

The Dialectics of Female Friendship in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract

*Female bonding and sisterhood are vital and intrinsic to African American women in America, as they have been sources of strength and solace to each other from slavery times. Friendship among black women has served as the ultimate antidote to overcome the triple subjugation faced by them. It can, but necessarily needn't be sibling, or mother-daughter relationship. This paper analyses the novel **Sula** (1973) by Toni Morrison within the frame work of black feminism concentrating on the aspect of female friendship between black women and the need for it, as their three-way struggle is different from others. Toni Morrison in her works, talks about the need to usher in unselfish bonding between black women. Through the oeuvre of her novels, Morrison suggests that women can forge in a united front to combat oppression, of all sorts. **Sula**, is a novel about female bonding leading to discovery of the female self. This paper specifically concentrates on the friendship between Nel and Sula, and the metamorphosis it undergoes in due course of time, that displays the dialectics of friendship between black women. Through the novel, Morrison asks women not to impersonate each other and indulge in rat race, but resolve the dialectics of friendship and enrich each other's lives as sources of strength and positivity.*

Keywords: Female friendship, Sula, United front, Oppression, Black Feminism.

Female bonding and sisterhood are vital and intrinsic to African American women in America, as they have been sources of strength and solace to each other from slavery times. The bonding that has existed among black women from times of their import to America has been a compassionately endearing one. Moreover, female friendship and sisterhood along with motherhood influence the subjectivities of black women, and chart their course of life. Both the black freedom movement and white feminist movement have relegated black

women and have tried to diminish their identity. **“White women were not sincerely committed to bonding with black women and other group of women to fight sexism. They were primarily interested in drawing attention to their lot as white, upper and middle class women” (Hooks 142).** White American women were never concerned with the interests of black women who have been closely associated with them, nor were they compassionately bothered about women from other ethnicities. This strengthened the friendly ties between black women. Black women in America through several generations have fortified each other, by sharing their same, yet different joys, sorrows and existence. Friendship among black women has served as the ultimate antidote to overcome the triple subjugation faced by them. Above all, it is the fundamental symbiotic relationship nurturing and protecting their interests, and that of their children.

Black Feminist Scholars like Bell Hooks, Patricia Hills Collins, Boyce Davies, Elizabeth Abel, Audre Lorde have acknowledged the importance of female friendship in shaping the identities of women, their families and the black community at large. Abel has conceded the importance of female friendship by stating that:

“ In developing a theory of female friendship, I seek to represent the world as women imagine it could be, and as many women have created it. Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the survival of women as well as those that maintain the subordination of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our Selves and each other. (434)

Female friendship may be a sexual or asexual relationship between women, where they give and share moral support, and means of combating oppression. It can, but necessarily needn't be sibling or mother-daughter relationship. Female friendship despite its advantages has certain limitations, yet is invigorating and gratifying. The dialectics of friendship between women are always in a state of flux, yet they revitalize women at every given instance of life. The greatest boon of female bonding is that women get a chance to confide in each other their true feelings, dreams, fears, aspirations and hopes. Moreover, female bonding becomes an invaluable treasure for African American women for combating the anomalies of life created by racism, sexism and classism.

Toni Morrison in her works, talks about the need to usher in unselfish bonding between black women. She has succinctly stated that **“the loneliest woman in the world is a woman without a woman friend” (qtd. in Wade-Gayles, 111).** Through the oeuvre of her novels, Morrison suggests that women can forge in a united front to combat oppression, of all sorts. *Sula* by Toni Morrison published in the year 1973, is a novel about female bonding leading to discovery of the female self. The novel showcases women as sources of strength to each other as mothers, friends and sisters. This paper analyses the novel *Sula* within the frame

work of black feminism concentrating on the aspect of female friendship between black women and the need for it, as their three-way struggle is different from others. Morrison through the novel depicts that the diverse needs of black women can be catered to by ushering in true female friendship. She harps on the need to redress the dialectics of female friendship, to make it a source of ultimate solace and happiness.

The novel showcases female friendship and bonding influenced by social and cultural realities. Morrison through the novel delineates how nurturing female friendship can be. The novel affirms that female friendship is not uniform and monolithic amongst black women, yet is a strong invigorating bond. Female friendship showcased in the novel changes with time, personal needs and societal conformities. Morrison through the novel depicts that, it can be quite a difficult task for women to maintain the same sort of friendship throughout their life, owing to their own personal needs, racism, sexism, classism and patriarchal forces. Furthermore, the novel shows how patriarchal power structures, selfishness amidst women, differences in life style and backgrounds, dismantle friendship at various levels. The novel showcases that friendship between women is based on commonality, and complementarity. It depicts that a symbiotic relationship between black women alone would enable them to assist each other. Notable friendships showcased in the novel are between Eva and Mrs Suggs, Hannah, Patsy and Valentine, and Nel and Sula. The novel depicts how female friendship among black women is mutually invigorating, nourishing the women involved in it, despite disputations. When Boy Boy abandons Eva and their children, she depends upon Mrs Suggs and Mrs Jackson for help. Though they share a similar financial background like Eva, they come to her rescue. Mrs Suggs looks after the three children of Eva when she goes away to earn money leaving them in her foster care, without an iota of doubt. After coming home to the Bottom, she thanks and rewards Mrs Suggs, and reclaims her children. The friendship between Hannah, Patsy and Valentine showcased in the novel is not deep. It is only limited to exchange of views and sharing a bit of time together. The only friendship that stands out in the novel is the one between Nel and Sula that starts as children, and grows into adulthood.

The novel set in the early 1900s to the first decade of the later part of the twentieth century traces three generations of women in two families and the friendship between the women characters especially Sula and Nel. Inseparable friends, Sula and Nel come from two diverse backgrounds from the black community at the Bottom in Medallion. Nel is raised in a conservative household by her strict, orthodox mother Helene, far away from her grandmother Rochelle, a Creole prostitute. Sula on the other hand, is raised by her unorthodox mother Hannah, under the tutelage of Eva. The friendship showcased in the novel questions and balances the power relations in the black community, and asks women to strengthen each other, than weakening one another. Friendship between the women characters in the novel either intense or otherwise, helps them discover their potential and reinvent themselves amidst hardships. This paper specifically concentrates on the friendship

between Nel and Sula, and the metamorphosis it undergoes in due course of time that displays the dialectics of friendship between black women.

Born to and brought up by mothers who fail to comprehend them completely, Sula and Nel seek solace in their friendship as children. As they grow up into women the bonding between them affects their subjectivities, and empowers them. The friendship between them is not constant. Sula and Nel's subjectivities change, so does their friendship and vice versa. The bonding they nurture, helps them establish a specific space for themselves, to look inward and strengthen each other. At times, friendship between them becomes so close that **"the boundaries between the two becomes fluid"** (192 Quashie) leading to discovery for both friends. It gives them solace from the noise, callousness and humdrum at their homes. For them "a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other" (Morrison *Sula* 83). Strengthening each other, they become reflections of each other that "they themselves had difficulty in distinguishing one's thoughts from the others" (Morrison *Sula* 83). Seeing the lives of their mothers and grandmothers they understand that, black women are triply subjugated, and as black females "freedom and triumph was forbidden to them" (Morrison *Sula* 52). In order to overcome limitations of the aforesaid sort, they "create something else to be" and love (Morrison *Sula* 52). As young girls, friendship helps them overcome **"male approval"** as they find **"total worth . . . in each other's eyes"** (Smith 422) and lives.

The friendship between Sula and Nel benefits them in different ways. Nel comes out of the domineering influence of her mother, and finds confidence. She starts loving and accepting herself as she is, although "her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had" (Morrison *Sula* 83). Nel longs for freedom, understanding and whole hearted acceptance that is denied to her by her parents, and she gets all this in the company of Sula. She feels beautiful in Sula's company as she does not pester her to "pull her nose" (Morrison *Sula* 55) like her mother Helene. Moreover, her friendship with Sula makes her confident about her overall appearance that "smooth hair— no longer— interested her" (Morrison *Sula* 55). Friendship with Sula helps Nel accept her blackness. She realizes that black is beautiful in its own way. Above all, Nel finds her voice in the presence of Sula, which she can never do in the company of her mother. She becomes nonchalant to her mother's domineering bickering to the extent that the "hateful comb and smooth hair- no longer interested her" (Morrison *Sula* 55). Never does Nel get a chance to be a leader except with Sula throughout her life. Moreover, for Nel "an occasional leadership role with Sula . . . only [with] Sula did that quality have free reign" (Morrison *Sula* 53). The freedom Nel experiences with Sula, strengthens her subjectivity positively by helping her make her unique self.

For Sula, the friendship between her and Nel acts as an anchor taming her too high spirits, making her come close to reality. Sula is temperamentally volatile. "Earlier she could hardly .

... sustain any emotion for more than three minutes” (Morrison *Sula* 53). In their friendship, she learns to wait and give others the chance to be themselves. Moreover, their friendship helps her develop leadership qualities that change her into a different being, and a go getter, later on, in life. Nel tames Sula’s temper for good, and becomes a positive outlet for her energy. For instance when a group of boys harass them, Sula scares them away like the protector of Nel. “Holding the knife . . . She slashed off only the tip of the finger. . . . raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. “If I can do this to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (Morrison *Sula* 54-55). As pointed out by Gillespie and Kubitschek both the friends become empowered in each other’s company as **“Nel and Sula’s antithetical strengths and weaknesses assure them mutual dependency and thus equality of participation. Sula’s preservation of herself allows Nel to limn boundaries between herself and her mother; in turn, Nel’s attention to details of connection and her calm consistency allow Sula’s rigid boundaries to become fluid” (41).**

This paper does not concentrate on the lesbian overtones in the novel, as they only hint at the fact, that the young girls discover their budding sexuality through female bodies, but do not become pronounced lesbians as put forth by many critics. Many critics haven’t concentrated on the fact that sexuality of an individual is in a fluid state till later adulthood. **“sexual orientation is typically portrayed as developing early in life, though . . . for many women, it can emerge in mid to late adulthood. . . . environmental and interpersonal factors interact with biological influences. . . . [it] can change either abruptly or gradually over time.” (Diamond 236).** As adults, Sula and Nel prefer leading heterosexual lives. Moreover, it is to be observed that friendship is friendship, be it heterosexual or homosexual. Above all, female bonding accentuates **“one’s capacity for compassion, generosity, humour and wonder” (Elizabeth Schultz 69)** to lead a fulfilling life. As young children they understand that fraudulent competition is worth nothing, as they are the best company for each other. But this thinking changes as adults. Friendship and its variables are not monolithic, but are always in a state of flux influencing each other. As Nel and Sula grow up, they become two distinct personalities. Nel sticks to societal conventions, while Sula flouts them, and in turn they turn out to be conventional, and unconventional figures.

As young adults, changes happen in their lives leading to a brief period of separation. Nel bows down to societal conformities, under her mother’s psychological manipulation and tutelage. She is married to Jude at a young age, and this act stops her education. She places him above her, bears children and settles down to domesticity. Sula on the other hand goes to college, sees life, and broadens her perspective. Sula has been to “Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, San Diego” (Morrison *Sula* 120). Moreover, she becomes an upholder of the values there. Except for motherhood, Sula experiences life in its totality. She embarks on a quest to make herself, which is very gusty and audacious for her

times. She goes astray when she becomes selfish, and callous to other's feelings. The personality of Sula is best described as:

“Distinctly different. Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life.” (Morrison *Sula* 118)

Loss of contact with Sula changes many things for Nel. She again falls prey to her insecurities. Nel feels lost, as she misses Sula "who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy" (Morrison *Sula* 95). She falls into the quagmire of her mother's boss over. She becomes a victim of her mother's supercilious coaxing, conformed by patriarchal measures, and follows the stereotyped gender roles assigned to women. She fulfills all the roles as a wife and mother to the fullest, but always senses an unfathomable void in her life. In the process of being a good wife and mother, she loses contact with her true self. She loses the voice, she has found along with Sula. She becomes someone else, silent and uncomplaining.

Sula returns to the Bottom after ten long years, least interested in any activity other than making herself. But in the process of making herself, and finding her autonomy she loses contact with her true self. Sula and Nel revive their friendship after Sula's return to Medallion. Sula turns out to be a totally different person. To add to all the changes in her, she becomes hardheartedly selfish. Her return to the community at the bottom is marked by a Robin ridden sky, which serves as a bad omen and the dwellers of the Bottom take notice of it. To Nel, the return of Sula is very precious. It is like vitality coming to her. She observes that "The May that followed the leaving of the birds . . . had a sheen, a glimmering as of green, . . . Even her own body was not immune to the magic. ... Although it was she alone who saw this magic, . . . She knew it was all due to Sula's return to the Bottom. It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed" (Morrison *Sula* 94-95). All goes on well between them, till Sula dumps the codes of friendship.

Sula breaks the codes of friendship with Nel by having a promiscuous relationship with Jude, her best friend's husband. Moreover, she expects Nel to take it lightly. She uses Jude to quench her lust without any attachment, as she has used any other man in her life, but this brings in doom to the marital relationship between Nel and Jude. Sula is shunned by the black community at the Bottom as she is perceived as evil incarnate. Having stayed in big cities outside Medallion, Sula has a first-hand feel of all that is impermissible to the conservative community at the Bottom. Sula **"wilfully denies Medallion's values and its conventions"** (Denard 174). Sula learns flouting societal conventions from her mother. As a young woman "Hannah exasperated the women in the town" (Morrison *Sula* 44) and Sula as youngster

follows suit. Moreover, she learns from her mother that “sex was pleasant and frequent but otherwise unremarkable (Morrison *Sula* 44). Sula flouts all the conventions of the community, as she considers them to be **“rigid norms for women” (Mc Dowell 83)**. She does not consider marriage as a secure nest that can give her peace and rest. Sula develops this perspective of life on seeing her mother and grandmother. Hannah and Eva welcome motherhood into their lives, despite many obstacles, but Sula denies it even a bit of space. She never likes being anchored by any relationship. She considers relationships to be fetters. Quest for the self is a sought after quality as it brings into focus, things that have been kept out of visibility for too long. However, in the process of finding herself, Sula loses contact with reality and becomes disdainfully selfish, least caring for the feelings of others which brings in, her ultimate doom. Sula’s one time fling with Jude brings doom not only to her, but also to Nel, Jude and their children. Nel loses a precious friend forever, along with her husband, while her children lose their father forever.

Nel fails to recognize the fact that Jude has been the silent aggressor in their relationship. She fails to comprehend that “Jude has his own reasons for bitterness and hatred that make him betray Nel- the pressures of being a black man kept from promotion because of white men” (Demetrakopoulos 80). She wonders how Sula could do it to her. In bewilderment “she thought of Sula as though they were still friends and talked things over,” but later on realizes that it is too much to “lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for” (Morrison *Sula* 110). Nel out rightly blames Sula, but fails to blame Jude’s unfaithful patriarchal stance, that makes allowances for men to be promiscuous. Later on, Jude abandons her and their children without saying sorry and redressing his mistakes. Nel pines for Jude and blames Sula for everything, without realizing that Jude’s act of abandoning the family nest, they have made together, to stay in forever, is unethical on his part.

Sula the queen honey bee in the real sense, who has discarded several men after using them, has always sought being the subject in any relationship she has had with them. She has never been the object in any relationship. Mc Dowell has succinctly pointed at this aspect in Sula’s personality by stating that Sula prefers being the **“sexually desiring subject rather than object of male desire” (82)**. Sula’s interest in Ajax which goes into the realms of possessiveness comes to a halt, when he discards her. She starts loving being the object of a man’s affection, at least for some time. Later on, she does not even care about his presence. The absence of Ajax seems to be “so decorative, so ornate, it was difficult for her to understand how she had ever endured, without falling dead or consumed, his magnificent presence. His absence was everywhere, stinging everything . . .” (Morrison *Sula* 134). Sula forcibly puts Eva in an asylum for the old called Sunnydale and on this “the people of the Bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach. . . . Everybody remembered the plague of robins that announced her return, and the tale of about her watching Hannah burn was

stirred up again" (Morrison *Sula* 113). The black community at the Bottom castigates her as a pariah. Moreover, she misses the friendship of Nel. To add to all this, her health deteriorates. A sort of nonchalance creeps into her life that Sula tells herself "there aren't any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are. I have sung them all. I have sung all the ones there are." (Morrison *Sula* 137). Sula seeks autonomy that is merciless towards those involved with her, which is a reflection of her supercilious selfishness. Sula's heard-hearted, un-empathetic attitude towards fellow human beings brings in her doom.

Nel never remarries, yet she bemoans the failure of her marriage. Nel visits Sula on her death bed at a hospital. Nel on visiting a dying Sula asks her, about the fling she has had with Jude, despite their friendship. She questions her "Why you didn't love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away." Sula sharply answers Nel with a question "If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (Morrison *Sula* 145) The brief talk after few years does not end on a positive note. Sula dies thinking of Nel, the solacing friend she has lost. Nel fails to realize and let go Jude's fault, of having a momentous fling with Sula. Sula fails to realize that all things are not permissible in friendship, however close it is. She fails to understand that, there are certain rules and ethics to be followed in friendship. Neither Sula nor Nel, do anything constructive to resurrect their friendship. Sula dies at the age of thirty, thinking about her life and Nel. Years later, Nel realizes that Sula has been the centre of her happiness. Both Nel and Sula fail to realize that **"women's relationships with each other are more important and certainly more enduring than relationships with 'men who restlessly drift in and out' "** (Anne Adams 169). Nel realizes that her unhappiness is a result of not missing Jude, but Sula. She bemoans Sula's death saying " "We was girls together," . . . "O Lord, Sula," . . . "girl, girl, girl girl girl." . . . "It was a fine cry-- loud and long-- but it had no bottom. and it has no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (Morrison *Sula* 174). This belated awareness leads nowhere.

The friendship between Nel and Sula ceases as they fail to dissolve the dialectics of friendship between them. They involve in a blame game that fractures their personal lives and severs their friendly ties forever, till one of them passes away. Morrison in a speech delivered at Barnard College, an all woman's college in New York commenting on the violence inflicted by women on women has insightfully, and painfully mentioned that she is: **"alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence . . . alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women"** (Morrison *Cinderella's* 283-284). Through the speech she has further curatively and righteously told fellow women that: **"In wielding the power that is deservedly yours . . . Let your might and your power emanate from that place in you that is nurturing and caring."** (Morrison *Cinderella's* 284). Through the novel *Sula* and the poignant women characters in it, Morrison has asked women not to impersonate each other and indulge in rat race, but enrich each other's lives as sources of strength and positivity, resolving the

dialectics of friendship. Demetrakopoulos commenting on the nuances of female friendship and unresolved conflicts between Nel and Sula has adroitly retorted that **"The novel suggests the cosmic value in women realizing how much they do love each other, of how much joy and pain they share. But still, at the end Nel is alone; Sula, dead; and we see how much pain is solitary. Even the realization of loss is often too late for the relationship itself"** (90). The Nobel Laureate through the novel *Sula* has thoughtfully asked, and advised women to leave hatred, conflicts, and selfishness and help each other in the evolution of empowered life. Morrison through the novel has asked women to build in trust for the development of each other that would ease the dialectics of female friendship. She asks women to be sisters and buddies in struggle rather than competitors, strangulating one another's wellbeing. Morrison vouches that for black women, friendship **"is the only currency of their lives"** (Essence 275) that accentuates positive aspects in the offing. She asks women to forge in positive female friendships that will be lifelong treasures.

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