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"Flying Down" into the Heart of Darkness Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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❐ ABSTRACT ❐

This study aims at examining an important aspect in Toni Morrison's novels: it is the aspect of 'blackness' which made Morrison's works 'private' and 'universal' at the same time. Through studying Morrison's novel Sula, I reveal how blackness constructs definitions about identity and gender. In Sula, blackness becomes the orbit around which issues about identity, race, gender, and power revolve, and the motif for fantasies about freedom and the formation of an identity beyond limitations. Blackness forms the only real past and present in the lives of black people and hence, any attempt, whether individual or communual, to transcend this history, is doomed to fail. Through the triple plot Morrison uses, she moves gradually from the individual to the community to emphasize that only by embracing their past, torture and all, can black people find solutions to the existential, racial, and gender problems from which they suffer.

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"السقوط في قلب الظلام"
رواية توني موريسون "سولا"

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(قبل للنشر في 1998/2/10)

□ الملخّص □

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء جانب هام في روايات الكاتبة السوداء توني موريسون، وهذا الجانب هو "السواد" الذي يجعل رواياتها "خصوصية" و "عالمية" في الوقت ذاته. فمن خلال دراسة رواية Sula للكاتبة موريسون، أبين كيف يساهم "السواد" في تركيب تعاريف هامة حول الهوية الفردية والفروق بين الجنسين. في هذه الرواية يصبح "السواد" المحور الذي تدور حوله عدة قضايا مثل الهوية، والعرقية، والسلطة، والدافع المسؤول عن الفانتازيا التي تقدمها الرواية حول الحرية وإمكانية تكوين هوية فردية تتجاوز كل القيود. ففي مجتمع يشكل "السواد" ماضيه وحاضره، تبوء كل محاولة لتخطي هذا التاريخ، فردية كانت أو جماعية، بالفشل. ومن خلال الحبكة الثلاثية التي تقدمها الكاتبة، تتمكن من الانتقال التدريجي من الفرد إلى المجموعة لتؤكد أن السود يستطيعون إيجاد الحلول للمشكلات الوجودية والعرقية التي يعانون منها عن طريق التزامهم بماضيهم وقبولهم به، بكل العذاب والشقاء الذي يتضمنه.

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In an interview with her, Toni Morrison declares: "I want my work to be a private thing for public consumption"[1] exactly like the specifically black Jazz music which invaded the world. In fact, this is how Morrison uses blackness in her second novel *Sula* (1973). Blackness is the 'private thing' that connects all the characters in the novel. In *Sula,* blackness becomes the oribt around which issues about identity, race, gender, and power revolve, and the motif for fantasies about escape, freedom, and the formation of an identify beyond limitations. My concern in this study is to reveal how blackness constructs identity and gender definitions in the community. I am further going to argue that since blackness is the only real past and present in the lives of those people, any attempt, whether individual or communal, to transcend this history, is doomed to fail. Through the triple plot Morrison employs in *Sula,* she moves from the individual to the community, and emphasizes that only by embracing their past, torture and all, can black people find solutions to the existential, racial, and gender crises from which they suffer.

The consciousness of a place without a history, a community without a center, and an individual without an identity, is brought foreward at the outset of the story. Even the narrator's attempt to present a clear insight into the story is undermined as the confused story of the shell-shocked Shadrack trails upon that of a community which has almost forgotten its history. Originally the creation of this community was "a nigger joke"[2] and its continuity at present relied on a fantasy about a better future through building a bridge across the river to connect it with the other world. The town is significantly called "the bottom" (p. 3), but in reality it was situated up the hill, a barren land which a white man offered to his freed slave after he convinced the poor man that it was called so because "when God looks down, it's the bottom"(p.5). The bottom is more concerned about its present and survival, about what Shadrack, Sula, and "what they themselves were all about"(p.6), than about its history. In linking these two individuals with the community and with history, the narrator draws our attention to the importance of looking at them together. Both Shadrack and Sula are individuals experimenting to find meanings and definitions of identity and freedom in an enclosed social system that is poor, exploited, and above all, *black* (emphasis mine).

As a matter of fact, Sula's story is shaped by Shadrack's madness. For the Shell-shocked solider, self-discovery is accompanied with self-fragmentation. Shadrack's discovery of his blackness and its consequences forms a miniature of other recurrent discoveries made by Sula and finally by the community itself. Almost out of senses due to the horrific scenes he witnessed in the war, and tied in a straitjacket by the unsympathetic nurses at the army hospital, Shadrack loses control. His

Obsession is to connect the word "private" by which he is addressed, with his own face which he seems to have forgotten because of his traumatic experience. He wants to link his present with his past, to establish presence through absence. Interpreting the word "private" as "something secret", Shadrack tries hard to allow his mind to "slip into whatever cave mouths of memory it chose"(p.l0) in an attempt to escape confrontation with the secret by discovering it in memory. But the problem is not solved through memory, and the narrator states that Shadrack's very life depended on releasing "the knots" of his existence. Shadrack, we are informed, does not know "who or what he was"(p. 13) and this identity crisis is only resolved after he faces himself. Imprisoned and humiliated, the emotionally and physically battered Shadrack discovers the secret "in the toilet water" at night when the only thing he could distinguish is "a grave black face ... so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him" (p. 13). Shadrack realizes that his blackness is the only real and comprehensive thing about him. It connects his present with his past and gives him knowledge, and that was all he wanted: "When the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more" (p. 13).

I stressed Shadrack's act of facing because of its textual importance since it recurs as a motif entailing different discourses, actions, and consequences. In her study of the Facing Tradition in African American Literature, Kimberly W. Benston examines facing as a motif and suggests that it only occurs with individuals and communities which feel the pressure of being looked at and identified as the other. Hence, the neglected, down-trodden Shadrack tries hard to find a center for himself, to know what and where he is, and blackness is the answer to all these questions. Benston further argues that "underlying" this "motif of facing is the effort to constitute the self in a postspecular relation to the otherness against which the self seems to arise."[3] Upon the revelation of his blackness Shadrack discovers his psychological mutilation, his imprisonment and isolation as the other, and reacts immediately, transforming himself from the black other to the other's other, as the community's pariah, the mad, fragmented outcast who stands beyond communal bliss.

Shadrack reacts to his confrontation with blackness by attempting to escape the past and the present through emptying blackness of a major constituent: fear. In her study of fantasy as subversive literature. Rosemary Jackson defines the fantastic as that which "gives utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence within a dominant 'realistic' order."[4] Shadrack's fantasy initiates the exorcism of fear which is repressed inside the blacks: fear from exploitation, fear from the future and from the past. The National Suicide Day which Shadrack invents is his own art of self-expression, his

fantastic discourse about blackness, and his policy about survival. His hypothesis is that if one day was dedicated to let one's fears out, that might render the "rest of the year ... safe and free."(p. 14). But this peculiar art of self expression labels Shadrack as the "mad other" and once the limits of his madness are defined, he is left outside communal codes and values, and he is fitted "into the scheme of things"(p.15).

The discourse with which the novel opens through Shadrack's madness develops to become a more conscious analysis of blackness, femininity, and what the narrator terms as "me-ness" in Sula's case. Though different in sex, consciousness, and experience from the mad Shadrack, Sula is later linked with him and dismissed as the community's pariah. Like Shadrack's, her story is one of self-definition, rebellion, exile, and finally death. Sula's story occupies the body of the novel and is loaded with serious issues which start with the quest for identity and develop to become a struggle for freedom which questions the black woman's relation to the various discourses of power.

As Shadrack strives to embrace his past, Sula, together with her best friend Nel, and the majority of female characters in the novel seem keen to escape from, or if possible, to reject their past. When the story moves to Sula's childhood, a new kind of community seems to take control, while the larger black community retreats to the position of a looker-on. The new community is that of strong-minded, tyrannical matriarchs who reign supreme over their households and impose their unprecedented authority upon their daughters. At this stage, the narrative presents a series of mother/daughter, relationships which at heart examine black women's relation to men, to the community, and to a long history of oppression. The first generation, the grandmothers, completely rejects its past which is always a long history wreaked with pain. Eva, Sula's grandmother, mutilates her leg to get the insurance money for her children after her husband abandoned her. Eva's missing leg, the absent piece that is ever present in the story, serves as a physical symbol of the psychological mutilation of black women. Eva's bitter past engenders an almost hysterical way in her love for her children. She loves to the degree of killing as she sets fire to her son Plum so that he would "die like a man,"(p.72) or of self-sacrifice as she flies out of the window to save her burning daughter. This excessive love and hate render her a strange figure with whom neither daughter nor granddaughter would identify. On the other hand, Nel's grandmother is a "Creole whore" (p. 17) who dissociates herself from her family and community physically and linguistically since, ironically, neither daughter nor granddaughter speak or understand Creole, and thus even the possibility of communicating with her is annihilated.

The second generation in the novel, the mothers, is again controlled by its past. Their rejection of the past either results in selfless conformation to predominant values as in the case of Helen, Nel's mother, or an absurd search for warmth in a hostile environment as in the case of Hannah, Sula's mother. Keen to disconnect herself from the bad mother, Nel's mother, significantly named Helen W/right, tries to perfect a character which corresponds with all the sacrosanct communal values. Helen "won all social battles" (p. 18) to grant herself a place in the black community; but, significantly, a single matter remained unresolved: "the pronunciation of her name. The people in the bottom refused to say Helene. They called her Helen Wright and left it at that."(p. 18). Hence, ironically, Helen fails to grant the assertion of her identity. This failure is brought home in the train incident which suggests that Helen Wright might have been 'right' in everything except in her forgetfulness of the limitations of her skin colour. This forgetfulness is unforgiven by the white men who spit at her in the train as a reminder. The train incident further suggests that the mother's gained place in her community was an illusion since her value as an individual is buried under her blackness. Again, the only reality about her is this blackness which provokes the "bubbling" hatred of the white men, and causes the mother's entity to dissolve under the "custard colour"(p.22).

The daughters' consciousness of their degraded mothers entails another action of dissociation which springs from the girls' confusion about their identities and engenders their different responses to the community and to the world outside. Nel's imagination is stifled, driven "underground" (p. 18) because of the mother's insistence to perfect her daughter; in this sense, the mother represents the oppressive other against whom the girl wishes to identify. With the aid of a lamp and a profound awareness of difference, Nel stares at the "face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated"(p.28) in the mirror and asserts her difference: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me"(p.28). Nel's trip was real and so was her awareness of the necessity to resist melting into her mother's character. Nel's triumphant acceptance of her "new found me-ness"(p.29) and the feelings of "joy" and "fear" (p.28) aroused by the discovery correspond with the fear which Shadrack wanted to exorcise on the National Suicide Day, and her joy correlates with the happiness Sula feels when she embraces her self at the end, and with that of the raving crowd when it greets its death in the tunnel.

The fruit of the discovery of 'me-ness" is rebellion which is characterized on Nel's part in her relationship with Sula whom Helen refuses on moral grounds. The two girls share similar backgrounds since they are daughters of distant mothers and absent fathers. They both refuse to identify with their mothers, but while Nel is the product of an

obsessively ordered house, Sula is the product of a wholly distorted one. Sula's mother prostituted her body to get sympathy, but as she granted the support of men who looked at her as "a kind and generous woman"(p.44), she was feared by the female community. Sula's first action against her matriarchal community is actually a reaction against the mother's rejection of her. The mother's refusal to identify with her daughter liberates all the feelings of pain inside Sula. Hannah's declaration: "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference,"(p.57) brings "dark thoughts"(p.57) to the girl and initiates a strong sense of self that is separate from the mother.

Sula's sense of self is revealed in two major acts in the novel. The first is when she "slashes off the tip of her finger"(p.112) to protect her friend Nel from the harassment of the white boys. Marked by mutilation and self-injury, this act of self-assertion situates Sula in opposition to the other sex and the other race. The second act is performed immediately after she overhears her mother's unsympathetic rejection; it is the drowning of Chicken Little by Sula. This incident reveals the violence with which Sula is ready to stamp her self-assertion. Marianne Hirsch reads the death of Chicken and the other crimes committed by women in the novel as an unconscious refusal of motherhood as the two girls perceive it."[5] The drowning of Chicken at the hands of Sula is a key moment in the text. At a period when Sula was budding with life, the mother's rejection enacts an immediate revenge which, in Lacan's terms, results from the inability to identify with the mother,[6] who is again the "other". This act of drowning contributes to the creation of a secret self symbolically represented in the dark close in the w/hole that sucks Chicken in. This empty space in the water, or in the tunnel later on, becomes a metaphor through which different and "distinctive modalities of meaning" and "forms of knowledge"[7] about identity, history, and the self, are constructed.

Sula's creation of a secret self is emphasized by her encounter with Shadrack following the incident. As Shadrack discovers the secret of the drowning, Sula is the only one able to probe his secret self represented in his "home", where she discovers "neatness", "order" and "restfulness"(p.60) in the cottage of the publically labelled "mad" Shadrack. This encounter leaves Sula with more questions about identity, sanity, and the necessity to look at matters from the inside. It further disturbs her sense, and the reader's, of order and disorder. The encounter further alludes to possible meeting grounds between the two as they are later identified as the community's pariahs. However, the narrative seems to suggest that disintegration from the family or the community is connected with self-definition, and it would certainly entail separation from the self. The refusal to succumb to a preexisting norm is necessary

for growth and change. For, as Nel's self-discovery ends with her marriage and conformation to moral codes, Sula's experimental life starts at this same moment which registers her departure from the community, the family, and from an essential part of her past and self, her friend Nel.

The narrator asserts that Nel's marriage to Jude who was desperate to restore the mutilated masculinity which he felt as a result of his job as "a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman" (p. 83), was necessary to retrieve his lost superiority. Nel's loss of "me-ness" is the cause and result of Jude's acquisition of it through marriage; his "adulthood" would be fully "recognized" through Nel's passivity which would make "the whole venture seem like ... his conquest"(p.33) and would thus inflate his sense of self. Marriage for the psychologically and sexually mutilated Jude is the solution for the gender and race trouble he suffers from, but for Nel, it puts an end to the process of self-formation.

As Nel's marriage ends part one of the novel and with it Nel's own fantasy about the self, the community starts the second part with a new fantasy about survival. This fantasy is conjured up by the whites, as the ten-year project of "the New River Road" (p. 81) which was supposed to connect the community with the world is now changed for a tunnel. The emphasis on the illusion of this project is revealed in the fact that the tunnel project is still called "The New River Road" (p. 81). The second important incident in this part is Sula's return after ten-years absence. As the community strives to construct an identity as the other, through the fantasy of the tunnel which is its hope in survival, Sula returns to face the difficult task of constructing a female identity that is triply the other. As a black female, she is the other's other, and consequently the other of her own self. Hence, the dialogue of the construction of female identity at this stage is not only with the self as other, but also with the aspects of otherness within the same self. Sula was fully aware of her gender-race problem which renders her "unshaped and formless" (p. 53). Together with Nel, they knew that they were "neither white nor ti» male" and hence "all freedom was forbidden to them"(p.52). As Sula cannot find a form in friendship, she tries hard to search beyond the limitations of socially-accepted relationships.

Sula's insistance to transcend limitations, her refusal to be constructed by any one except herself presents a challenge to the community, and even to her own self. Her challenge to concepts like blackness, femaleness, and power is undermined because of her lack of form to express her views about these matters. Actually, Sula is often identified with water in the novel, "which is a primal force that has the power of fluidity but has to be contained within a form or it will become destructive. "[8] As the black community plunges itself into power relations when it draws its fantasy of survival from the false promises of

the white community, Sula implicates herself in the same relations of power which she rebelled against when she tries to use sexuality, which is a negative social construct of femaleness, in the creation of her fantasy about self-making. Sula experiments with sex as a form through which she hopes to explain the act of freedom within an enclosed, powerless system. This form is an extension to the art form Shadrack finds and an introduction to the form the community will find, to express itself at the end.

Sula's refusal to accept the formation of sexuality within accepted social constructs is directly linked to the issue of blackness and to her distinct sense of herself as the other. She rebelliously refuses motherhood on the grounds that it annihilates the self, and that, unable to make her own self, she would be unfit to make others: "I don't want to make somebody else, I want to make myself"(p. 91). This rejection of motherhood is linked to her identity crisis as "a woman and a coloured woman" (p. 142) which makes her feel her desexualization. She understands well that a black woman is a mutilated woman, that a coloured woman is "the same as being a man" (p. 142). Sula tries to reassert herself through the use of this mutilated sexuality as an active form, to make it subservient to her own will, and thus she places herself at the center of gender-struggle.

Sula uses sexual experience to form her individual views and to probe the essence of socially-approved relationships. The freedom she experiences in sex causes a severe criticism of the confined lives of women. Sula preceives that whether married or not, women are dead in life, as married women shrink into "Strached coffins" and those without men become hateful like "sour-tipped needles featuring one constant empty eye" (p. 122). Sula is also conscious of the element of fear that governs women's behaviour in the community. She declares that "flying" to freedom demands a person who is ready to try the fall and its pleasures, to accept it, because it entails grave consequences. The metaphor Sula draws for Nel and her likes is quite expressive. Like the spider which dangles in the dark in its own web, they are "more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below because "If they were touched by the snake's breath, ... they were victims" and it is so easy to act as a victim, but to be a pariah with an initiative, demands "invention: a thing to do with the wings ... a full surrender to the downward flight" (p. 120). Sula is aware that it is only "the flick of' the communal tongues which keeps women away from flying down.

Sula's free fall further allows her to produce revisions to the formation of a different black female identity that is solely related to the self not to the male other, and as she attempts to find a center for this self, she endangers the self-entity of the "other(s)". As she has freed the

feelings of psychological and sexual mutilation inside her friend Nel when she stole her husband, she engenders these same feelings in the women of her community, as she debases their pride in their men by dumping her lovers after the first encounter. She discarded with them "with no excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgement, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula had bruised," (p. 115). This threat Sula poses to the profoundly established power-relations through using sexuality as a form of power alienates her from the community as different.

Sula's alienation 'allows her as an outcast insider to present a new version of black man's history from a black woman's point of view. She understands the essence of Jude's story as one of power and domination rather than powerlesness. Placing the black man at the center of racial struggle, Sula interprets linching as a result of the white obsession with the black men's sexual power. Even white females, Sula suggests, have a mixed feeling towards black male sexuality. Furthermore, Sula gives insight into the solidarity of black male power against any subversive element which threatens men's positions inside the community.

Sula's proficy about the balck male power proves true since it was men who signed her final condemnation when their pride was threatened by Sula's interracial sexual experience. At this stage, Sula's body becomes the norm for the dynamics of power between black and white men. "It is her sexuality, read through the race relations, which structures her subjectivity within the male-dominated discourse of the black community"[(9)]. Interracial sex comes as an exit from the existential dilemma in which Sula finds herself because of her refusal to identify with the norms of her community, but it also undermines men's position to power and, therefore, Sula is singled out as the devilish, disruptive other.

In identifying itself against the evil other, the community finds a means to enhance its threatened sense of worth by which it asserts superiority, even imaginatively. People begin to "protect and love one another ... to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children; ... and band together against the devil in their midst" (pp. 117-118). The community's act of solidarity refers to its vulnerability and to Sula's. As the community is unable to expel Sula but rather uses her to reaffirm its communal integrity, Sula's violent reaction to the community's values leaves her, and for the second time in her experimental life, without a center. To use the image of the spider Sula employed before, the webs which she cut herself from to fly into other centers of the self prove crucial to her survival in that dark environment. Sula's proudly-announced self-created loneliness "my lonely is mine"(p. 143) becomes an arbitary term since she tries hard to escape from it. The defeat of the

interracial sex as a means to escape communal alienation is portrayed through Sula's dream about the disintegrating Baking Powder Lady who signals Sula's defeat and the end of her experimental life.

Both Sula's attempt to assert her free fall through transcending racial boundaries and her attempt to find self-cohesion through reconciling her sexuality with her black female identity, fail. Her efforts to become Ajax's woman are ignored by the black man who always looked at her as pig meat. The futility of this new fantasy is suggested in his wrongly presented name. Ajax is actually Albert Jacks, and after he dumps her, Sula discovers that she did not even know the man's name. Having transcended all limits, Sula is not allowed, even if she is willing, to slide back to traditional roles, to reinstate herself in the community. The failure of these two contradictory attempts to isolate herself from/or reinstate herself in, the community, dislocate Sula from the discourse of power, since the form of discourse she has chosen proves to be unfit. In a way, any attempt to form identity beyond race and gender is dangerous and is doomed to fail.

Sula's loss of control over the narrative discourse is suggested when she moves from voice to voicelessness in the final embryo-like position when she is even unable to get her last hawl out. In an opposite movement, the community crosses from voicelessness to hysterical self-expression as it drifts in the same womb-like baptisim image in which Sula dies, to join Shadrack and exorcise life and fear together. The chaotic discord with which the novel opens through Shadrack's madness changes into a human finale, a harmonious act by a community which finds a way to identify the source of its oppression and act against it. The tunnel becomes the link between Shadrack, Sula, and the community in their various attempts to find a center for their lost selves. Through the trio's final embrace of darkness, they embrace their blackness, which is the real center of their selves. Both Sual's and the community's final acts tunnel back to a past that keeps visiting on the present like a ghost. Sula wants to tell Nel, her precious past, about the triumphant death through which the self is unified, and the community reasserts its suffering through the necessity to remember its blackness, and with it, all its history.

Sula's attempt to reconstruct femaleness and blackness beyond the community and its limitations fails because she is confined within the racial and gender boundaries. "An artist with no art form" (p. 122) is the description that befits Shadrack, Sula, and their community and unifies their goal: the search for a special identity and the struggle for self-expression. As a result of the loss of form which accompanies the dangerous discovery of blackness, self-assertion becomes equivalent to self-extinction. Sula's song, for which she can't find a refrain is echoed by

the crowd's hysterical hawl which reasserts its enclosure and suppression. But, the final embryo-like image of both Sula and the community refers to the need to find an art form that can embrace gender, history, and race. Only then, can black artists, not like Sula and her community only, but perhaps like Morrison herself, find solutions to a host of problems left unsolved in the text, and create a new refrain to the story's unfinished song.

Notes

1. James Wood, An Interview with Toni Morrison, "A Terrible Privacy", *Weekend Guardian,* sat-sun., April, 18-19, (1992), p.5.
2. Toni Morrison, *Sula,* (1973), (London: Picador, 1991), p.4. All other references are to this edition and will be henceforward cited in the text.
3. Kimberly W. Benston, "Facing Tradition: Revisionary Scenes in African American Literature." *PMLA,* Vol. 105, No.l, January, (1990), p. 100.
4. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion,* (London & New York: Methuem, 1981), p.25.
5. Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother / Daughter Plot: Narrative Psychoanalysis, Feminism,* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989), p. 182.
6. Toril Moi, *Sexual / Textual Politics,* (London & New York: Routledge, 1985), p.101.
7. Deborah Guth, "A Blessing and a Burden: The Relation to the past in *Sula, Song of Solomon* and *Beloved," Modem Fiction Studies,* Vol. 39, No.3 & 4, (1993), p.578.
8. Barbara Christian, "Community and Nature: The novels of Toni Morrison," in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers,* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), p.59.
9. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" in Cheryl A. Wall, ed.. *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989), p.29.

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