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# SITUATING THE SELF: OVERCOMING SUBJECTION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA

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**Abstract:** Individual Autonomy is a prominent feature of women writers. It plans to advance a dream of self-governing self as basically autonomous and independent, a dream that precludes the inevitable connectedness from securing selves and the way that their inundation in systems of connections frames their wants, yearnings, to be sure their extremely personalities. As such, what is denied is that the self is basically social. Toni Morrison, an Afro-American woman writer, works strenuously to get autonomous self to her female protagonist. In her novels, she clearly describes the life of African-American women in white dominated in American society. Combining the aims of African-American Freedom Movement and Woman's Liberation, she produces literature which is indisputably black. In this research article, Toni Morrison's famous novel *Sula* has been discussed through two chief characters, Nel and Sula. The novelist tries to overcome racial boundaries in order to gain animated self with striking balance. To be specific, the chief protagonists of Toni Morrison tend to find expression amidst their sullen, irritable, and dangerously regressive existence, to find dependence of their own, complaisant and reliant beings.

**Keywords:** Women's Liberation, autonomy, Independent, Self-reliant.

**Abstrak:** Otonomi Individu merupakan ciri menonjol dari para penulis wanita. Ia berencana untuk meningkatkan impian diri yang mengatur diri sendiri sebagai dasar yang otonom dan independen. Toni Morrison, seorang penulis wanita Afro-Amerika, bekerja keras untuk menjadikan diri yang otonom pada protagonis perempuannya. Dalam novel-novelnya, dia dengan jelas menggambarkan kehidupan wanita Afrika-Amerika yang didominasi kulit putih dalam masyarakat Amerika. Menggabungkan tujuan Gerakan Kebebasan Afrika-Amerika dan Pembebasan Wanita, ia menghasilkan literatur yang tidak dapat disangkal sebagai "hitam". Dalam penelitian ini, novel terkenal Toni Morrison, *Sula* telah dibahas melalui dua tokoh utama Nel dan Sula. Novelis mencoba untuk mengatasi batas-batas rasial untuk mendapatkan diri yang bersemangat dengan keseimbangan yang mencolok. Spesifiknya, protagonis utama dari Toni Morrison cenderung menemukan identitasnya di tengah-tengah keadaan mereka yang muram, mudah tersinggung, dan memiliki kemunduran yang berbahaya, untuk menemukan kemandirian mereka, yang berkepribadian menyenangkan dan percaya diri.

**Kata kunci:** Pembebasan perempuan, Otonomi, Mandiri, Percaya diri.

“No particular task is set for us by society, no particular practice has authority that is beyond individual judgement and possible rejection. We can and should acquire our tasks through freely made personal judgements about the cultural structure, the matrix of understandings and alternatives passed down to us by previous generations, which offers us possibilities we can either affirm or reject. Nothing is “set for us”; nothing is authoritative before our judgement of its value”

- Will Kymlicka

It is understood that each and every woman works for one's self or autonomy. Traditionally, a woman's life has been devoted to the care of others and it is difficult for her to find the space for expression and the pursuit of her interest. So, the individualist conception of the 'self' or 'autonomy' is not possible for her. The notion of autonomy, based on feminist critics, explores *symbolic, metaphysical, critics', postmodernist, and diversity* as its traits. The symbolic critique of autonomy articulates autonomous man or woman. The metaphysical critics' claims atomistic, or separate, or radically individualistic agents. Care critique of autonomy gives primacy to independence, self-sufficiency, and separation from others. Post-modernist critiques of autonomy have hypothetical points of view, for example, psychoanalytic hypothesis, Foucauldian speculations of energy and office, and women's activist speculations of sexual distinction and otherness. Diversity critiques of autonomy discusses “multiple identity” among multiple groups.

The feminist critics focus their attention to find out the need for 'fine-grained and richer account of the autonomous agent'. They emphasize the fact that the 'self' can be studied based on social and historical contexts, in which the emotional, psychological properties play a vital role. It is to be noted here that the concerns of feminist critiques of autonomy mixes with main stream theory of autonomy. It is clear that both feminist perspectives and main stream theories, that is oppressive socialization, prove to be inimical to autonomy. Individual autonomy views that autonomy or self-determination helps the agent to work for 'her own', the theories of autonomy may be divided into procedural and substantive. Procedural autonomy encounters a series of difficulties, an attempt into reconciling autonomous agency into socialization, especially oppressive socialization.

Feminist critics have tried to promote the perspective of self-governance as individualistic being. In other words, they long to show that self is essentially social. L. Code (1991), for example, claims that the prevailing notion of autonomy posits human beings as "self-sufficient, independent, and self-reliant, a partial and ultimately distorted view that blithely ignores the fact that we are also interdependent and cooperating". (77). For similar reasons, Jennifer Nedelsky (1989) argues that "feminism requires a new conception of autonomy, one that is able to "recognize the inherently social nature of human beings."(36). Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) views that individuals are primary and society secondary and that individual interests are very important to construct a social bond. Generally speaking, autonomy in this perspective enables one to reflect once aim, aspirations, and motivations and choose one ends and purpose to such a reflective process. It also makes oneself anew to become a fully self-made woman. Autonomy and identity are socially determined, which also paves way for individual autonomy. A set of social influences, then, makes the 'choices'. From this perspective, one can say that there are social facts that explain why we do what we do or why we think. Thus, an authentic self emerges out of ongoing process accessing autonomy competency.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Afro-American women are by the nature of their race viewed to be a 'lower class'. Writers like Babara Christian, Hernton Calvin and Joel Kovel through their works prove that Afro-American women have to work very hard to get over their problems. Also, it is proved that any aggressiveness or intelligence on their part is constructed to be unwomanly. In fact, it is also viewed that the white master tries to reduce the individual being of his vassal to a Samoa and then to a thing: he dehumanized self-transporting him to a market of fecund trading.

### Nonpareil Conscious Self of Sula

In *Sula*, Morrison focuses on the African-American woman Sula who is struggling for the power to think, act and speak along with self-hood. Her 'self-consciousness' destroys her state of *in nite partem*. She is an aggressive woman from the Midwest, who has a kind of torment to be a wife or mother. Her individual quest for selfhood is precipitated different persons need. Her journey to attain selfhood is comprehensively different. All she has to do is to resort to a formidable struggle, for she lives in a society which curves individual expression especially for woman in doing so, she makes others to see her flourishing state and how she evolves into a preliminary model inner wholeness and an independent self-governance. Through her character, she evolves around the ardours and eventualities of women and the role she assumes by option or by intimidation. The novel also records the fortune of a woman in matriarchy within the black community, whose life represents the scope feasible for African-American women in white dominated American society. Having said that the novel has brought out the consequence of the relationship between man and woman, it is the wisdom of persona and subsequent reaction of self-conscious is central to it. In this novel, the male characters show no maturation and play no prominent part. But, they become important because of their reactions due to the provocation of female character. Each man lives in a community of abandoned woman. So, Morrison has brought the quest of her protagonists, Nel and Sula for creating a persona of their own and working towards their own identity as black women. In the novel, the writer has brought out the problems and difficulties of two black women and how they try to explore the different aspects their self. Thus, the novel focuses on Sula and Nell, the two friends from their childhood, in spite of their opposite matrilineal lines. Although Nell hails from respectable home and Sula from permissive, they lock together because they are dreamers. This is observed by Morrison in the following lines:

“So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends.

Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on” (52).

### None such intimacy of Nel and Sula

The intimate friendship between Sula and Nell has begun at the age of twelve. From that moment onwards, both of them work for security, love and identity of the other. For African-American women bonding is necessary for their survival. Keeping this in mind, Nel and Sula work together for their bonding with their tint of courage. Also, these two prominent women characters in the novel work for 'the total human personality'. They are the writer's choice because they have brought out good and evil. This is observed by Morrison herself in the

following manner: "Yet Sula and Nel are very much alike. They support each other. I suppose the two of them together could have made a wonderful single human being" (253).

Further, the life long bond between Nel and Sula is observed by the writer once again in the following lines, "Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality. Although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes" (53). It is interesting fact that see that the friends share everything: games, hopes, fears and terrors. Morrison observes that "greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (54).

Throughout the novel, Sula is portrayed as emotional and adventurous, and Nel as conscious and consistence. Both of them try to get over sexism and racism and try to attain liberation. Between these two, Sula is always in the quest of attaining selfhood, and therefore she is ready to defy the rules, codes and customs which brings some sort of constraint to her life and behaviour. All the time, Sula has sort for education and adventure. In spite of the racial and sexual threat, Sula denies "Coloured Woman's" lot of marriage, child raising, labour and twinge. In order to overcome social trauma, Sula understands the relationship with Nel, which results from self-understanding and self-intimacy. Through them, Morrison depicts the friendship of the protagonist of the novel. It is evident, when they play game 'grass play'

"In concert, without ever meeting each other's eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark...

Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper.

Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same." (58)

Through this play 'grass play', Morrison brings out how Sula is the replica of Nel, having the trait of independent selfhood. Gloria Naylor (1992) notes that while Nel and Sula's relationship fell short of physical bonding, it "involved a spiritual bonding that transcended the flesh and was much superior than a portrayal of an actual physical bonding would have been anyway" (Toni Morrison: A Conversation, 578). It is apparent that the nexus between the friends creates caring and maturation. Further, they complement each other in order to form a unique psyche. Their tow generates "safe harbour of each other's company where they can afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (*Sula* 55). Morrison said in her interview with Claudia Tate:

"Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexuality in *Sula*. Relationship between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they're playing. This is not true of men" (157).

The name Sula is connected with the colour blue. She is always sported in a blue dress. The colour blue represents the qualities of being loyal to someone or something. Through this colour she brings out her loyalty to Nel, her only friend. For instance, this is evident when she and Nel are forced to face hostility amidst four white boys on their way to home from school. They have barbed Nel by shoving her until they have become zonked. But Sula is not hurtful to the brute force of them. She threatens them and she yells at them, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (54-55). When the oozing blood of Sula's shows that she is ready to face political and social challenges with determination. Sula

is ready to safeguard Nel through her bold act, which forces the boys to take to their heels out of fright.

Women are grudging Sula because she is incompatible to them. Also, she has no desire also she has no impulse to be like them, her homecoming to bottom is observed in the following lines:

“She was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat with veil of net lowered over one eye. In her right hand was a black purse with a beaded clasp and in her left a red leather travelling case, so small and so charming-no one had seen anything like it ever before, including the mayor’s wife and the music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome.” (90)

The writer attires the Sula, the protagonist, in such huge numbers of various colours to show that she isn't a similar persona, who has gone out of the Bottom the decade ago. Black individualizes profound vitality, fellowship, artefact, enhanced spirit along with profound strength. Pink is related to the quintessence of femininity. This colour, which is seen as red, furnishes warmth and geniality and, along with delicacy, smoothness, charm, and sweetness. Yellow symbolizes sacredness, value, eminence, riches, profound imperativeness, and fruitfulness. Red is an image of uplifted otherworldly and political disposition, scarifies, and fight. Fortunately and unfortunately, Sula, with these colours, has shown her perplexity, and resorting to this type of nature makes anyone hard to classify.

She remains for female opportunity, notwithstanding for a woman like Nel, who has carried on with an existence in light of norms of cultural. The Hermetic or mercurial association between feminine salt and masculine sulphur, in later life, appears to underline Nel's manifestation. This is excruciating association for the customarily female Nel: torment and jubilee blend in her sob for Sula. However, it might likewise place the protagonist Nel in contact with to have associated with the manly standards of escape and opportunity, fresh and passion that the protagonist Sula has dependably ushered into Nel's life. Incomprehensibly, Nel, through the femininity, genuinely converges with her in order to discharge her manly inside.

It appears that Sula herself is, indeed, a picture of feminine psychology and metaphysics, which conveys the human mind promoting compos mentis explanation and apprehensive self. Sula exemplifies the feminine archetype, which has pulled her down, stifled and oblivious. The text shows that the untamed side of women should be seen. In this manner, the text explores the obscure past of tormented self. Nel weeps for her friend and also weeps for her misfortune. She yells at her with the following words:

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed 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, girl, girl, girl,” I was a fine cry- loud and long- but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.” (149)

Sula encapsulates the basic African Archetypes of fire, water and ground. The prickly, fire colour of her race, the watery tadpole, the earth-bound snake that is differently found in the tattoo on Sula's brow are physical indications of these African originals. She is aged from inside and resembles an Earth Mother who re-establishes, manages and expends herself.

Here, Morrison warns us against women like these because Sula carries these archetypes in a hostile land. The Bottom signifies America’s repression and destructiveness and untrustworthiness. It offers the place of silence for girls like Nel, who wanders away from

them and makes the survival of African woman like Sula difficult and fraught with pain and sorrow. Sula as a child is about the most individualistic character we could imagine. Her sexuality is not threatened by aggressive males: she removes the tip of her finger, cautioning of her negligence for their sexuality.

She is a model of female constancy for Nel and she is connected to the natural world around her. She is a woman of certain strength and stature. She dares to leave the bottom but comes back because she was to claim at community as her own, one cannot deny the factor. Sula emerges as the best character from Morrison's imagination, though she is a portrait of women for one to respect, hate then only to pity. Sula's claim to verifiable 'goodness' derives from her wholeness which must be measured by subjective experientialism.

Thus, in *Sula*, Toni Morrison presents a text in which the perspectives of memory and phenomenological perception are in the foreground, along with enlarging the black female hero and deconstructing the expectation of politicized "determinacy". This text also simultaneously shelters boundaries and defines new dominations. Both Sula and Nel can search peace and bliss in the association of since they share the basic obligation of youth, blackness and female virtue and vices in a universe, which is designed to combat the framework of the developed white males. They come from altogether different backgrounds, but the unifying force is greater than the separating one. Indeed, the empowering practices of Sula and Nel have engaged them to attain autonomy, which is entirely remodelled: deindividuated, decentred, and reconfigured along examples of common and befuddling acknowledgments and obligations. For them, the appearance of stability and autonomy and identity is generated and sustained by the relation of domination, denial of aspects of subjectivity. Voices of Sula and Nel are not to be viewed as ordinary voices. Though they face blow in their life, they work for autonomous self against racism and sexism in their dwelling place. But, the advocacy claims to be a serious hearing. Suggestions are uneasy because of the delicacy of issues, amidst racism and sexism. Still, the writer Toni Morrison, through Nel and Sula, works for appropriation acknowledging that they speak for the Afro-American women without under-informed as they are empowered.

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