

# Patriarchy and a Disciplined Woman: Perspective from *Sula* and Foucault's Disciplinary Power

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## ABSTRACT

A considerable quantity of feminist investigations of Toni Morrison's *Sula* has appeared in previous studies, most of which focus on the image of Sula's rebellion against patriarchal society, which in most cases is perceived as a triumph. However, Sula's fate turns out to be tragic, suggesting that her resistance may have been ineffective. This essay analyses the essence of Sula's rebellion and the discipline she suffers in the context of the theory on disciplinary power proposed by Michel Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish*. The study finds that, in a pragmatic sense, Sula is a representative black woman who is disciplined. In spite of her brave attempt, the ultimate goal of getting rid of patriarchal oppression is still not realized. Based on the above analysis, this research provides an insightful perspective for understanding Sula's resistance and contributes to comprehending the power relations between two genders, and how oppressed women in a patriarchal society can seek independence and freedom.

**Keywords:** *Sula, Disciplinary power, Patriarchy*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As an epitome of American black female's living state in the early 20th century, Sula records the growth of Sula and Nel and their rebellions against the patriarchal society. In this novel, Sula is the forerunner of black females who revolt gender bias, racial discrimination and oppression. [1] However, she still did not get rid of the control of patriarchy oppression, just as Pi-hua Ni argued, "*Instead of being a changing force and regenerative power, Sula is de facto a powerless social nonconformist and sexual dissident.*" [2].

Many studies have analyzed the image of Sula as a successful rebel against patriarchal oppression under the perspective of feminism. Some have investigated how the female characters explore themselves and achieve their self-construction, and some have examined the alienation of females and their social relationships in this novel. However, neither have discussed whether the substance of Sula's rebellion is just invalid struggle to escape discipline of patriarchal disciplinary power. This essay will draw on Michel Foucault's power theory to argue that Sula is a

representative disciplined black female and failed resister under the patriarchal society.

Foucault's power is different from the traditional concept. As a diffusive existence, it is "*exercised but not possessed.*" [3]. In addition, disciplinary power plays a role in shaping individuals and supporting the operation of modern society. As is described, "*disciplinary power functions in the domain between 'struggle and submission'.*" [4] Hence, it makes sense to adopt this theory to interpret how the patriarchal society operates and imposes its effects on Sula. According to Foucault, the disciplinary power is modest and suspicious, while its influence is permanent. [5] Its main function is "*to 'train', rather than to select and to levy.*" [5], which means objects of disciplinary power will be unconsciously trained to accept and conform to social norms on their own initiative. Moreover, disciplinary power achieves its goal through three basic instruments: "*hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and together they function the whole process to the last part—the examination.*" [5]. In this work, the three instruments above have played a crucial part in imposing patriarchal oppression on Sula.

In the light of previous illustrations, this essay will be divided into two sections: the first section will focus on Sula's struggle against the patriarchal society and analyze the substance of her rebellion efforts. The second part will examine whether Sula is free from the patriarchal oppression in real sense, or just become disciplined step by step.

## **2. SULA'S RESISTANCE TO THE PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION**

The society depicted in Sula is dominated by patriarchy, of which the disciplinary power is diffused pervasively. According to Foucault, "*Disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility.*" [5]. Meanwhile, disciplinary power has spread in the form of capillary type around the society due to its subtle features. "*There is no strong male figure but there is present 'passive patriarchy.'*" [6]. This society is a typical literary projection of modern patriarchal society that relies on the operation of disciplinary mechanism.

It is difficult for Sula to avoid her fate of being subjected to oppression and discipline in the patriarchal society. Before reaching the conclusion and figuring out whether Sula has been completely disciplined in the end, initially, it is necessary to have a retrospect of the resistance Sula has made. As is summarized, "*Sula pursues her own independence and completely disconnects herself from the community in order to confront the power of submitting herself to any fixed customary system.*" [7]. Sula's rebellion includes mutilating herself to deter the boys who harassed Nel and drowning Chicken Little in 1922; escaping from home after 1927, engaging freely in sexual relations with men, and living without getting married and having a child. As it is argued, "*Sula appears as a character that chooses her path and put behind the traditional life and gender roles.*" [6] Her pursuit of freedom and rebellion against the oppressed and inferior status quo have been praised by many scholars.

However, Sula's resistance is ultimately nominal without substantially meaningful object. The oppression she has suffered derives from the patriarchal system instead of a specific individual like the ancient monarchs. The social environment featuring male dominance is "*reflected in correlative inequities throughout the society.*" [8]. This makes it difficult for her to find out the prime culprit of her suffering, and her resistance thus can only stop at the surface. When bullied by several boys, to discourage them from harassing her, she "*pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge.*" [9]. The purpose of her behavior is to show her courage to rebel. Instead, behind this behavior Sula's rebellion can only stop the violation of the boys, who are just a small group of the dominant gender. Or to say, her efforts can just protect her from current hazards, but are not able to help her get rid of the weak position caused by

the deep-rooted patriarchal disciplinary mechanism once and for all. Therefore, her seemingly effective rebellions are virtually nominal struggles.

Sula's resistance is mostly nominal, so breaking through the oppression of patriarchal society is just a fantasy for her. "*Stubbornly, Sula was unwilling to define herself as part of the fixed community and to conform to its standards, deliberately, she placed herself out of the accepted boundaries,*" [10]. yet "*she stood alone.*" [10]. The symbolic resistance that Sula has made does not shake the foundations of the problems caused by the functioning of the social mechanism, and can only result in temporary or limited effects. "*Sula's nonconformity is not accompanied with a regenerative power.*" [2]. She still remains trapped in a patriarchal society, and unable to escape the fate of being disciplined.

## **3. DISCIPLINARY POWER THROUGH THE LIFETIME OF SULA**

Sula is living under observation. In Foucault's claims, "*observation is an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power.*" [5]. She first becomes the object of male observation in 1922, when Sula and her friend Nel walked through a valley where they suffered male gaze, they were "*chilled by the wind and heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares.*" [9]. This reveals that female characters like Sula exist as viewing objects for males and slaves to the male gaze. Unbridled gaze from the male on Sula formally introduces her to the patriarchal power structure. This male gaze troubled her and kept Sula under the observation of males for a long time.

The male gaze on Sula actually functions as one of the means of discipline-hierarchical observation. It has not only aroused her curiosity about males, but also satisfies her hidden desire for sex. In the two girls' eyes, "*those smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them.*" [9]. Thus, there is an unequal mutual gaze between man and Sula. While the males are free to gaze at the female's bodies and make titillating actions, the females can only passively accept it, feeling secretly satisfied while repressing themselves. In this unequal interacting gaze, the sexual power of the male over the female is implied, constituting observation upon the female by the male. According to Foucault, "*observation functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere.*" [5]. It is in this gaze that females receive confirmation of their attractiveness and the satisfaction of their unspeakable desire for men. It is only in this observation that females can confirm their value. While Sula enjoys receiving the male gaze, she has been subliminally disciplined to obey the male.

In the novel, Sula indeed escapes the punishment from legal perspective after drowning Chicken Little, however, she cannot escape being judged by the males. Her

drowning of Chicken Little does not escape male observation in that Shadrack witnesses it all. When Sula goes to find him, his reaction is quite intriguing. “*He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come.*” [9]. And when she left, her belt was gone. “*Always. He had answered a question she had not asked, and its promise licked at her feet.*” [9]. The power relationship was established between Shadrack and Sula at the moment when the promise came into effect. Her belt was held by Shadrack, indicating that no matter how she resists, Sula is always firmly disciplined under the underlying patriarchy. Although she has managed to escape punishment from the public and legal system, Sula, as a rebellious female, still has to endure the punishments inflicted on her by the males in the disciplinary system. These punishments are unavoidable and imperceptible, through which Sula has been disciplined further.

Sula is the object of male examination. In this novel, females “*are afraid their husbands would find out that no uniqueness lay between their legs,*” [9]. they scare of ‘*losing job*’ [9]. This is precisely because males have the power of examination on females. It is through examination that comparisons between females as individuals can be realized. Compared with other women, Sula seems quite different. She appears to be sexually free and not bound by marriage. In fact, her complicated relationships with other men self-evidently connote the sexual examination by males. “*They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money.*” [9]. It is this examination that brings out her uniqueness and allows her to have numerous lovers to secure her source of money.

Males are in fact regulating Sula through the means of examination. As Foucault explained “*the procedures of examination were accompanied at the same time by a system of intense registration and of documentary accumulation.*” [5]. From other aspect, in a patriarchal society, males have the power to discipline based on their knowledge, and thus they have the right to work, realizing the control over the females on material level. As demonstrated above, after Sula's escape from home, her money mostly comes from her lovers, which means that she cannot exist outside of the male examination. On the other hand, the act of examination turns Sula into a special case that requires intensive discipline. “*Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. As soon as the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another.*” [9] As Morrison memorized “*The local women were reckoned as a certain kind of figure, they were envied and approbated by men.*” [9] The difference embodied by Sula in the examination threatens the very existence of those who are already disciplined within the mechanism, thus she becomes the object of intense infliction by the disciplinary power. Isolated and sickened to death, Sula is the very case to be erased from the system of discipline.

Although Sula has been constantly rebelling, underneath her acts of rebellion lies the spiritual core of being disciplined. She becomes possessive in her relationship with Albert Jacks. “*Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it.*” [9]. After possessiveness occurred to Sula, she began to dress herself up to please Albert, which implies that Sula gradually lost her defiant attitude, voluntarily submitting to males. This means that Sula's unique spirit of rebellion in pursuit of freedom and liberty is finally worn out under the long period of discipline. It is “*a society penetrated through and through with disciplinary mechanism.*” [5]. Sula disappointed Albert Jacks because she began to become no different from other females. This is Albert Jacks examination on Sula. And his departure indicates that Sula is already a successfully disciplined individual. This resisting soul, however, “*is nothing but the effect and instrument*” [11]. of the disciplinary system, “*in fact became the prison of the body.*” [11]. Eventually, Sula regretfully becomes an ordinary woman disciplined in the patriarchal society.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

No single theory can adequately explain whether Sula succeeded in escaping the oppression of patriarchal society through her struggle. The debate about Sula's rebellion is still ongoing. Foucault's theory of how disciplinary power helps to sustain the functioning of modern society and offers a new lens to re-examine Sula's rebellion and her profile. Based on this perspective, Sula is a representative disciplined black woman, a failed rebel under patriarchal oppression. She lives in a patriarchal, disciplinary society, where the disciplinary power is pervasively dispersed, which makes it impossible for her to find the cause of her suffering—neither a specific person nor a specific rule. Her revolts against a specific individual can merely remain superficial. The failure of the confrontation leads to social discipline from all sides and a lifetime of suffering for her. She is subjected to male gaze. Even if she manages occasionally to escape the law, she is unable to be free from normalizing judgements by men. Sula seems to have sexual freedom. Yet, as always, she is dependent on men and has endured their scrutiny. With the three basic instruments of disciplinary power continuously imposing influences on Sula, she is thoroughly disciplined at last. Foucault's theory thus provides an insight for the study of Sula's image and rebellion, and is also useful for understanding the power relations between the genders and for inspiring women to strive for independence and freedom.

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