



WOMEN'S FREEDOM IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept of women's freedom in Toni Morrison's Sula, an important and relevant topic, particularly within the context of a patriarchal culture that continues to shape the lives of many women. The research focuses on the family and societal factors influencing women's experiences. Employing a narrative qualitative methodology, the primary data is derived from Sula by Toni Morrison, supplemented by relevant literature from library research. The study applies feminist theory as proposed by Soenarjati Djajanegara, emphasizing the impact of family expectations and social conventions on individuals and their roles within society. The findings reveal that two key components shape women's lives: family expectations and social conventions. Family expectations are often portrayed as burdens that restrict women's freedom, while social conventions are the traditional norms, rules, and gender roles that govern how women are expected to behave, interact, and live. The analysis concludes that women need freedom to empower themselves and realize their potential. However, this freedom must not lead to self-destruction or harm to others, as such outcomes can result in women's downfall.

Keywords: *women's freedom, feminism, family expectation, social convention*

I. Introduction

Women's freedom has made significant progress in various aspects of life, although the journey toward full equality remains ongoing. Women have experienced major transformations in their lives, striving for gender equality, empowerment, individual rights, and freedom. They also address social and cultural issues, engage with technology and social media, and navigate challenges and societal expectations. Furthermore, awareness of women's rights and the feminist movement have taken root, championing gender equality and increasing protection for women against violence and discrimination.

One of the most influential novelists whose works are worth studying is Toni Morrison. Born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison grew up in a spiritually oriented family as the second of four children of George and Ramah Willis Wofford. Her parents had moved to Ohio from the South to escape racism and to seek better opportunities in the North. Within a decade, Morrison had established herself as a significant American novelist (Pound 1996, 107).

In 1993, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming the first

African-American to receive this honor (Ferdinal and Ardina 2022, 113–117). The Swedish Academy's recognition of Morrison was a global acknowledgment of her extraordinary intellectual impact and the exceptional power of her writing (Beaulieu 2003). Her novels are known for their epic themes, beautiful language, and richly detailed African-American characters that lie at the heart of her narratives. She sets her novels against the backdrop of the experiences of black people, particularly women, in an unjust American society. It is clearly found in her novel entitled *Sula* (1973). The title of this novel is given after the main character named Sula Peace.

Some researches on this novel have been performed. Ahmad, et. al (2020) discuss the theme of alienation and female friendship in black women in *Sula*. They argue that this female companionship nevertheless is corrupted by the power of explicit or implicit patriarchal forces working under the umbrella of social institutions of class and marriage. Their study is limited on alienation and friendship which are not the theme discussed in this study. Different from Ahmad, et. al, Ndoulou and Massala (2024) explore some selected narratives of Morrison included *Sula* as the evidence of black



women's struggle for black freedom. Although it is talking about the same issue, this study employs feminism to get a better understanding about women's freedom.

The concept of women's freedom represents a significant area of scholarly discussion, as it cannot be uniformly applied to all women. Each woman must undertake an introspective journey to comprehend and achieve liberation from the constraints imposed by oppressive patriarchal structures that hinder their autonomy. Women's freedom involves a profound understanding of how societal conditions characterized by gender inequality, violence, and oppression shape their experiences. Women exhibit a strong determination to liberate themselves, marked by a desire to transcend various limitations, including social and literary constraints. These efforts frequently necessitate revisiting their identities, artistic values, and the broader societal norms that influence their lives (Djajanegara 2000, 49).

Based on her outstanding achievement above and the issue of women's freedom which still remains until now, this study chooses *Sula* as the source of data in analyzing the concept of women's freedom. It is important to do because this novel talks about Sula's family expectation and social convention where Sula, the main character of this novel involved in.

This study employs feminist literary criticism. Feminism, as an ideology, advocates for equal rights and opportunities for women in areas such as education, employment, and cultural and social life (Abrams 1981, 36-37). Literary criticism focuses on defining, classifying, analyzing, and evaluating literary works.

Ii. Research Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative narrative approach. According to Cresswell (2007, 54), narrative research is a form of qualitative study in which researchers describe the lives of characters, collect and convey stories about individual experiences, and compose narratives about unique events. The primary data source for this study is

Sula, which is analyzed using a note-taking technique. Secondary sources include various books, journal articles, and other relevant materials obtained through internet research.

The research process consists of several steps. First, the novel is read extensively to achieve a comprehensive understanding of its content. Second, data in the form of character dialogues and narrative descriptions are collected by highlighting significant events. Third, additional relevant information is gathered from various books, online sources, and tertiary references. Once the data is collected, it is analyzed and interpreted using feminist theory, focusing on character aspects related to the theme of freedom. This analysis aims to produce a comprehensive and meaningful interpretation of how the novel portrays the issue of women's freedom through identity, friendship, and the societal pressures faced by women within an African-American community.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Family Expectations

Morrison, as the author, clearly depicts family expectations within the family context involving the character of Sula Peace. She creates Sula, a young black girl who grows into a strong and determined woman in the face of adversity, as well as distrust, and even hatred, from the black community in which she lives. As a black woman, Sula rebels against the patriarchal system, racism, and class discrimination, which are the social norms in The Bottom, the place where black people reside. Sula becomes the embodiment of the concepts of family freedom and social conventions. Although women's roles were traditionally confined to those of housewife and caregiver, Sula refuses to be trapped in these roles. She chooses not to marry and does not want to have children. She is considered a woman who does not adhere to social norms.

Morrison contrasts Sula with Nel in terms of personality, values, and life choices. Sula and Nel share similar fates; freedom and success seem forbidden to them, yet they begin to create something new to define



themselves. Sula is free-spirited and passionate. She is a bold figure, often challenging social norms. Nel, on the other hand, is more conventional and adheres to social norms. Nel comes from a stable yet conservative family background. She is portrayed as obedient, gentle, and introspective. In many ways, Nel embodies traditional norms and the broader societal expectations.

Eva is a dominant figure in the household and often serves as a source of pressure for the other family members. Sula, like her mother, prefers a more relaxed lifestyle and is not bound by conventional norms. From Hannah, Sula witnesses an unconventional and often unstable life, which influences her views on relationships and responsibility. Growing up in a poor black town in Medallion, she lives in a house that frequently hosts men, though they do not stay long. Her grandmother and mother allowed men to satisfy their sexual desires but did not need them to remain permanently in their lives. Coming from this environment and experiencing other events in her youth, including ten years in the outside world, college, and living in different parts of the country, Sula returns home as an attractive woman who, like her mother and grandmother before her, uses a different man every night to satisfy her inner urges, but nothing more. There is no love for Sula; she has exercised her freedom.

Morrison describes Sula's new ideals through her family background. Sula lives in a disorganized and unstructured household.

As for Nel, she prefers Sula's house made of wood, where pots of something are always cooking on the stove, where her mother, Hannah, never scolds or gives directions; where all sorts of people come to visit; where newspapers are stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes are left for hours in the sink and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (29)

The quotation shows that Sula's family has raised her to be a free woman. She is

never ordered around by her mother. Her mother never scolds her to take care of the house, clean the house, and wash dirty dishes. She decides for herself what she wants to do in life without anyone telling her what to do, as Djajanegara (2000, 4) suggests, one way for women to achieve freedom is to gain equal rights and opportunities as men, while another way is to free women from the constraints of the domestic sphere or the traditional roles within family and household.

Morrison depicts Sula growing up in a family environment that is not bound by traditional values. After her father's death, her mother engages in various relationships, and her grandmother also leads a life of independence.

Sula came home from school and found her mother in bed, curled up in the arms of a man. Seeing her mother so easily step into the pantry and emerge looking exactly as she had when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that intimacy was a frequent and pleasurable experience, though otherwise unremarkable. (44).

However, upon Sula's return to The Bottom, Eva criticizes her for not marrying and for her independence, suggesting that a woman should not remain unmarried which is shown below.

"Well, don't let your mouth start nothing that your ass can't stand. When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man" (92).

Sula's desire to be free and independent is evident here. She believes that marriage would restrict her autonomy and limit her ability to pursue her own dreams and desires. For her, marriage is a confining institution that contradicts her outlook on life. This echoes the notion in moderate feminism, as Djajanegara suggests, that women should first focus on developing themselves intellectually and economically.



This self-sufficiency enables women to achieve equality with men and frees them from dependency on others (2000, 63).

Morrison highlights the stark contrast between Nel and Sula, particularly through Nel's family background. Nel's personality is heavily shaped by her mother, Helene Wright, who is a well-respected woman in Medallion. Helene has clear expectations for Nel, urging her to be polite, obedient, and dutiful. Nel grows up humble and somewhat sheltered, spoiled by her mother's care, and ultimately chooses to follow the traditional path of marriage.

"This wedding offered a special attraction for the bridegroom was a handsome, well-liked man—the terror of Mount Zion's Men's Quartet, who had an enviable reputation among the girls and a comfortable one among men. His name was Jude Greene, and with the pick of some eight or ten girls who came regularly to services to hear him sing, he had chosen Nel Wright" (80).

Nel's decision to marry Jude reflects her desire to meet her mother's expectations and conform to the social norms of Medallion, which emphasize the importance of marriage and family stability. Nel's path is one of obedience to traditional values, with her actions shaped by societal pressures and family expectation.

Sula's strong personality is first evident when she becomes the decision-maker in shaping her own future by leaving The Bottom and enrolling in college. The conversation between Sula and Nel highlights this decision.

"They still here. You the one went off."

"Didn't I, though?"

"Tell me about it. The big city."

"Big is all it is. A big Medallion."

"No. I mean the life. The nightclubs, and parties..."

"I was in college, Nellie. No nightclubs on campus."

"Campus? That what they call it? Well. You wasn't in no college for—what—ten years now? (99).

This quotation shows that Sula's

decision to leave The Bottom signifies her rejection of the old ideals imposed upon her. By leaving, she demonstrates her determination to break free from those restrictions and pursue her own path. Upon her return, Sula has undergone a transformation in her life—she has altered her behavior, style, and thinking. She now seeks freedom from both her family and societal expectations. As Djajanegara suggests, with a sharpened mind, Sula is able to further develop herself and achieve economic independence, which ultimately empowers her (2000, 5).

3.2 Social Conventions

Morrison depicts Medallion as a small town with a predominantly black population, governed by a strict social structure. The town upholds conservative norms, with a strong expectation for women to marry and establish families. Sula rejects this societal expectation, which clashes with the values upheld by Medallion's community. In this society, women are expected to fulfill traditional roles as wives and mothers, but Sula defies these norms with her promiscuous lifestyle. Society harshly judges behaviors considered immoral, such as engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage. Sula frequently becomes the subject of criticism due to her unconventional lifestyle, which is seen as controversial.

Morrison presents Sula as a woman who defies and challenges the norms of her conservative society. She rejects the traditional roles of Medallion society. Unlike most women, Sula is not interested in getting married or living a domestic life. Instead, she seeks personal freedom and a life filled with adventure. Her unconventional lifestyle and behavior, which many consider indecent, are seen as violations of social norms.

Sula serves as a symbol of the Afro-American people, whose ideals are rejected, especially those represented by Eva. Eva's appearance and old age symbolize the old or traditional ideals that society expects women to follow. In these traditional views, women are primarily defined by their reproductive



roles, with an emphasis on marriage, childbirth, raising children, caring for husbands, and managing the household.

"Not by choice, I said. It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need... I'm a tell you what you need."

Sula sat up. "I need you to shut your mouth."

"Don't nobody talk to me like that. Don't nobody..."

"This body does. Just cause you were bad enough to cut off your own leg doesn't mean you have the right to kick everybody with the stump" (92-93).

Sula holds a different perception of women compared to her grandmother. As an independent woman, Sula rejects the traditional view of women as passive or confined to household roles. She does not see herself as selfish or self-centered; rather, she refuses to marry and believes she can thrive without a man. Sula resents her grandmother's attempts to control her life and wants to determine her own path, free from anyone's influence, including Eva's. Eva's pressure for her to marry represents a societal expectation that Sula rejects, which is why she makes the decision to place Eva in the nursing home. She asserts her autonomy, as Djajanegara notes, women possess characteristics that distinguish them from others (2000, 48).

Sula desires a life of freedom and adventure, rejecting the societal norms associated with race and class. For her, this rejection represents a quest to explore the world and live life on her own terms, rather than adhering to the expectations imposed by her society. As Djajanegara points out, feminists seek to free women from various forms of oppression and societal restrictions (2000, 16).

Sula's return to *The Bottom* challenges societal norms, especially through her choice of attire. The years of life experience outside the town have shifted her perception and way of life, as shown in the following passage.

"She was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as

anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye. In her right hand was a black purse with a beaded clasp and in her left a red leather traveling case, so small, so charming—no one had seen anything like it ever before, including the mayor's wife and the music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome" (90).

Wearing attire that is deemed inappropriate, symbolizes her rejection of the community's social norms and expectations. The bold clothing reflects her sense of freedom, her disregard for others' judgment, and her assertion of a distinct identity. It expresses her individuality and signals that she does not want to be confined by the constraints imposed by the community. Furthermore, her clothing serves as a symbol of her life abroad, a life filled with new experiences and perspectives that contrast with the conservative values of the town. As Djajanegara suggests, feminism seeks to understand the function of judgments, which can either support or challenge existing worldviews (2000, 24).

Moreover, Morrison creates Sula as a character whose life is marked by freedom, even when it means engaging in relationships that defy social norms, such as her affair with Nel's husband, Jude:

"But they 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 fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs" (105).

Sula's willingness to have an affair with Jude is a clear reflection of her rejection of societal constraints and her quest for personal freedom. She defies the conventional expectations placed upon women, seeking to carve out a space where she can live according to her own desires. As Djajanegara explains, women often attempt to liberate themselves, breaking free from the limitations imposed by society, and this desire to transcend social and literary boundaries can be understood as an effort to



reclaim the individual and redefine values (2000, 49).

Throughout the novel, Morrison portrays Sula as someone who is unapologetic about her choices, willing to defend her independence to the end. However, this defiance comes at a price. Sula's sexual freedom, once a symbol of her autonomy, becomes a source of alienation. As a result, she experiences emotional isolation, and ultimately dies alone. Her rejection of social norms and inability to form deeper connections with others, particularly Nel, is a significant part of the tragic arc of her life. The consequences of Sula's quest for freedom are felt deeply in her later years, where the very independence she fought for leads to a profound sense of loneliness.

Morrison contrasts Sula with Nel to highlight the different types of freedom they represent. While Sula is bold, independent, and defiant, Nel embodies the conventional, obedient woman who follows societal expectations. Nel is gentle, quiet, and bound by the norms of the community, living a more traditional life in contrast to Sula's adventurous spirit. This contrast serves to underscore the tension between individual freedom and social conformity, with Sula's life illustrating the costs of total autonomy and Nel's life showing the security and stability that can come from adhering to societal standards.

Morrison portrays Afro-American women's traditional roles through the character of Nel. Her household is conformist and proper, yet it lacks emotional warmth and connections. Raised in an atmosphere of "oppressive neatness," Nel is molded by a strict, organized environment that instills society's gender roles. Her mother's constant attempts to suppress Nel's spirit and imagination contribute to her becoming obedient and polite.

After knowing that Jude had an affair with Sula and left Nel and their children, Nel still keeps her role as a mother for her children.

"They will never give me the peace I need to get from sun up to sun down, what good are they, are you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go all the way through these days all the way, O my god, to that box with four handles with never nobody settling down between my legs even if I sew up those old pillow cases and rinse down the porch and feed my children and beat the rugs and haul the coal up out of the bin even then nobody, O Jesus, I could be a mule or plow the furrows with my hands if need be or hold these rickety walls up with my back if need be if I knew that somewhere in this world in the pocket of some night I could open my legs to some cowboy lean hips but you are trying to tell me no and O my sweet Jesus what kind of cross is that?" (111).

Despite Jude's departure, Nel does not change her life's routine. She continues to take care of her children and fulfill her household duties. There is no indication that she plans for anything new in her life or seeks out ways to make herself happy. She is trapped in the cyclical, unfulfilling tasks of daily survival, with no vision for a different future.

The author also presents Hannah as a symbol of women's freedom. Hannah Peace is depicted as a woman with an unstable and ever-changing lifestyle, one that lacks commitment and follows her own desires. This often makes her an unreliable figure, reflecting a freer way of life and embodying the theme of sexual freedom. Hannah represents an unconventional lifestyle, which influences Sula's views on relationships and social norms. Sula observes how her mother's carefree way of life is often negatively judged by the people in Medallion, especially after the death of her husband, Rekus. The following quotation illustrates this:

"Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and



neighbors. Her flirting was sweet, low, and guileless. Without ever parting her hair, rushing to change clothes, or quickly applying paint, with no gesture whatsoever, she rippled with sex" (42).

By living without commitment and following her desires, Hannah rejects the societal norms that require women to adhere to traditional roles of marriage and fidelity. Through her many relationships, she asserts her independence and demonstrates her ability to control her own life without relying on men. She seeks personal happiness and fulfillment through her interactions with various partners. As Djajanegara points out, women, by rejecting domestication and strengthening their demands, also fight for other important rights, such as control over their sexuality and bodies (2000, 10).

The Medallion community, conservative and centered on maintaining customary norms, views Hannah negatively. Her freedom and lifestyle clash with their expectations. They perceive her as a disobedient figure, often labeling her immoral because, as Djajanegara explains, women are traditionally expected to be housekeepers and caregivers, spending most of their lives in the home (2000, 6).

Morrison presents the Peace women, including Eva, as embodiments of freedom. After her husband leaves, Eva's house becomes a place frequented by numerous male guests, as the narration reveals:

"Those Peace women loved all men. It was man-love that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually, that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter" (41).

The Peace women are free in their actions and choices. In Eva's case, the arrival of these men represents a means of emotional and physical fulfillment, providing some

comfort in the wake of BoyBoy's abandonment. Despite living in difficult circumstances, she allows the men into her life, seeking solace in their company, though she remains distant from full romantic involvement. Her behavior, while sometimes stigmatized by society, demonstrates her autonomy. As Djajanegara argues, feminist struggles do not revolve around domination or revenge against men. Rather, women seek empowerment and agency without the desire to subjugate men (2000, 4). Eva's actions align with this understanding, reflecting her search for independence and support rather than an act of defiance or revenge.

With her bold and independent personality, Sula refuses to adhere to the traditional norms of Medallion society. Her decision not to marry, her relationships with multiple men, particularly white men, her promiscuity, and her unapologetically defiant attitude all place her at odds with the community's expectations. As a result, Sula is often viewed as the source of trouble and regarded as a threat to the social order. Her life, which does not conform to society's expectations, makes her a controversial and alienated figure.

IV. Conclusion

The analysis of *Sula* through a feminist lens using the theory of Soenarjati Djajanegara reveals how societal expectations shape women's identities and the pressures they face from both their families and the broader community. It can be concluded that women fundamentally need freedom to fully enhance and empower themselves. However, this freedom should not come at the expense of self-destruction or causing harm to others. If freedom leads to self-harm or negatively impacts those around them, it can result in women's downfall.

This study suggests that women, in coping with the various demands and expectations placed upon them by their families and society, often find themselves making choices that conflict with their personal desires and needs. Ultimately, the journeys of these women highlight their



struggle for freedom. However, true freedom does not always lead to happiness; instead, it brings with it challenges and sacrifices.

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