

Sexual Subversion :

An Analysis of Female Subjectivity and Growth Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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ABSTRACT

Most current studies of *Sula* draw on female relations or black feminism, while the construction of female subjectivity is rarely addressed. In this context, this essay, therefore, focuses on Sula's upbringing as she is influenced by her maternal elders, develops her sexuality, and eventually practices it in rebellion against patriarchal society. Through her inheritance from her elders and the practice of establishing her subjectivity, Sula acquires a self-centered feminist outlook and breaks the bonds of patriarchal society on women. By applying Hélène Cixous's theory of *Écriture féminine* (female writing) to analyze the image of the protagonist in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, this work aims to examine the establishment of Sula's subjectivity and feminist consciousness. The construction of Sula's image represents a subversion to traditional patriarchal society in the sense that she emphasizes women's consciousness to explore the value of their bodies and promotes the emancipation of black women.

Keyword: *Sula*, Toni Morrison, Postmodern Feminism, *Écriture féminine*, sexual concept

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, as a black female writer, uses black women as protagonists and relates the journey of black women's self-seeking with the process of reconstructing black people's national consciousness. Many black women with a rebellious spirit are created by Morrison. In *Sula*, Morrison uses the narrative strategy of *Écriture féminine* (feminine writing) to examine Sula's rebellious sexual concept, which reveals its essence as the resistance to patriarchy and the need for female self-expression.

In Karen F Stein's *Toni Morrison's Sula: A Black Woman's Epic*, F Stein adopts the method of ironic structuring and character pairing to research the novel and the characters. She examines the novel's narrative strategy by researching Nel and Sula's relationship and their different personalities. The examination of the two heroine's relationships is important but not comprehensive. There is a great deal of body writing strategy in the novel, and the idea of sexuality of Sula is

conveyed by this method, which is another significant aspect of the novel.

Currently, most studies, like F Stein's, focus more on Sula and Nel's relationship, and the significance of their friendship. But few studies have addressed the issue of body writing in *Sula*. Therefore, this paper will explore how Sula's concept of sexuality is shaped through body writing. To reach this research goal, this paper will apply Cixous's feminine writing theory to analyze Sula's sexual growth and how she embodies it in her practice, ultimately achieving the effect of rebelling against patriarchal social conventions. Through this study, we will learn how the novel uses the female body as a discourse and amplify their voices by feminine writing theory.

Sula, different from traditional women, uses her own body to express women's self-consciousness and resist the patriarchal society. So the following analysis will be divided into three parts. First, analyzing grandmother Eva and mother Hannah's characters and their views towards

men to study how Sula develops a bloodless and independent personality as well as casual sexuality under the influence of her maternal elders. Second, analyzing Sula's indifference to her mother's death, to abandon her grandmother, and her casual life of making love with different men to study how Sula reconstructs her sexual concepts in the process of seeking and establishing herself. Finally, by analyzing the change in her best friend Nel's feelings towards Sula and the attitudes of the whole "Bottom" community, from resistance and exclusion to progressive acceptance to study the influence of Sula herself and her sexual ideas.

2.FEMININITY INHERITANCE: MATERNAL ELDERS' IMPACT ON SULA

In Sula, the development of the plot can be seen as the development and practice of Sula's concept of sexuality. Therefore, to research Sula's sexual concept, this paper will first focus on her childhood experiences. Sula's mother Hannah and grandmother Eva are the two maternal elders who had the most influence on her. As Jane S. Bakerman says: "The girls learn their most important lessons from their mothers." [1] The novel is about women, and their relationships with one another are central to the plot. Through the influence of her two elders, Sula gained an initial understanding of sex. In her mind, sex is no longer a mystery that needs to be kept away.

In the mindset of most children in the community, sex is often something that cannot be fully understood. "Outside the house, where children giggled about underwear." [2] They don't fully comprehend what sex means; they simply find it intriguing and alluring. The contrast is reflected in how Nel regards sex as something shameful and frightening. "It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way." [2] Nel believes that sex equates to the loss of dignity, shame, and negativity, which is obtained by observing how her mother Helene behaves on the train.

According to Hélène Cixous's theory of feminine writing, "there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink." [3] The white ink represents the milk of the mother, implying that there is an inheritance of characteristics among women. "Morrison's preoccupation with the theme of motherhood in her novels is indicative of the significance of maternity as an integral part of a woman's state of being." [4] The influence and transmission of maternal qualities are a part of the novel that cannot be ignored. Morrison profoundly portrays the characters of Eva and Hannah, both of whom are both mothers and have a significant impact on Sula. Therefore, the establishment of Sula's concept of sexuality, awareness of her own body, and the enlightened roots of feminism in her mind

all originate from Eva and Hannah.

2.1. Eva's Image and Influence on Sula

Eva plays the role of God in the whole story. "The ambiguity and complexity of Eva's character as an individual capable of making important decisions and taking drastic measures to present her not merely as a maternal force conditioned by the idealized notions of assumed expectations of society but also as a multidimensional and autonomous individual." [4] As the "matriarch" of the family, she is very determined in her approach to survival. Eva utilized a leg in exchange for an insurance payment to support her family when her husband abandoned her. She killed her son Plum because he was addicted to drugs. Eva's actions were astonishing but reasonable. Her viciousness comes from deep maternal love. "...I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man." [2]

Eva's personality is multifaceted. She is not the mother of the traditional sense. She broke free from women's enslavement, doing as she pleased and becoming a cruel parent. As Eva's offspring, Sula inherited some of Eva's ruthlessness and determination. Sula develops a potential sense of feminism and the desire to break free and express herself. When young Sula was bullied by four white boys, she cut her fingertips with a knife to scare the boys away to protect herself and her friend Nel. As a child, she already has a rudimentary sense of feminist consciousness. Sula dominates herself by using her own body, overturning the male perspective of women's weakness and powerlessness.

2.2. Hannah's Image and Influence on Sula

Sula's mother Hannah is another woman who has a profound impact on Sula. Critic Elizabeth A. Rand thinks "Hannah is an important link in the Peace matrilineal line: she inherits Eva's need for "Manlove"; she extends an evocative sense of sexuality passed along to Sula" [5]. Hannah is the thread that connects the three women's relationships. She shares similarities with Eva, yet also differs. Sula, her daughter, inherits these traits from Hannah. Through the observations of her mother, Sula calmly and openly accepts the existence of "sex". "Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable." [2]

Hannah is good at pleasing men and she knows how to behave in a way that appeals to them. As a black woman, she knows how hard it is for women in the bottom class to survive. As a consequence, she never expresses herself, instead, she relies on men to protect her. By doing so, Hannah achieves her goal of survival. Hannah doesn't love her mother or her daughter, she only

loves herself. Although she stays mild and stoic in her social life, she is self-interested.

At this point, Sula inherits her mother's character. She always wants to be herself, as she says to Eva, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" [2]. That is the reason why Sula feels pleasure and enjoys herself in sex as she grew up. Sula never connects love and sex. She treats sex as a process of exploring herself. In this process, she only enjoys herself.

Sula's two elders have a profound influence on the development of her personality and the establishment of her sexual concept. Sula naturally inherited the personalities of Eva and Hannah. As a child, she initially formed her concepts. She is decisive, self-centered, and subconsciously pursues freedom and resistance to patriarchal society. As Sula grows up, she puts these concepts into practice and displays them physically. She gradually establishes her identity as a female subject and brings influence to others as well.

3. SUBVERSION OF SOCIAL DISCIPLINES: FROM MOTHER, FAMILY TO SOCIETY

The sexual values Sula learns from her maternal elders are paradoxical. "Under the shadows of Hannah's independence" [6], Sula learns the importance of pleasing herself that "sex is pleasant and frequent" [2]. "The matriarchal community Eva runs" [7] decides that her upbringing is female-dominated, and she understands women do not have to be reliant on men. In this way, Sula obtains the weapon of body practice to free herself from the object of male desire. However, Peace women's love for maleness is also a preference that they always "prejudice about men" [2]. The ethical barriers they erect make Sula skeptical of feminine and even maternal subjectivity. Due to the internalized patriarchal paradigms, the independence of Sula's maternal elders is not full. To "make herself" [2], Sula must launch a rebellion against the patriarchal disciplines her elders have been lured to be bound by and then used to bind her to.

3.1. Break with Maternal Bondage

Sula's first act of defiance of discipline is to watch her mother die indifferently as to sever her bond with her mother and the maternal mythology regarding motherhood as a source of femininity. Hannah isn't the "Old Woman" Sula must "get beyond" [3] or "the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" [8]. Instead, she is a fighter who refuses to be confined to the role of a mother or a maternal appendage but in pursuit of subjectivity. However, when a mother distances herself purposefully from motherhood, she is also "shaping the child's view of maternal love" [6]. When Sula overhears that her mother says: "I love Sula. I just don't like her... In bewilderment, she... (was) aware of a sting in her eye"

[2]. The family ties and the sense of belonging in her crumble. Shocked and bewildered, Sula has to shift her concept of the mother-and-daughter bond into a perception of selfhood. As a result, "Hannah's death becomes necessary for Sula to break free from patriarchal bondage and actualize her self hood" [9]. Sula's indifference, as her initial revolt against subjectivity, is the first step toward a rupture in matrilineal belonging as well as the quest for her subjectivity to construct her self-identity. By taking the initiative to cut off her contact with her mother, Sula completes Hannah's one-way breaking with her daughter and her motherhood, freeing the daughter and the mother jointly from the bondage. For women of old age, only by breaking the old mother-and-daughter bond restrained by patriarchal paradigms could they gain the opportunity to develop their self-identity.

3.2. Break with Family Bondage

Sula's second act of defiance of conventions is to send her grandmother to the nursing house to sever her bond with her family and the patriarchal values regarding the family as the source of humanity. Eva "establishes masculine authority and holds biased views against women to favor men" [6]. The damage she inflicts on her body makes her no longer a subject of male desire and earns her a certain amount of subjectivity and discourse power, but "being a woman without a body couldn't be a good fighter" [3]. It was difficult for her to perceive the infinite source of the feminine body, let alone fully practice it. It is because her sense of misogyny couldn't be dispersed by understanding herself, that she ends up becoming "the executant of men's virile needs" [3]. Eva desperately wants Sula to "get married" and "have some babies" [2] to perform her mothering and to perpetuate the family. "I don't want to make somebody else" [2], Sula says of such a discipline, expressing her quest for sexual liberation and subjectivity, "I want to make myself." [2] In "an attempt to avoid further victimization" [10], Sula verbally offends her grandmother. She denies the concept of family oppressing women, declares her sexual values of enjoying the feminine body, and establishes her subjectivity. For the women of the new age, deconstructing the role that women must play in the patriarchal society is the path to developing their self-identity.

3.3. Break with Social Evaluation

The community excludes Sula when she voluntarily severs her family ties. She once again abandons her grandmother just as how she abandoned her mother. Family is the prototype of the social hierarchy of power which is also reflected in a patriarchal society, hence family betrayers are often associated with unreliability and lack of conscience. According to this logic, filial piety becomes an important aspect of one's social evaluation. So while Sula was believed "struck dumb" [2]

previously, this time she could only be considered despicable in the community. By severing her family ties, Sula can inflict a fatal blow to the concept of family—the core of patriarchal society, being free from social norms and being able to practice her sexual values. “Given the final label” by men who “fingerprints her for all time” [2], Sula becomes a thorn in the community but she doesn't care about it. After proclaiming her sexual values to love herself, Sula goes on practicing her sexuality in a more determined way to break down the societal, racial, and gender-based oppression of her.

The indifference to Hannah's death and the determination to get rid of Eva makes Sula a courageous rebel against patriarchal society: she breaks the traditional family bonds while transcending the shackles of motherhood; she opposes the rules of patriarchal society while transcending the old women's repressed by gender and ideology. Step by step, Sula gets free from a series of patriarchal limitations including motherhood constraints, family disciplines, and social paradigms. She builds her self-identity and takes the first step away from masculine discourse discipline. Through the social subversion, she will be able to practice her body and her subjectivity more freely. She will then complete her self-practice through a sexual subversion and by returning to the true state of her body.

4. THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE SEXUAL VALUES: A REBELLION AGAINST PATRIARCHY

Eva and Hannah, as Sula's maternal elders, have partially deconstructed the traditional gender orientation of men and women, but their pursuit of feminine subjectivity is not spontaneous, active, or full. Though Sula's maternal elders have inspired her initiative pursuit of feminine subjectivity and the rebellion against patriarchal physical discipline on women, the more essential reason for Sula's success is her own experience and practice. Compared with Eva and Hannah, Sula's resistance to patriarchal society is more active and full. She takes the initiative of her sexuality as an important way to resist male power and obtain feminine subjectivity. In the novel, the main expression of Sula's subversion of the traditional gender concept is to take control of her sexuality, “During the lovemaking, she found and needed to find the cutting edge. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act.....forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break.” [2] And when she was making love with Ajax, “She looked down, down from what seemed an awful height at the head of the man.....Letting her thoughts dwell on his face to confine, for just a while longer” [2]. Sula feels her existence and strength through her sexual activities. However, Eva was forced to gain the hope of living through self-mutilation, and Hannah had affairs with men just to please herself. Sula gradually

clarifies the feminine subjectivity in sex activities and became the master of her destiny.

4.1. Pursuit of Sexual Initiative

Sula's pursuit of the sexual initiative is her first step to realizing feminine subjectivity and gradually finds her true self in her realistic behavior. During Sula's travel and back to “the bottom”, Sula chooses all kinds of men to have sex, with and then ruthlessly abandons these men, even her best friend Nel's husband Jude. When Sula and Nel talk to each other, Nel thinks Sula needs to “keep a man”, but Sula thinks it's not “what I'm supposed to do.....They ain't worth more than me” [2]. Sula's words are full of questions and criticisms of patriarchal society's physical discipline. Hélène Cixous believes that “women should express their thoughts through their bodies” [3]. The female body and sex have long been exploited to enslave women as the core of patriarchal conventions. According to the traditional gender paradigm, men have the right to choose women, and women rely on men for survival. As Simone de Beauvoir said in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes one” [11]. Due to the congenital physical differences between men and women, patriarchy encourages biological essentialism to determine social gender to limit women's dominance and put them in a subordinate position. However, Sula's dominance of her body, sex, and sexual partner selection has completely demolished the traditional gender paradigm that women are chosen by men and have to rely on men. Sula uses sex to explore herself and sense its true being, not to gratify men or gain temporary happiness. Sula not only recognizes the demystification of sex but also exerts control over sexual liberty and initiative.

4.2. Only Live by Herself

Sula also sharply learns why her mother Hannah doesn't “love” her through her sexual activities. Sula discovers the alienation she experiences in post-coital sadness when she sinks into a hidden core of loneliness and melancholy nostalgia. “Sexual intercourse, rather than encouraging human relatedness and mystic insight, increase her isolation and misery.” [12] Hannah's “love” for Sula is only due to patriarchal society's demand for motherhood. Sula finally reveals the cruel truth about family affection hidden behind the discipline of patriarchal society. She insists that she “can do it all” without following those stock traditions. Sula comes into the world alone and dies alone, she discovers the secrets of the patriarchal society and soberly finds her true self.

Sula's sexual practices are not for satisfying male vanity, but to find her true self and establish her feminine subjectivity. Sula subverts patriarchal society's masculine supremacy through her sexual initiative. As McDoewill pointed out, Sula's sexual activities “do not belong to the category of morality or legal behavior

within the marriage system. It belongs to the category of sensory experience and is a means for her to explore and understand herself ” [13]. Sula's sexual activities and sexual concepts are physical manifestations of her criticism and protest. And this concept deconstructs the phallogocentrism in the patriarchal society, as well as subverting the dominant position of men and the traits of disciplined women, and it depicts black women's exploration of self-existence and self-worth.

5. SULA'S IMPLICATIONS: INSPIRING NEL AND THE UNDERCLASS TO A PERCEPTION OF SELF AND IDENTITY

After ten years of traveling, Sula returns to Bottom, becoming more determined to construct herself and seek identity. Sex remains the most important aspect in the course of Sula's self-construction and acquisition of identity “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.” [3] Sula liberates her body, knows herself, and senses her selfhood in sex with men, but Sula's indulgence in her sexuality has a huge impact on the entire Bottom community, including Nel.

5.1. Three Shocks to Nel

Nel sees Sula having sex with Jude, and this is the first time that Nel is struck by Sula's casual and indulgent sexuality. “Sula and Jude had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor where the tie is pointing to, on all flours like dogs.” [2] Nel feels bitter and desperate, and this act of Sula breaks the pattern of life that Nel has clung to for years - existing as a shadow of her husband and endlessly giving to her family - and it can be said that Sula shatters Nel's beautiful illusions about her own life. Nel feels the presence of a gray hairball on her head for a long time afterward, and after Jude leaves, Nel feels that there is no way she could live without a man. “Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways.” [2] Nel, like many of the ordinary women in the community, has lost herself and is unable to live independently. On Sula's journey to find herself, Nel is like a mirror to her, and now Nel has shattered that mirror with her own hands. But the deterioration of Sula's relationship with Nel makes Nel find herself constantly remembering what Sula has told her even when she should have hated Sula. For Nel, some long-ago memories of the search for self-awareness begin to resurface.

The second shock to Nel is Sula's attitude towards her sex life and men. Nel and Sula have a conversation that helps Sula complete her self-construction and also plants a seed in Nel's mind regarding women, self, and identity. “You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man.” [2] Nel believes that she, as a woman, especially a black woman, needs a man. Nel denies her self-worth and the meaning and importance of female

independence. But Sula is the opposite of Nel. “They ain't worth more than me...Worth didn't have nothing to do with it(love).” [2] Sula has sex with different men without ever feeling that they are more important than herself. Sula's disinterest in men and casualness about sex infuriate Nel. Nel doesn't understand that women's bodies are powerful weapons for them to perceive, express, and be themselves. As Cixous says, “A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor—once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction - will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language” [3]. Sula points out that the loneliness of the black women at the bottom, including Nel, is given by others, but for Sula, “her loneliness is her own, of her own making” [14]. Sula's remark silences Nel and gives Nel a chance to think about her self-worth.

The third shock to Nel is that she recognizes her nostalgia and love for Sula after Sula's death. Nel suddenly realizes that it is not Jude she misses, but Sula. Sula is like Nel's soul and her departure represents Nel's decision to conform to the bottom tradition of raising a child and leaving behind her female ego and independence. When Nel begins to miss Sula it means that Nel's long-lost sense of self is rekindled. “She(Nel) carries the additional burden of shadow that white culture projects onto black people. But she is still typical of most women in Western culture.” [14] Nel gradually realizes the importance of gaining an identity, which also means that women represented by Nel begin to have the desire to gain equal identity in the pursuit of self.

5.2. Two Changes in the Bottom Community

By returning to the bottom and “going to bed with men as often as she can but then carelessly tosses them aside” [14], Sula's behavior completely overturns the traditions of the Bottom community. Sula's casual approach to sex and her disregard for men stir up a great deal of anger in the hearts of the community. The entire community is disturbed by Sula's forward-thinking behavior. Sula is certainly a powerful bomb for the Bottom. The inhabitants of the Bottom begin to resist and reject Sula, “they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps” [2]. They talk about Sula, saying that she is evil, that she has sex with white men. The Bottom dwellers treat Sula in the same way that “the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run” [2] and then they feel uneasy and disoriented, so they begin to make some changes to distinguish themselves from Sula. The inhabitants of the bottom briefly unite and fight together against Sula. The whole community strangely becomes “good”, but this change is only a sign of the bottom residents' resistance to change and their adherence to tradition.

After Sula's death, two distinct changes occur in the

Bottom community. The first is “the community’s role of defining itself through acceptance and disapproval of one of its member’s shifts” [14]. Women who choose to take careful care of their mothers-in-law because of Sula “return to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people” [2], and the wives “uncoddles their husbands” [2]. Everything changed because Sula comes to an end with Sula’s death. The second is that the community changes when people begin to accept the Shadrack and dance with him in the sun. Before her death, Sula says that “It will take time, but they(the Bottom residents) will love me” [2]. The Bottom dwellers’ acceptance of Shadrack who is similar to Sula is like a response to Sula’s “love”. Sula’s death indicates the end of her self-construction, but she has planted the seeds called “self”, “identity”, and “womanhood” in the Bottom community. The community commemorates and embraces Sula, just as they will embrace Sula’s new ideas eventually. The impact of Sula is long-lasting, and the entire community becomes more open and inclusive afterward.

6. CONCLUSION

Within the theoretical framework of *Écriture féminine*(feminine writing) of Hélène Cixous, this paper pays attention on the psychoanalytic feminine writing which is partly deficient previously. By examining how the eponymous protagonist of *Sula* constructs her female subjectivity in female growth as well as applying her sexual values in sexuality and body practice, this paper conducts an in-depth text analysis on the perspective of sexuality which was rarely used in predecessors’ studies.

Sula’s subjectivity is gradually built and developed as a result of her sexual knowledge and practice. She inherits her maternal elders’ boldness, self-centeredness, and openness to sexuality which gives her an initial sense of subjectivity, and she learns to demystify and treat sex correctly. However, with the long internalized patriarchal values, Sula’s maternal elders can’t genuinely become independent female subjects. Sula must transcend the patriarchal restraints, shatter the limitations of her elders, and break free from the confines of motherhood and the constraints of family through violent “separation”. Sula breaks away from the patriarchal system of evaluation to be truly free to practice her sexuality. Thus, through the practice of her body and sexuality, Sula recognizes her selfhood and reveals the nature of patriarchal oppression--the regulation of women as objects of motherhood and male desire. By mastering her sexual autonomy, Sula subverts the patriarchal society’s sexual disciplines of women and establishes a strong sense of her subjectivity. In the course of her daring sexual practices, Sula harms her friend Nel and others in the community, but she also disseminates the ideas of selfhood in the process. Sula’s life is short, but magnificent since she defies patriarchal obstacles oppressing her gender and her race and makes a significant difference in the lives of others.

In this essay, an analysis of how Sula constructs female subjectivity through the practice of sexuality delves into the narrative strategies Morrison employs to portray Sula as a fearless and vivid character, and the call for female subjectivity that Toni Morrison hopes to demonstrate through her characterization. Under the influence of generations of patriarchal paradigms, the path to true subjectivity for women remains difficult. However, there are certain shortcomings in this paper, such as a neglect of the double obstacles Sula encounters during her process of self-liberation as a black woman as well as a lack of support from black feminist theory. Hopefully, the inadequacies in perspective and theoretical basis will be fulfilled in future studies.

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