

“A Guide to Bad Motherhood”: Failure of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Sula*

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〈Abstract〉

This essay reads Toni Morrison's *Sula*(1973) as a fictionalized rendering of Sigmund Freud's observations in "Female Sexuality" (1931/1964); in this novel, Morrison scrutinizes the mother-daughter relationship and its correlation to female sexuality and ultimately offers *Sula* as a critical survey of African-American motherhood. To this end, Morrison arguably posits three separate sets of mother-daughter relationships and three distinct women whose sexualities are very much the result of this crucial relationship. In so doing, Morrison rewrites the narrative of motherhood in *Sula* by presenting Sula and Nel as surrogate mothers of one another. The failure and fatality of "real" mother-daughter bonds engender a parallel relationship between Sula and Nel as the two turn to each other for motherly love and nurturance. Subsequently, I submit that Sula and Nel's relationship should be understood in the context of the erotic underpinnings of mother-child relationships, rather than that of lesbians; reborn to their surrogate mothers, Nel and Sula re-experience Freud's infantile psychosexual stages, in hopes that their surrogate mothers will better prepare them in their road to integration with society. This relationship, however, also falls short of their expectations in this world of bad black mothers and isolated daughters.

Key words: *Sula*, Toni Morrison, Black Motherhood, Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality"

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The mother, with her tender sexual caresses, is the initial and the ultimate seductress, the first love-object for children of both sexes. In "Female Sexuality," Freud(1964) argues that when a girl retains her original attachment to her mother, she remains "arrested" in a pre-Oedipal phase and thereby becomes "exclusive[ly] attach[ed] to the mother," never making a "true change-over" to men(226, 230). He takes note of the predominance of the pre-Oedipal phase in women, and channels his interests into the "mechanisms ... at work [within the woman that] turn[s] away from the mother who was an object so intensely and exclusively loved"(231). According to Freud, it is this very relationship women have with their mothers in the pre-Oedipal stage and at the onset of the Oedipal which enables them to negotiate their strong tendencies towards bisexuality; moreover, Freud suggests the fact that women have two leading sexual zones - the vagina and the clitoris - renders them more susceptible to deviation from heterosexuality. As such, Freud makes careful analysis of the mother-daughter relationship, perceiving it as vital to solving the riddle of female sexuality. To a certain extent, I submit that we can read *Sula*(1973) as a fictionalized rendering of Freud's observations in "Female Sexuality." In this novel, Toni Morrison scrutinizes the mother-daughter relationship and its correlation to female sexuality and ultimately offers *Sula* as a critical survey of African-American motherhood; to this end, Morrison arguably posits three separate sets of mother-daughter relationships and three distinct women

whose sexualities are very much the product of this crucial relationship.

Women's sexuality is hence the focal point in *Sula*, and it has long been placed at the hub of critical debates relating to this novel. For one, many have argued that *Sula* is fundamentally a lesbian novel. Adrienne Rich(1993) is one such critic who places *Sula* in the lesbian continuum, disregarding the "genital sexual experience, or a conscious desire for such, with another woman" as an essential factor of lesbianism; Rich expands the definition of lesbian to denote "forms of a primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support"(Rich, 1993: 239).

Conversely, Barbara Smith(1999) makes a provocative suggestion that African American women are *less* inclined to become lesbians because:

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining 'straightness' is our last resort ... I am convinced that it is our lack of privilege and power in every other sphere that allows so few Black women to make that leap that many white women, particularly writers, have been able to make this decade. (Smith, 1999: 169)

Maintaining that heterosexuality and their potential as prospective mothers are the only privileges allowed to black women, Smith cites *Sula's* (dis)placement as a lesbian novel as another case of the inapplicability of white feminist criticism on works by black female writers.

Notwithstanding such heated debates, *Sula* deserves our critical attention in that in a novel teeming with black mothers and daughter, all relationships between the two end in debilitation or death. Heteronormativity does not necessarily entail a semblance of empowerment for these black mothers as Smith asserts. Social prejudice of white patriarchy preempts black mothers of any privilege, which, in turn, implicates the body maternal as the source of suffocation and fatality. Lucille Fultz(1996) remarks that *Sula* is a novel that demonstrates among other things how to be a "bad" mother; along these lines, I argue that in *Sula*, Morrison rewrites the narrative of motherhood by presenting Sula and Nel as surrogate mothers of one another. The failure and fatality of black mothers engender the forging of a mother-daughter bond between the two protagonists, Sula and Nel, in which they rely on each other for motherly love and nurturance. Carolyn Dever(1998) notes (albeit in the context of Victorian fiction) that "in the space of the missing mother, novelists ... are free to reinscribe the form and function of maternity"(Dever, 1998: 2). Subsequently, I submit that Sula and Nel's relationship should be understood in the context of the erotic underpinnings of mother-child relationships, rather than that of lesbians; reborn to

their surrogate mothers, Nel and Sula re-experience Freud's infantile psychosexual stages, in hopes that their surrogate mothers will better prepare them in their road to integration with society. This relationship, nevertheless, also falls short of their expectations in this world of bad black mothers and isolated daughters.

The leitmotif of the "bad black mother" has become affixed to the crux of literary works by a multitude of black female writers emphasizing, more often than not, the *originary* relationship daughters establish with their mothers. This strong literary presence of black mother-figures can be attributed to the idea that motherhood is the "only honorable creative role in which black women can reasonably hope to participate"(Wade-Gayles, 1984: 8).¹⁾ Still, black mothers remain a convoluted figure in the American imagination in that the "complex ideology of

1) The recurring theme of the "bad black mother" has been observed by sociologists, politicians and also by such literary critics as Hortense Spillers; in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers(1987) attacks the findings of the controversial 1965 Moynihan Report, wherein Daniel Patrick Moynihan directly correlated the "disintegration of the black family" and the "serious retard[ation] of the progress of the Negro community" with the "weakened role of men" and more significantly, its "matriarchal structure which [...] is so far out of line with the rest of American society"(Spillers, 1987: 65). Moynihan(1965) cites the high percentage (compared to white families) of matriarchal families as one of the fundamental sources of the "deterioration of the Negro family ... [engendering, in turn] the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society"; in so doing, Moynihan was attempting to generate public policies fortifying the economic role of black men and to re-institute patriarchy within the black community. As Spillers maintains, the danger of Moynihan's commentary lies not so much in his call for more economic agency for black men, but in the fact that he is condemning the strong motherly presence in the black household for its degeneration. Nevertheless, one saving grace of Moynihan's highly criticized report is that it calls attention to the overarching influence of the mother, be it positively or negatively perceived, in African American families.

Afro-American motherhood" is a production of an intersection among "three points of view - the Afro-American community's view of motherhood, the white American view of motherhood, and the white American view of Black motherhood"(Barbara Christian, qtd. in Schramm, 1992: 167). In a novel pervaded by a persistent motherly presence, Morrison provides three different pairs of mother and daughter. First, there is Eva and Hannah Peace, whose relationship merges black and white community's respective views of black motherhood; Eva appears as the stereotypical strong black mother, loving yet emotionally distant from her children. Then, there is Helene and Nel Wright, representing the white American view of motherhood. Helene is a constricting force in her daughter's life, continuously attempting to indoctrinate Nel with white patriarchal values. Nel, in turn, is estranged from her mother who neither understands nor makes any efforts to understand her daughter's potential beyond those of traditional gender roles: wife and mother. Finally, there is Hannah and Sula Peace, whose relationship can be seen as a *distorted* version of white American view of black motherhood. Hannah is a deeply sensual woman (redolent of stereotypical assumptions about the hypersexual black women) who sleeps with all the men in the Bottom. She is a woman who has refused the asexual image of traditional motherhood. Instead, Hannah revels in her sexuality and devotes her time and energy almost wholly to the practice and pleasures of sensuality, which ultimately distances her away from her daughter.

Adrienne Rich contends that in white America, "mother-love is supposed to be continuous and unconditional"(Rich, 1976: 29), highlighting the positive attributes of motherlove. However, Morrison demonstrates in *Sula* how white patriarchal hegemony has managed to distort black motherlove; while both white and black mothers alike may be displaced as subordinates in a gendered society governed by white men, racial prejudice adds another tier of oppression for black mothers. The bleak reality of social conditions impairs black motherlove much more severely. Many black feminist critics have noted "the oppression of women has created a breach ... especially between mothers and daughters. Women cannot respect their mothers in a society which degrades them"(Joseph, 1984: 17). In *Sula*, Morrison seemingly points to economic and racial prejudice as forces that distort black motherlove, which, in turn, engenders the separation of mothers and daughters. Eva Peace is the formidable matriarch of the Peace household; she is "the creator and sovereign of this enormous house ... directing the lives of her children, friends, strays and a constant stream of boarders"(Morrison, 1975: 30). All the same, her authority does not extend outside the limits of her household and the black neighborhood; she is rendered powerless in the larger society as a black single mother. When her husband BoyBoy runs off after "five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage"(27), she wholly sacrifices her life to the well-being of her three children; as an act of economic disidentification, Eva sticks her leg under a train for monetary compensation from the

insurance company. Eva, pulling her children along with her, manages to survive despite the social, economic, and racial disadvantages of being a black single mother. Nevertheless, Eva cannot extend her love beyond the undertaking of their physical well-being and her emotional detachment ultimately undermines the magnitude of her motherlove because her children, her two daughters in particular, are alienated from their inaccessible mother. Pearl gets married, moves away, and never comes back, not even for Hannah's funeral. Nor does she return when Sula institutionalizes Eva. And Hannah questions if Eva ever loved them: "I know you fed us and all. I was talk in 'bout something else. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us"(59)?

Considering that Hannah herself is a single mother, it is difficult to understand Hannah's lack of understanding and compassion for her mother's sacrifice; still, Hannah finds it much easier to blame Eva for being an unloving mother than try to understand the pressures of child-rearing for disadvantaged black mothers. Hannah is unable to understand the magnitude of Eva's motherlove because it is still sheltering her from the harsh realities of being a single black mother, with no means or education to sustain herself or her daughter Sula. Hannah only understands the void left by her mother's emotional distance, and she turns to sex as a substitute for the lacking motherlove. Hannah, by turning a blind eye towards the responsibility of social and economical situations in taking Eva away from her children, is rejecting

prospects of any reconciliation, thereby driving a further rift between them.

Not only do the effects of harsh social and economic conditions render black mothers vulnerable to the misunderstanding of their daughters in particular, but it is important to observe how these disadvantages "make[s] black] motherlove take on deadly proportions"(De Lancey, 1990: 17); protective motherlove is, more often than not, transformed, in the hostile milieu, into desperation, possessiveness, and violence. Vickroy(1993) observed that "[i]n reacting to their own victimization by social forces, [black mothers] extend that victimization to their children"(29). For instance, Morrison(1987) states in *Beloved* that "unless carefree, motherlove was a killer"(132). And in *Sula*, she problematizes the sanctity of the traditional view of motherhood by revealing the lethality of motherlove. The proliferation of murderous mothers are indicators of economic disadvantage and social oppression; in Eva, who is most antagonized by social oppression and is most adamant in her love for her children, fatal motherlove becomes manifest. As Morrison insisted elsewhere, "Parents who simply adore their children and really and truly want the best for them may, in fact, destroy them"(Schramm, 1992: 172).

For instance, when her son Plum returns from the war as a drug addict, Eva cannot tolerate his deterioration. As much as she loves him, she cannot abide his regression. Her motherlove becomes violent as she attempts both to re-draw the boundaries between herself and her child and to save Plum from

self-destruction: "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"(Morrison, 1973: 71). Eva is apprehensive of Plum's increasing desire to return to her womb. Plum's such desire can be interpreted in two contradictory ways: one, as a desire of the "murderously aggressive [infant who] entertains fantasies of tearing it to bits, suffering [simultaneously] paranoid delusions that [the body of the mother] will destroy it"(Eagleton, 1998: 142), and also as a longing to return to a state of passivity, in which he was sustained by the matrix.²⁾ When Plum is around 9 months old, he stops having bowel movement; in her determination to keep her baby alive, Eva "sodomizes" Plum - she inserts her finger to let his stool loose, manipulating his bodily functions. Eva's actions - an ultimate violation of Plum's bodily boundaries - also crushes his first efforts at mastery over others; she hammers in who's boss, disrupting the significant process towards autonomy. In this reversal of "traditional" mother-father roles, Morrison conflates the "mother" and the "father" and reinforces the concept of "black woman as parent"(Sokoloff, 1986: 434, please refer to footnote 1).

Moreover, according to Vickroy(1993), Plum becomes a reminder of Eva's prior powerlessness and inability to provide for

2) Psychoanalytically speaking, Plum's passivity may also be related to a traumatic experience during his anal stage; Freud states that in this stage, the infant becomes aware of passivity and activity. The anal stage is sadistic, in that the child derives erotic pleasure from expulsion and destruction; but it is also connected with the desire for retention and possessive control, as the child learns a new form of mastery and a manipulation of the wishes of others through the 'granting' or the withholding of the faeces(Eagleton, 1998: 133).

her children and ultimately, it is only with Plum's annihilation she can regain her sense of stability she has managed to attain since then(29). Eva becomes fearful of Plum's violation of her psychological and physical boundaries in his attempts to crawl back into her womb. She resorts to desperate measures to keep him out. Consequently, she rationalizes her part in the homicidal mission by indicating the necessity of her actions in saving Plum from the drug addiction, which would have been worse than death itself. All the while, Eva professes her love for Plum, even after confessing to her *infanticidal* actions; with tears in her eyes, Eva adds, "But I held him close first. Real close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy"(Morrison, 1973: 62). Her intentions may have been justifiable, but we cannot overlook the fact that Eva victimizes and exploits Plum's fundamental rights to his body, not only once but twice. Eva's fatal bond with Plum is convoluted by her double standards for their physical boundaries; Eva accepts Plum as a part of her body for her convenience but not for his - i.e. she has no misgivings about transgressing his boundaries but she, on the other hand, will not tolerate Plum infringing upon her bodily bounds.

In *Sula*, murderous mothers of different sorts reside alongside each other. Hannah's prospects of becoming a good mother are killed off by Eva's inability to empathize with her children's needs for expressive love. By her death, Hannah's absence in her daughter Sula's life becomes absolute. Even in life, Hannah is uninvolved, which is evidenced by the lack of any conversation

worth noting within the novel. All Hannah wishes to be involved in is with herself and those who can offer her pleasure, namely her sexual partners. Eva too is prioritized because she can offer the pleasures of economic stability; in a word, Eva is deemed worthy by Hannah's standards because she provides Hannah with a roof over her head and food on the table. Sula does not fit anywhere into this equation and is thereby forgotten and ignored.

Helene Wright offers another variance of the already complicated picture of motherhood. She is involved, yet uninvolved. She is ever-present in her daughter Nel's life, yet she is absent. She is attentive, yet not attentive enough to recognize what Nel truly craves: love and approval from her mother. Helene is a middle-class domesticated housewife and mother, and a respectable, upright citizen of Medallion. She is a conformist, upholder of social morality and is proud of it. She preaches that women should be docile and submissive. Helene makes Nel pull her nose so that she may improve the broad flat nose she got from her father. She makes Nel suffer through "hateful hot combs" for smooth hair(47). Helene eradicated early on any traces of imagination and enthusiasms in little Nel(16) and instead, indoctrinated her daughter with white patriarchal values. As Joseph(1984) notes:

Mothers socialize their daughters in to the narrow role of wife-mother; in frustration and guilt, daughters reject their mothers

for their duplicity and incapacity - so the alienation grows in turning of the generation. (Joseph, 1984: 17)

Nel resents the limitations set forth by her mother and dissociates herself from Helene. As "[d]aughters 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"(44-5) - i.e. the intimacy they found lacking in the relationships with their parents. Nel and Sula try to recreate this elemental intimacy by becoming each other's surrogate for motherlove.

Chodorow(1978) argues in her "object-relations theory" that in mother-child relationships, the mother identifies more closely with the child of the same sex, which hinders the daughter from establishing her own ego-boundaries(Chodorow, 1978: 3). Because the daughter does not give up her attachment to her mother in the Oedipal stage, she faces a conflict within herself between wanting to identify with the mother and being autonomous. Still in the process of their identity-construction, Sula and Nel are faced with an irreconcilable need to separate from Hannah and Helene (who already alienated them, in any case) and to still identify with someone to continue on with this process. Thus, they rely upon each other to fill the role of the absent mother. Moreover, they progress from the passivity, which colored the nature of their mother-daughter relationships onto the "active side

of femininity"(Freud, 1964: 237). As Sula and Nel abandon their biological mothers and accept each other as surrogate mothers, each experience re-birth through her surrogate mother. Reborn, Sula and Nel (and their relationship) re-enter a convoluted version of infantile psychosexual stages proposed by Freud and Lacan. Eagleton(1998) recapitulates the mirror stage as "a pre-Oedipal state, [in which] the child lives a 'symbiotic' relation with its mother's body which blurs any sharp boundary between the two: [the infant] is dependent for its life on this body [of the mother] ... For Lacan, the ego is just this narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify"(Eagleton, 1998: 143). Seemingly, Nel and Sula occupy opposite ends of the character spectrum in that Nel represents social conventions, stability, and rigidity and Sula, anarchism, flux, and verve. Since Lacanian subjects define themselves through self-alienation or lack, self-discovery is based on an ideal image equipped with a coherence which the subject, in effect, lacks; according to Lacan, Nel and Sula are, then, mirror images of one another, finding in each other - as their reflections - that pleasing image of coherency.

By replacing one symbiotic relationship with another, however, Nel and Sula are faced with the same dilemma as before; as they become surrogate mothers of one another, the boundaries of their physicality are again obfuscated. Nel thinks that talking to Sula has always been like talking to herself(Morrison, 1973: 82). Sula

thinks of Nel as "the closest thing to both another and a self" (103); Sula and Nel are "two throats and one eye"(126). Their synthesis is so complete that other characters in the book perceive them as one; Eva says to Nel; "You, Sula. What's the difference? ... Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you"(168-9). Sula's and Nel's post-fetal desire for a re-unification with the body maternal is dangerous as is foreshadowed in the case of Eva and Plum. Rather than anticipating maturity as some critics (Gillespie and Kubischek, in particular) have noted, the conjoining of their identities hinders each other's road to construction of a coherent self as much as a smothering mother might have. Coleman(1993) consistently argues that Sula and Nel "do not have complete identities or egos unless they are together interacting with each other"(Coleman, 1993: 152). Coleman carefully elides the implication that it is their interaction that perpetuates and underscores the division of Sula as id and Nel as ego and that as long as they have the "mirror image" which provides them with the pleasing coherency, they will never make the effort to acquire completeness as individuals. Morrison(1973) ominates on the dangers of extreme conformity; the deweys, who are unable to, nor show any desire to be separated, are stunted in their maturity.

[E]very one realized for the first time that except for their magnificent teeth, the deweys would never grow. They had been

forty-eight inches tall for years now ... The realization was based on the fact that they remained boys in mind. Mischievous, cunning, private and completely unhouse broken, their games and interests had not changed since Hannah had them all put into first grade together. (Morrison, 1973: 73)

Departing from the pre-Oedipal mirror stage, Sula and Nel enter the Oedipal. The girl's existence in the Oedipal stage is intrinsically ambiguous since Freud's observations of the Oedipal as an essential step for the child to become a responsible adult, is, of course, mostly limited to boys. The girls were, on the other hand, encouraged to remain bonded to their mothers. In any event, a precondition for entering into the Oedipal is exchanging the mother for the father as a love-object. This problematizes Sula's and Nel's transition into the Oedipal stage because they both lack a father to transplant their affections.

In Sula's case, her progression proves to be much more arduous; not only does she lack a male-receptacle for her evolving desire but also her entrance into the Oedipal is induced by a traumatic severance from her mother Hannah. Sula overhears Hannah saying that she loves Sula but does not like her and this "sen[ds] her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window ... aware of a sting in her eye. Nel's call floated up ... pulling her away from dark thoughts"(49). To some degree, all subjects find the transition into the Oedipal painful. Nevertheless,

Sula is thrust into the Oedipal, unprepared and incapable of negotiating the pain of rejection by her original love-object, Hannah. Freud notes that one probable cause for daughter's disavowal of her mother is that she resents her mother "not giv[ing] her enough milk, [and] not suckl[ing] her long enough"; however, he claims to be rather surprised at a child's insatiable need for motherlove, belittling it as "greed of a child's libido"(Freud, 1964: 234).

On the other hand, Wick(1996) reiterates Jessica Benjamin's argument that "the child's need for independence depends not upon an abrupt severance at some pre-ordained magical oedipal moment, but upon sustained nurture for a long period during which the child makes forays into the world from a secure base"(Wick, 1996: 96-7). Hannah's words clarify what Sula has suspected all along; that Sula is denied the steady assurance of her mother's love and this knowledge agitates the foundation of Sula's self. Furman(1996) argues that in this moment, "some crucial element of [Sula's] consciousness [becomes] arrested" (Furman, 1996: 27); Sula edges her way into the Oedipal but the trauma she encounters at the point of entry, leaves her without a "center, no speck around which to grow"(Morrison, 1973: 103). Eagleton summarizes that Oedipus complex is:

not just another complex; it is the structure of relations by which we come to be the men and women that we are. ... [I]t signals the

transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle. ... Moreover, the Oedipus complex is for Freud the beginning of morality, conscience, law and all forms of social and religious authority. (Eagleton, 1998: 135- 6)

Disrupted in her transition to the Oedipal, Sula feels no emotions, nor guilt, nor remorse for the consequences of her reckless actions. After overhearing her mother, Sula, with Nel, runs off into the woods. Sula and Nel are both twelve, with "their small breasts just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort when they were lying on their stomachs"(Morrison, 1973: 49).

Sula's brutal entrance into the Oedipal is immediately followed by the scene in which the girls become cognizant of their blossoming sexualities. Together, and without words or eye contact, the girls being to play in the grass, rhythmically "strok[ing] the blades, up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence"(49). Sula follows suit and soon they begin prodding "rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole ... Nel began a more strenuous digging ... Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. When ... Nel's twig broke, [w]ith a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too"(49-50). Entering into the Oedipal

stage, the little girls prove to be little men, as Freud indicated. They are in control of this symbolic sexual play; they have the phallus. They discard it, however, when they are confronted with its limitations. Recent psychoanalytic thinking emphasizes that the girl becomes interested in the penis, not because she wants to be a boy, but rather in order to detach herself from her mother and become autonomous as a woman (Mollinger, 1981: 52). This is pertinent to Sula's actions because she gets rid of her twig even though it did not break. Sula is "castrated" but it enables her to realize that she need not depend on the twig for empowerment; its incompetence has shown her that it cannot always be relied upon, just as mothers cannot be.

Thus, Sula concurrently becomes and possesses the phallus while Nel regresses into gender conformity. Sula's action was sequel to Nel's; however, we can infer that Sula is gradually gaining more autonomy. As Freud (1964) notes:

Thus in women the Oedipus complex is ... not destroyed, but created, by the influence of castration ... the cultural consequences of its break-up are smaller and of less importance in her. We should probably not be wrong in saying that it is this difference in the reciprocal relation between the Oedipus and the castration complex which give sits special stamp to the character of females as social beings. (Freud, 1964: 230)

The child emerging from the Oedipal stage, is a split one: upon exiting from the Oedipal, the id and the ego separate as do Nel and Sula. However, upon their separation, Nel's and Sula's life become copies of their mothers' lives. As Wick(1996) points out, "[Sula and Nel are] finally too needy for the other to completely fill the gaps left by their parents and society ... [Their relationship], which is limited to one generation to the extent that it limits their interaction with others, cuts them off from cultural wisdom and inhibits their cultural literacy"(Wick, 1996: 109). Nel's conformist upbringing finally succeeds in constricting her within heteronormative values of patriarchy. Nel's life becomes a replica of Helene's - she embraces traditional woman's roles and passively obeys the patriarchal *modus operandi* by marrying Jude and mothering his three children. Sula, on the other hand, refuses to conform as Nel does and leaves Medallion.

Just as the unconscious always returns to plague the conscious, Sula returns to Medallion to deconstruct the restrictive heteronormativity of the town. Sula's lax sexuality parallels Hannah's shameless seductions of her neighbors' and friends' husbands. However, unlike Hannah, Sula finds the men she sleeps with utterly insignificant and she becomes a sexual menace to the black community. Sula's presence threatens to further displace black men within the Law of the Father; for the black men to lose the authority to constrict black women, they would be losing their authority all together. Hélène Cixous(1976) has noted, in relation to feminine writing, that "[t]he voice in each

woman ... is not only her own, but springs from the deepest layers of her psyche; her own speech becomes the echo of the primeval song she once heard, the voice the incarnation of the 'first voice of love which all women preserve alive ... in each woman sings the first nameless love'"(Moi, 1985: 114). Just as feminine writing reverberates the voice of the Mother, Nel and Sula is delimited by traces of the "originals" within their psyche and revert to replicate their mothers' lives.

In reproducing their mother's lives, they are following "what every colored woman in this country is doing ... dying"(Morrison, 1973: 123). Mostly, Nel replicates Eva's act of sacrificing her body to the altar of her children. Eva's body no longer exists for herself and is ravaged for the sake of her children. Eva risks death for her children; she severs her leg by placing it in front of an oncoming train so that she may collect insurance policy to support her family. For Nel, motherhood and its subsequent loss of self also represent death. She never regains her sense of self even after she is released from the role of wife. Motherhood consumes Nel; she considers death but physical death is not an option for her because of her children. Instead, she "wraps herself in the conventional mantle of sacrifice and martyrdom and take her place with the rest of the women in the community"(Furman, 1996: 25). Instead of facilitating her death, Nel becomes an oppressive, suffocating, deadly mother herself.

In Sula's case, Hannah never inculcates the necessity of marriage; thus Sula does not require a male presence for

fulfillment. Therefore, she escapes death-by-marriage. But the innate death instinct lures her to her ultimate end via another route. Sula stands by and does nothing while her mother burns to death. Also, Sula institutionalizes Eva, confiscating her freedom. By this act, she socially erases not only her grandmother but also herself. Morrison asserts, "When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection"(Sokoloff, 1986: 430). According to Sokoloff(1986), because Morrison extensively traces the history of matriarchal lines to show its power in formulating the characteristics of the major female characters(430), Sula's deliberate dissociation with her history can be interpreted as a wish to erase her existence.

Furthermore, Sula's excessive expression of her sexuality is another way that becomes the guarantor of her death by alienating her from the society at large. As Freud noted, the lack of motherlove engenders "the uninterrupted continuance of libidinal cathexis"(Freud, 1964: 231). Sula shows no scruples over having sex with almost anyone in town, even Nel's husband Jude. The ruthlessness of her sexual antics not only denies her relationship of any kind with her lovers but also severs her strongest tie to society: her ties to Nel. Lacking history and societal attachment, she faces, without any distractions, the ultimate goal of life - i.e. death. Her libido (the Latin word for "I desire") is what provides her with the assurance that she may live

her life the way she wants to live it so that she may proceed on her way to death:

During lovemaking she found and needed to find the cutting edge. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. ... But the cluster did break, fall apart, and in her panic to hold it together she leaped from the edge into soundlessness and went down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the endings of things. ... There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning. (Morrison, 1973: 106)

Sula's awareness of death and lack of anxiety towards that inevitable end allows her consciousness during her progress towards it; "While in this state of weary anticipation, she noticed that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely ... Then she realized, or rather sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. 'Well, I'll be damned,' she thought, 'it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel'"(Morrison, 1973: 128).

In death, Sula is "returning to the earlier state of things"(128);

some critics commented that Morrison has managed to imbue Sula's acceptance of death with positive qualities; for Sula, death is not resignation but is transformed into a moment of renewal in that "her fetal position and the accompanying water imagery suggests a longing to return to infancy, and the space of the bedroom transforms into the wet, protecting and creative space of a womb in her imagination"(Vickroy, 1993: 37). Nevertheless, these critics are eliding the fact that Sula is returning to a state even prior to that of the womb; thus she need not deal with the mother's anxiety of bodily intrusion. Returning to this primordial state, she does not even need the minimal aides that sustained her life - such as air and nourishment and in which she can remain smiling, happy, in anticipation of meeting Nel and talking to her about their common experience of dying.

In his extensive research about mother-child relationships, Freud(1964) discovered that "[c]hildhood love is boundless; it demands exclusive possession, it is not content with less than all ... it has, in point of fact, no aim and is incapable of obtaining complete satisfaction; and principally for that reason it is doomed to end in disappointment"(Freud, 1964: 231). Helene, Hannah, Nel, and Sula have failed to reconcile with insufficient motherlove. However, the sustaining image of this novel is not that of pessimism. Eva outlives Hannah and even Sula, and escapes from being devoured by her own motherlove for her children. Sula rejoices in her moment of death that she is "going down like one of those redwoods"(Morrison, 1973: 149); Sula is able to fill up

the void left by her mother, just as she and Nel covered up the hole they had made when they were girls. Sula knows that she "sure did live in this world" and this completes her sense of self. And Nel comes to realize the value of her relationship with Sula. She cries, "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude ... We was girls together ... O, Lord, Sula ... girl, girl, girlgirlgirl"(149). Nel realizes that Jude was just a remnant of patriarchal hegemony, the broken twig she had thrown away in the hole she had made with Sula. And she mourns for Sula, in "circles and circles of sorrow"(149).

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『술라』에 나타난 흑인 모성성 연구

정혜연*

〈국문초록〉

본 논문은 프로이트의 「여성적 성욕성」(“Female Sexuality,” 1931/1964)을 통해 토니 모리슨의 『술라』(*Sula*, 1973)에 대해 논하고자 한다. 이 소설에서 모리슨은 여성의 섹슈얼리티라는 렌즈를 통해 모녀관계를 들여다보고 있으며 특히 흑인 모성성에 대한 비판적 개관을 제시하고 있다. 모녀관계의 필연적 결과로 섹슈얼리티가 형성된 세 여성을 소개하므로써 『술라』는 “어머니 서사”에 대한 다시 쓰기를 시도한다. 흔히 동성애적 사랑으로 이해되는 두 친구 술라와 넬의 우정을 모녀관계의 맥락으로 접근하여 이 소설의 가장 주축이 되는 술라-넬의 상관관계를 살펴보고, 이 작품에서 제시하는 흑인 모성성에 대해 다루고자 한다.

주제어: 『술라』, 토니 모리슨, 흑인 모성성, 프로이트, 「여성적 성욕성」

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