

REJECTION OF THE CULTURAL CONCEPT OF GENDER IN *SULA*

Ms. Medha Sarjerao Sagare

Research Scholar

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University,
Aurangabad, Ms, India

Dr. Mathpati Sudhir

Assistant Professor

Department of English
Adarsh Mahavidyalaya, Omerga
Dist. osmanabad, Ms, India

Abstract:

Sula is a second novel by Tony Morrison centred on the eponymous female protagonist and her childhood friend Nel. The novel comes under the category of 'bildungsroman' also known as 'coming - of- age' novel. Generally the coming of age novel stresses the journey of adolescent youth from immaturity to maturity where the wide experience of society eventually modified the personality of the adolescent struggler and he or she is accepted by society as a responsible citizen. The eponymous protagonist is an exception to the standard norms of the general theory of the coming of age novel. Sula refuses to accept the societal frame created for females. The present research paper thoroughly discusses Sula's rejection of gender role and strong revolt against patriarchal society. Sula whose responses are spontaneous and intuitive and therefore becomes impossible to predict. Moreover, she is bold, unconventional and dominant. In short, according to her native community known as Bottom community in the novel, she is an embodiment of evil hence her presence is harmful to society. Sula remains honest to herself, many incidents in the novel prove that she is beyond any criticism and it is a blunder to judge her through the patterned norms of the society.

Keywords: Society, Gender, Sex, Patriarchy, Submission, Acceptance, Revolt, Orthodox, Culture, Exploitation, Discrimination, Black, White, etc.

The eponymous protagonist Sula and her soulmate Nel are at the centre of the novel. The novel focuses on the 'coming of age' of these two girls. These novels stressing the journey of an individual from childhood to maturity are known as bildungsroman or 'coming of age novels'. Bildungsroman is a German term that can be defined as – "Bildungsroman refers to a novel that is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former). it describes the process by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life" (Cuddon, 77).

Gender is another important term that is under discussion in the present research paper. Earlier the demarcation line between the sex and gender was not clear hence the terms were considered as a synonym but at present much light is thrown on their connotations and used differently. The credit goes to the feminist movement for making the demarcation between the two terms. Earlier the two terms were differentiated on biological grounds but at present, these two terms are differentiated on sociological grounds. French feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir was the first in the field who provided orientation regarding these two terms on sociological grounds. According to French philosopher and second-wave feminist critics, the term sex is used to determine the physiological

differences on biological grounds. Male and females are different from each other on the basis of the reproduction system which they have by birth. On the other hand, gender is a term having sociological connotations that have values and meanings ascribed by society. This debate gives more prominence to 'gender' and brings forth how the role of women is naturalized. In simple terms, from a woman, it is generally expected that she should learn cooking, have a husband and children and should take care of her family. The point is that this role is not given to her by birth on biological a ground that is sex. On the contrary, this role is given to the gender by society. Tony Morrison through her character Sula overthrows the gender role. She never wedded, have no children and never performed the duties expected from her and keep challenging social norms. In short, she refused gender roles.

Various incidents in the novel prove that Sula's rebellion against the cultural norms of the society. Sula's character is more important than Nel because she revolts against the patterns of life and gives shock to the orthodox mind by topsy-turvy the binary opposition good and evil. Sula represents the dark and beastly side of human nature on the other hand Nel is bright and tamed. The difference between the two lies in their upbringing. Sula grows up in a relatively free household full of guests and strangers where Nel is a protected child raised by her mother keeping in mind to separate her daughter from the community. In Sula's case, her grandmother Eva Peace is a very dominating and courageous figure. Eva struggled a lot after her husband abandoned her when Hannah; Sula's mother was a child. The tragedy continued when Sula's father died young. As a result of these things, Sula is grown up in a family dominated by women. Eva Peace along with her children provided shelter to the strangers therefore her house is always full of guests who belong to the different strata of the society. The culmination of this is a loss of homogeneity of the house. Sula is the product of such a house therefore she is bold and untamed. On the contrary, the upbringing of Sula's friend Nel is disciplined and meticulous. Nel's parents Helene Wright and Wiley Wright are largely responsible for such protective upbringing. Helen is fond of cleaning. She keeps her house always neat and ensures the same behaviour from her daughter Nel. It should be noted that Nel's mother's strictness and excessive emphasis on cleanliness suffocates Nel and generates the feeling of in-adequateness as well as insecurity. The strict atmosphere at the house compels Nel to dream of escape. She started dreaming about the saviour who will free her from this tyranny. She believes that her husband will provide her with the happiness she is longing for. It is clear from the difference between the two girls that both are incomplete without each other. Nel has something that is not in Sula's personality and Sula has something that is not in Nel's personality. Both need each other to become complete.

Symbolically Sula and Nel are the two aspects of human nature one is bad and the other is good. Nel's surname indirectly suggests her right path. It is also accepted by the community of the Bottom. The notion of right and wrong is highly significant in the novel. Nel's perception of being right gets changed at the end of the novel that makes profound impact on her understanding of the life. Few incidents in the novel are extremely helpful to create demarcation line between the two friends and their chosen path. The Chicken Little's unfortunate sudden death is an important incident that compale Sula and Nel to adulthood. This is an incident where both learns about the harsh truth regarding death as well as sexuality. Chicken Little, a little child, accidentally slips into river when Sula was playing with him and giving swing to him. The child accidentally down into the river and died. Sula never intended to harm him she was just playing with him unintentionally. The accident is just witnessed by her intimate friend Nel and shell shock Shadrack. Both friends never disclose the secret to anybody and there is a little possibility that Shadrack will tell this anyone because of his mental illness. The tragic death of a black boy makes no difference to the world but the incident killed the innocence of two girls. The incident happened after the significant moment when Sula's mother told her that she had no place in her life and no love for her daughter too. Rejection by her mother and self hatred created by the crime alternate her personality thoroughly. This is the moment when she wiped out the difference between good and evil.

Nel as mentioned earlier tread the conventional path of life by marrying and taking responsibility for her domestic duties. It was expected from any girl in the 1920s that the marriage, birth of children and domestic duties are all that a woman's life comprises. The deviation from these norms is considered immorality. Nel on this criterion is a good girl, on the other hand, Sula decided to take education in college and travelling across the country. The novel remains silent for almost one decade in her life. Sula returned to the Bottom after ten years. She is now a modern woman who is equally careless about the opinions of the conventional mind. Her attitude provides a chance for the

community to perceive her as an embodiment of evil. What shocks her community and the reader are the few incidents that make her behaviour seem strange. The first incident occurred when Sula and Nel were harassed by a group of Irish white boys on their way to the ice cream parlour. These mischievous boys try to make fun by blocking their path as it is very narrow. Sula and Nel are no more considered a child. Among these boys, Ajax has a special ability to describe passersby. He described Sula and Nel as 'pig meat' in his typical tone of voice. The behaviour of the group of Irish boys must be understood in the light of psychology. The group of Catholic Irish boys suffered the same kind of harassment through the native white Protestant community. The harassment of Sula and Nel comes from revenge mentality which they cannot take from white Protestant boys as they are natives and they are immigrants. On one such encounter with the group of Irish boys Sula makes them nervous by cutting her fingers tip and warning them of the dangerous consequences. The boys are also frightened because of the unexpected move taken by the Sula. This is the difference between Sula and Nel. Sula's behaviour is instinct based and unpredictable while Nel's behaviour is consistent and predictable.

The very next chapter again reveals the dark side of Sula's nature. The hint of something dangerous is going to happen is suggested through some bad omens. Sula's mother Hannah discussed the dream she saw last night with Eva. In the dream, Hannah saw herself in a red wedding gown. The dream implies death by burning. On the very next day while lighting the fire in the yard all of a sudden Hannah was engulfed in flames. Eva saw this from the second floor and without thinking about the consequences she jumped out to save Hannah. Eva being handicapped tried her best to save her daughter. People called an ambulance to send them into hospital. Hannah's severe injuries resulted in her death on the way to the hospital. Eva while pondering over the incident remembered that when Hannah was engulfed in flames Sula was watching the tragic event peacefully. She did not try to save the life of her mother by putting out flames. She has even not moved from her place. Sula's strange behaviour surprised Eva. How can one treat own mother so indifferently? Eva also provides a hint regarding the pleasure and curiosity Sula shows while her mother was burning in the flames. This act of coldness formulates doubt about her character from which she never came out. According to Eva the ultimate source of all bad omens is Sula. A superstitious society readily accepts her conclusion and Sula becomes the villain in the eyes of the community. It should be noted that Sula's mother Hannah was not the embodiment of virtue but the community never loses trust and considers her harmful as the community think about Sula. Though Hannah established sexual relations with men in the community their wives never considered her as a threat to their marital relationship. The community has a keen sense of what to accept and what not to accept. Sula never gained the trust she loses and the community never accepted her as a part of society.

Part two of the novel reopened after a gap of ten years. The chapter entitled 1937 opens with the arrival of Sula in her native town. The novel is extremely silent about the mysterious ten years. For the townsman, Sula is an embodiment of evil therefore they start relating bad omens with Sula's arrival. Only her intimate friend Nel is happy with her arrival. Both spend leisure time together discussing different topics. Nel is happy with her family and unlike Sula is a responsible woman serving her family best. Sula is now an attractive woman having experience of the world seduces Nel's husband Jude Green. Nel caught Sula and Jude in a compromising position in a bed. This was the last stroke of their friendship. Sula never understands the gravity of this act. For her, this is a kind of sharing as they share each and everything in life. For Nel, this is an unbearable loss of her husband and best friend. Their marital relations come to an end with divorce. Jude left the town immediately. Nel's life is now shattered, she can't overcome the pain. One incident affects the life of three-person. It is beyond Nel's imagination that why Sula betrayed her and it is beyond the imagination of Sula, why Nel is making a big fuss about a small issue. The incident proved that Jude never loved his wife. Their marriage was a kind of a compromise that breaks with a little temptation. At the end of the novel when Nel visited dying Sula she recognised that it was Sula who was more important than her husband in her life. According to Sula she only fastens the process of ruining their marriage which is eventually going to meet an end. Sula remains free from guilt.

There is a trust issue between Eva and her granddaughter Sula. Both are dominant by nature and it is not possible to keep them under a single roof without clash. There is respect and fear regarding Eva's authority. She is equally venerable for her sacrifice and motherhood. Three things about Eva remain ambiguous but rumors are spread about that. The first thing is she sacrificed her one leg to survive children when she was caught in extreme poverty. She left her children in the care of her

neighbour Mrs Suggs and disappeared for eighteen months. When she returned with one leg and ten thousand dollars she is now capable to sustain her family. It is suggested that she purposefully committed an accident on a railway track and gained this amount as compensation for the loss of her leg. This proves her love for her family. The second act is related to the death of her son Plum who returned from the battlefield having emotional loss and is addicted to heroin. Eva realized the future of the Plum and cannot see his slow poisoning death. She decided to free him from unbearable pain by dousing kerosene and setting him on fire.

There is much debate on the act of Eva but what she did is not a crime but the supreme love of a mother generated from extreme compassion. The third rumour is associated with the death of Hannah. She died by burning. The accident happened when she was setting fire to something in the yard. She was engulfed in flames suddenly. The incident was seen by Eva and without thinking about the consequences jumped from the second floor. She risked her life to save her daughter. Both were sent to the hospital in the same ambulance. There is a rumour that she killed Hannah by smothering her on her way to the hospital. One can not deny this rumour learning the Plum's incident. It is again she freed Hannah from life long-suffering and disfigured body. This act also came from her love for her daughter. These doubts are not cleared by the author and the mist of uncertainty remain surrounded her character. This mystery never affected her personality and she is accepted by the community as a symbol of motherhood. On the contrary, Sula calmly observed her mother dying without any effort to save her life. Sula also betrayed her soulmate Nel by establishing a sexual relationship with her husband. But she gave a shock to the community when she sent Eva to the old man's house. It is considered a crime in the community. Moreover, Eva provided shelter to the strangers in her house but ultimately, Sula separates her by sending her to the old man's house is a heinous act committed by Sula. In short, Sula betrayed motherhood.

The Bottom community suspicious about Sula's behaviour is deeply hurt for sending her grandmother into a nursing home. The community also strongly condemned Sula's betrayal of Nel establishing an illicit relationship with her husband. These two incidents still do not damage the trust issue with Sula but her sexual relationships with men break the last thread of trust issue that is irreparable. This act of sleeping with white men is considered the most heinous act of Sula because she betrayed the race. According to the Bottom community, Sula breaks nature's law. Henceforth the community abandoned Sula to such an extent that nobody attends the funeral of Sula after her death. Generally, the novel Sula is described as a coming of age novel but this judgement is inadequate because most of the time in the coming of age story the rebellious protagonist after many ups and downs, surrenders himself or herself to the norms of the society and ultimately becomes a useful citizen. The Sula is an exception to this because the eponymous protagonist never loses her individuality and remains rebellious to the last moment of her life. There is a need of completely different parameters to judge Sula's character. It can be said that she is not good and not bad she is just herself. She is beyond all frames created by civilized society to tame an individual. Sula is spontaneous and intuitive hence it's not possible to imagine her responses to different situations. Sula is immersed in the creation of self rejecting the predetermined models. This is conveyed through the symbol of her birthmark which is also changing with the seasons. Much has been written about the birthmark as it speaks volumes about the psyche of the person who tries to figure out what it resembles. For Shadrack who lives by fishing in the river, it resembles a tadpole. It suggests his umbilical cord with mother earth is not broken. To Jude, the birthmark resembles a rattlesnake. In psychology, sneak is a symbol for men genital organs. It also suggests the temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden and the serpents pivotal role. Jude's perception of Sula's birthmark instead of providing information about Sula opens his psyche. Jude immediately engaged in sexual activity proves his inner reality. For the majority of the masses, the birthmark on Sula's eyes resembles a rose flower it indirectly suggests the beauty of her soul. Sula is like a rose blooming for once own sake not for others.

It can be noted that Sula only once tried to accept societal norms but the attempt failed because Ajax left her for her conventional possessive behaviour. Ajax appreciates Sula's independent and indifferent nature. He is the same person who called Sula and Nel on their way to the ice cream parlour 'pig meat'. Sula takes this as a compliment because there is a kind of attraction between them. Ajax, when realized the relationship is changing into a burden he moved on. Sula later on finds his drivers license and come to know his real name is Albert Jacks. She consoles herself thinking that she

never loved him therefore not aware of his original name. Sula after break up with Ajax becomes more isolated and caught in despair that turned into her health deterioration from which she never recovered. Sula died peacefully without any regret and pain.

Tony Morrison stretched the character of Sula to the utmost extent. Sula never compromised with the society and always ready to face the consequences. Tony Morrison also cleared her intention behind the creation of the character of Sula in the foreword of the novel Sula stating that- “Outlaw women are fascinating - not always for their behaviour, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status is an illegal one from birth if it is not under the rule of men. In much literature a woman’s escape from male rule led to regret, misery, if not complete disaster” (Morrison, 14).

References

- Cuddon, J.A., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Fifth Edition, Wiley Blackwell, UK, 2007. Print
- Morrison, T., *Sula*. New York, New American Library, 1973. Print.



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: *Sagare, Medha, Mathpati, Sudhir*, “Rejection of the Cultural Concept of gender in Sula”. *Literary Cognizance*, II-1 (June., 2021): 32-36. Web.