

Helene Cixous's acknowledgement of Women's Self: Contextualising Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is about feminine individuation, interwoven and developed through the development of characters of Nel and Sula. In writing herself, Helene Cixous argues that a woman does not only bring herself into writing but also creates women's writing thereby moves into and away from 'the fatal goal' of subjugation of her body under patriarchy, under law and other socially oppressive practices. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison is conscious of the violent entrapment of women's bodies. While articulating oppression she also writes about resistance and bonding. The present paper explores the dimensions of female bonding as well as resistance to the patriarchal order in *Sula*. An attempt is made to read the novel in the light of Helen Cixous's theory of women's writing where she claims that 'the future must not be determined by the past.'

KEYWORDS: self, individuation, femaleness, *Sula*

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. The future must no longer be determined by the past.

(Cixous,pp 875)

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst-burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naivete, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength?

(Cixous,pp,876)

Lacan preserves it in the sanctuary of the phallos (0) "sheltered" from castration's lack! Their "symbolic" exists, it holds power-we, the sowers of disorder, know it only too well. But we are in no way obliged to deposit our lives in their banks of lack, to consider the constitution of the subject in terms of a drama manglingly restaged, to reinstate again and again the religion of the father. Because we don't want that. We don't fawn around the supreme hole. We have no womanly reason to pledge

allegiance to the negative. The feminine (as the poets suspected) affirms: ". . . And yes," says Molly, carrying Ulysses off beyond any book and toward the new writing; "I said yes, I will Yes." The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. (Cixous,pp,885)

French feminism is mostly centred around language and writing while critiquing the discourse of patriarchy. While phallogocentricism is the dominant trope for women's subjugation, father's tongue mediated by mother and taught to the child traps the female child into father's language from where originates the language of subjugation that a female child is forced to internalise. Helene Cixous, in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", argues for *écriture féminine* or an exclusive women's writing as a disruptive mode of the patriarchal linguistic order in a uniquely feminine style of writing characterised by disruptions, gaps, silences, puns, new images and so on. Through this writing, she attempts to restore the female voice to her original articulation outside the borrowed language of the father. Such a mode liberates the woman writer from the logic and repressions of the phallogocentric language while opening up to free play of meaning. Julia Kristeva, another theorist, takes the discussion to the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal stage of a female child where the free play of signifiers is repressed following father controlled syntactical, logical and the 'symbolic' order in that the mother becomes the source of the 'semiotic.' The effort of the female writer should be to break open the patriarchal order and break away from the linear, masculine, and authoritative function of patriarchy. The new discourse so formed could break into a revolutionary space by disrupting and dispersing the authority of the father and father's law. Kristeva gives Emily Dickinson's poetry as an example of free play of signifiers where the poet has bonded herself to herself in her femaleness and has been successful in creating a distinct feminist poetic language. *Écriture féminine*, as possibility and practice, has been taken up by many modern women writers successfully in creating a new language of female bonding and resistance.

Among the most famous modern writers, committed to *écriture féminine*, Toni Morrison is perhaps the most celebrated. As an Afro-American writer, she is an inheritor of a tradition of Black women writers before her. Phyllis Wheatley, Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker are some of the women writers who represent Black women's tradition and this tradition was followed by Morrison and many others. This tradition proposes not only to keep away the white men but also all men. Thus, a tradition of women's own has developed by the Black women writers. Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* records an exchange between Ceile and Shug about turning away from the old white man which soon turns around to the elimination of 'man' as a mediator between woman and everything:

Still, it is like Shug say, you have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall. Man corrupt everything . He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God . But he ain't. (Walker 179)

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The ungrammaticality and colloquial registers are kept in the narrative to bring about the disruptions in male narrative syntax and other grammatical rules. However, meaning production remains unhindered even becomes more transparent between to women who have undergone similar experiences in the hands of men. Zora Neale Hurston's work was path breaking in the sense that her characters are not constrained by the need to 'prove' themselves to the 'high' culture. As Alice Walker who would write years later confirm to the same.

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This African American exclusivity of looking inward into themselves and to their history has been the raw material for many of the great black American women novelists .Zora Neale Hurston's work was path breaking in the sense that her characters are not constrained by the need to 'prove' themselves to the 'high' culture.

Morrison belongs to this tradition of *écriture féminine*. *Sula*, published in 1973, is set in the early 1900s in a small Ohio town called Medallion. It tells the story of two African-American friends, Sula and Nel, from their childhood through their adulthood till Sula's death. Morrison draws on her own small-town, Midwestern childhood to create this tale of conformity and rebellion. In the course of the novel Sula undergoes changes to represent a larger feminine identity and creates her own community having a world view that is opposed to the white, western, materialist culture while confirming to the one that is primordial, natural and conducts itself on natural laws. Sula becomes the symbol of the natural world representing all elemental forces that constitute the human body and consciousness. In this world, the primacy of the female, representing nature is a discourse of conformity. Sula's story becomes a story of conformity and resistance in a linguistic labyrinth that Morrison creates is an example of *écriture féminine* that breaks down many barriers.

Morrison's projection of woman's self in *Sula* substantiates Cixous exhortation about realisation of self. It is in complete consonance with the image of the woman she exhorts women to be. Sula is the image supreme of Cixous 'women. The book dramatizes the inwardness of the quest.

At the book's heart is the story of the friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace. Their friendship begins as adolescent girls continuing as they mature, the friendship changes in nature but makes for the deepest bond and most profound influence their lives. Both share dreams of adventure and unfolding selfhood. The road taken by the two are extreme opposites. Nel indulges in romantic fantasies sacrificing her

independence to conventionality, while Sula, insisting on her independence, becomes isolated from society. Obedient, quiet, and repressed, Nel first experiences herself as an individual apart from her family when she gazes in a mirror and dreams of traveling in the world beyond the Bottom. "But," the narrator interjects at this point, "that was before she met Sula. . ." (p. 25). The introduction of Sula at this crucial birth of Nel's self-awareness highlights the link between the two girls. In fact, it is her sense of her nascent identity which gives Nel the strength to defy her mother's prohibition and establish a friendship with Sula. Yet it is to be Sula, rather than Nel, who eventually realizes Nel's dreams of a journey and of independent selfhood.

A feminist perspective is what Sula calls for ,a perspective that works for Sula as a woman ,as a Black woman a character that defines herself through her female selfhood .The sexual/racial typology creates interaction between the natural universe and culture in ways that are ancient within a Black culture. Sula/Nel moves towards individuation through an acknowledgement of the feminine psyche. Morrison moves us to a perspective where we can understand Sula, and in consequence Nel,Jude,Hannah,Eva and Helene, who are her society through some independent, autonomous, and gender-identified consciousness that Sula and these other characters have, endanger, lose, or recover.

Sula's individualism defies male definitions. Her sexuality is not threatened by aggressive males. She cuts off the tip of her finger speaking of her disregard for their sexuality. She is a model of female constancy for Nel.Hers is a tale of courage in the face of limitation and powerlessness and wresting self knowledge from loss and suffering. We see the townsfolk ostracising her morality and sexuality .She separates herself from her family, places Eva in a nursing home and watches her mother Hannah burn with an objective interest. She has no one but herself and it is through this solitude that she crafts herself into a woman.The rose/snake tadpole scar above Sula's eye is a shifting elemental image-a flower nurtured by air and water and rooted in the earth; It's a snake bound to the ground, and a tadpole whose survival depends entirely on water.Exploring her motivations and reactions outside of these connections with the natural world and the elemental universe belies Morrison's emphasis.

Nommo the African word creative potential ,passed on to women or nature is the same. It is complementary to African view that women should hold this power. Women's power gives life, and retains the life giving sustenance of the word. Because there is an essential link between the natural, physical world and the spiritual world in African octogeny, when women carry knowledge it can be manifested in things from the either world. The rocks, trees, grasses all hold magical powers. As little girls Nel and Sula experiment with this awareness of body/self and world while playing in the dirt and are brought to the trembling ,excited agitation that presages awareness of their womanly power.

Sula's extreme powerfulness extends from her embracing wholly and without reserve her natural power. She makes no effort to separate this power from her physical self.Sula, a woman of the African earth who has claimed the body and spirit of that essential unity and who has dared to live an expression of that unity in a culture whose survival threatens African values. Sula embodies the essential African archetypes of fire, water and ground.

Dubois describes this worldview of the African as one that reflects a tropical imagination...a keen delicate appreciation of nature...a world animate....Sula retains more of this world animate than the women around her. They have been acculturated. Sula is incompatible. When Nel leads her towards her earth-self ,she fully accepts this identity ,claims it ,enfolds it within herself.

Morrison creates a strong connection between Sula and nature and the bond between the two is symbiotic. Her relationships, to Eva, to Ajax, to Nel, Jude add no dimension to her character. Sula emerges from each of these relationships except for the one dangerous interlude with Ajax unchanged by the others' identities. Adopting male perspective towards Sula fails to explain her. Sula is an extension of the natural world. Order and chaos of the natural world parallels and reflects her because she is the source of her own power in the same way that nature ravages and replenishes itself.

The community presented in Sula is a caricature. The culture that Helene accumulates for herself and her daughter is sterile, spotless and artificial. Nel's marriage to Jude is empty of passion and feeling. Only Sula escapes it .Nel was capable of interaction with the natural world and once had the potential to determine and accentuate her womanhood. This connection with things natural ,this push towards feminine individuation ,is suggested very early in *Sula*,in a scene where both Nel and Sula engage in a sexual play with the earth.

They ran in the sunlight (and) flung themselves into the four cornered shade to taste their lip sweat and contemplate the wildness that had come upon them so suddenly. They lay in the grass.(*Sula* pp58-59).

Yet it is Nel who early in her childhood ,comes to a realisation of what selfhood holds. "I am me. She whispered Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant." I am me. I 'm not their daughter I'm not Nel .I'm me. Me. "Each time she said the word there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear..."Me," she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, "I want...I want to be wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful."(*Sula*,pp24-25)

But her potential dissolves.

Women in Sula are consumed by fire or fever men are submerged by women's fiery potential.Morrison suggests that Sula's kind of survival(alone, inner-dependent, and autonomous) comes from carrying individuation to an extreme and her accomplishment causes her to burn itself out in her becoming.

Nommo the life-force ,is the fluid as such ,a unity of spiritual -physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything.

Morrison seems to suggest that through the earth play that feminine individuation is within the reach of every girl The rest of Sula the novel is about Sula choosing individuation Nel's rejection and reclamation of her legacy.

Helene pushes her daughter away from African fringe of racial and sexual awareness back into mainstream white American mode one that entraps her in her duplicity. Though Sula dies ,it is with a sense of herself intact. We can see Sula as a type of women who has reached totally inward and chosen flight and freedom in such a way that she can serve as an ideal of feminine values and individuation. Sula is ideally

mysterious, and incredible. In this sense Sula is an image and an ideal ,an ideal of female imagination set free.

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