



Race and Shame in Toni Morrison's Sula: A Thematic Review

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الملخص: في هذه المراجعة، تُناقش رواية "سولا" لتوني موريسون من حيث استكشافها لموضوعي العرق والعار المتشابكين كقوى مؤثرة في هوية المرأة السوداء والحياة المجتمعية. تدور أحداث الرواية في حي "القاع" الخيالي، وهو حي أسود، وتروي حياة شخصياتها المهمشة ليس فقط بسبب العرق. تكشف موريسون كيف يعمل العار كأداة للسيطرة الاجتماعية، مدعوماً بالقواعد الأخلاقية للمجتمع، كما تنتقل من خلال شخصية "سولا بيس"، التي يُشير رفضها للخضوع إلى قمع الآفات الاجتماعية التي عانت منها المجتمع في السابق. وتبحث الرواية في كيفية تصنيع العار وتوارثه عبر جيلين على الأقل في إطار العلاقة بين الأم وابنتها، وفي ظل التصورات المشتركة لجسد المرأة السوداء. في النهاية، توظف موريسون سياسة العار لتقويض الأعراف الاجتماعية الجامدة، بحيث يُمكن التخلص منها النساء السود من تخيل إمكانيات أخرى للذات والقدرة على التصرف تتجاوز العرق والتوافق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: توني موريسون، سولا، العرق، العار، الصدمة، الهوية السوداء.





Abstract. In this review, Toni Morrison's *Sula* is discussed in terms of how she explores the intertwined themes of race and shame as powerful forces of Black female identity and communal life. The novel is set in the fictional Black neighbourhood of the Bottom and gives the lives of its characters who are not only marginalized by race. Morrison lays bare how shame acts as a tool of social control sustained by the community's moral code as transmitted through the character of Sula Peace, whose refusal to conform points to the suppression of the social ills that once troubled the community. It examines how shame gets manufactured and handed down through at least two generations in the mother-daughter dynamic and around shared perceptions of the Black female body. In the end then, Morrison employs the politics of shame to undermine rigid social norms so that to do away with them, it is possible for Black women to imagine other possibilities of selfhood and agency that transcend race and conformity.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Sula*, Race, Shame, Trauma, Black Identity.

Introduction

The Black female subjectivity, resistance, and communal verdict in 20th century American literature are still one of the most powerful explorations found in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). The novel takes place in a faux Black community of the Bottom of Ohio and through the experiences of two central female characters—*Sula* Peace and Nel Wright—it shows the complexities of friendship, betrayal, identity, mortality, the interconnected forces of race and shame. These themes are used by Morrison to interrogate how race: as a social system of classification, but also as psychological force that goes deep into the self-perception and into the emotional life (Bouson, 2000; Fernandes, 1996). *Sula*'s characterization conflicts with the historical and traditional representations of Black women, especially such that is based on moralistic and patriarchal community expectations. Due to her autonomy, sexual independence and nonconformist attitude, her behavior sparks moral panic within the Bottom and makes her both an outsider and scapegoat (Ni 2015). In *Sula* the shame is not just a moral or personal failure and it is not just one person's failure, it is a cultural failing or a socially constructed emotion embedded in historical and racial trauma. According to Bouson (2000), characters of Morrison are often 'shame-burdened' as they had to face their





feelings of inadequacy, guilt and stigma as defined not only by internalized racism, but also by the established community norms. The legacies of slavery, segregation, and systemic dehumanization have developed the psychological landscape of African American communities such that these shame responses are further heightened (Chegeni and Chegeni, 2013; Aivazis, 2015).

Similarly, Morrison's nuanced depiction of the Black female subjectivity is also evident in her representation of Nel who despite adhering to social norms initially got community approval but finally ended up emotionally stunted and unfulfilled. On the other hand, *Sula*'s inconsistency with social expectations is condemned however she also gains a complicated kind of liberation (Banaj, 2016; Ramin & Yadollahi, 2014). By juxtaposing these two arcs with each other, it seems that shame in *Sula* is something that exists as a product of both individual choices as well as the community's regulation of racial and gender boundaries. Ramin and Yadollahi (2014) state that throughout the novel, characters are judged not simply for who they are, but how well they match group expectations based on common racial and gender norms (p. 3), as the medium of social identity theory would suggest. This thesis reviews *Sula* as a study in the thematic convergence of race and shame, in which Morrison represents shame as a culturally and racially bounded emotion that is a means both of ostracism and survival. The analysis draws from scholarly interpretations of *Sula*'s resistance to traditional femininity and morality, as well as behaviour and decorum of the race to undermine entrenched Black power structures. In this regard, Morrison criticizes how shame is not only a private experience but politically and socially constructed to (often) use as a weapon in order to silence deviance and propagate conformity (Holm, 2010; Bouson, 2000). *Sula* is a radical site for rethinking Black womanhood, communal ethics and the psychological residue of racial trauma, and in doing so, makes visible some of the dynamics through which it is produced.

Race as a Site of Internalized Shame

For Morrison, race is more than a social identification in her fictional universe; it is also psychological burden deeply imbedded in emotional landscape, relationships and individual identity. Race, shame, and gender function as tools for communal discipline and personal crisis in *Sula*. Morrison shows how the racialized body carries the historic and collective memory of deprived existence wherein it survives as an internalized shame. Another emotion that makes Black people consider it a form of social regulation that





restricts their autonomy and enforces conformity on the Black community (Bouson, 2000; Chegeni & Chegeni, 2013). In refusing to marry, have children, or abide by codes of Black female respectability, *Sula* Peace becomes the novel's defiant protagonist, rejecting the expectations set for her. What the community hears in her behavior, goes beyond being a moral aberration, and is perceived as a racial betrayal. Ni also explains *Sula*'s refusal to adhere to the role of a woman defined by the Bottom as a direct insult of the Bottom collective identity which, throughout history, has associated longevity with conservative values of moral rightness and racial cohesion. When *Sula* transgresses these unwritten codes that came to be imposed by the community, she becomes a pariah, a 'shame,' an 'evil' person, whom the same community that secretly admired her boldness more than openly praised. She gets more scrutiny than anyone because of her Blackness; which makes her perceived moral deviance inseparable from race (understood) within her community's perception of her.

Aivazis (2015) goes on to explain that Morrison's characters are often caught in 'strained private lives' as a consequence of being forced to adapt to public racial scripts. The presentation of surrounding racial expectations allows the actions of Nel and *Sula* to be interpreted as morally and emotional permissible. While at first Nel complies with society's standards of marrying, mothering, and entrusting herself to the communal structure, this very neglect is at the root of her conflict with herself. According to Bouson (2000), Morrison exposes internalized shame born out of suppression of one's real self to fulfil racially and gendered demands of the community. Ultimately, when Nel questions the values, she believed in, she questions an emotional void in her life structured in the pursuit of social approval and not in pursuit of one's personal fulfillment. This makes evident Morrison's larger argument regarding the psychological impact of racialized shame and especially the duality of resistance and compliance. Morrison's work, Fernandes (1996) points out, imprisons the African American women in cyclical cycles of guilt and humiliation as they have inherited the social roles. These are not gender only roles, but gendered roles in the ways that systemic racism and a community built by oppression have influenced the expectation of these roles. As in *Sula*, shame in the novel is transmitted and internalized via race, even when racism is not apparent on its face. Generational trauma itself is absorbed by the community, which becomes the victim and the enforcer of the same oppressive norms.





According to Holm (2010), *Sula* and Nel's internal conflict can be attributed to the dissonance between the public racialized identities and the private desires of characters. Such dissonance creates a kind of self-surveillance whereby characters evaluate their worth on the terms of a community that — also beset by centuries of racial degradation — wields the power to check the times. Thus, Morrison exposes how shame in the novel is in no way based upon actual criminal acts, but rather from a required acquiescence to racial strictures developed in response to white supremacy. In the end, Morrison gives *Sula* the shame of societal inheritance rather than character flaw. The emotion becomes a haunting remnant of an experience of systemic exclusion that is simultaneously inculcating community cohesion by bidding unresolved grief, anger and distrust to begone, and sustaining emotional repression. Morrison exposes both emotional tolls of racialized conformity and courage it requires to pursue self-definition when subjected to collective judgment by portraying characters who both fall prey to and defy this dynamic (Ramin & Yadollahi, 2014; Ni, 2015).

Shame and the Rebellious Black Female Body

The Black female body in *Sula* is enlarged beyond being a body of physicality alone, and becomes instead the battleground for assigning and exploring cultural, racial and moral identities. Inher sexual autonomy and refusal to conform to gendered expectations, *Sula* Peace embodies a prorn of rebellion that disturbs regular understandings of the Black woman. Her body is framed, by her community, as symbol of disorder because it is uncontained by marriage, religion, or domesticity. According to Ni (2015), Morrison subverts the existing dominant discourses by presenting *Sula* 's body as at once both threatening and liberatory and an object of fear and desire. The placement of a nude Black woman in a prominent position in society subverts the conventional morality that associates deterministic readings of female sexuality (and especially Black female sexuality) as deviant. Reactions of the community to *Sula* 's sexual behavior are part of a moral economy of patriarchal respectability politics. Bouson's (2000) argument is that the Bottom community cannot survive without the clearly defined roles so that social order could be maintained and *Sula* 's unwillingness to fulfill the passive, nurturing role for women is both threatening and shameful. Her bodily autonomy, and the choices she makes in regards to her physical appearance, behaviors, and lifestyle, are subject to repeated moralizing and scrutiny through a moralizing lens that links bodily autonomy to moral corruption. In this way, the





community projects its unease over the definition of survival, racial representation, and the living of gender by shaming *Sula* 's body, which resists being written over (Banaj, 2016).

Sula shamed, though, because her body exposes the community's repressed desires and hypocrisies, as Morrison points out in her essay. Aivazis (2015) further notes that the female body in Morrison's work is often a place of public judgment and particularly so when it crosses class, race, and sexual boundaries. *Sula* 's behaviour is also perceived as controversial, breaking some unspoken agreement among the ladies of the Bottom to safeguard men's fidelity as a frame of reference for their feelings about community respectability. After rejecting that moral compact, *Sula* destabilized gender hierarchies, and was branded as wicked, but there are many of her critics who secretly admire her freedom. According to social identity theory, Ramin and Yadollahi (2014) explain that shaming *Sula* within the community reinforces group boundaries. In this way, *Sula* is made into another within her own race, but an internal outsider whose body serves as a cautionary tale, proving that these bodies are not to be treated well. However, Morrison's narrative does not pathologize *Sula* 's choices. Rather, she sees the character's embodiment of bodily autonomy as a statement of identity and value in a world where Black women's bodies have been commodified and policed (Holm 2010). The price of embracing the tension between freedom and judgment is the price of self-definition: refusing the prescribed roles that our society attempts to force us into, is the price of being excluded from society, but it is also the price for a radical reimagining of black women.

The theme is further complicated by the way in which Morrison portrays *Sula* 's eventual death and by the community's retrospective veneration of her. According to Bouson (2000), the community unites paradoxically in *Sula* 's absence, which indicates that she must push boundaries in order for the community to gain moral clarity, for which they blame her. His posthumous redemption is yet another layer of Morrison's commentary on the cycle of shame embedded in communities that are in need for transgressive figures to define their own virtues, and later to romanticize those transgressive figures after they are not a threat anymore.

In Morrison's representation of *Sula* 's body, her use of shame shows the manner in which shame responds to a confluence of racial, gendered, and moral discourses. The mirror the rebellious Black female body becomes is a mirror that reflects the community's insecurities and vulnerabilities and reflected racism. Using *Sula*, Morrison questions the dominance of oppressive scripts





that are intended to curb Black women's bodies, and posits that the will to body autonomy is a form of psychological and political resistance (Chegeni & Chegeni, 2013; Ni, 2015; Fernandes, 1996).

Motherhood, Identity, and Generational Shame

Toni Morrison's exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in *Sula* is intricate as a means by which identity is formed and the transference of strength and shame from one generation to the next. While many of the maternal figures in the novel are complex legacies of racial oppression, survival, moral rigidity, and emotional detachment, Eva Peace and Helene Wright are the most illustrative. Each is more than just a baby sitter; these are products, even perpetrators, of traumas throughout the generations. Fernandes (1996) notes in Morrison's work mother-daughter relationships are 'primordial' and a way to understand 'historical knowledge' and lived experience. Yet, in *Sula*, both of these relationships have broken down so that the daughters are emotionally isolated and prone to shame as a result of unfulfilled emotional needs and unresolved maternal pain. *Sula*'s grandmother's portrait, Eva Peace, as a powerful woman who finally makes great sacrifices to save her children alive. It is often cited as a symbol of her pragmatism and resilience because she self-mutilated to gain insurance money. But as Davila (2002) suggests, Eva also stands for generational transmutation of anger, guilt, and unuttered maternal love that has been gathered up in women that have always been outside the power to do something about their children's lives. Her bond with *Sula* is, especially, remote and ethically corrupt. For *Sula*, nurturance and emotional guide missing leaves her as a unique one who has to define her own identity without some warm affection of mother and therefore, she is more vulnerable to the societal shame because of being different from the general standards (Fernandes, 1996).

While Nel Wright is raised by Helene Wright, where propriety, religious morality and the importance of race subdue expression of emotion. According to Banaj (2016), Nel's view of self is very much influenced by Helene's internalized racism and rigid value system. The psychological conditioning that results from Blighter makes Nel dismiss *Sula*'s traits at the outset to which she later comes to appreciate them, thereby confirming how attitudes of shame and judgment are absorbed deeply from maternal figures. Morrison lambastes the intergenerational emotional suppression that mothers transmit to members of oppressed communities in order to conform for survival. However, in the process they're typically going to alienate their daughters from their real self.





In his reading, motherhood in *Sula*, Nandi (2018) offers an intersectional reading of motherhood in *Sula* by suggesting that African American mother and daughter relationships, in the African American community, must be read in the context of layered identities—race, class, gender, which all have the potential to simultaneously shape such relationships. In Morrison's portrayal of these women, they are tied together temporally, with, rooted in blood, as well as spatially, with the structures of society trying to keep them apart. Due to the generations' inability to clearly state love, we end up in a shameful cycle where mothers and daughters mistake emotional distance as moral judgment.

In addition, the intergenerational dynamic among the Peace family, which traverses Eva, Hannah and *Sula*, exhibits what Oliveira (2011) describes as 'an ethics of care', which is based on survival not an actual expression of one's emotions. First, Hannah, *Sula*'s mother, is emotionally ambivalent, confessing to her daughter that she both does and doesn't like her, loves her but does not like her. Instead of helping honesty, a confession of this kind fosters a feeling of unworth and estrangement in *Sula*. These maternal bonds allow Morrison to show that shame can be due to emotionally neglectful mothers born out of inherited trauma and racial oppression more than due to actual abuse.

On the basis of this idea, Banaj (2016) examines the ways in which epiphanies helped *Sula* and Nel to understand their mothers and with that develop their own identities. In particular, after the death of *Sula*, Nel reconsiders her mother's rigid values and sees that her own conformity did not provide her emotional protection but drove a wedge between her and her true self. It is this recognition of the challengeability of the shame carried through one generation to the next along the bloodline from maternal silence and the givens of the world, that Morrison espouses is not immutable but rather can be undone, just as in retrospect. Morrison presents motherhood in *Sula* as both a place of continuity and a place of discontinuity. Shame is both transmitted through and questioned in these maternal relationships. Morrison's portrayal is neither sentimental nor is it transformative. By compelling the readers to see where the identity, especially of the black female identity is constituted under the matrix of the intergenerational silence, the control that social factors have over the female in terms of gendering or racialization and the necessity to manoeuvre the dual burden of the race and the gender (Davila 2002; Fernandes 1996; Nandi 2018; Oliveira 2011).

Social Identity and the Politics of Shame





Toni Morrison in *Sula*, uses shame to portray it as a communal force constructed by the rigid social hierarchies that also contribute to a collective identity. According to Social Identity Theory, Ramin and Yadollahi (2014) assert that Morrison's characters serve as a sort of means of overcoming identity while entangled in fairly structured in-group and out-group structures, as those that go against the grain of community norms are faced with collective judgment. They are used to keeping a group cohesively together through exclusion, surveillance and emotional control. *Sula* operates within this framework as the archetypal outsider, someone who transgresses the boundaries of socially acceptable Black womanhood and so is cast as a scapegoat to better cohere the group's moral unity. While itself marginalized by white society, the community in the Bottom deploys certain mechanisms of control within itself, primarily by the use of shame. *Sula*'s refusal to wed, her station in life of openly sexual behavior, and her motto of 'If you're going to burn, burn' debunk the moral expectations of the community. According to Banaj (2016), by demonstrating how the community utilizes the shame as a regulatory tool to enforce oppressive values based on the racial and patriarchal values, Morrison critiques the community for deploying the form of shame. Ultimately, *Sula* disturbs the community's collective security derived from compliance, and she is then demonized in what becomes a ritual of symbolic purification. Ironically, her death survives to bring about communal harmony, albeit it reveals how paradoxical the community is: the community needs a transgressor to reassert its own cohesion (Ramin & Yadollahi, 2014).

Shame serves both a destructive and cohesive purpose for Morrison in her nuanced depiction of Black communal life. As opposed to representing the community as either simply repressive or protective, Morrison examines how historical trauma and survival mandates lead community to act likewise. Bouson (2000) argues that Morrison's fiction depicts shame as the emotional residue of systemic racism and social exclusion which the community has internalized as external pressures. Because of that, shame is thus a complicated mechanism of affect, serving 'to regulate behavior, enforce moral codes, and, even, to sustain collective identity in the face of historical fragmentation'.

Additionally, Morrison's use of *Sula* as a social 'other' also reveals larger discourses surrounding the Chick Black female subject and her intersectional identity. Olson (2017) asserts that Morrison's characters are unable to 'construct place out of no place', to create a sense of belonging and being within such marginalized spaces. In this sense, shame should be viewed as a social force that helps construct and constrain identity. Yet, for Nel, following





the norms of the community not only gives her the sense of belonging but repressions of emotions. Resistance of these norms is freedom for Sula, at the cost of isolation and vilification. Morrison refuses to give simple resolutions though displaying the way that identity is formed through negotiation between personal agency as well as community force.

This complicates the politics of shame further by the race component. According to Aivazis (2015), Morrison's description of the struggle of private lives portrays the psychological scars of public racism and of strife in the Black communities in the search of dignity in a white dominated world. Sula is judged harshly by the community as that is a defensive strategy of managing external stigmatization by defining deviance as being found amongst someone other than everyone within the community. This corresponds with Yan's (2022) contention that behavioral alienation in Sula is not a matter of individual pathological, but collective trauma and treated both as inherent and natural to women who disobey.

In addition, Morrison connects shame with performative identity, whereby characters are always assessing their own behavior against how they appear to others in the community. He suggests that this performativity functions in this way to exhibit how shame is a narrative device to show the limits of socially constructed roles. Sula's refusal of this script of performance makes her unintelligible to her community, an embodiment of moral ambiguity and radical individuality. Ramesh (2024) extends this by pointing out that Sula's character must be hated, respected, and finally pitied, and this process represents the use of shame to regulate, and later rehabilitate the transgressor from beyond the grave.

Morrison uses the figure of Sula to undertake a deep meditation (perhaps without employing that term) on how social identity is preserved, mediated, and enforced by shame. She questions the morality of group judgment and what it means to be included or excluded. In doing so, she questions the culture internal politics of Black communities living under systematic oppression, and envisions a Black, selfhood removed from exemplary roles.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *Sula* offers a profound meditation on how race and shame come together to shape black womanness as emotional, psychological, and social terrain. Deployed in an enclosed and racially discriminated group, the Bottom, the novel explores the consequences of this departure from the norm as it manifests at personal and collective levels. Morrison's critique of





communities policing behaviour, enforcing conformity and internalizing the systems of oppression comes through the character of *Sula* Peace. *Sula* 's resistance to marriage, motherhood and to the kinds of moral conservatism that restrict the identity and belonging of Black women challenge these expectations, and in this way make visible mechanisms of shaming.

The novel is about the devastating effect that generations have been conditioned with shame. This anxiety is born of historical trauma, racial exclusion and community. Instead of depicting the community as a purely punitive one, Morrison uncovers the varied contours in the web of occurrences including the shame that can be used as a means of survival as well as a way of repression. Although her boldness thwarts the society, her death forms a paradoxical sense of unity, implying that even those communities that are devoid of outcasts may need outcasts to imply their moral denomination.

The novel also demonstrates how shame is transmitted and internalized by motherdaughter relationships. These maternal bonds resemble the legacy of restraint and endurance in their emotional distance, silence and pragmatism. Instead, these relationships are neither as gentle nor as tender as they are oft portrayed; instead, they are survival, with every interaction and every admission of vulnerability being a liability in a world bent on punishing anyone exhibiting weakness. And this emotional inheritance involves a form of daughters struggling with a feeling of being unworthy or alienated, and therefore adding to her psychological weight about generational shame.

The politics of social identity are also interrogated with the story: individuals are not judged solely on their behaviour but on how much they embody collective expectation. *Sula* fails or refuses to conform, and for this she is marked as the outsider, a threat to social cohesion. This marginalization points towards the community's dependence on clearly defined roles as a way of relieving others of anxiety regarding stability in the face of oppressing forces from outside the community. And Morrison refuses to give her characters simplistic shapes. Instead, she uses them as complicated, as conflicted and always adjusting to their status in a society that both rears and bars them.

Ultimately *Sula* questions if authentic selfhood possible with communal expectation and inherited trauma. Rather than viewing shame as a personal defect, Morrison centers shame as a social construct so that the reader can rethink what communities deems moral, womanly, or what represents identity. Novel's de construction of these theme is still actually relevant and teaches us some valuable lessons as regards to the emotional costs of complying, and the freedom in the defiance, which is radical. Morrison does not provide us with





easy fixes, rather she allows for reflection, for resistance, for a rethinking of what it means to be part of something.

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