becomes author of her 'self' taking control of the story and her image. To prove this Rose De Angelis states, "She establishes authorship of her 'self' something that had been denied to her simply because she was a woman and more significantly because she was a black woman" (2). *Sula* has presented many aspects of feminine struggle and their relationship among themselves. Female members are dominated, discriminated and exploited by the patriarchal system. Sula, the protagonist challenges the constraints of black community over black women (*Sexuality in Toni Morrison's Sula: A Study of Power Relations* 8-9).

## Analysis

*Sula* features female characters as the protagonists. Throughout the entire novel, the actions of the protagonist Sula remain significant. The conflict brings destruction to both community and individual experiences. It eliminates all happiness and romance from young people as a method of destruction. Toni Morrison portrays Shadrack's experience of enlisting in the military during World War I. She claims that once he returns from the war, the same level of attraction from women that was present before the war does not remain with him. Indeed, Shadrack has come back to Medallion after it was completely devastated by the war. He is unable to behave as a man does. Yet, he struggles to remember his nostalgic memories of intimacy, as indicated by 'the flavor of lipstick'. Morrison describes how even the most meticulous individuals in the town occasionally found themselves imagining what he was like before he left for war. A twenty-year-old man, his mind empty and his lips remembering the flavor of lipstick . . . Number seven means good luck and prosperity in many cultures around the world. War dismantles the masculinity associated

with virility and sexual prowess, which Foucault intriguingly refers to as peripheral sexuality. War taking away the sexual power from him puts him next to the category of those who “who did not like the opposite sex, reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage” (*History of Sexuality* 38). This denial or lack in Shadrack refers to the impact that war genuinely leaves on the emerging generation that begins to think about sex as the bliss of life through “a reflux movement, originating in these peripheral sexualities” (39). War brings devastation in both social and personal life and the denial of sexuality in Shadrack’s body deeply implies the social side of destructive power of war.

War brings devastation in human’s life. It completely destroys people’s creativity and makes abnormal. Toni Morrison describes the situation from Plum’s life who returns from war being drug addict and shows childish behavior. In fact, Eva kills her son to lessen Plum’s pain before drugs completely ruin Plum. She at first embraces Plum. She afterward sets fire to him so that he can die while he is, to some degree, still a man. Morrison states:

. . . he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well. . . He was growed, a big old thing. . . . make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. (71-72)

An individual exercises the power that brings devastation in the society that Foucault refers to as ‘how’ of power as ‘struggles’. In reality, one uses power to dominate others for one’s benefit. Foucault states, “Although the individual who exercised the power was not of interest to Foucault (he did not believe that power always followed hierarchy), how the power was exercised was definitely of interest. Foucault often referred to the ‘how’ of power as ‘struggles’” (*Truth and Power* 57). Eva kills her son, Plum in order to show the power that becomes ‘struggles’ for the society and agitation against war. War destroys Plum’s creativity and makes him child again because of which Eva takes Plum’s life away exercising power.

Women have no issues even when their husband is not present. They are able to live happily with their children. Toni Morrison depicts Eva Peace as living a content life without her husband. She satisfies her sexual desires with the guests. Morrison describes Eva, who despite her age had many gentlemen visitors. While she did not engage in sex, there was much flirting, kissing, and laughter. (41) Woman engages in non-committal sexual acts like teasing, kissing, and laughing to fulfill her sexual desires, which Foucault labels as unproductive sexualities. In reality, women wield power for their own enjoyment as Foucault explains in his assertion that they use mechanisms driven by both pleasure and power, despite claiming to reject certain sexualities (*History of Sexuality* 45). Eva engages in unproductive sexual behaviors as a means of asserting power over men and derives sexual gratification from this behavior.

Women, in this novel, spend their life cheerfully even in the absence of their husband. They fulfill the vacuum of husband sleeping with other men. In fact, Hannah, the mother of Sula, always desires to get sexual pleasure. Hannah takes sex as a sexual object.

She also invites the men to have the pleasure of casual sex. Hannah describes the visitors about her body parts, as she likes doing it. Toni Morrison describes the circumstances from Hannah's life who gets indulged in sexual intercourse with different men throughout her life after her husband's demise. Morrison puts, "... sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands and friends of neighbors. Her flirting was sweet . . . she rippled with sex . . . she made men aware of her behind, her slim ankles, the dew-smooth skin and the incredible length of neck" (42). Parents' immoral behavior affects the children's attitude.

Children learn good or bad activities in their life from parents. Toni Morrison justifies the situation from Hannah who does not pay attention towards her daughter, Sula and openly gets involved in sexual activities. In fact, Hannah's sexual activities disturb Sula. Hannah fucks anything. She never demands anything from the visitors. Her aim is simply to get some touch every day. Parents' characteristics play a vital role in the life of their children. Hannah does sex for pleasure and not for money that proves power imposition to bring men in right track. Morrison explains, ". . . seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable"(43-44). Sexual pleasure is guided by the political behavior that Foucault presents as the violation of the tradition of sex. Virtually, Hannah gets involved in sexual activities with many men and employs the sexual power. Sex is played as a game that is shown through Hannah's character that breaks the prevailing norms and values and reveals political behavior. Actually, power motive has been applied which he puts:

... analysis of the modes of sexual conduct, their determinations and their effects, at the boundary line of the biological and the economic domains. There also appeared those systematic campaigns which, going beyond the traditional means--moral and religious exhortations, fiscal measures--tried to transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior. (*History of Sexuality* 26)

Girls wear the fashionable clothes to attract men. They do so with the purpose of getting the feeling of sex. Toni Morrison describes the condition of Nel and Sula who put on the clothes to get the gaze of the Bottom people. Both the girls are sexually harassed but they like it for pleasure. In fact, old men move their lips seeing Sula and Nel's stalk like legs and tight skin. Nel and Sula have their first experience of sexual agitation together. Ajax harasses the girls. Men admire Ajax for his foul mouth but Nel and Sula really like the behavior of Ajax for pleasure. Morrison explains:

The old men looked at their stalk like legs . . . they moved their lips as though to stir up the taste of young sweat on tight skin. . . . cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. Those smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them. (50)

Sexual excitement makes the girls move in the community to attract and control men with

their beauty that Foucault interestingly call it as ‘exercise of power’. Actually, the commenting and gazing behavior of men towards the girls fulfill the power motive of girls behind hovering in the Bottom that Foucault states:

...concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail. (*History of Sexuality* 18)

Nel and Sula keep on moving in the community for the feeling of sex and dominate men with the power of beauty. The feeling of sex is normal among the teenagers but it is guided by the motive of exercise of power. In reality, at first, Nel was unable to believe the incident. Nel was shocked by seeing her best friend, Sula being involved in sexual activities with her husband, Jude in the bedroom. Here sex results in irreparable damage to the lives of the characters involved.

Sex is viewed as a form of entertainment by certain individuals. Engaging in sexual intercourse with others for enjoyment is still present in certain communities. Sula and Jude engage in sexual intercourse, altering positions for pleasure. Morrison elaborates, "However, they were on their hands and knees without clothes, only their lips touching on the ground . . . on all fours resembling dogs (yes, continue, say it)." Biting each other lightly . . ." (105). Having sexual relations with someone outside of the relationship damages the bond between the members of the community. Sula engages in sexual activities with Nel’s husband, Jude, and numerous other men for pleasure rather than financial gain, demonstrating the influential nature of marginalized sexualities. Sex is transformed into a tool for enjoyment, deviating from the customary practices of the Bottom community in order to explore power dynamics. Foucault argues that engaging in sexual relations with multiple partners allows marginalized sexualities to assert their sexual agency and enjoyment. Morrison states:

And the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible – for she would lay their husbands once and then no more. Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. (115)

Doing sex with different lovers’ breaks the prevailing tradition of sex that Foucault calls power generation and exercise through relationships. In reality, women making relationships with many men not for money and for pleasure shows power exercise not in isolation. In fact, Hannah and Sula indulge in sexual intercourse with many men that prove power generation and exercise through relationships and not in isolation. Women use men as per their sexual wish that Foucault puts, “Power is not only generated through relationships, it is also exercised through relationships. Foucault believed that although there was no set structure for power to be exercised, power could not either arise or be exercised in isolation” (*History of Sexuality* 507-527). Men used to dominate women physically. However, the trend of domination has changed in course of time. Women consume men as a sexual object. Toni Morrison explores the condition from Hannah and Sula who sexually exploit men for

their sexual satisfaction. Actually, they use men in terms of sex purpose. They have changed the tradition of using women that the men used to do with the women. She does sex not for money, property or things rather for sexual satisfaction and power.

According to V. Sharmila, the tale of Black oppression and suppression by White masters is stark. The setting of *Sula* takes place in Medallion, where the characters reside. The individuals Eva Peace, Shadrack, Hannah, Helence, Plum, Nel, and Sula. Not like Pecola Breedlove, Sula Peace, a young African American girl, is a part of a traditional family led by women, residing in their typical community. Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, is likewise a troublemaker. To summon our Sula's. By showcasing distinctive characteristics and individuality, Morrison introduces readers to another new character. Nel Wright is the same age as Sula. Nel, similar to her mother, organizes her life in a way that aligns with middle-class values. She agrees to marry Jude Greene, attempts to start a family, and lives according to his terms. The regulations, guidelines and beliefs are dictated by the leading culture. In contrast, Sula, questioning societal norms and working to establish a personal set of beliefs, principles, and norms and criteria. Sula is not bothered even if society dismembers her. Under these circumstances she gains bravery, remains steadfast, and asserts her unique identity rebels against the prevailing beliefs and cultural dominance that hinder her personal growth.

### Conclusion

*Sula* talks about the societal condition of African Americans. In this book, Morrison delves into the dynamics of black men and black women's relationships. Black women face oppression and unfair treatment from their spouses. Still, the female characters are seen as formidable individuals who appear unfaithful to their husbands and strive earnestly to achieve parity. The lack and distortion of parental love impacts the characters in *Sula*. The destructive sexual behavior of men devastates the lives of young girls and women. To comprehend the power rankings of individuals, one must analyze relationships case by case, as without this, it is impossible to determine if an individual has the ability to wield power.

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