

# I Am for You What You Want Me to Be Motherhood and Women's Quest for Self in Sula

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## ABSTRACT

Helene Cixous came up with the idea of "feminine writing" and discussed its relationship with motherhood in *The Laugh of The Medusa*, in which she view "mother" as an idealistic metaphor. In contrast, Toni Morrison created more complicated mothers and mother-daughter relationships in her novels, especially in *Sula*. Both Cixous and Morrison involved the connection of females' self-identities and the role of mother, but they presented in different ways. By examining these two texts, this passage aims to analyze how positive and negative aspects of mother-daughter relationships contribute to women's self-identities.

**Keywords:** *Helene Cixous, Toni Morrison, motherhood, female identity, feminine writing.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the *Laugh of the Medusa*, Helene Cixous passionately encourages women to write for themselves, especially with the assistance of their bodies. To fight against the patriarchal narration, she strongly advocates that women should love each other, which naturally includes mother and daughter's relationship. Mothers empower their daughters to grow up and find themselves. However, are these monolithic relationships always solid? To what extent is Cixous' claim that women's relationships with their mothers empower women and shape their self-identity undermined when examining *Sula's* relationship with her mother and grandmother?

In Toni Morrison's novel, we could see *Sula* is not only inspired by Hannah and Eva's deeds but also revolts against them. It is noticeable that this rebellion could be an impetus for her growth as well. Therefore, women's relationships with their mothers seem more complex than Cixous claimed, and she might only reveal half of the truth to us. In a realistic mother-daughter relationship, women gradually form their self-identity by both inheriting valuable qualities from their beloved mothers and revolting against their mother's antiquated beliefs and deeds. Briefly, self-identity answers the question of "Who am I". For *Sula* and other black females in this novel, it especially emphasis on their struggles to fight against inequality.

## 2. FEMININE WRITING AND MOTHERHOOD

To fight against the phallic culture and narration, Cixous coined the term "feminine writing" or "women's writing" (*Écriture féminine*) in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1976, which was a lyrical and drifting theory with political pursuit. Affected by Jacques Derrida's binary opposition theory on linguistic, Cixous came up with "phallogocentric discourse" to describe males' centric position in language and narration, which enshroud females' situations and voices or even pent them up as the other. Therefore, Cixous put experiences in the first place, rather than language. She believed that only with bodies' assistance could females present their libido, write for themselves, and exist in their own voices. In this way, women could get rid of the penis-power-pen combination, which ben the truth of females and death out of males' fear to them. By deconstructing the paternal line, Cixous led readers back to the maternal line and mothers. She argued that infants are at an ideal pre-Oedipus stage in mothers' uterus, as they are not disciplined by the phallic discourse then. In her poetic theory, "mother" is not a role, but "a metaphor, a source of goods" [1]. Cixous emphasize procreation, where "mother" nurses and empowers women with their "white ink"[2]. Thus, women could create their own "sext" in a bisexual way: "the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes"[3], which concerns not only

male and female duality, but also the binary of self and other.

As two acclaimed female writers, Helene Cixous and Toni Morrison holds different attitudes on feminism and illustrated “mother” from disparate aspects. As a post-modern theorist, Helene Cixous is unpredictable. Generally, her writings are lyrical, fluid, and open to various interpretations. She is writing in diverse genres and standing at the junction of literature, philosophy, and politics. Cixous refused to be a “feminist”. On the one hand, she recognized herself as a person of diverse identity, the woman is just one of them; on the other hand, she considered feminism as a trial to get recognized and gain power in patriarchy. Thus, both feminism and patriarchy should be deconstructed. Therefore, she deprecated to define feminine writing, as theorization would limit the possibilities of writing practice; also, she dislikes the usage of “female” in French, as it contains so many cultural oppressions that one could hardly get rid of. As a result, Cixous didn’t refer to her mother as a “female”. Instead, Cixous called her “mother”, described her by a smile, viewed her as a young man, a girl, a daughter. It is noticeable that “mother” usually is a metaphor to Cixous and the role of mother is to be replaced. Mothers could be daughters, and daughters might be mothers, it is the life and art heritage among women that Cixous valued, rather than the role[4]. According to Mairead Hanrahan, “Writing is an unequal combat between writer and object in that the speaking subject is never displaced writing is not only a combat between the writer and her mother but between the writer and herself” [5]. Hanrahan explained why Cixous started to place her mother Eve at the center of her writing, but this could also be expanded to describe the practices of feminine writing. Traditionally, women and mothers are viewed as “the other” or “m/other”. Their voices could hardly be found in writing, and only a few male writers, like Shakespeare and Kafka, presented female characters in their works. The practice of female writing is to make women come back alive in discourse and bodies. Cixous has always been controversial. Critics like Toril Moi argue that when Cixous passionately emphasizes the ability of women’s sensibility, she might slip back to patriarchal culture. It is patriarchy that defines males as “rational” and females as “sensible”[6]. Also, Cixous’s attempt to break the boundaries of the genre is admirable. However, it might bring difficulties to readers. Moreover, Cixous’s theory is often criticized for being utopian. As a post-structuralist, she did not show a politicized stance in most of her works. In fact, Cixous might be radical, and American readers may find her style different from their familiar types.

For Cixous, the metaphor of mother and her personal mother Eve was her resource of power and writing. According to her, motherhood is just like sisterhood. They are symbols of women’s love and

assist females’ writing in a monolithic way. However, when we exam Toni Morrison or some other black female writers, “mother” could be a word with complicated meanings. As a Jewess born in Germany, Cixous felt alienation and loneliness at the junction of two cultures[7]. This kind of experience more or less led her to an ideal metaphor of a mother[8]. For Morrison, she is familiar with those mothers who were loaded with family burdens due to racial and sexual reasons in black communities. Historically, slavery seriously undermined black families. Black babies were born to be the property of slave-owners and usually face a departure from their parents. In Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, young Pecola could not tell her mother from other females working on the farm. Even when slavery was abolished, the effect is still lasting. Black males could hardly find decent jobs to feed their families, and segregation makes black people see their future as hopeless. Facing financial pressure, males like BoyBoy deserted their families and left their communities. The absent or warped fathers left the heavy burden to their wives, and the suffocating mothers’ relationship with their children is highlighted. Thus, black mothers made various choices, and their images could be complex in most cases. In *Sula*, Nel’s mother, Helene Wright is the representative of those black females who were disciplined and deny their identities, at the same time, readers could see Eva Peace, a powerful woman who sacrifices herself for beloved children and helped Sula shape her self-identity. However, her love seems inconsistent or even thrilling to readers unfamiliar with black culture and history. Also, Eva is under suspicion of being a phallic mother when we examine her attitudes toward males.

### **3. EVA AND HANNAH: SULA’S TWO TORTUOUS PATHS TO LIBERTY**

#### ***3.1. Eva: Maternal Grandmother and Women’s Power***

In Morrison’s novel, the new generation of women like Sula is shaping their self-identity through their relationships with mothers, female friends, and entire communities. Sula gradually develops her personality by observing and investigating Eva, Hannah, and Nel [9]. These women, especially grandmother and mother, affect Sula in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, Eva taught Sula that women could be powerful. Eva is often compared with the biblical Eve, because Eva is the queen of her No.7 building, implying God’s seven-day creation. After being deserted by Boyboy, Eva did everything she could to feed her children. She sacrificed her leg for compensation which could make her children survive. She crawled to save Hannah in spite of the fact that the raging fire is burning her as well. Raised by Eva and Hanna, Sula undoubtedly inherits wild and powerful qualities from

her elders. Compared with her close friend Nelly, whose nature was strictly repressed by her mother and great-grandmother, Sula benefits from the crucial family culture. She becomes a woman of independence and freedom. On the other hand, however, sometimes Eva's love might be twisted. Eva saved Plum with the last piece of food when he was young, but she burnt her beloved son with her bare hands when he grew up. Similarly, she jumped out to save Hannah, but she might kill her on the ambulance. Thus, Sula is bearing perplexing feelings to her grandmother and mother.

The author may depict the complicated relationship between Eva, Hanna, and Sula by expressing their feelings straightforwardly. In the Chapter 1922, Sula unintentionally heard her mother chatting with another woman:

"Well, Hester grown now and I can't say love is exactly what I feel."

"Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference."

"Guess so. Likin' them is another thing."

"Sure. They different people, you know..."[10]

Hanna finds herself loving Sula, while she doesn't like her at all. They are different people. This chat strongly depressed and hurt Sula. She does not rely on anybody else since then – if the tight connection with mother is fake, who else could she rely on then? Undoubtedly, this is a painful experience for Sula, but from another perspective, she grows stronger after this event. Thus, Sula's division with her mother could be an impetus to form a more powerful woman. A similar situation is going on with Eva and Hanna. When Hanna asked her mother whether she likes her, Eva feels offended, but she failed to give Hanna a satisfying answer. With this kind of feeling and experience, Sula calmly watched Hanna burning in fire, and Eva is under the reader's suspicion that she might kill Hanna after desperately saving her. Therefore, the Peace women are having a hard time getting along with each other, which is far from Cixous' monolithic mother-daughter relationship.

Moreover, we could tell that the Peace women all have been trying hard to find a way out as black females, but their attitudes toward men are quite different. There's no doubt that Eva is a powerful woman, but she became a phallic mother at the same time. For instance, she would teach the new brides how to behave "properly" to their husbands. In this way, she builds a close relationship with males and gains her voice by catering to the patriarchal rules. Her daughter Hannah, however, has a different strategy. She loves and depends on all those males who have affairs with her, which makes her acceptable to women in the "bottom," but this is just another path under phallic

culture. Different from her mother and grandmother, Sula has affairs with males while loving none of them. This action is an important reason why she is generally viewed as a witch in her neighborhood. It turns out that males neither respect her nor acceptable to those females who the patriarchal society has disciplined. Readers may tell the Peace women's different attitudes through this conversation between Eva and Sula:

"When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man."

"You did."

"Not by choice."

"Mamma did."

"Not by choice, I said. It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need...I'm a tell you what you need." [10]

This excerpt gives us an idea of how does Sula rebel against her grandmother. Instead of taking Eva's advice to have a family and raise a new generation, Sula is determined to explore the possibility of herself by rejecting the males and consciously choosing to be lonely. But it is noticeable that when she revolts against her grandmother, she comes up with the example of Eva and Hannah to support her own point of view, which means she at least partially agrees with their deeds, even if not she is not satisfied with their philosophy. Therefore, when Sula is rebelling Eva, her identity is already strongly shaped by her mother and grandmother, unalienable.

### ***3.2.Hannah: Motherhood and women's bodies***

According to Judith Butler, females are considered contributors of matter for procreate function, and males are considered creators of souls and reason in patriarchal heterosexuality. She traced back to etymology and found the combination of matter, mater and matrix. Women's bodies are material and do not contains the ability of creation and logos, for matrix is the origin of substances. The linkage of matrix, body and motherhood is mentioned both in *The Laugh of the Medusa* and *Sula*. For Cixous, matrix is the energy source and ideal stage, in which infants are linked with their mothers without any discipline from patriarchy. Morrison illustrated this linkage mainly by the relationship of Hannah and Sula.

Compared with Eva and Sula, Hannah seems like a reduced role in this novel. Admittedly, she usually functions as a transition between the first and third

generation, but she inspired Sula in a way other than Eva. The previous part discussed how did Eva gain power based on her hatred towards Boyboy, and how did she internalize phallic rules. Generally, Eva presented women's abilities on creation and government, while Hannah explored a gentle and relatively liberate pattern to treat her body. Hannah loves her body, takes pleasure from sex, and treats men with tenderness. She neither emotionally relies on men, nor hates them[11]. For Hannah, sex is frequent and joyful. Her deeds partially subverted men's hegemony in sexual relationships and gender discourse. Sula develops her mother's philosophy in a more resolute and solitary way: she has sex with males and deserts them (except Ajax) soon after the affairs, which women of the "bottom" may find offensive. At the expense of being vied as a witch, Sula takes well control of her body and life, and that is what she inherits and develops from Hannah's matrix. It is noticeable that when Sula dies, her posture is like an infant in the uterus, implying her underlying relationships with her maternal line. In Chapter 1940, Toni Morrison depicts Sula's painful yet reassuring and romantic death, "she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels"[5]. Sula's last posture is like an infant in uterus, which is the ideal stage that Cixous came up with in *The Laugh of The Medusa*. Admittedly, this plot may take the uterus and infant stage as an ideal condition, and Sula seems to return to an ideal mother. But this setting might be strongly affected by Morrison's death narration at the same time, which makes the previous explanation questionable. For Sula, this kind of ideal mother-daughter relationship would only occur when she dies. Thus, even though she may have a will to recombine with her mother unconsciously, the ideal "good mother" could hardly occur in her real-life experiences. The difference between real-life and unconscious dreams makes Sula different from what Cixous expected – Cixous built up a Utopia of women, where the women to- women bonds are idealistic.

When we examine Cixous's work and Sula's deeds, some similarities could be visualized. Morrison emphasized Sula's "complex, contradictory, evasive, independent, liquid modernity"[12], which Cixous's readers may find familiar. At the same time, Cixous and Morrison viewed and described "mother" differently. Cixous is aware that mothers are not always affecting their daughter positively, she mentioned the kind of overmother who are "overbearing, clutchy" [1] in her article. However, to gain the cement of females, Cixous passionately emphasizes the love of women at the expense of ignorance of the contribution of conflicts in women's relationships.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

By analyzing Sula, we may find how do women gradually gain their self-identity through their paradoxical relationship with their mothers. Cixous consciously choose to present the Laugh of the Medusa as lyric poetry, which is her significant way to fight against the rational and phallic theory and remix some conflict ideas in a binary patriarchal culture. Thus, her articles could contain paradoxical metaphors and become inspiring. Cixous's attempt at present thoughts is innovative and admirable, but this passionate lyrical style may cover some contributing realistic situations at the same time. By analyzing Morrison's narration, readers could notice the necessity for women to encounter their imperfect mothers and develop self-identities by partially opposing them, both in practice and in theory, as maternal relationships shape women's identities in one way or another.

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