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Transcendence and Transgression in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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The Black women writers like Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Banbara and Toni Morrison have always propagated the black feminist consciousness through their works. By giving voice to the voiceless, these writers renounce all the negative stereotypical images of black women. Morrison is an important writer among the league who has always startled her readers with her creative powers by giving her work such a finesse that one feels engulfed in her storyline. Awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993, her novels are replete with African American cultural aura : myths, symbols, festivals and the name that she assigns to her characters. *Sula* (1973) is the second novel of Toni Morrison which is set in her Medallion, Ohio. The novel involved a lot of critical attention as far as her depiction of Sula is concerned. Sula, the protagonist of this eponymous novel, is unlike the other female protagonists for the way she attains her personal identity is quite unusual. She is not a conventional woman who accepts the societal laws and norms wholeheartedly but her heroism lies in her way of abrogating such societal pressures. She challenges all such patriarchal paradigms that aim at belittling black women. The birth of the community "Bottom" directs us to the notions of racism prevalent in America. The name Bottom is ironic in the sense that it is high up the hills and hence believed to be a "nigger joke". The master outwits his slave by offering him such land where the living was tiresome.

Black female is considered as a butt of ridicule for both White and Black males. All the confinements and rules are for her and she ought to obey them without raising her eyebrows. She is more like a machine than a human being bound to perform all the chores wilfully. *Sula* is an attack on all such notions wherein the protagonist aims for herself attainment by denying to fall under the categorization that is assigned to her. The friendship between Nel and Sula is an attack on the cliché of male – female friendship. Through their friendship, Morrison presents her critical stance towards heterosexuality that belies the domination of men and suppression of female. However, Nel does fall into such relationship which ultimately leads to her alienation as a result of her submission. Sula on the other hand, refuses to marry as she believes marriage is nothing but the extermination of one's identity. After returning to Medalliion, Eva-her grandmother, asks her about her marriage, Sula replies, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." She abjures marriage, children and all such attachments that pose limitation to the role of black women. She enters the church scantily dressed and moreover, she sends her grandmother to the old folks home thus subverting the doctrines of the role of daughters and wives. Notwithstanding her transgression, the community considers her as a pariah and outlaw. What is considered as a bold departure by black males Sula's interracial sex though when it comes to white women, they would not give it a second thought. The whole people unite

in regarding Sula as an evil as she transgresses their impositions, she negates all the limitations and her only concern is her belief in her own 'Self'. She doesn't need anybody's shoulder for herself and acts according to her own will. She is an embodiment of the resilience and willpower among women which paves the way for their survival amidst the patriarchal norms. Sula's faith in herself is delineated in the novel through her death scene. Her conversation with Nel prior to her death is a critique of all those women who take up their conventional roles unquestioningly. She is proud of her loneliness and hence dies peacefully.

Nel : "I always understood how you could take a man. Now I understand why you can't".

Sula: "Is that what I'm supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man? They ain't worth more than me."

In presenting her black feminist perspective, Morrison depicts her female characters as overpowering male characters. Eva Peace the senior woman character in the novel, is a matriarch figure who makes her own rules without anyone's intervention. Eva transcends the image of a traditional mother by putting her son "Sweet Plum" so as to prevent his life from getting wasted by drug addiction. Being abandoned by her husband BoyBoy, she leaves Medallion for eighteen months and returns with an amputated leg. Eva is an epitome of black woman's survival without the interference of any male. Hannah peace, her daughter, refuses to remarry after losing her husband Rekus. She indulges in various illicit affairs with her neighbours' and friends' husbands. Her character too suggests the non conformity of the bindings that burden a black woman's soul. Instead of taking refuge in seclusion after losing her husband, she enjoys her own pleasures. After hearing her mother's opinion about herself that she loves Sula but does not like her, Sula feels shattered and the same is engraved in her mind. It is this realization that leaves Sula unaffected when she sees Hannah burning. Nel is the daughter of a conventional mother yet she transgresses such conventionality by making friends with Sula. The revelation, "I'm me. I', not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (28), dawns upon her after a train ride to New Orleans with her mother. Morrison illustrates the fragmented and multiple identities of Sula through her birthmarks which is a "rose" to the narrator, "stemmed rose" to Eva and Nel, "rattlesnake" and "copperhead" to Jude, "Scary black thing" to Nel's children , "tadpole" to Shadrack and Hannah's ashes to community.

Sula's absence from Medallion for ten years is a mystery in the novel yet it is after her return that Sula rebels against the existing rules and regulations. By committing adultery with Jude, Nel too becomes the part of the community and severs connection with Sula. Nel is a quintessence of those women who accept their fate in silence. However, it is in the end that Nel affirms her love for Sula.

"All that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss passed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (174).

The only person who does not reject Sula is Shadrack- a war veteran who spends a year in lunatic asylum. "It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both" (14), which ultimately leads to his declaration of the "National Suicide Day" to be celebrated on

January the third of every year. Shadrack shows respect to Sula even after others reject her, “his visitor, his company, his guest, his social life, his woman, his daughter, his friend – all hung there on a nail near his bed.”

Sula transcends the traditional and patriarchal enforcement by setting herself on a journey of the ‘Self’. She is adamant at unchaining herself from the clutches that imprison her. She has the resilience, willpower and strength to stand at odds with the community. She is no longer ready to accept what she is forced to follow. She does not compromise in submitting to the whims of masculine powers. She defines her identity herself and refutes any such view that leaves a woman with nothing but a burden which she is forced to bear. Sula in this respect transcends and transgresses the line discriminating the female from male. The imagery that Morrison employs during Sula’s death scene connotes to the position of foetus in the womb thus symbolizing the birth of new Self. Sula as a result, leaves behind what is assigned to her and instead sets out to search for her own destiny. It is a journey of self actualization from self effacement, confidence from diffidence, from collective to individualism, from rootness to dissolution and power from powerlessness. As Morrison puts it

Hers was an experimental life – she had no centre, no speck around which to grow. She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself – be consistent with herself. (118-119)

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