

Sexuality, Power, Identity Voyages of Identification in *Sula*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the link between one's sexuality and one's identity formation with a case study of *Sula* written by Toni Morrison. Michel Foucault's theories in *The History of Sexuality* will be applied to provide an answer. As the two female protagonists – Nel and Sula – portrayed by Morrison hold opposed attitudes towards sexuality and show different sexual behaviours, Sula can distinctly reflect the influence of a female's sexual concept on her identification. Since Foucault illustrates the connection between sexuality, power, and identity, his theories will explain the relationship between sexuality and the generation of power in *Sula*, after which the role the power plays in the two protagonists' identification processes will be analyzed.

Keywords: *Sula, Foucault, Sexuality, Identification, Power*

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is an American novelist, editor, and college professor noted for her writings about the Black American experience in a society of racial inequality. Born in 1931, Morrison is the second child in a family of intensive love for Black culture. Despite the Great Depression during the 1930s and 1940s, Morrison's childhood is filled with happy memories of family folktales and anecdotes in a black community, which play an important role in shaping her literary career. Her works shed light on the detrimental effects of racism in the United States and the value of African American history and culture [1]. As a black women writer, Morrison is also a well-known pioneer of Black Feminism despite her denial. Touching on issues such as gender and sexuality, she further highlights the identities of women in the black community, and how their lives are shaped by their bonds with both men and women [2]. *Sula*, as one of the most typical examples, was published in 1973. Since the 1960s, the world has witnessed the second wave of feminism in the civil rights movement. In this phrase, importance was attached to women's sexuality and reproductive rights, forming a feminist sex war [3]. Sexuality, however, is also the central theme in Morrison's *Sula*. Plotting chronically, Morrison portrays the fortunes of two female protagonists – Nel Wright and Sula Peace –

within the black community from 1919 to 1965. Nel and Sula are two women with opposite characteristics. The former represents the conventional matriarchal household, while the latter represents the antithesis of her society code. Through bold descriptions of their different attitudes towards female sexuality and their sexual behaviors, the underlying link between one's sexuality and one's identity formation is embodied. How does one's sexuality affect the identification process? In this case, Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* will be used to provide an answer.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault connects sexuality, power, and identity. He starts his argument by introducing modern sexual repression since the Victorian age. Sexuality is one essential part of human nature. However, to coincide with the development of capitalism, the function of sexual behaviors is limited to guarantee reproduction; people had also become silent on sex due to conservative Victorian values. Instead of simply revealing the phenomenon, Foucault inquires deeper into the discourse of sexual repression, "We are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making." [4]. Focusing on speaking about sex in terms of repression, Foucault doubts the

traditional concept of repression and tries to define the power-knowledge-pleasure regime that functions behind the appearance in theory. Moreover, the term *scientia sexualis* is raised, the effect of which, as mentioned by Foucault, is the close link between a person's identity and sexuality. Considering the research question, this essay aims to discuss the relationship between one's sexuality and identity formation by applying Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.

2. THE LINK BETWEEN SEXUALITY AND POWER IN SULA

The link between one's sexuality and identity is established under the effect of power, which can be interpreted with the application of Foucault's power-knowledge theory. In the case of *Sula*, one clear embodiment of the Foucauldian power is the hostility that Sula received from other traditional women in the community. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault questions the dominant view that repression defines the relationship between sex and power. Instead, he argues that power is shown through the creation of knowledge concerning people's sexuality. By mentioning the discursive erethism appeared since the eighteenth century, he proposes, "And these discourses on sex did not multiply apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise." [4]. Furthermore, with the production of knowledge arises scientific analyses and categorizations of peripheral sexualities, which institutionalizes public stereotypes concerning "abnormal" sexualities. In this case, these "abnormal" sexualities are more a support of power than an enemy to be eliminated. In *Sula*, Morrison successfully reveals such power through the description of other women's attitudes towards Sula due to her outlaw sexual behaviors and perspectives: "Later, when they saw how she took Jude, then ditched him for others, and heard how he bought a bus ticket to Detroit (where he bought but never mailed birthday cards to his sons), they forgot all about Hannah's easy words (or their own) and said she was a bitch. Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in a general band together against the devil in their midst." [5]. In this traditional community, sexual taboos are omnipresent. Sexual activities within matrimonial relations are a muted standard, reflecting the unwritten rule generated by people's knowledge of sexuality. Evidence can be found in the conversation between Sula and her grandmother Eva. Upon Sula's return to Medallion City, Eva urges her to get settled: "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you." [5]. Under the effect of such a social attitude toward sexuality, Sula is labeled as evil, devouring, and dangerous fame fatal for her sterile behaviors. Knowledge-power mechanism, therefore, takes form. According to Foucault, "Perhaps

the point to consider is not the level of indulgence or the quantity of repression but the form of power that was exercised. When this whole thicket of disparate sexualities was labeled, as if to disentangle them from one another, was the object of excluding them from reality?" [4]. Just as the question proposed, the function of such power is much more complicated than simple prohibition. There is one thought-provoking point in Morrison's depiction of how the other residents plan to deal with Sula, "There was no creature so ungodly as to make them destroy it. They could kill easily if provoked to anger, but not by design, which explained why they could not "mob kill" anyone. To do so was not only unnatural. It was undignified. The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over." [5]. Instead of eliminating Sula's illicit sexual preferences, they decide to recognize its existence and defeat it by reinforcing their superior status as people with normal sexual practices and defining Sula as a curse to the community. This "triumphed over" process reveals how the constant existence of evilness sustains the workings of power. Apart from a direct psychological description of other villagers, such a power mechanism is also shown in their attitudes towards the plague of robins, "But they let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also were they with people." [5]. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault provides his explanation of this dependence relationship between power and peripheral sexualities it targets, "always rely on this support, power advanced, multiplied its relays and its effects." [4].

3. THE INFLUENCE OF POWER ON NEL'S AND SULA'S IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES

With the relation between sexuality and the generation of power analyzed, the following sections will further discuss the role power plays in one's identification process. In addition to the unidirectional power exercised from other residents to Sula, the interaction of both strength and her resistance, which can be seen as another form of power, shapes Sula's unique identity. According to Foucauldian literature, the unidirectional power operates to fix identities on individuals while the resistance works against this first power to deconstruct the identity formation process and reconstruct one's identity [6]. In the novel, Morrison illustrates such a dynamic relation between power and identity not only by the portrayal of Sula, but also that of her counterpart – Nel. Despite their different life trajectories ultimately, Sula and Nel share identical sexual impulse in their adolescence. Their sexual desires are clearly shown in the plot of buying Edna Finch's ice cream, "It was not Edna Finch's ice cream that made them brave the stretch of those panther eyes. Years later

when their own eyes would gaze as they cupped their chins in remembrance of the inchworm smiles, the squatting haunches, the track-rail legs straddling broken chairs. The cream-colored trousers are marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. Somewhere beneath all of that daintiness, chambered in all that neatness, lay the thing that clotted their dreams.” [5]. Morrison’s bold descriptions of the two protagonists’ inner world unveil their original attitude towards female sexuality. Both of them hold the male fantasy that is considered obscene by the traditional women in their community. Considering the continuous existence of rejection towards sexual openness, in other words, the constant existence of the first power in the novel, the resistance process becomes the crucial factor that explains the diametrically opposite identities of Sula and Nel when they enter their adulthood.

In the case of Nel, the unidirectional power imposed on her from the society dominates the battle. With her resistance power vanishing, Nel gradually accepted the identity constructed by the first power. After the travel with her mother on the train, Nel’s resistance power wakes up, and she finds her identity for the first time--she decides to be herself instead of following orders. Nel’s friendship with Sula is just originated from her resistance power against the rules. Both at that time are rebellious and hold fast to their identity, “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.” [5]. However, during the ten years of Sula’s departure from the Bottom, dramatic changes have been witnessed in sexual concepts. As Helen Hendaria Kamandhari argues: “At the time when Sula stays outside Medallion (in the 1920’s to the 1940’s), there are many things happening among which are : feminism, modernism that permits sexual liberties, and the inventions to improve daily lives’ activities.” [7]. Nevertheless, being a housewife who has never left Medallion after her first trip out with her mother in her childhood, Nel has never absorbed the new thoughts and opposes Sula’s sexual liberation as most women in the neighbourhood, accepts their general perspective on Sula as a dangerous woman who will possess their husbands, and has no courage of starting a new life after her divorce with Jude. With her resistance power vanishing, Nel gradually accepted the identity constructed by the first power. In the case of Sula, a constant power-resistance process is displayed during her identity formation process. Aware of the hatred of other people around her, Sula faces her sexual preferences and shows similar disgust for the whole conventional world. In her psychological description, she confesses, “She was pariah, then, and knew it. Knew that they despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men. Which was true.” [5]. When talking with Nel after

returning to Medallion, she describes the big city she has been to as a big Medallion in a disappointing way. In this vein, the meaning of medallion goes beyond a simple city to represent the conventional society. Never succumbs to the power, Sula states her will to destroy the town in her conversation with Eva, and she proves her determination with practical behaviors. One clear embodiment of their different reaction towards the first power is their attitudes towards the concept of marriage. Similar to Sula in her girlhood, Nel has hated the boring and suffocated marriage life that will obscure a woman’s identity, “She knew well enough what other women said and felt, or said they felt. But she and Nel had always seen through them. They both knew that those women were not jealous of other women and were only afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs.” [5]. Unfortunately, after Nel meets her first husband, she enters a sexually repressive life. On the contrary, Sula believes, “Marriage had changed all that but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men are available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes, she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to.” [5]. Matrimonial doctrine that limits sexual activities to a married couple and despises fornication can be seen as the origin of the power. However, Sula regards such limitation as unremarkable.

Moreover, marriage is also a turning point marking the beginning of the divergence between Sula and Nel. After marrying Jude, Nel assimilates by those housewives and becomes the same kind of woman Sula looks down upon. On the contrary, Sula is never trapped by marriage. She defines married women as those who “folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people’s skinned dreams and bony regrets.” [5]. Her indifferent attitude towards the hostility of traditional women and her rebelling sexual behaviors save her from the same threat of assimilation, which explains the process of reconstructing her identity as an antithesis towards the conventional concepts that advocates sexual freedom.

As An argues: “Morrison and other Black women writers also recognize the preeminent influence of the mother-daughter relationship, its quality an important determinant of a young girl’s successful passage through psychological and moral development, especially in Black culture.” [8], Nel and Sula’s different attitudes toward sexuality are also influenced by their family backgrounds despite their distinctive personalities. Nel was born and raised in a decent but oppressive family. Her grandmother is a Creole whore. Warned by her great grandmother to “be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood.” [5], her mother Helene suppressed Nel’s impulses early to ensure that Nel grows into a “good” woman in a

traditional sense. One psychological description of Nel on her wedding day reveals her change due to the family influence, “Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had.” [5]. On the contrary, all the women in Sula’s family show different levels of rebelling spirits against traditional values on female sexuality, “With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was Manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters.” [5]. Their resistance gradually strengthens after the evolution of three generations. Sula’s grandmother, Eva, enjoys teasing and pecking and laughter with men, although she never participates in the act of love due to her age and disability. However, Sula’s mother, Hannah, is much more rebellious. She is “rippled with sex” [5] and refuses to live without the attention of a man. Compared with Eva, Hannah is the one that has a determinant influence on Sula. When Sula sees her mother came out of the pantry even happier after having sex with her lovers, She forms her very first perception of sexuality: “Sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable.” [5]. Consequently, the resistance power reaches its peak when it comes to Sula. “Lovemaking seemed to her, at first, the creation of a special kind joy. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center. And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her abiding strength and limitless power.” [5]. It is revealed in this soliloquy that the purpose of her outlaw sexual behaviors goes beyond the pure pleasure of sexuality to become the way she realizes her power. This strong sense of resistance power distinguishes her from other women in the Peace family and contributes to her identity formation.

4. COUNTERARGUMENT

One might reasonably point out that there exists one plot in Sula that Foucault’s theory cannot explain. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault underlines the mutual effects between power and pleasure in addition to the power-knowledge (sexual knowledge) apparatus: “but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting.” [4]. According to Foucault, the pleasure discovered during the struggle between power and resistance feeds back to the exerciser of that power and brings joy to those who evade and oppose it. Nevertheless, the illustration of Sula’s inner world after

sleeping with men shows that the ultimate feeling of Sula is sadness and loneliness instead of pleasure, “It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow.... There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning.” [5]. Such an opposite result might question the tenability of the theoretical basis. Yet Morrison’s narrative provides an extended interpretation of Foucault’s theory rather than challenges it. According to the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, anticlimax is a technique used to “to designate an ineptly expressed idea meant to be superlatively grandiose or pathetic... or to designate a deliberately ironical letdown of this kind.” [9]. By switching Sula’s feelings quickly from a high to a low point, Morrison creates an anticlimax to show the sharp turn from pleasure to sadness after Sula having sex with men. This striking contrast provokes doubts about whether a person can construe his identity entirely through the power regime generated due to sexuality. Sula, depicted by Morrison, is a woman who lives for herself. Although she enjoys sexual freedom due to her independence, her loneliness is clearly shown in the novel. Throughout her life she struggled to truly complete herself. As Sima Farshid argues “There are several paradoxes in the novel, but its central paradox is lack of a center in its central character whose lifelong, though illusory, desire to attain the wholeness of ego impels her to search for the “other” part of her splintered “self”. That drive forces her to cling to her friend Nel and then to her lover Ajax—both acting as the fragments of her fractured ‘self’.” [10]. However, after Nel’s accommodation to the traditional values, Sula loses her only spiritual sustenance in the world, “She hand clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not the same thing.” [5]. Having failed to find another half of herself among all her male lovers, Sula encountered Ajax. The days with Ajax have completed Sula for a while, but his leaving declares Sula’s final failure of her pursuit for completeness. Sula gives up and decides to be intimate only with herself. Sexuality, therefore, serves as a method for her to identify with herself, “She waiting impatiently for him to turn away and settle into a wet skim of satisfaction and light disgust, leaving her to the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony.” [5]. However, physiological abundance can never offset the void of spiritual resonance; Sula still cries for the desperate solitude she found when she has sex with men. As a result, Morrison’s characterization uncovers the importance of spiritual abundance to construct a complete identity despite sexuality as an essential component and raises further discussion.

5. CONCLUSION

Power acts as the intermediary between *sexuality* and *identity*. As Foucault believes that knowledge production leads to people's discrimination against abnormal sexual concepts, Sula is also insulted by other women for her immoral sexual behaviours and is considered a demon. In this process, the knowledge-power mechanism is gradually built in the neighbourhood, and people attack Sula with their general sexual concepts to strengthen their superiority. Also, since resistance power can reconstruct one's identity, it is the main reason why Sula and Nel form entirely opposed identities after growing up even though they have had common sexual desires as young girls. Under the power of families and society, Sula's resistance power waxes with her growth while Nel's wanes: Sula keeps on living a life of sexual openness but Nel surrenders to the power and is reduced to a slovenly housewife as most people. As a result, Sula reconstructs her identity as an activist of sexual liberation, and Nel becomes one repressing her sexual desires. Sula indeed finds her identity by way of sexual openness. However, sexuality cannot compensate for the lack of spiritual resonance, and Sula always feels a sense of loss after orgasm. It implies that the pleasure coming from sexuality only is far enough to form a complete identity.

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