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## Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula*: An Intersectional Approach

**Dr. Srima Nandi**

Assistant Professor & Head

Department of Humanities

Supreme Knowledge Foundation Group of Institutions

West Bengal.

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### **Abstract:**

Mothers are the culture-bearers in society. They form the main fulcrum, exhibiting love, care, and nurture and, inevitably they create a strong bond within the family. Motherhood is seen as a symbol of power and strength. For a long time ideas about Black mothers in the context of the African American communities have been very different. Historically speaking, the concept of motherhood has been of prime importance to the people of the African descent. Black motherhood has been sanctified in most African American communities to the extent that “the idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has come to be seen as a norm” (Collins 188). But at the same time many African American men failed to see their mothers who came back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families”(Collins 188).

This paper will study the African American women and their role as mothers within intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). Different types of mothers will be analysed in this paper and in doing so motherhood in myriad shades will be analysed and studied within the framework of intersectionality theory. Intersectionality is a sociological theory that examines the socially and culturally constructed categories of inequalities and discriminations that operate and interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, motherhood, Black mothers, controlling images.

“Black Motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical.”

—Patricia Hill Collins (190)

African American women have long been subjugated and enslaved in the United States and their role as mothers were similarly shaped under slavery. Slavery has given rise to different types of mothers—the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, the othermother and such controlling images that has been orchestrated to oppress. The concept of motherhood intersects with the trinity (race, class, and gender) and this interlocking will explain how African American mothers' lived experiences are intertwined within this matrix of domination where they are

racially exploited and emotionally humiliated<sup>1</sup>. For the African American women, motherhood as an institution is celebrated and at the same time questioned. It 'occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place' (Collins 57).

"African American women's experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant groups' efforts to harness Black women's sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation", says Patricia Hill Collins (57). This was done in order to maintain the slave order and also the maintenance of race, class, and gender inequality. Mothers during slavery in the United States encountered inhuman treatment and several hardships by their oppressor. Children born to enslaved mothers were treated as slaves. Black men were forbidden to have sexual relations with white women. If children who were born "of such liaisons must be seen as a product of rape" (57). This then makes [m]otherhood and racism... symbolically intertwined, with controlling the sexuality and fertility of both African American and white women essential in reproducing racialized notions of American womanhood"(57). Before we go into the analysis of the intertwining matrix of race-class-gender, we shall first understand what the term intersectionality is.

## I

The term 'intersectionality' was introduced by an African American theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality is a sociological theory that examines the socially and culturally constructed categories of inequalities and discriminations that operate and interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. The various forms of discriminations and injustices, which we observe in socio-cultural hierarchies, are exercised on the axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and other forms of identity categories. These inequalities are seen in every strata of society. Socio-cultural and political identities have affected the lives of the marginalized sections of the society, particularly of women and children. The dominant and the powerful bodies work effectively within the system to subjugate the less powerful and less privileged ones. Within this context, we observe that African American women have long been subjugated and enslaved in the United States and their role as mothers were similarly shaped under slavery. Slavery has given rise to different types of mothers—the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, the othermother and such controlling images that has been orchestrated to oppress. It is because of such oppression meted out to them. The theory of intersectionality will be very useful in discussing the various intersecting oppressions in this paper. Intersectionality theorists have argued that all the variables such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability—work in groups rather than individually.<sup>2</sup> They no longer believe in the traditional method of looking into oppression that saw the different identity categories as separate entity but instead found them as

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<sup>1</sup> Sentence has become too complex

<sup>2</sup> The sub-clause is not complete. Please revise

intersecting with each other. Much debate about this theory has given rise to different models of intersectionality such as the ‘additive model,’ ‘multiplicative model,’ and the ‘interlocking model.’ I will use the insights provided by intersectionality theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Adrien Wing, Nira Yuval Davis and Patricia Hill Collins to interpret the dynamic roles of mothers in myriad ways.

Let us begin with Crenshaw. Her metaphor of the crossroads explains how multiple differences intersect in the lives of the marginalized. She explains the metaphor in the following way:

Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group ...tries to navigate the main crossing in the city.... The main highway is “racism road.” One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street....She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Crenshaw, qtd. in Yuval Davis 47-48)

Yuval-Davis calls Crenshaw’s approach as the ‘additive intersectionality’ model. She views this approach problematic because it ‘often remains at one level of analysis’ (Yuval Davis 49) without considering other levels during analysis of other categories. ‘Each street largely remains isolated from the others and the entire topography cannot be visualized by a single street which may intersect some other street at one point but may not merge with the other(s)’ (Nandi 185).

Yuval-Davis along with Floya Anthias also argue against the notion of ‘triple oppression’ that was prevalent among Black British feminists. This notion was basically a claim that Black women suffer oppressions on the axes of three independent categories— race (blackness), gender (women), and class (members of the working class). Yuval-Davis and Anthias argue against this approach saying that there is no such thing as suffering from oppression “as black”, “as a woman”, “as a working class person” (Yuval Davis 46). They believe that each social division has a different ontological basis and that they are irreducible to each other. Though each social category has their own ideologies they always remain connected with other social divisions and, studying one category without the other becomes impossible. She argues that for example being oppressed, as “‘a black person’ is always constructed and intermeshed in other social divisions” (46). It cannot be studied as independent to other categories. Therefore, “these theorists are not in favour of the Additive model (race + class + gender) which studies race, class and gender as if they are an independent body of their own” (Nandi 185).

Adrien Wing, a legal scholar and critical race feminist, explains the theory of intersectionality as the idea that identity is ‘multiplicative’ rather than ‘additive.’ She observes that “instead of understanding identity as the addition of one independent element to another, identity would make more sense if you think of each element as inextricably linked with others” (qtd. in

DeFrancisco 8).<sup>3</sup> She further explains that “an intersectional approach to identity in general, and gender identity in particular makes clear that all facets of identity are integral parts of a whole”(8). Therefore, she is in favour of the multiplicative model (race × class × gender).

Patricia Hill Collins, on the other hand, uses the concept from another angle. She speaks about the “metaphor of interlocking identities” (qtd. in Ryle 51). This perspective of intersecting identities is also known by the term “multiple consciousness” (Ryle 51). This describes a way of thinking that “develops from a person’s position at the centre of intersecting and mutually reliant systems of oppressions” (Ryle 51). The intersectional approach seeks to correct “the tendency to perceive one system of domination as more important or fundamental than another” (Ryle 51). Traditionally, when looking through feminist perspective, gender as a category is discussed as an isolated concept. Whereas, the intersectionality theorists perceive gender in conjunction with other categories like race, class, ethnicity etc. Collins uses the model of interlocking circles of experience as the best method to discuss oppression highlighting on the intensity of the effect. This model rejects the additive status and the multiplicative status in favour of the model of interlocking circles of experience. The explanation of the model of interlocking circles goes like this: “At any given moment, a person can be within the circles of race, gender, and sexual orientation and experiencing all of them at the same time” (Ryle 52).

## II

The concept of motherhood intersects with the different identity categories and this interlocking will explain how African American mothers’ lived with experiences which are intertwined within this matrix of domination where they are racially exploited, emotionally humiliated and at the same time resisted such oppression. For the African American women, motherhood as an institution is celebrated, and at the same time questioned. It ‘occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place’ (Collins 57). Therefore, motherhood and the survival of mothers within racist America will form the epicenter of my argument.

*Sula* is a remarkable for its neatly knit narrative of different kinds of mothers and about different mothering attitudes. The issue behind the concept of mothering lies in the inherent quality of taking care of children. It is sometimes a biological phenomenon and sometimes an attitude. This, of course, then leads to several types of mothers and *Sula* looks at them through a different lens. There are some mothers in *Sula* who take care of their children from the basic instinct since they have given birth to them. Mothers who look after and care for the others’ children are called othermothers. There are senior women who take care of the children of their children playing the role as grandmothers. Women’s lived experiences of mothering in *Sula* are

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<sup>3</sup> Use standard style

rich in all its diversity and the complexity of oppressions encircling African-American families and communities are seen through the lens of intersectionality approach.

The institution of motherhood in the African American context is seen as a series of relationship between mothers and their daughters, and mothers and their mothers within the African community. In *Sula*, the generation of mothers and their relationship to their daughters in the post-slavery era is seen from varied perspectives within the framework of the black community and their marginalization in society. In the African American community, motherhood is looked upon as a symbol of power and the power to control the family. Controlling the family then becomes a responsibility to mothers and consequently mothering too becomes strenuous in the absence of the father. The mother is left alone with the option of single parenting the child /children. In *Sula*, we observe different kinds of mothers and their mothering tactics where several issues such as race, class and gender intersect, making motherhood experience complex and cumbersome. This paper deals with mother characters like Eva Peace, Hannah Peace, Helen Wright, Nel Wright, and Mrs. Suggs— all these women play their roles as mothers and have different experiences with their children and other children.

Eva Peace, the single parent of three children—Hannah, Pearl, and Plum encounters the most difficult part of her life after her husband Boy Boy leaves for another woman. Her pain and struggle takes the central position where the narrative revolves around her mothering tactics and ability to fend them at all odds. Having a ‘disgruntled marriage’ (Morrison 32) with Boy Boy, Eva learns that she has to survive alone in order to feed her children. More than she needed her children; her children needed her while she needed money to look after them. She had to deal with reality and struggle for her survival. Belonging to the class of the underprivileged, belonging to the category of women, considered weak by men and racially segregated, Eva is trapped and intertwined within the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender. She fights her way out “alone” minding her three children during the winter and nothing left to feed them. The few black families residing at the ‘low hills’ helped her with ‘a plate of cold bread’ and ‘little milk’ but she knew that this little act of magnanimity would not remain for long (32). ‘Low hills’, ‘cold bread’ and ‘little milk’ connote the disadvantageous side of livelihood which Eva confronts. These adjectives refocus on the rejection of the underprivileged section of Blacks and the sense that they are at the bottom of the scale highlights their “aloneness” and deprivation.

One December winter, Eva Peace was greatly challenged of her maternal guts when her youngest one, Plum was outrageously suffering from bowel movements. The child shrieked and found no relief after the massage and warm water given to him to relieve his pain. Even the castor oil given by Mrs. Suggs did not work. Morrison’s great talent is seen in the following passage where she describes Eva’s struggle to relieve her son’s constipation and in the doing is pressurized to fulfill her motherhood obligation:

At one point, maddened by his own crying, he gagged, choked and looked as though he was strangling to death. Eva rushed to him and kicked over the earthen

slop jar, washing a small area of the floor with the child's urine. She managed to soothe him, but when he took up the cry again late night, she resolved to end his misery once and for all. She wrapped him in blankets, ran her finger around the crevices and sides of the lard can and stumbled to the outhouse with him. Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground. And now that it was over, Eva squatted there wondering why she came all the way out there to free his stools, and what was she doing down on her haunches with her beloved baby boy warmed by her body in the almost total darkness, her shins and teeth freezing, her nostrils assailed....As the grateful Plum slept, the silence allowed her to think. (34)

This incident exposes the mother's excessive bonding with her child, her sacrifice and the excruciating pain she experiences to relieve her 'beloved baby boy' (34). Yet, despite the sacrifice Eva, one fine day, leaves her children to a neighbour Mrs. Suggs and disappears for eighteen years. Mrs. Suggs takes care of the children and plays the role of the othermother. Eva returns after eighteen years with an amputated leg. The story of her lost leg is interesting and there are several versions of it. Many say that she has cut it off in order to receive insurance money to feed her children. Some say that she had stuck it under a train or sold it for 10,000 \$. With the money she buys a mansion and lords it like a vibrant matriarch in her busy household. Aside her children there are several other children like the Dewey's who occupy the house.

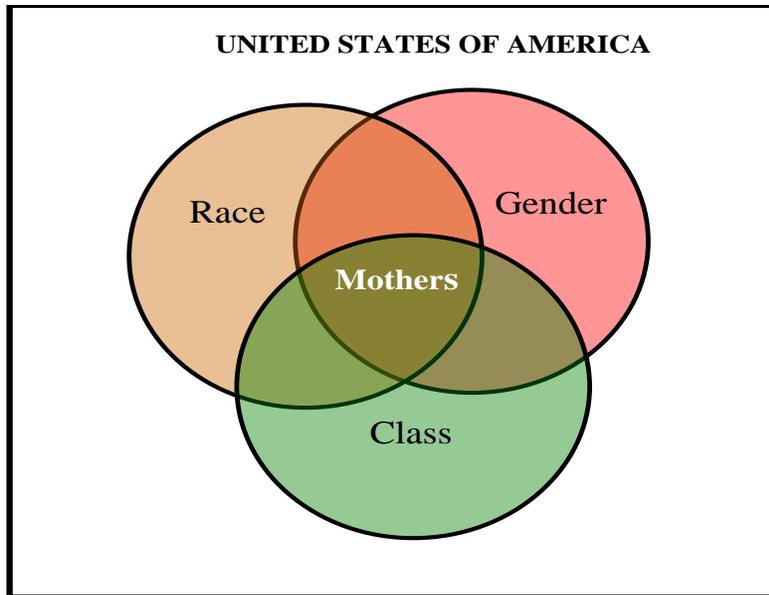
Eva's maternal identity is sometimes intriguing. At one time she embraces her child in her arms and the 'grateful Plum slept', (34) but at another she puts her son on fire and kills him. Her motherhood arouses curiosity. Is she a cruel mother? Is Plum 'grateful' to his mother, who rejects him later, for wanting to crawl, back into her womb once again? Hannah, her eldest daughter questions her: 'mamma, did you ever love us?' This question leads to a series of arguments between the mother and the daughter. Eva tries to elicit her strong feelings of a mother and how she struggled to take care of her three children during 1895 when things were very bad and 'niggers were dying like flies' (69) and she had only 'three beets' (69) to feed them. Eva calls her daughter an 'ungrateful hussy' (69) and admonishes her for daring to question about her love for her children. She remains unclear as to why her mother killed her little brother. Was it just because he was crawling back into her womb? Eva complains about her son:

...he wanted to crawl in my womb and well...I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin'

back ....I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again. He was growed, a big old thing. (71)

Was this the only reason for burning Plum? Has she no responsibility of looking after her children even when they grow up? Hannah introspects and finds no justified answers to them. When Hannah screams: "Plum!, Plum!, He's burning, mamma...", Eva only utters this: "Is ? My baby? Burning?" (48) and Hannah understands that her mother is not going to save her brother. Eva hoped and aspired to see her only son grow and establish himself into a successful big man, leave her, and lead a life like how all men did. But her Plum only resorted to drinks confined in a room and failed to live up to her expectations. Eva felt defeated when her son wanted to be 'wrapped up inside his mamma'... (72) and, therefore wanted to see him 'die like a man not all scrunched up inside [her] womb' (72). As Collins views: 'The pain of knowing what lies ahead for black children while feeling powerless to protect them is another problematic dimension of Black mothering'(Collins 212). This could be Eva's desperation regarding Plum, very well knowing the bleak future lying ahead. It is bleak because of his race and class, and it is her desperation because she is black, low class and a woman. A feeling of powerlessness creeps within her and she finds killing him as the only option left to save Plum from becoming unsuccessful. Her unconditional maternal love forces her to take her son outside in the cold to relieve his son's constipation and at the same time leaves her children to Mrs. Suggs shirking her mothering responsibilities. She no longer feels inclined to play mother and subsequently abandons it.

Looking into other mother characters—Hannah Peace is a subtle contrast to her mother. Married to a man named Rekus, who dies after Sula's birth, Hannah's life becomes more cheerful and easy going. No tension of parenting and taking care of her daughter, who grows by herself in the house of Eva. Hannah's mothering ideology is different from Eva. She refrains from the responsibilities of a mother and leaves Sula uncared for. Hannah busies herself in the company of men and one time she is seen by her daughter "curled spoon in the arms of a man" (44). As Hannah never had her father's affection like Sula (Hannah's father deserts her mother and Sula's father dies when she was a baby) both never talk about them and we find no trace in Morrison's narrative about these daughters talking about their fathers. Being fatherless, the centrality of motherhood is focused here. Matriarchy becomes the dominant force within this black community, where these mothers (in the absence of their husbands) as well as their daughters (in the absence of their fathers) fight against the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender. I have devised figure 1 to indicate how mothers are trapped within the interlocking systems of oppression.



**Fig. 1**

**Black mothers within the interlocking circles of experience**

The mothers are entrapped within the matrix of domination. When we place the mothers within the interlocking circles we observe their unique experiences and their position. The first circle represents 'race', the second one 'gender', and the third circle 'class'. When we position the mothers at the centre of the interlocking grid, we find that they experience all the identity categories simultaneously. These identity circles are very powerful. Power permeates between them since these rings affect each other to marginalize the black mothers.

Motherhood and child-rearing are problematic issues that are connected and enmeshed in the lives of these marginalized women. Most women in the Black community value mothering and motherhood as symbols of power. They want their children to live up to the traditional values and strong family ideal. At the same time most black women feel difficult to cope up with the unwanted pregnancies or having children too early under oppressive conditions within the racist environment. Morrison explains this through her characters. As a child Sula overhears her mother's conversations one day when talking to her friends:

"They a pain.

"Yeh. Wish I'd listened to mamma. She told me not to have 'em too soon:

" Any time at all is too soon for me" (56-7)

These mothers who have experienced and lived life under hard racist conditions always advised their daughters such problems and difficulties. Sula's mother Hannah and her friends realise that though children are a real 'pain' (57) they still can't help loving them no matter what they do.

Sula secretly hears her mother and her mother's friend talking to each other: "Well, Hester grown now and I can't say love is exactly what I feel", to which Hannah replies, "Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula, I just don't like her. That's the difference" (57). Here the blood mother, Hannah, explicates the difference between 'love' and 'like' and the daughter understands that her mother does not 'like' her. This confession of Hannah not liking her daughter is reciprocated in the chapter entitled "1923", when Sula sees her mother burning without the least anxiety of saving her. Eva, the biological mother and a physically disabled woman throws herself out of the third floor window to save her 'first born'(76) by dragging herself to her burning daughter in the yard. The black community of the Bottom like Mr. and Mrs Suggs and others work to put out the flames while Sula keeps watching her mother struggling amidst it. People at the Bottom comment that:

Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mama burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralysed, but because she was interested. (78)

The complexity of motherhood is analysed here. Eva's maternal bond with her daughter is highlighted. It becomes a sight of empowerment. She fights with herself and jumps from the third floor to save her first born. Black women like Eva have been denied male protection and therefore, she struggles to save her daughter but in vain. The two episodes: one saving Plum from his bowel movement in the cold winter night and the other jumping out of the third floor window, represents Eva as a strong mother who is willing to go to the extremes to ensure the survival of her children. Though Eva is a mother and a provider for the many children in her household; "she is not reduced to the figure of a traditional matriarch. She challenges boundaries of social roles attributed to mothers by accepting her sexuality" (Oliveira 67-84). She is neither a perfect mother nor a selfless one. The justification can be observed when the same mother burns her son Plum and at the same time saves him when an infant. If Eva could burn her son Plum, then what was wrong with Sula just watching her mother burn? Here Eva's motherhood is questioned. Why did she burn her son but jump down to save her daughter? Was Eva's bonding with her daughter Hannah greater than her son Plum? Hannah is a stay-at-home mother and Eva never expects anything great from her but from her son Plum, she envisages a great future. While her daughter is active flirting with all men and the husbands of newly married women, Plum only sleeps in his room, drunk all the time. Eva complains about her son saying that "... he didn't even want to be born. But he comes on out. Boys is hard to bear. You wouldn't know that but they is" (Morrison 71). The mother and the daughter "with the exception of Boy Boy...loved all men". And the narrator says: "The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake" (41). Therefore, Eva is ravaged when she sees her daughter Hannah burn, but celebrates the death of her son whom she believes died like a man. Collins says: "Within African American communities, women's innovative and practical approaches to mothering under oppressive conditions often bring recognition and foster their empowerment" (Collins 211). Then

motherhood as an institution challenges the contradictory notion of motherhood empowerment. This empowering factor then allows Eva to leave her three children (Hannah five years, Plum, nine months and Pearl between nine months and five years old) under the care of Mrs. Suggs saying she would be back the next day but returns after eighteen months. Mrs. Suggs becomes the 'othermother' in the absence of the biological mother.

Othermothers, according to Collins, "provide a foundation for conceptualizing Black women's political activism." (205) The othermother ideology comes into force when biological mothers refrain from shouldering responsibilities of their children. So the othermother, while within the black community is encouraged in taking care of the 'unfamiliar children' (205) of the bloodmothers. They form a strong bond and become accountable to children of their neighbours. Mrs. Suggs acts a perfect othermother to Eva's biological children, whom she leaves them under her protection.

After eighteen months, Eva returns to the Bottom transformed into a strong woman. Constructing for herself a huge house, she lives with her children like a matriarch unlike before. Apart from being a blood mother, Eva also becomes the othermother for the children who occupy her big house as boarders with her granddaughter Sula. The three children who stay in Eva's big house have no name and Eva calls them the Deweys. As the othermother, Eva sends all the three Deweys to school 'together' and the teacher records them in the first grade, all aged six years. Eva plays several roles: as a matriarch, as blood mother, as a stay-at-home mother and also as othermother. She lives in her own big house unlike a 'mammy' which 'typifies the Black mother figure in white homes', but like a 'matriarch' that "symbolizes the mother figure in black homes" (Collins 83). According to Collins, 'the mammy represents the "good" Black mother while 'the matriarch symbolizes the "bad" black mother' (83). But this is for certain that Eva will not nurture her boy once again and does away with Plum and rejects playing mother once again.

Nel Wright and Sula Peace, the black girls at the Bottom are twelve years old and are the best of friends. They are the "daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (Morrison 52). Despite their intimacy, their upbringings are different as both their mothers possess virtues that are poles apart. Nel's mother, Helene Sabat, though the daughter of a 'Creole whore' (17) is brought up by her virtuous grandmother Cecile Sabat in New Orleans. Helene's grandmother constantly protected her granddaughter from 'her mother's wild blood' (17). Helene Sabat married to Wiley Wright, is definitely a sharp contrast to Sula's mother, Hannah Peace. Being calm, sober, full of piety, domesticity and submissiveness, Helene Wright lives to be a true woman. She rightly befits the woman seen in most traditional African American family.

Helene Wright, the biological mother of Nel Wright stands in perfect contrast to Hannah Peace, mother of Sula Peace. She is a stereotyped traditional mamma, whose motherhood responsibilities and perfect upbringing is reflected on her daughter and, according to Morrison

“she rose grandly to the occasion of motherhood” (18) and the little Nel becomes obedient and polite under her guidance. She is an “impressive woman” (18) and lives up to her moral values. She is the only one “who never turn[s] her head in church when latecomers arrived” (18). She is an ideal and stay-at-home mother and wife who “enjoy[s] manipulating her daughter and husband” (18) with an expertise in housekeeping. Therefore, we can categorise Helene as a ‘true’ woman, because she has all the virtues that a woman needs to possess according to the African American family tradition. In most white families and among African American middleclass society, women are encouraged to aspire these cardinal values of piety and purity. Helene’s aspiration of a ‘true’ woman and good mother qualities are transferred to her daughter Nel, who, when becomes a mother adopts the same mothering skills and techniques when mothering her children.

Most African American families like Helene encourage their daughters to live up to the expectation of the White male power, where black women are implicitly taught and made to comprehend their place in their own homes as well as in the white family. Therefore, issue of motherhood as a concept makes these mothers accept their own subordination. They willingly respond to their family ideals in which they are happy and everybody around them are also satisfied with their performance as mothers. In regard to this, Nel lives up to the ideal of true motherhood. Getting married to Jude Greene and having children and looking after her family, Nel acquires the ‘maternal behavior’ (Collins 80) of her mother. Disciplined, feminine, submissive, and family conscious, she directs her home like her mother.

Nel keeps and lives up to the principles of a traditional black mother and, obviously intelligent than Sula. As all black women fear the idea of single parenting their children, Nel like others becomes a victim to this. Jude leaves Nel after Sula comes into his life. Sula unlike Nel challenges heterosexuality and never wishes to marry and rejects the idea of having a home and becoming a mother. Her grandmother Eva persuades her to marry, settle down and have babies, but she replies back: ‘I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself’ (Morrison 92). This stereotypical mother (Eva) who refuses to play mother herself to her son plum, questions her granddaughter to make a family. This is a different Sula on her return to Bottom after ten years. She busies herself, experimenting on her femaleness and discovering a ‘new’ identity. Rejecting the idea of motherhood and mothering, Morrison through Sula is directing in the formulation of a new woman and the radical Sula. She wants to make herself, create an identity and ‘never compete[s]’(95) with other women nor does she feel jealous of others setting up a family, becoming a mother and having children. “She simply helped others define themselves” (95) and proved all the time that heterosexuality is not going to sustain. She sees her grandmother Eva and her mother Hannah all lived to be single without their husbands. Even her close friend Nel is deserted by her husband (for which Nel blames Sula) who feels hurt by her best friend’s action of breaking her family. Black mothers like Nel must be prepared for such a situation as black men feel that the making of a family rests in the hands of a woman: a place of care and solace. Sula is very different from Eva, Hannah and Nel. The difference lies in the

making of a choice. The three women (Eva, Hannah and Nel) lose their husbands not by choice but destiny plays on them. Whereas Sula chooses to live single and that too from a decision that is entirely hers. Collins is of view that “many Black women want loving sexual relationships with their Black men, but instead end up alone” (Collins 173). This ‘tragic loneliness’ (173) that Eva and Nel encounter without their husbands within the intersecting oppressions are the causes of greater hardship in mothering their children. As all black women are capable of living their life independently, Eva and Nel though hurt surpasses this kind of loneliness and bring up their children. Motherhood then becomes a marginalized platform within the black community that despite the lack of fathers these black children continue to live their lives and adjust to this male absence within the family. Thus Eva serves both as the biological mother and blood mother to Hannah and Plum and othermother or community mother to the Deweys as well as Sula, while simultaneously remaining as the stay-at-home-mother. Both Eva and Nel grow up to make ‘somebody else’ unlike Sula, who wanted to make herself. Eva challenges the much sought-after black motherhood popularly known for its nurturance among the Black families.

Nel as a mother struggles to live up to be a good mother and while experiencing the same, learn to self define herself by being self reliant within the intersecting oppressions of race , class and gender. She rebukes Sula for having shattered her married life and tells her: “And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away” (Morrison 145). To this Sula retorts saying: “What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145)

Sula’s insensitivity irritates Nel who fails to understand the meaning of “take him away.” Taking Jude away from Nel either through physical relationship or permanently has made an indelible mark in Nel’s life for which she is not going to forgive Sula.

Sula’s assertiveness is yet another characteristics element which Nel is annoyed because Sula doesn’t believe in the making of somebody else. She doesn’t believe in the existence of a family and in the institution of motherhood. Sula is another prototype of Hannah while Nel is of her mother Helene. Each of the mothers has transmitted the values to their daughters directly or indirectly. To Sula, being within the family and being a mother means shouldering immense responsibilities and to which she has never been moulded into. Motherhood, to her, means living a ‘lonely’ life like Eva and Nel. Here ‘lonely’ has a different definition to the two friends. Sula translates this loneliness in this way: “Yes, but my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (143). She rejects the glorification of motherhood as she is never fond of her mother or her grandmother. In this context, we can quote Collins who perceives that black mothers “came back frequently to thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families” (188) after their jobs as domestic servants in white families. To Sula, family is a wholesome burden and mothering and motherhood a strain and pain. She explores the mystery behind men and their familial relationship and understands that men, walk into women’s lives and conveniently walk out too, leaving their wife and children. At one point of time she argues with her best friend, Nel when

“lying at death’s door still smart talking” (Morrison 142) and Nel makes her understand that a women’s life is altogether different from the men: “You *can’t* do it all. You a woman and a coloured woman at that you can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent – like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t”(Morrison 142). Nel reminds Sula that first of all she is a ‘woman’, then a ‘coloured woman’, all intersecting at one point with her class and therefore going alone in the world without a family is difficult to sustain. But Sula disrupts Nel’s stereotypical talks with her radical attitude saying that: “Every man I knew left his children” (143). Sula understands that the destiny of every coloured woman and that all are “dying” (143). Severed from her mother, Hannah, because of her mother’s sexual proclivities and also of her confessions that she does not ‘like’ Sula, the lonely daughter feels justified not entering into matrimony and experience that kind of life encountered by her friend and her grandmother. Both Nel and Eva are her living experience of a failed marriage and a broken family, fraught with loneliness, pain and agony. Though Eva, the matriarch of the three floor mansion experiences the absence of Boy Boy, she challenges Boy Boy’s absence and emerges as a strong mother, wielding her power and domination in her big house. She survives without her husband and refrains from being submissive, docile and ‘feminine.’ Patriarchy is challenged in the ideal traditional black family. All the men folk in her big mansion are in a way emasculated and she rules them like a man.

Therefore, mothering and motherhood in *Sula* gives a wide perspective of the different kinds of successful, unsuccessful, and least interested mothers that are seen, explored, questioned and celebrated within the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender matrix.

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