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The Landscape of Femininity in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*: A Comparison

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to primarily interrogate the multifaceted portrayal of women's relationships in *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987). Both novels by Toni Morrison feature a strong female presence as the textual epicenter pivoting narrative action. In discussing certain thematic concerns, a tenuous comparative framework shall be established to better illuminate the broader engagements of the chosen works. Excavating similarities, differences, and diversities in the texts' enmeshed representational matrices this argument hopes to orient the thriving critique around Morrison's works to a newer discursive axis.

Keywords: African-American, Toni Morrison, *Sula*, *Beloved*, Comparison, Femininity.

Sula (1973) traverses a time span of 46 years (1919-1965). Set in the fictional town of Medallion in the ironically named 'Bottom', the narrative begins with the 'awarding' of hilly land to the unnamed founding father, a colored slave who earns it through a labor bargain with his white overseer. It is the origin story of the communal settling of Medallion, and thus begins at the beginning of time to weave a strong mythic structure around its characters. The eponymous protagonist's story is focalized through a host of ancillary textual presences, most of them female. Nel, Eva, Helene, Hannah, Rochelle, Cecile, Shadrack, Judd, Ajax, and a strong community of African-American peoples propel the depiction of Sula Peace through the forging of relational ties.

The threshold between the reader and the black-topic text need not be the safe, welcoming lobby I persuaded myself [*Sula*] needed at that time. My preference was the demolition of the lobby altogether. [Of all of my books], only *Sula* has this 'entrance'. The others refuse 'presentation'; refuse the seductive safe harbor, the line of demarcation between... them and us. (*Sula*72)

Beloved demonstrates Morrison's latter avowed intention by plunging the reader headlong into house number 124 and the venomous presence haunting its inhabitants. It does not stop to explicate beginnings- of the characters, the house, or its geographical location, but kick starts, in-media-res, as unpredictable in its approach to narrative action as the baby-ghost whose wrath is inexplicably set off sporadically. Unlike *Sula*, with a definitive "horizon of expectation" (Jauss and Benzinger 12) embedded in its titular presentation of the female

protagonist, *Beloved*, is not just about the eponymous, murdered baby, or the textual representation of the factual Margaret Garner's story, but also about the act of loving, and being loved by someone. It can, therefore, be read as both a noun, and an adjectival presentation of a central theme, along with its specific historical inspiration. Like *Sula*, *Beloved* draws its tight web around a diverse supporting female cast.

Both selected texts, in characteristic Morrison style, escape the boundaries of a one-dimensional focus on character; relying instead on establishing a dialectical femininity through a host of female relationships for its protagonists. Sethe's bond of all-consuming love for her daughters, Denver and *Beloved*, and *Sula* and Nel's association majorly drive forward the two narratives, marking off the points of an effective literary strategy that reincarnates across the texts separated by a gap of fourteen years.

Without veering too much into fallacies of intention, it is important to explicate the contextual imperative of these texts, and the conscious construction of a black female aesthetic by Morrison. Toni Morrison, in her forewords to *Sula* and *Beloved*, discusses the feminist hinterland of these works.

I think now it was the shock of liberation that drew my thoughts to what "free" could possibly mean to women. In the eighties, the debate was still rolling; equal pay, equal treatment, access to professions... To marry or not. To have children or not. Inevitably these thoughts led me to the different history of black women in this country – a history in which marriage was discouraged, impossible or illegal; in which birthing was required, but "having them"... being, in other words, their parent – was as out of the question as freedom. (*Beloved* 86)

In that atmosphere of "What would you be doing or thinking if there was no gaze or hand to stop you?" I began to think about just what that kind of license would have been like for us black women forty years earlier... What could that mean in 1969 that it had not meant in the 1920s? The image of the woman who was both envied and cautioned against came to mind. (*Sula* 72)

It is her contemporaneous response to the complex issues being discussed under the metanarrative of the women's liberation movement at each point of time that urges her to embark on a retrospective theorizing of the historical possibilities offered by the past. Polygamy, abortion rights, women's response to women's actions, all these are still hotly debated topics, post-third wave. Cynthia Davis's argument about Morrison, forwarded through a particular discussion of race, can be extended as being equally valid to Morrison's treatment of gender within the chosen novels:

White brutality and insensitivity are part of the environment black characters must struggle with, but they are most often conditions, institutionalized and often anonymous, rather than events with ritualistic overtones. This allows Morrison to focus

attention not on the white characters' forcing of mythic rites – as if they were gods – but on the black characters' choices within the context of oppression. (Davis 334)

The peculiar beauty of Morrison's works lies in the convergence of myth with a specific social unmasking of race and gender oppression, without falling into the dangerous, Universalist trap of mythopoeia.

Beloved is about the overarching debate regarding women and motherhood couched in the particular story of an 'unnatural' mother. Similarly, *Sula* is as much about broader questions of women's sexuality and identity, focalized through the particularized telling of one woman's life. Elsewhere, Morrison has discoursed at length on the inter-constitutive relation between the past and present of African-American existence: the present-ness of the past and vice versa. In a modified sense, these two texts also bear out a similar engagement with certain aspects of contemporaneity, through recourse to temporally displaced narratives.

Pairing characters, in order to present multiple perspectives towards similar conditions, is a pet trope in Morrison's fiction (Salvatore 154). *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Sula* (relevant here), all have these yin-yang couplings that allow for a polyvalent teasing of complex social imperatives. Critics have interpreted *Sula* and Nel's relationship in various ways. What is common to most such readings is a delineation of the antithetical nature of their textual responses to conformist societal pressure (Salvatore 161). Growing up, the two are inseparable, finding companionship, but also defining their own Self by mutually creating each other as an 'Other', necessary for self-definition (Davis 324). The potentially lesbian overtones of their association escapes the realm of conscious articulation, but the love that they find in each other has been poignantly indulged through various descriptions, most notably the one where they're described as each other's dream companions. They round off each other's rough edges; Nel receives courage from *Sula*'s carefree attitude, while *Sula* enjoys emotional support through Nel's comforting presence. Together they fit as snugly as two pieces in a love puzzle. Coming from such vastly different backgrounds, but also with some startling similarities, these "daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers... found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (*Sula* 673).

Kevin Everod Quashie in his essay "The Other Dancer as Self: Girlfriend Selfhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" makes a significant observation about the relationship between Nel and *Sula*:

This idea of the girlfriend in Black women's discourse carries serious weight: the girlfriend is someone who makes it possible for a black woman to bring all of herself into consideration, to imagine herself wild and adventurous, but also safely and of the shore. (Quashie 190)

After a shared childhood, the girls adopt wildly divergent approaches to gendered expectations. *Sula* becomes the freewheeling, polyamorous, detached, world-wise traveller, who eventually returns to her hometown because the repetitive banality of life outside

Medallion makes the latter a viable alternative. Conversely, Nel marries Judd and settles into a respectable, morally sanctioned wifely existence with the community's approval. Sula's return throws everybody into a tizzy, as she waltzes in and lays waste Medallion's ethical façade through her multiple sexual liaisons with all kinds of townsmen. The point of no return is reached when Nel walks in on Sula and Judd sexually engaged on the bedroom floor. Jealousy and possessiveness, emotions that had never been entertained in their childhood now tear asunder their older selves. It's ironic that it is not the shared guilt of Chicken Little's drowning, but the destruction of Nel's culturally ordained respectability (achieved through marriage), which estranges the pair. Adopting extreme, incompatible positions vis-à-vis the episode, Nel and Sula do not meet again for years. The final conversation, which occurs only when Sula is nearing death, does not offer the warmth of reconciliation.

It is much later, after Sula and Hannah's death, when Nel is pushed into acknowledging, not the immense ideological difference, but the lived existential similarity between Sula and herself. It is Eva who spurs on this final agonizing cry that encircles the conclusion of the narrative:

"Tell me how you killed that little boy."

"What? What little boy?"

"The one you threw in the water. I got oranges. How did you get him to go in the water?"

"I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula."

"You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched."

"You're confused, Miss Peace. I'm Nel. Sula's dead"...

"Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you"... (Sula 2058)

It is this loaded conversation that brings the looping narrative back to that earlier stage of understanding where Nel realizes that it was never Judd who she missed, but Sula. Significantly, Nel (like Sula earlier) here is accused of 'watching', rather than being 'paralyzed' with fear. The "circles and circles of sorrow" (2168) that rend the air in a never-ending cry of "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (2168) offer Nel some semblance of self-awareness in life, and therefore the possibility of a transformative subjectivity. Sula dismisses the concrete emotional impact of her actions on Nel, and only attains a limited knowledge of Nel's importance post-death, sans any tangible delayed decoding of her own selfhood.

There is no exact counterpart to the Sula-Nel pairing in *Beloved*, but as Ann Salvatore perceptively points out in her essay "Toni Morrison's New Bildungsromane: Paired Characters and Antithetical Form in 'The Bluest Eye', 'Sula', and 'Beloved'", the Denver-Sethe, mother-daughter relationship enacts some structural similarities to the former pair:^[1]_[SEP]

Through the growth of Denver, Morrison retains the more traditional bildungsroman convention in *Beloved*. Sethe's living daughter is the secondary personality whose

eventual mustering of different behavioral strategies counters the anti-heroine's unresolved quest and permits a movement towards fulfilling selfhood. (Salvatore 171)

At the conclusion of *Sula*, Nel inches closer to a reconciled subjectivity, but the process's success escapes the purview of the text, tingeing the epiphanic ending with ripples of doubt. Unlike this, Denver's escape into the world outside 124 is portrayed with greater positivity. She overcomes her fears and steps forth into self-sufficiency, knowledge, and a happier future, through the support of the African-American community. Instead, the elements of self-doubt and lack of subject-hood are transferred to the other pair of Sethe and Beloved respectively. In *Beloved*, it is Sethe, whose unsure "Me? Me?" (5346), spoken to Paul D, and Beloved's unpleasant 'rememory' that overshadow the text's dénouement. The difference that this displacement makes to the structure of the two novels is arguable. Maturity, though definitely also a certain traditionalism, underpins the end of *Beloved*, which is missing from *Sula*.

There is an interesting thematic similarity that runs across the two texts: both feature an act of child-murder, followed by a withdrawal from the community, a protagonist whose all-consuming devotion to the self threatens the African-American collective's desperate bid for a communal homogeneity. Sethe's killing of Beloved is a publicized, punishable offense: a violent ontological rupture that sunders time, and Sethe's identity, into two irreconcilable halves, before and after the murder. On the other hand, *Sula's* accidental killing of Chicken Little happens secretly, with no witnesses except Nel and Shadrack. Another, less apparent epistemological fracture that underpins *Sula's* behavior is the death of all filial affection that she experiences when she overhears Hannah admit that she loved *Sula*, but never liked her.

Sethe's act of violent reprisal is underscored as an aberration, too complex to unequivocally condone or condemn, brought on by the impact of conditions beyond her control. *Sula's* proclivity for pain (self-inflicted or otherwise), and curiosity at annihilation, is posited almost as an innate quality. Her cutting off a part of her finger to scare off the Irish boys ("If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" 223), the almost-serene drowning of Chicken ("The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank" 482), her passive contemplation of a burning Hannah Peace ("Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that *Sula* had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" 664), the desire to peel back the layers of Ajax's face to sift the loam behind gold and alabaster ("And if I take a nail file or even Eva's old paring knife – that will do – and scrape away at the gold, it will fall away and there will be alabaster" 958), all submerge seamlessly into the guise of a true postmodernist protagonist.

Both works betray Morrison's preoccupation with the postmodernist conundrum of shattered selves, and the loss of a logocentric language with which to articulate a stable identity. However, *Sula's* flirtation with these ideas is done largely through the central character. *Sula* is a woman without an ego, she is paradoxically both beyond and before meaning. She craves the annihilative power that she claims she receives only through orgasm during the sexual act. Her life has been a fruitless search for difference (a Derridean *différance*

perhaps?), but all she has found is the nightmarish stasis of a cyclical reality. Even on her deathbed she is forced to realize that she has/had no meaning, and that “nothing was ever different. They were all the same. All of the words and all of the smiles, every tear and every gag just something to do.” (1089) She is an antagonist whose Self abhors the very notion of appropriation or negotiation through a middle path. It is against her excesses, that Nel, and by extension the community, defines their own behavior. Sula’s life ends on that telling narratorial comment: about a restless nature that might have let her live had she channeled those energies through art or other creative pursuits. But without the comfort of constructive conscription, she is dispersed, a forever antagonist, whose death is not mourned by anyone except Nel.

In *Beloved*, this frittering of subjectivity is not an overarching condition that uniquely plagues a single character, but is a legacy of that crippling historical system of slavery, that denies the slave any prospect of self-fashioning. It is Sethe’s anger at being reduced to a mere characteristic, that forces her to take the extreme decision of claiming ownership of her children, and herself, through another act of erasure, that of murder. Sula and Sethe are rendered into cultural anomalies by their transgressive performance of love – Sula’s curious, non-monogamous kind, and Sethe’s overpowering, life-taking kind. But the major differences that intrude at this juncture, namely their relations with the men in their lives, as well as the response of the community to each of them, are arguably the biggest factors that result in the eventual divergence of the narratives of *Sula* and *Beloved*.

Sula refuses circumscription by recognizable hetero-normative expectations. Her power is premised on her deliberate aloofness from the performance of social ideology. Ajax is her male counterpoint in that he is as indifferent to being ‘tied down’, and as eager to participate in free love as Sula. Judd is the polar opposite of Ajax. He needs Nel to define his own hyper-masculinity against her femininity. Nel shares these conservative tendencies, making them the perfect orthodox counterpart to the former pair. Despite these stark differences, neither Ajax-Sula, nor Judd-Nel, work out as viable models of companionship, because neither men, nor women demonstrate any real understanding of each other. Sula refuses to entertain Nel’s feelings for Judd when she sleeps with the latter; similarly, Ajax refuses to stick around once he realizes that Sula might be falling in love with him. The novel offers myriad extremes in all motifs, but falls short at postulating a synthesis of these models.

Contrarily, *Beloved* features the relationship of Paul D and Sethe, which weathers significant obstacles to chart a developmental oeuvre, and emerges stronger at the end of the story. Paul D bears striking similarities to both Ajax and Judd from the other text. He is a traveller like Ajax, avoiding staying too long at one place or getting too attached to a person. The shared experience of a dehumanizing slave past at Sweet Home and a subsequent suppression of any of its continuing effect on their lives curiously cements Sethe and Paul D’s love. Upon arriving at 124, he dreams of a settled future with her. Desirous of reclaiming a diminished masculinity, he embarks on stamping his mark on everything in Sethe’s life. Much like Judd, he wishes to play the quintessential man-of-the-house, and his very first act is to banish the baby ghost. However, *Beloved*’s arrival and subsequent pursuit of him, forces

him to rethink his hyper-masculinist persona. Unlike Judd, or Ajax, he learns to embrace his painful “red heart” (1201) past, and mature enough to understand that he must work with Sethe to build a lasting relationship.

The community of African-American people encircles the protagonists in both Morrison works. Sula and Sethe’s deviations are measured against the referential ethical standard of the community. Both are severely censured for their highly individualistic demonstrations of love. The protagonists and the community are in an inter-constitutive relationship where the community uses Sethe and Sula to establish its communal identity. However, the community is not allowed to be an omniscient judging authority reacting against the protagonists, Morrison trains the critical lens on its own hypocrisy as well. The community of black people that condemns Sula is spurred to then adhere to its own rigid standards. Husbands become more attentive to their wives, mothers to their children, and daughters to their mothers, in a bid to be the negative of Sula’s over-zealous indifference. Malnourished teapot’s food being given special attention by an otherwise uncaring mother is a specific instance of the same aforementioned impulse. Sula’s death encourages the townspeople to revert to their old disinterested lifestyles. The heavily ironic narratorial voice masterfully brings each of these instances of Medallion’s unnecessarily harsh judgment of Sula’s actions into sharp focus for the reader’s extra-diegetic analyses.

The African-American neighborhood in *Beloved* reacts along similar lines to Sethe’s murder of her youngest daughter. In *Beloved*, the community is a better-shaped almost-protagonist in itself. It’s envious response to Baby Suggs results in their neglecting to inform the family of the impending danger of the Schoolteacher’s arrival. Merged with its morally rigid stance on murder, dark deeds in the townspeople’s own pasts are juxtaposed against Sethe’s choice. Ella, who completely ostracizes 124 and its inhabitants, has the taint of being a murderous mother herself. The mulatto child born of her rape by a white father and son is left to die since she does not consider it her kin. The people’s refusal to nuance their perspectives of Sethe’s circumstances is repeatedly highlighted. Notably, the communities in both novels come together to unequivocally lend their support and approval to one of the women in our relational pairing: Nel in *Sula* and Denver in *Beloved*. However, where Sula dies unasked and condemned, Sethe receives the near-ritualistic blessing of a female congregation that gathers outside her house to exorcise *Beloved*. The group’s (led by Ella) willingness to rally behind one of its own is the transformative agent in *Beloved*, which pushes the later narrative to an organically superior realm with respect to the aesthetics of storytelling. The bringing of Sethe back into the folds of communal comfort, and the return of Paul D, tinge the text with empowering, companionate colors.

Both *Sula* and *Beloved* approach a particular historical manifestation of larger enmeshed concerns in their own diverse ways. There are significant thematic overlaps between the two narratives to have warranted this detailed attempt to contribute something new to an age-old critical fund. The novels, separated by a temporal gap of fourteen years, must not be weighed with an eye to deem one better than the other, but a comprehensive engagement with their complex concerns must be offered to encourage a wider perspectival analyses of their myriad

motifs vis-à-vis Morrison's larger literary aesthetic. This paper has attempted to construct a tentative comparative between two of her works – *Sula* and *Beloved*. The analysis does not claim to be exhaustive; rather, it must be taken as an opening for further literary excursions into newer ways of deconstructing the plethora of possibilities still offered by Morrison's fiction.

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