

Difficult Daughters: Mother-Daughter Relationship in Sula

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Modern man has made tremendous efforts to earn all the luxuries so that he may lead a comfortable and happy life, but ironically this incessant chase to achieve material comforts has robbed him even of the small pleasures of life. It is also a fact that the person doesn't want the comforts only for himself but he also wants his family to be equally benefitted from them. However, in the course of time he realizes that he has gained material happiness at the cost of human relationships. This is the stark reality behind the human relationships of the 21st century. The mother-daughter relationship which is considered to be one of the most pious relationships, is no exception to it. In the modern age, the bond between a mother and a daughter has also undergone a drastic change, therefore, the idealized notion of the relationship between a mother and a daughter has largely ceased to exist. Nevertheless, the psychologists agree that the mother and the daughter still continue to affect each other's lives to a great extent, consciously or unconsciously.

Until very recently, female bonding with reference to mother-daughter relationship was not dealt with much seriousness in literature. It is primarily with the emergence of the Afro-American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor that one finds the various dimensions of this relationship being discussed in the psychological perspective. It is a known reality that Black men had tough time in seeking employment in the South America, therefore, they had to move North, where the racial intolerance was somewhat less. Due to this physical distance of the male members from their families "the Afro-American mother had to depend on her children for emotional support, especially daughters as mothers found it easier to relate with the female child. This historical necessity gained further significance in the wake of the feminist movement, which gave a call to forge 'sisterhood' and saw mother-daughter bonding as an extension to woman-woman dyad"(Singh, 62). Thus, began the tradition of analyzing the warmth and love, tension and turmoil in the bond shared by a mother and a daughter which ultimately resulted in building the critical understanding of the complexity of this relationship.

One such attempt is made by Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison in her much talked about novel *Sula*. In the novel, Morrison effectively traces the mother-daughter relationship among the three generations of Peace family-Eva Peace, Hannah Peace and Sula Peace, collectively referred to as the 'Peace women' and the other between Helen Wright and Nel Wright, to explore the many faceted mother-daughter relationship in the Black community. Among the three generations of the Afro-American women who feature in *Sula*, Eva Peace is the matriarch and the sole controller of the Peace mansion and she is projected as an authoritative and opinionated woman. At the very outset, Eva is shown shouldering the responsibility of the family because her husband BoyBoy "liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (Morrison, 32). BoyBoy never partook any familial responsibility but when he finally abandoned his wife and children, Eva reconciles with the reality and gears up for the role of a single mother. She sacrificed her happiness for the well being of her children. Although Eva never verbalizes her love for her children, she shows it through her unselfish actions. Later, Eva leaves her children with a neighbour, Mrs. Suggs for a long period of eighteen months and when she returns, she is missing a leg but has enough wealth to support her family and secure the future of her virtually fatherless children. It must be noted here that the "physical distance from the children is not a sign of abandonment, but of love" (Gillespie and Kubitschek, 35). Toni Morrison plays on the metaphor of 'distance' to bring out two completely different interpretations of this word and the effect of this 'gap' on the relationship between Hannah and Eva. It has already been clarified that Eva left her children for eighteen months only to provide a comfortable and a safe life to them. However, this period was extremely important for Hannah as she was in the impressionable period of her age when one needs mother the most. For the children of Hannah's age group, especially girls, a mother is more than just a family member. She is the beacon light and the most reliable person to confide in but unfortunately Eva was not with her daughter during her growing years. Moreover, when Eva comes back she doesn't share with anyone the reason of her being away for so long, not even with her children. Eva's cold attitude has such a deep impact on Hannah's psyche that years later also she could not get over it and this gap of eighteen months created 'emotional distance' between mother and daughter. The feeling of alienation which seeped into the personality of Hannah was further intensified by the manner in which Eva dealt with her son Plum, who had returned from the war all shattered and broken.

Eva's son Plum returns home as a shell-shocked soldier and drug addict. Like most of the Black men, Plum had also joined the White army inspired by the idea of serving the nation and nurtured the much cherished notion of the glory of war. But ultimately Plum was disillusioned as he gained the first hand experience of the havoc a war creates and how it leaves a man bereaved of one's senses. It troubled Eva to see Plum in such a miserable and

painful state as it also reminded her of the time when as a child Plum had a very difficult and painful bowel movement and at one point it occurred to her that her son may die of it. Once again Eva was confronted with the similar situation when she realized that her drug addict son is dying every moment, therefore, she resolves to kill Plum, thereby, relieving him of the pain. As Eva decided to kill Plum in the dead silence of the night, therefore, some critics agree with Hannah's opinion and interpret Eva's doing as an act of filicide, but according to Eva; she killed her son because she wanted him "to die like a man"(Morrison, 72).

Eva never discloses the truth of Plum's death and because nobody saw it, she thought that with Plum's body, the truth of his death will also be buried. But to her utter amazement, years later Hannah unveils the mystery and tells Eva that she was the witness of her act. According to Hannah, Eva was guilty of a sacrilegious act and it was a sheer violation of her responsibilities as a mother. Eva's killing of her own son had a very destructive impact on Hannah's psyche. She refuses to believe that Eva killed Plum just because she could not withstand the fact that her son was in utter pain and she had thought that it was better for him to die than suffer incessant pain. Hannah compares Eva's act with that of a dog owner's who kills his lame dog not out of compassion but because of the fact that the presence of this unfit creature in the house irritates him and makes him uncomfortable. Eva's killing Plum completely tarnished her image in the eyes of her daughter who had a firm belief that Eva had no love for her children. Judith Jordan opines, "Empathy is central to an understanding of that aspect of self which involves we-ness...it is, in fact, the process through which one's experienced sense of basic connection and similarity to other humans is established" (Jordan, 68). Lack of communication and understanding is the prime reason why there is no "empathy" and "we-ness" between Eva and Hannah. This is also the cause as to why they don't share a cordial bond which is expected to exist between a mother and a daughter.

Hannah's relationship with Eva hadn't been very warm and cordial. A gulf had been created between them earlier when Hannah was only a child, but later on when Hannah loses her husband, she comes back to her maternal house with her only child Sula "prepared to take care of it and her mother forever" (Morrison, 41). Morrison maintains that Eva continues to be a great influence on Hannah even though the mother and the daughter are not on amiable terms. Two prominent personality traits which Hannah inherits from her mother include her boisterous nature and her love for men. From the analysis made so far it is clear that it is only her reckless confidence because of which Eva managed to do all the things which an average human being and especially a woman could not have done, be it killing her son or anything else. In the similar fashion, Hannah also exhibits immense confidence, be it her conduct in the social quarters or otherwise. The Black society had its own laws and code of conduct set for the widows that restricted their movement as a free being but Hannah didn't conform to any such rules and interestingly nobody dared to question her.

Secondly, both Eva and Hannah enjoyed male attention. Both the ladies loved to play with their looks and dress up flamboyantly to attract men. Hannah, however, took a step further as she indulged in being physically intimate with men of her community. She didn't view physical relationships with other men from the lens of immorality, therefore, she boldly flaunted her sexuality in social quarters. Hannah's immoral acts maligned her name, still she never mended her ways. The lawless life which Hannah led was partly a result of lack of parental control as Hannah's father BoyBoy never partook any familial responsibilities nor did he ever show love and concern for his children. Eva's character, on the other hand, deviates from the stereotypical image of a Black matriarch. She lacks the warmth that most stereotypical Black mothers in other famous texts by Black writers exhibit. The kind of environment Hannah lived in, shaped her personality, but it was largely her mother's behaviour that made her the way she was.

It is evident that Morrison challenges the archetypal image of a mother being docile, meek and forgiving in the portrayal of Eva. However, the novelist refrains from projecting Eva as a heartless mother. It's a fact that Eva hardly verbalizes her love for her children, but this doesn't mean that she has no motherly feeling towards them. Hannah once asked her mother, "Did you ever love us?" (Morrison, 67) Eva's bitter reply reaffirmed Hannah's doubts regarding her mother's love and she kept a distance from her but when accidentally Hannah caught fire, it was her mother Eva who tried to save her at any cost, despite her deformity. This incident clearly reflects that there was no love lost between the mother and the daughter, rather it was only the lack of communication and understanding between the two which resulted in an unhealthy relationship.

The third generation of the Peace women begins with Sula. Right from her childhood, she has seen the conduct of her mother and her grandmother that's why her personality clearly exhibits the influence of both the women as is evident in the novelist's words, "Eva's arrogance and Hanna's self-indulgence merged in her" (Morrison, 118). Through the mother-daughter relationship between Hannah and Sula, Morrison demonstrates how the daughter's equation with her mother unconsciously shapes her social behaviour. As Hannah had a very problematic relationship with her mother, therefore, that same tension appears in her relationship with her daughter. Hannah's unconventional notion of motherhood is an added factor that spoils her relationship with Sula. Hannah believes that mothers are likely to love their children, but don't want to have them and that's why she remarks, "I love Sula, I just don't like her" (Morrison, 67). After Sula overhears her mother's dreadful words, there is a very little hope that their relationship will grow. Hannah's words have such a destructive effect on Sula's psyche that she begins to detach herself from her mother. It should also be noted that though Sula lives in a house inhabited by so many people including her mother, grandmother and her uncle, yet she does not get a feeling of being loved. None of Sula's

female family members provide her with the necessary protection or teach her how to love herself. It is the lack of family support, especially of a mother, that leads Sula to reject her family. According to Beaulieu, “when women deny their mothers in Morrison’s novels, as they often do, the result is a loss of self or center” (Beaulieu, 116). When Sula does not feel the sense of belonging in her relationship with any of her family members, she tries to look for it outside and consequently, she finds her sense of belonging and her center in her friendship with Nel.

Just as Hannah inherited love for male attention from her mother, similarly Sula inherits this trait from her mother. While Sula was still young she witnessed her mother’s rendezvous in the pantry and came to realize that “sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise remarkable” (Morrison, 44). Moreover, the kind of environment Sula experiences at home disillusioned her especially with marriage and it’s only the lustful activities that she indulges in. Sula is shown indulging in sexual relationships with men in the community very frequently. The rumour mill has it that Sula apparently had sexual encounters with the White men also while she was away from the town. Hannah enjoyed love making, but Sula surpasses her mother in forming illicit relationships with men. She goes to the extent of having physical relationship with her soul mate Nel’s husband. Sula, like her mother, has no sense of morality and is, therefore, seen as evil incarnate by the community.

Morrison makes ‘distance’ one of the key factors in the novel and makes it play a significant role in not only shaping the character’s personality but also in the relationship they have with one another. The pattern of going away and coming back to Medallion is repeated by Eva, Hannah and also by Sula but there is a slight difference in the way they behave after coming back to this place. It is worth noting that when Eva and Hannah return, they are hopeful of doing something for each other, but when Sula returns to her natal home, she doesn’t show any sense of belonging to that house or its inhabitants. Instead of taking care of her ailing grandmother, Sula packs her to the old age home and gets rid of her to lead a hassle free life. The kind of a person Sula ultimately becomes is a classic example of how destructive a fractured identity can be as Gill Rye notes, “It is this ongoing conflict between destruction and reparation that gradually allows the child to separate psychologically from the mother and to become an independent individual. It signifies bitterness” (Rye and Worton, 71).

Another kind of mother-daughter relationship that Morrison deals with is between Helen Wright and her daughter Nel Wright. Helen Wright had a disturbed childhood. Her mother was a whore, therefore, she was brought up by her grandmother who also gave her the lessons of life. Helen felt ashamed of her family background and believed that it was “somehow flawed” (Morrison, 20) Her marriage to Willey Wright gave her the much needed

escape from her Creole family. When she came to Medallion, she started following the town's norms and standards and unlike her mother, Helen became a highly conservative and religious woman. Helen believed that marriage is the *summum bonum* of a woman's life and when Nel was born it was "more comfort and purpose than she ever hoped to find in her life" (Morrison, 18).

Helen's husband was a seaman and lived away from the family and that made Nel, Helen's priority. Helen painstakingly tries to build a secure world around Nel and guards her moves which ultimately become the cause of tension in this mother-daughter relationship. Nancy Friday in *My mother, My Self* observes, "there is real love between most mothers and daughters, but the problem arises when the mother doesn't allow the daughter the 'separation' from her and infuses her with her own 'fears', refuses to let her grow and tries to keep the symbiotic relationship beyond psychologically advisable limits. The relationship is particularly damaged when the mother becomes the representative of patriarchy" (Friday, 28). In the present context, Helen commits the same mistake. Helen is deeply interested in ensuring her daughter's well-being but she "is not particularly maternal or nurturing" (Beaulieu, 116), comments Beaulieu. Nel, who is dark-skinned and not so beautiful is made to feel inferior by her mother who judges her on the parameters of the American standards of beauty as she repeatedly tells Nel, "Don't just sit there, honey. You could be pulling your nose" (Morrison, 28). Helen's actions aren't only affecting Nel's psyche and damaging her self-esteem, but these actions also weaken the cordial bond between the mother and the daughter.

Further, Helen also fails miserably in proving herself to be the role model for her daughter. When the mother-daughter duo goes to pay their visit to Helen's ailing grandmother, Helen mistakenly enters the White section of the train and is rebuked by the White conductor. She feels humiliated and apologizes to the conductor as if she has committed a crime and this invites harsh reaction from the fellow passengers. At this moment, Helen appears to be a helpless "street pup" (Morrison, 21) to her daughter and from the reaction of the passengers, Nel "felt both pleased and ashamed to sense that these men, unlike her father, who worshiped his graceful, beautiful wife, were bubbling with a hatred for her mother" (Morrison, 22). Nel's reaction is a reflection of the fact that she has no absolute reverence towards her mother. This conflict becomes so pronounced at a particular point of time in Nel's psychic apparatus that she refuses to submit to repression and resolves, "I'm me. I'm not Nel. I'm not her daughter. I'm me. Me..." (Morrison, 28).

The child psychologists constantly lay tremendous emphasis on the fact that physical affection plays a vital role in strengthening the relationship between a child and the parents. This may be accounted as one of the reasons for the failure of the mother-daughter

relationship in the novel as neither the Peace women nor Helen Wright show any physical love for their children. Rochelle, Nel's grandmother, is the only female character who falls out of the line. When Rochelle meets Nel for the first time she hugs her and this gesture has such a profound effect on Nel that while she "sat on the red-velvet sofa listening to her mother but remembering the smell and the tight, tight hug of the woman in yellow" (Morrison, 28).

Helen might not have been a doting mother but she successfully models her daughter according to her own whims and desires, as is pointed out by the novelist, "Under Helen's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (Morrison, 18). Nel is conditioned by her mother in believing that marriage is "the woman's adventure, the object of her quest, her journey's end" (Heiburn, 309). Once married, Nel dissolves like a salt doll. Whatever identity she had, she loses it and is unable to make space for herself on her own. Like her mother, she walks the chalked path of righteousness and goodness as befits a woman. The Wright women are so obsessed with idea of maintaining the traditions and values that they lose their individual identity. Thus, their relationship demonstrates an acute psychological damage which is the result of taking the idea of virtue and goodness to its extreme.

Morrison breaks the immensely powerful mother myth and suggests that the mothers in the novel fail to induce the feeling of self-worth in daughters as they themselves still feel entangled in the memories of their respective childhood. The mothers also fail to be the "umbrella figure" and "culture bearers" (Stepto, 27). The nonchalant attitude of the mothers towards their daughters and vice-versa bars the fostering of their relationship. Due to this, the mothers as well as the daughters do not appear as a wholesome family unit. Instead, they are viewed as characters having their individual desires and expressions. They express them in their own way and each looks for her way of realizing her ambitions and each comes to terms with her problems in her own way.

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