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Role of Race and Racism in Toni Morrison's Sula

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's "Sula" delves into the complexities of identity formation within the context of a racially and socially oppressive society. Through the character of Sula, Morrison explores themes of race, racism, oppression, and the quest for individual and collective identity within the African American community. This paper examines how race and racism play a pivotal role in shaping the characters' experiences and interactions, ultimately influencing their sense of self and belonging. Toni Morrison's Sula is a story of a black woman's changing self-perception through her role in matrimony and society. The journey that Sula undertakes is not as easy as appears. The course of her life becomes a sort of saga for her as it is an incessant effort that she has to put up in her fight against the whites.

Keywords: Race, Racism, Oppression, Identity, African American, Toni Morrison.

1. Introduction

Literature often serves as a mirror reflecting the societal norms, struggles, and triumphs of a particular community or group. In "Sula," Toni Morrison provides a poignant portrayal of the African American experience, focusing on the challenges of identity formation in the face of systemic racism and oppression. Through the lens of race and racism, Morrison explores the intricate dynamics of individual and collective identity within the context of a racially stratified society. Literature reflects the life and lifestyle of either a community or an individual. At times, it may tell about a particular society, spanning a particular culture, faith, attitudes and attributes and what and how do people think about a specific motif, motto or purpose. The story of a community or a group of people may be functional but it portrays their lives through different characters.

2. Race, Identity, and Oppression

The character of Sula embodies the struggles faced by African Americans in defining their identities amidst racial prejudice and societal expectations. From her early experiences in the Bottom to her eventual rebellion against social norms, Sula grapples with the complexities of race and identity. Morrison's portrayal of Sula's journey underscores (Morrison: 1973) the impact of racism on self-perception and communal belonging.

Identity formation in one's own country does not carry any significance because it is natural and one need not struggle for it. For a foreigner, in a country like America when the situation is worst, under pressure, stress and slavery, it is self-identity one craves for. They are two different terms: Self and Identity. They are two different concepts also.

'Self' is an umbrella terms that encompasses several aspects like personal, social, religious and political. Speaking about the notion of the 'Self', Adjaero focuses on psychological elements of how the notion of 'Self' is a decisive factor in one's life: 'Social psychologists believe that because of social interactions, the self-concept as a person's understanding of his or her own being is shaped, reshaped and influenced by many factors such as the environment, cultural and historical background, family status especially parental relations, religious beliefs, etc.' (Adjaero, N. M: 1996).

Sula is a very good illustration for the formation of one's identity. The black community in America struggled hard towards achieving identity even when they were suppressed by the white dominated society. It is the story of a girl from her birth to her death and the process of predicament that paved the way for her despair and destruction. It holds good in the context of a racist and sexist society that rules the minority. The course of events that follow one after the other, he r

experiences with the people of her own community and of the dominant group that suppresses them. Sula 'depicts the process of her individuation and the forms of her personal and social identity construction under the influence of her life events and experiences as an African American female.'

Sula is the protagonist who lived in oppressed situations; she had to swim against the tide. It was all because of the cultural superiority of the white society which dominated them. She struggled for her identity in the inferior cultural context. The novel depicts the struggle of every character on the path of identity formation. In the words of Bloom H., "'Sula is the story of a girl who is a rebel against all society, all conventions and nearly all moralities"'. (Bloom, H: 2001).

Even when she was dying, she felt satisfied because she lived her life to the extent of her will and decision. She opposed and rebelled against repression and exploitation: To analyze Sula and discuss it in the background of black identity in the context of white dominance, it is better to highlight on identity crisis. In the course of the novel, the characters of Morrison pass through many tests and trials that fortify the traits of their personality. Shadrack, for instance, is a man of socially damaging attributes. His insanity is an obstacle to be the citizen of America in the sense that his lifestyle is compatible with the American philosophy. Referring to the black community at the Bottom, their life of leisure and pleasure was the barrier for their positive progress.

Black literature and Movements were the tools Afro-Americans used against their white rulers. The New World compelled them to renounce their religion and to embrace Christianity. Their primitive traditional lifestyle was snatched. A Negro wanted to live in three positions: like a human being, an independent citizen of America without renouncing his traditional ways of life. 'A concomitant to this state is an unending and always expanding Quest for identity in an ever-changing context.'

Digressing from the general point of view regarding identity of the Negroes in America, the Afro-American women had doubled struggle against race, class and gender. Race and class distinction was prevalent everywhere and gender disparity had suppressed them in all walks of life. (Carmean, Karen: 1993). They had to fight against their negative image. The intensity of their torture was that Afro-American women were considered as 'Non-human beings'. But African-American women writers reversed the statement and made them human beings who hearts have their own desires and aspirations. In fact, black writers gave their genuine image back to them.

3. Gender and Intersectionality

In addition to race, Morrison examines the intersection of gender and identity within the African American community. Black women, like Sula and Nel, face compounded challenges stemming from both racism and sexism. Morrison highlights how societal expectations and stereotypes contribute to the marginalization of black women, further complicating their quest for identity and agency.

The position of women in the white dominant society was that of a feeble slave who could satisfy their lust. The ever-humiliated personality of a black woman had no identity of her own except that of a female creature that was able to serve others in all respects and at all times.

Her quest for identity had no meaning to the white exploiters. This is the main reason for Sula and Nel to choose different paths of life, according to their whims and fancies. The two characters of Sula and Nel had different identities in the Bottom. It was their choice. Sula wished that she should remain independent and unconcerned by what her won people think about her. Their outlook contrasted with each other. Coping with the social evils like racism and sexism was their priority because they knew their position in the patriarchal society. The above-mentioned factors were responsible for the heightening of the intensity of their wild hegemony.

Morrison, being a feminist writer, creates ideal characters through which she conveys her message in general, and to the black women, in particular. Her women are strong and wise whereas her men are irresponsible and care-free. In Sula, Morrison is successful in portraying the different female roles that represent different personality traits.

The identity of the black women was degraded by their own men who were busy in rescuing their manhood. Male preoccupation made them independent in the field of decision making which led them to destruction, many a time. A black woman had the support and friendship of another black woman owing to the fact that they mutually encouraged each other. They had two factors in mind: one was their survival and another was to overcome the doubled pressure of the whites' (Das, Soma: 1.7 2012: 82-86) exploitation. To a great extent, Sula depicts the role of female characters in the backdrop of situational victimization.

Sula is an event-based story. In other words, it is a story which has been linked by using instances and happenings belonged to the past with the present. There is no straight story to relate. It is event-oriented. Every character craves for the identity of the self but the loophole is that everyone of them has their own defects and weaknesses which make them lose their personal identity. It is an undeniable fact that black women do not have patriarchal protection. All

characters of Sula have no parental identity. Quest is no matter with regard to parental support. No member of Sula's family provides her protection.

Hannah, Sula's mother had no individual identity because as a widow, she had illicit contacts with 'the husbands of her friends and neighbours'. Morrison's characters are devoid of stability or composure. A gap of relationship is seen absent in Sula. There is nothing like familial identity. Every family is disturbed and distorted (Santori, G. (2012).

The inability of male and female characters to form a sense of identity in her novels Sula and Tar Baby is knotted to the cultural trauma they experience which makes it impossible to shape a sense of self. This paper focuses on the dilemma of female figures in constructing their identities in a racist and sexist society.

Searching for identity is mostly connected with women characters because of their sense of responsibility and immediate reaction and response in a given situation. Different black women react differently at different situations, depending on the need of the hour. They respond immediately to malpractice and intolerance. Morrison questions the self-identity and self-concept of the black people on the path of achieving freedom. They lost their originality through the manmade institution of slavery (Morrison, T.1999). Thus, they lost identity, either individual or collective.

Their identity can be called Pseudo Identity. One possesses real identity when it is practically effective and productive. So, it is 'a cumulative product built up over a person's lifetime experiences.

4. Community and Belonging

The community of the Bottom serves as a microcosm of broader societal issues, where racial tensions and divisions are palpable. Within this community, characters navigate the complexities of identity formation amidst social hierarchies and power dynamics. Morrison portrays how race shapes interpersonal relationships and influences perceptions of self and others.

A few characters do not think of their individual identity because they are pessimistic in their approach to life. Sula spends her time by living in her own world. It can be due to her self-hatred because Sula did not achieve anything in her life. Her deformed personality in her society had a different reaction. Before dying, what Sula said to Nel reflects the plight of a black woman who lacks either individual or collective identity:

Sula represents all black women who have nothing of their own. She is a symbol of black community. A person loses his identity when he is alone or separated from his family. She led a life of leisure and pleasure, whims and fancies. She lived for her sake not for others. She had no family attachment and responsibilities. She listened to what her heart said. She did not use her mind i.e., the power of reasoning:

She tries hard to create her own identity by changing places and people. She quit Medallion and went searching for the ambience where she could get individual identity. For ten years she had been away from the Bottom. When she came back 'Sula, as the symbol of a rebellious female character in a black community, is the major character who deals with issues of identity formation in social contexts such as family, school, church and her town.'

As far as one's identity is concerned, one starts behaving in the same manner which is available in the environment and locality. One automatically categorizes oneself from the age when one is conscious of his society and its norms. Rejection of the social norms means staying aloof from one's people and family. Caste, class, gender, and race are the four pillars on which a society usually rests (Rumin, Zohreh 2014:100-103). This is a general categorization that is deep-rooted. According to Tajfel, social status or class is formed when an individual lives in a group of people; it is his first identity. Strictly speaking, his family is his primary identity but as a social animal, man's behaviour changes based on the situations and people with whom he interacts. 'Tajfel believes that this social categorization leads to the creation of different groups in the society and the individuals' tendency to join these groups and show biased behavior due to their in-group and out-group attitudes'.

In case of a black community, its language, culture, faith, religion and ambience in which he is brought up count a lot. Every society is influenced by the hegemonic caste and class. Gender is secondary to their attitude. The norms of a society are standardized by the dominant group. The economic status of a group of people and their cultural values are the factors that affect other people who are supposed to be minority group. This classification either on the basis of caste, class, colour or race, is a shame for humanity. 'This social identification and social categorization, according to Tajfel, leads to social comparison in which the individual compares his/her physical, psychological and social characteristics to other members of the society.

To speak about identity of a black man or woman, Morrison has taken the main roles of Sula and Nel. Their friendship is a symbol of how a person's identity can be created on the basis of one's rapport and interaction. It depends on how one perceives the feelings of his fellow-beings. On the other hand, the basic structure of a person is his family. Therefore, family and the environment in which he lives are his identities.

Identity of a personality or of a community is complex entity. It is like a riddle which cannot be easily unraveled. Self-discovery is a conundrum because every man is an entity of eccentric traits. What he longs for and how he behaves at times, none knows. So individual identity is very difficult to earmark. Through Sula, Morrison wants to apprise the readers that the theme of identity (Morrison, T.2016) cannot be definitely portrayed because of its timely changing quality. Situations and circumstances both shape and change man's approach towards life. The character of Sula represents this fact.

No character declares one's identity but people understand the nature of a personality. Sula's different stages of life denotes this nuance. Carmean suggests that "if one takes all of her writing into account... it becomes apparent that even though she doesn't specify it as such, her grand theme is actually that of self-discovery, or its close variation, the issue of self-definition".

It is a relevant interrogation that when Sula passes through numerous experiences throughout her life, what made her lack a definite identity? She spends all her life in search of identity. Sula does not have a genuine identity because of her distraction and digression. She loses herself in the intricate instances that she comes across in the course of her life. She becomes egoistic and self-centered owing to her childhood experiences. Her childhood was not taken care of by Hannah, her mother. She herself overheard her mother saying that she did not like Sula. This was the juncture when Sula lost hope of affection from anybody (Morrison, T.2019). Morrison gives another example self-identity, i.e., the death of Chicken Little. He dies accidentally but she takes it as her blunder. From that day to the day she dies, she does not believe herself.

Morrison conveys the message to the readers that identity is complex; it is not a definite single element. It changes as man grows. It is an ever-changing factor. A person's character is made of many identifying features. A general study of the oeuvre of the Toni Morrison reveals the fact that her novels proclaim the motif of identity. The search for self is the only theme Morrison wanted to highlight. Another avenue to her intention to achieve is 'Dual Identity' of the African-Americans (Morrison, T., & Stepto, R.1977) the first is the native and the second is the American. As a black feminist writer, Morrison, she knew the climate of rivalry in which her people breathed, in the midst of racial dominance, oppression, repression and suppression. Her novels are women-centred, committed to exploring black women's lives and their nuances that are both extrinsic and intrinsic.

5. Conclusion

In "Sula," Toni Morrison offers a nuanced exploration of race, racism, and identity within the African American community. Through the character of Sula and her interactions with others, Morrison illuminates the multifaceted nature of identity formation in the face of systemic oppression. By examining the role of race in shaping individual experiences and communal dynamics, Morrison invites readers to reflect on the enduring impact of racism on society as a whole.

Sula transcends stereotype protagonists. She lives with a deliberate extravagance. Her tough and rough attitude and her self-confidence results from an unstable relationship with her mother. Sula is at large sans obligation towards none. There is an abrupt and dramatic turn in Sula's view when she becomes aware of the hatred of her mother towards her. She is psychosomatically independent. She turns a human being who is devoid of emotions, ambition, material comfort, greed, desire, and luxury.

She was away from Medallion for a decade; it was a life of experimentation and trial, not conforming to the conventional Afro-American woman. In brief, she led a life of immorality and unethical fantasies. The illicit relationships with white and black people had made her go astray. She lost all the personality traits of the women of her community. The idiosyncratic way of life detached her from the rest of the community people.

She dropped all acquaintances and familiar faces with the intention to be free from the shackles of social etiquette. She found pleasure in being lonely and she felt proud to be in her own world. Strictly speaking of the altered personality of Sula, she is selfish. Her mind did not think of what was going to happen in the offing. Every incident in her life teaches her some lesson. Take for example, the death of Chicken Little while playing with him; he is thrown into the river. She feels that she is guilty of his murder but later she takes it as an accident. This feeling of hers brings her redemption and thus she consoles herself.

Morrison wants her readers to understand the cultural norms of the black community. To live with people whose culture has different norms and everyday customs and practices, they need to compromise and adapt themselves to the target community. There is no other way but to tolerate and live with their American fellow beings. The Afro-Americans should deal with the matter with tolerance and soft-mindedness.

In Sula, Morrison presents two types of women who belong to her culture and faith: the first category is that of the African-American people who are Fickle-minded and the second one is 'strong-minded. Sula's mother, Hannah led an indecent life; This is the reason Sula hated her mother. She did not like her mother's past. And the impact on her was

that she did not take care of her mother. She was not worried about her mother's mysterious death. Throughout her life, her experiences made her behave eccentrically.

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