

**NORMS AND ENVIRONMENT OF GENDER, SEX, AND LOVE:  
BLACK FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA***

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**Abstract:** *The present paper discusses the great African American woman novelist Toni Morrison and her novel Sula. This work is an expression of Morrison's concern for the degradation of women in society. It is about two female protagonists who have been born and brought up according to norms and an environment of gender, sex and love that shape their personalities. The female protagonists Sula and Nel represent two different opinions and attitudes toward gender roles, sex and love. Nel follows the conventional norms of society; while Sula throughout her life rejects the traditional notions of feminine 'responsibility' and refuses to see women as only wives and mothers. This paper also explains how these norms and environment of gender, sex*

*and love destroy the relationship between not only men and women but also women themselves.*

**Keywords:** *black, environment, gender, love, norms, oppression, sex, woman.*

The African American novelist Toni Morrison is a writer deeply concerned with issues such as race, gender, sex, and class. A Nobel laureate, she is one of the most prominent writers of fiction in contemporary America, as Raynor and Butler note: “The numerous accolades and awards honoring Morrison for her literature testify to her importance as one of the most prolific and talented writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (175). Her focal point is often girls and young women situated at the bottom of African American society. She writes about aspects of black life connected to race, gender, sex, and class, as well as about the importance of the ancestors in the community. She also writes about historical and social matters, but the individual person is always the center of attention. Sexuality is a recurring motif in her works and helps her to develop her themes of gender, love and oppression.

Over the past few centuries, prevalent gender conventions have reflected an uneven balance of power between the sexes diffused into the minds of all members of society. The norms and conventions of society influence the mind of the people, and the gender conventions handed down to us by our ancestors, relatives and immediate environment are no exception to this. Gender signifies the description of the self, the condition of being man and woman. The term ‘Gender’ is commonly confused with the term ‘Sex’, but in a social context sex

is different from gender. 'Gender' refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women, and 'Sex' refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women (WHO).

The gender codes, the complexity of sexuality and love, and the oppressive environment in Morrison's works can all be recognized as aspects of the society of the twentieth century, familiar to all. She clearly demonstrates sympathy for marginalized people through the portrayal in her fiction of the most vulnerable members of society such as children and women. As Raynor and Butler point out, critics have examined how Morrison "[...] illustrates the destructive nature of patriarchy both within the mainstream American society and African American communities. Morrison's novels serve as "historical" narratives by showing the inextricable links between gender, race, and class" (178). In the analysis of women writers, gender studies also provides useful perspectives on issues related to the social construction of what is feminine and what is masculine: "Whereas *sex* is the biological difference between males and females, *gender* is the cultural difference [...] Western culture [...] has ruled that certain kinds of behaviour are "abnormal" and "unnatural" for females to practice [...]" (Griffith 191). This is why the study of gender in a particular society must look to its culture for answers, as Barker states: "Since gender is a cultural construct, it is said to be malleable in a way that biology may not be" (289). Ideas around gender may be altered or controlled by forces or influences in society, whereas biology may not be. Morrison's writing is profoundly concerned with the ways in which ideas of the feminine and the masculine are constructed in society.

Morrison presents through her novels the more complex and damaging aspects of masculine and patriarchal societies, and how such societies destroy the relationship not only between men and women, but also between women themselves. In *Sula* (1973) three generations of women, Sula, Hannah, and Eva, represent economically and sexually independent people who gain strength from each other in the absence of any male member. Women are also portrayed either in terms of being focused around the home and the family, like Nel and Helene, who see sexuality as part of marriage, or like Peace, deviating from the conventional norms. So we have Eva the desexed matriarch, Hannah the promiscuous woman who fails to form healthy relationships with men or give her daughter the love she needs, and finally Sula, who refuses to take any responsibility in the name of marriage or to act like a good woman. Nel and Sula, though quite different from each other, develop a friendship. Nel appears as a traditional and conventional lady like Helene and lives with limited self-expression of these gender-identified roles. By contrast, Sula rejects all the social conventions taught to her within the family like her grandmother Eva Peace, who despite her physical handicap defies the sexually inhibiting gender roles and challenges the conventional notion of womanhood as well as of motherhood.

Gender is clearly a dominant theme in all of Toni Morrison's novels and shapes her characters' conflicts. The way sexuality is portrayed in the different relationships between the characters in *Sula* suggests a clear and direct link to the gender roles in the society in which the novel is set. The main characters in the novel are women. The main character, Sula, is shown from her teens in the year 1922 to her death in 1940, a lonely little girl. Morrison introduces the other

characters first, including Shadrack in 1919 and Sula's best friend Nel in 1920, and then Sula is introduced in 1922. This shows that Morrison introduced and depicted the environment in which Sula's character and personality grew and were shaped. Sula's grandmother, Eva, was abandoned by her husband, BoyBoy, when their children were young. Eva later became the vigorous matriarch presiding over a busy household and a constant stream of boarders. To Eva, Plum, Sula's uncle, is not a man, and she reasons that if he cannot live like a man, then she has to help him at least to die like one. In the end, Eva kills Plum, and in this manner she appears as one of the main characters of the novel and "The creator and sovereign of this enormous house [...]" (Morrison 30). Eva receives an insurance payment for her injured foot that she had sacrificed for her family by putting it under a train. Thus Eva takes on a man's role and provides money for the family.

Eva's action in killing Plum, her son, represents the ambiguous power of love. Of all her children, Eva clearly loved Plum the best. In a conversation between Hannah and Eva Morrison shows how Eva loved her son, as she says, "But I held him close first. Real close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy" (72). This had not changed, even with his return from the war as a heroin addict, and Eva's decision to kill him is an expression of her love for him. Because she loves him she is unable to watch as he sinks further into addiction, and so she kills him. On one level, this is a sacrifice: a mother putting her son, whom she loves, out of his misery and thereby losing him. On another level, it is an act of selfishness; because Eva believes that she loves him, she therefore also thinks she has the right to decide what is best for him, and she believes death to be better than addiction. Through the relationship between Eva and Plum,

Morrison makes the claim that love is far more complicated than the way in which it is usually perceived. Love is not merely a thing of beauty and moral good, Morrison claims, it is rather a forceful amoral emotion that drives people to actions both selfish and selfless, both beautiful and horrible. In fact, as can be seen in Eva's killing of Plum, love is so complex and intricate that it can imbue a single action with both selfishness and selflessness. In other words, love is not subject to morality.

Sula grows up in this environment with Eva and Hannah as her role models. Eva does not have sexual relations with anybody, but flirts with her male visitors and enjoys their company. Eva's daughter Hannah, however, enjoys frequent sex with any man who comes to visit the house. But Eva fails to qualify as a role model for Hannah and Sula where healthy relationships are concerned. The Peace women's love of men clearly shows their need for male company. As Morrison writes:

With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run to it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter. (41)

Hannah is portrayed as a woman who is sexually confident and in charge of herself. Her behaviour is perhaps engendered by Eva's lack of love for her children when they were small, which in turn is reflected in her neglect of Sula. Hannah has never demanded anything from her male lovers, is not jealous or in

search of a relationship; her interest is only in enjoying sex for pleasure. She is in conflict with the traditional norms and values in the society due to her lack of emotional engagement. It is in this environment that Sula grows up and it has a major effect on her and her relationships with men.

The contrast between Sula's and Nel's upbringings is startling. Nel's household is bound by the social standards that define the conventional meaning of 'family', while Sula's household is built on an unconventional family structure, since she lives in a multigenerational household run by women. Whereas Nel's household is static and repressive, Sula's household is vibrant, active, and subject to constant change. A constant stream of boarders complements the long-term residents of her house. The differences in the houses are evident in the physical structures themselves. Nel's house is always in order and well-kept; Sula's house is huge and rambling, as Eva has added on additional rooms piecemeal over time. The houses symbolize the different degrees of potential for growth and change in the girls' families. Morrison depicts the relationship between Sula and Nel, who became friends. They come from very different environments but their isolation binds them together. They were both molested by Ajax at the age of twelve and thus their first encounter with sexuality was an ambivalent mixture of fear and pleasure. For men in the Bottom to sexually harass two young girls in this manner is obviously part of the gender conventions of the Bottom. Sula and Nel do not have male members in their families and this is the only male interest and attention they received in their early adolescence. Nel, though she appears to be a conventional girl, did not respond differently to this harassment; both of them seem to have enjoyed it. As the narrator notes "The new theme they were now discovering was men.

So they met regularly, without even planning it, to walk down the road to Edna Finch's Mellow House, even though it was too cool for ice cream" (55-56). This indicates that not only the men in this society but also the girls and women act according to gender conventions.

Sula has seen her mother's cheerful expression after she has enjoyed sex with so many different men. Sula likes them but does not love them. Once she accidentally overhears Hannah talking with her friends about whether they love their children or not. Her mother's remark about her loving, but not liking, her own daughter, upsets and hurts Sula. Hannah's offhand comment that she does not like Sula even though she loves her again raises the ambivalence of a mother's love. Morrison stresses that there is a difference between loving and liking someone. Her comment heralds Sula's loss of childhood innocence. Hannah's comment reveals to Sula that love is not a simple thing and conforms to no idealistic, romantic understanding. Rather, love can be an involuntary emotion that carries a heavy weight of responsibility; love can be something that engenders frustration and annoyance; it can feel unfair, or be a burden. Hannah's comment has the effect of making Sula feel simultaneously secure and insecure: her mother will never stop loving her, but that love is not the simple thing Sula had long believed it to be. Sula's confrontation with the ambivalent, often mysterious side to human emotions is her first inkling of the complicated world of adulthood. Even Nel has been taken away from Sula and Sula is about to disappear from Nel's life because Nel is marrying Jude, "who could do real work" (81). Jude is however not able to get real men's work. This shows how the conflict between the blacks and whites in the society affects Jude. Jude's marrying Nel is an attempt to comfort himself and soothe his pain.



Their relationship is thus an example and a result of both racism and traditional gender roles in society. Nel too is an incarnation of gender roles in society. She is not interested in Jude so both marry for the wrong reasons. And the marriage in its turn destroys Nel's life, as Jude in the end betrays her for Sula. Nel is very happy to see Sula back in the Bottom and welcomes Sula's visit to her married home but is destroyed when she finds her best friend and her husband having sex together in their bedroom.

Sula's view of love is as thwarted as her attitude to sexuality, and both destroy the relationship between her and Nel. She does not see sex as anything special, which is why she is not able to understand the consequences of her sex with Jude. She is unable to comprehend the wound that she has inflicted on Nel by having sex with Jude. She is not able to relate sex to love. She talks with Jude about how everybody loves black men:

I mean, everything in the world loves you: White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? (103)

This ironically illustrates Sula's mixed-up view of love that she relates to sexuality, gender and race. Sula has something which Nel does not have, a mind of her own. She is not the typical housewife like Nel, and this unconventional behaviour of hers is what made Jude want to have sex with her. To Nel sex is something which has to take place within the conventions of

society. She links her own sexuality to her unpleasant household tasks and to marriage as an institution. She has never tried to see it as an expression of an individual's healthy longing and desires. She is unable to separate her individual sex needs from society's norms, and accepts only the norms of gender in the society.

Sula has no consistency in her personality and has developed into an 'oddball' as a consequence of her mother and grandmother's behaviour, her family background and the gender conventions of a rigid society. She is independent and manly like her mother and grandmother. "She rebels against the role she is assigned to take within the black community. Consequently, she becomes a transgressor and an outlaw, just like Shadrack" (Suranyi 20). Sula breaks off her relationships with her family, her childhood companion and her best friend, as well as the social codes regarding morality and gender by having sex with Jude. She totally refuses to fit/ into the codes of gender in the Bottom. Even the fact that she sleeps with white men is another example that shows her violation of the norms of society. She uses men in a manner in which men have traditionally been using women. She becomes a danger to their community. Christian makes a similar comment about Sula: "She challenges her community's definition of a woman, and since that definition is intrinsic to their philosophy of life, they turn her into a witch" (247). Here it may be said that Sula's background and her wish for independence do not' allow her to adopt the norms of gender in the society.

Sula is separated from her family, friends and society, so she has never found a companion in her male lover, but only sex. Like her mother, she used to enjoy sex with male members of the household, but never found the same

pleasure and satisfaction – only misery and sorrow, as the storyteller points out: “There, in the centre of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning” (123). Sula is not able to form a relationship with anybody or even with herself. She doesn’t know how to properly relate to anybody in the society on a personal level. She has experienced the lack of a caring father figure and a loving mother and this has resulted in an emotionally damaged life. Her relationship with Ajax has influenced her, and even Ajax was attracted to her because he thought that she resembled his mother. While having sex with others she experienced only sadness but with Ajax she experienced something new, which pleased her. Like Sula, Ajax wanted to enjoy freedom and not to be overburdened by family responsibilities. So also he liked Sula’s freedom, “He liked for her to mount him so he could see her towering above him [...]. She looked down, down from what seemed an awful height at the head of the man whose lemon-yellow gabardines had been the first sexual excitement she’d known” (129). This image of Sula towering above Ajax symbolizes that she is not happy following the conventional gender codes.

To Nel, Sula represents shame and the loss of love, loss of her love for Jude and even her love for her children. Though Nel marries Jude for the wrong reasons, she certainly feels deprived of both the love and the sex that normal life had promised her. Nel and Sula view their place in society differently and their understanding of love is different. Sula does not link sex to love, which is reflected in their conversation:

And you didn't love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.

What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?

You laying there in that bed without a dime or a friend to your name having done all the dirt you did in this town and you still expect folks to love you? ...

... Oh, they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me. (145)

The friendship between Nel and Sula is ruined by Sula's inability to accept and follow the gender codes of society. At first Nel thinks that she lost Jude because of Sula, but at the end she realises that it was not Jude she had been missing all those years, but Sula, her childhood friend. On her visit to Sula's grave, Nel acknowledges her regret for the course of her life. When she cries out Sula's name, she is finally able to admit her feelings of love toward Sula and is therefore able to mourn her loss. And in grieving for Sula, Nel is able to mourn for herself, for the sacrifices she made to gain the social acceptance which Sula defined herself by refusing. Sula breathes a new life into traditional Black stereotypes of the Bottom, as Sumana points out that:

Sula thus represents unrestricted and multiple perspectives in the novel [...]. Sula, indeed, rejects traditional ordering principles as they relate to self and society. She rejects traditional notions of family, eschewing marriage, babies, and grandparental care. She rejects traditional sexual mores as well, ignoring the 'ownership' principle of marriage and operating on the principle that sex is non-competitive and non-threatening. Thus, her entire life represents a rejection of traditional notions of feminine 'responsibility'. Sula refuses to see women as only wives and mothers. (74)

Thus in this novel *Sula* represents unrestricted and multiple perspectives. *Sula* shows how gendered oppression in American society marks individuals and relationships. It also criticises the African American community for its tradition of oppressing and exploiting women and children. For Morrison the lack of loving and benevolent elders is the most important factor in the degeneration of the younger generation. Furthermore, she critically examines how society creates outsiders, with not only individuals but even whole families becoming victims of society's norms and environment of gender, sex and love.

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