CHAPTER THREE

ANALYSIS OF “SULA”
3.0 Preliminaries

After observing the feminist features in The Bluest Eye, we study and analyse the second novel of Toni Morrison called Sula.

The third chapter begins with feminist analysis according to race, gender and class. This part of the chapter draws our attention to the fact that race, gender and class can affect Black people’s life, especially black women. In this chapter also, female characters will be presented and they will be analysed.

Sula, Morrison's second book, which she calls a novel about black women's friendships and about good and evil, appeared in 1973. Sula not only breaks with popular stereotypes of black women in western literature but also creates one of the few black women heroines who deliberately embrace the role of a pariah. Although not universally liked, Sula had a wider reception than The Bluest Eye and brought Morrison national recognition. Black women and men were widely represented among its critics, with black women identifying most often with the issues that it raised in 1975, it was nominated for the National Book Award In fiction.

In Sula, Morrison captures most profoundly the way concepts of good and evil are related to societal definitions of women. "Bottom" is a
Black community located in the hills above the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio. This definition has much to do with the status of black people within the larger society, which ironically is the bases for the adventure, and rebellion that Sula represents. What is equally important is that the Bottom characterizes all its women as a class, though not in terms of dependent beautiful ornaments. Because of this black community's vulnerability, the distinguishing characteristic of the class of woman is that she insures the continuity of the community by bearing children and by supporting the beleaguered men either serenely, emotionally or financially.

*Sula* is fundamentally a woman's novel in the sense that it concerns itself with the feeling and affairs of women and the roles they assume, whether by choice or force. It chronicles the fortunes of women in two matriarchal households within the black community whose lives represent the range of choices possible for black women in white America. Even though a good deal of the action of the novel derives from the consequences of male and female relationships, it is the self-perception of woman. This self-perception slid her subsequent reactions of self-concept that are central to it.
3.1. Plot Construction

The story begins by telling how the neighbourhood, called the "Bottom" of the town of Medallion, is being destroyed to make room for a city golf course. We learn about how the neighbourhood used to be when people would hear singing and music and see dancing. We learn how outsiders would see happiness but never look deep enough to see the people's pain. This part of town is where the Negroes lived, and it all started with a joke laughter on the outside, pain on the inside.

The Bottom began when a white farmer promised freedom and land to one of his slaves after completing a certain amount of work. The slave did his work and asked for his "payment." The farmer told him he had wanted to give him land in the "Bottom" in which National Suicide Day begins on January 3, 1920 and takes place every January 3 except during WWII. After being in the war in 1917, Shadrack returns home to the Bottom of Medallion not knowing who he is or what he should do. The only thing he remembers is a window overlooking a river full of fish.

During the war, Shadrack's first encounter with the enemy surprises him because he expects to be exhilarated or terrified, but he only feels the "bite of the nail in his boot." As he rushes into the crowd of people, he turns his head and sees "the face of the soldier near him fly off."
Shadrack then opens his eyes and he is in a hospital bed. His meal is waiting for him. He "looks" for his hands and notices them.

Helene's grandmother wants her as far away from the Sundown House as possible because she is afraid she will start showing signs of her mother's "wild blood." When her nephew shows up, she pushes him to propose marriage to Helene and move her to his hometown of Medallion. Helene does well there. She is very proper and classy and is able to fit in very well. Wiley Wright works as a ship's cook and he is only home three out of sixteen days. After nine years of marriage, Helene has a daughter. Helene is a mother that raises an obedient, polite and unimaginative daughter. She likes life in Medallion and knows she is far enough away from Sundown House.

Sula lives in her grandmother's house. Eva Peace had the house built over a five-year period and had kept adding rooms, staircases and doors. Eva now lives on the third floor in a wagon where she oversees everyone in the house: her children, boarders, friends and strays... anyone who happens to be there. She sits in her wagon because she only has one leg. Nobody ever speaks of her missing leg, but she sometimes tells story about what happened to it. She is always known for her "magnificent" remaining leg. In her wagon, she sits low enough for kids
to see her at eye level and adults to look down on her, but they always feel as though they are looking up to her.

Sula and Nel have become fast friends despite their opposite upbringing. They like to walk to Edna Finch's Mellow House ice cream parlor past all the men and boys to see what they'll say and test their limits. They met in school, on the playground, and their opposite lives (appearance and personalities) gave them a sudden and intense relationship. Nel is light-skinned, strong and consistent. Sula is dark with unpredictable emotions.

Many strange things happen on this particular day in addition to a strange night before. There was a strong wind the kind that usually brings rain, but this time it only brought a drier heat. The second one is Hannah going to her mother's room to ask if she really loved her children. Eva defends herself and her actions and says she loved and kept them alive that should be enough. Hannah wonders why Eva killed Plum and Eva says it was to give him an honourable death as a "man" before he regressed any further back into childhood. Hannah leaves the room, heads to the kitchen and begins cleaning the beans for dinner. She sees the Deweys playing chain gang out the window with their laces all tied together. Then, she lies down…
Nel marries Jude Greene and it is a grand affair at her mother's house. Helene loosens her uptightness because she realizes that after the wedding, she will have years to clean up the mess. Jude Greene is well liked, a waiter at the Hotel Medallion and a singer in the men's choir. He is not planning on getting married until he realizes he is unable to get a job working on the new road connecting the Bottoms to the rest of Medallion: the gang boss always overlooks the black men trying to get jobs for the less qualified white men. Jude is disappointed because he wants to have a manlier role than just being a waiter.

Sula returns to Medallion accompanied by a plague of robins and with a flourish. She has on fancy clothes that catch everyone's eye even the white people. When she gets to Eva's room, Eva is immediately defensive and upset that Sula had not contacted her grandmother in ten years. They argue about many things including Eva burning Plum, Sula watching Hannah burn, Sula not settling down and how and why Eva had lost her leg. Sula threatens to sneak into the room and burn Eva just as Eva did Plum. Eva begins locking her door, but it does not stop Sula from having Eva committed and getting guardianship over her grandmother. Nel notices a new spark and excitement in life after Sula returns to Medallion.
As soon as people hear about what Sula had done to Eva, Nel and Jude, the nasty comments and rumors begin flying. They begin talking about how Sula had watched her mother burn and started talk that she sleeps with white men. They view her as evil and take precaution to protect themselves, watching her closely. Because of this, things change at the Bottom: Teapot, a neglected five-year-old boy knocks on Sula's door and asks her for bottles. As he leaves, he falls down the steps and Sula goes out to help him. Teapot's mamma only sees Sula leaning over her boy and starts the story that she had pushed him. She ends up taking Teapot to the hospital to find he has broken bones.

Nel visits Sula for the first time in three years. She practices asking Sula if there is anything she can do because Sula is sick. She is sure to make her question level and cordial. She does not want to betray any of the range of emotions she still feels towards Sula from the affair, how it had changed her love for her children or how she feels about working at the hotel as a maid.

Sula asks Nel to get her prescription filled with the pain relievers the doctor had told her to hold off on until the pain is "really bad." Sula wonders why Nel had stopped by her house. She is happy, however, that Nel, who always came through during the crises in her life will bring her new medicine.
Many people attend Sula's funeral some to see for sure that the "witch" is buried, others to make sure everything goes smoothly. The people of the Bottom notice that things in general seem to get better after Sula's death. There is a promise of work on the new tunnel and the retirement home gets renovations. Eva and the other black women can now occupy it. The people of the Bottom begin seeing new hope.

Years after Sula dies, in a flash of insight that puts everything in perspective, Nel sees that her friendship with Sula transcends everything. As the books ends, Nel hears Sula’s voice blowing through the treetops near the old cemetery and she realizes that all the years she thought she was missing her husband; she was actually missing her friend.
3.2. Analysis of *Sula*

3.2.1. Feminist Analysis according to Race, Gender, Class and different oppositions

While *The Bluest Eye* indirectly explores the black feminine difference from the Black Aesthetic, this difference occupies the centre of Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973). *Sula* embodies a radically new black femininity that upsets all the oppositions (between past and present, individual and community, absence and presence) that structure Black Aesthetic discourse. Jerry Bryant (1974) in his review, *The Nation*, wrote that in *Sula*, Morrison attempts to combine the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and Women's Liberation. Rather than merely combining, *Sula* plays feminism and nationalism against each others staging the encounter of these two ideologies as a dynamic contradiction. In a difficult double move, the novel assumes a feminist perspective to clarify the limits of nationalist ideology, but withdraws from a full development of its own feminist implications. The ideological ambivalence thus produced should discourage any programmatic political reading; however, *Sula* is often read as a feminist novel. Barbara Jean Vargas-Coley (1981), for example, argues that *Sula* advances the feminist argument that women are victimized in the roles society allows
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them. Vargas-Coley is right in that, unlike *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* emphasizes the sexual rather than the racial constraints on black women. Several other elements of the novel seem to invite a feminist reading, such as its depiction of black men and its critique of the institutions of heterosexuality and reproduction. However, a closer consideration of these elements reveals the counter pressure exerted by Black Nationalist ideology on a feminist articulation of black femininity.

Predictably, Black Nationalist critics denounced the feminist elements of *Sula*, focusing their critique on the novel's extremely unflattering portrayal of black men. Addison Gayle (1979) argued that the novel's feminist intentions necessarily fail because you can't very well do a hatchet job on Black men without also doing a hatchet job on Black women. Therefore, if you read *Sula* ..., the images of both the men and the women are equally nauseating.

Other critics, while not sharing Gayle's strongly censorious tone, emphasized that the novel's feminist focus involves a severe symbolic mutilation of the Black male psyche and is psychologically devastating for the collective male ego. It is true that, with the exception of Ajax, all the black male characters in *Sula* lit the type that the Black Aestheticians wished to ban from black literature. The very names of characters like Chicken Little, Boy Boy, and the dews evoke an image of black men
as frozen in a state of perpetual, irresponsible childhood. The stunted physical growth of the deweys, who remain boys forever, is paralleled by Plum's psychological refusal of adulthood. The emasculation of black male charters in the novel seems to be counterbalanced by the strength of some of the novel’s black women characters, such as Eva and Sula. Asked by Robert Steptoe to respond to the feeling in certain literary circles that black women should not be portrayed as emasculators, Toni Morrison remarked that everybody knows, deep down, that Black men were emasculated by white men, period. And that Black women didn't take any part in that. The presentation of Jude's character in *Sula* clearly pinpoints racial oppression rather than black female dominance as the cause of black male emasculation. Jude's failure to attain adult masculinity derives from his forced employment as a waiter, his inability to find any other meaningful work. As with Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, Jude's humiliation in the white man's world directly colours his perception of black women. Jude's position as head of the household compensates for his humiliation in the workplace; only by viewing his wife, as the hem of his garment is Jude able to reclaim some posture of adulthood.

However, unlike the presentation of Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, Jude's status as a victim of racism does not extenuate his responsibility for his
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treatment of women in any way. His narrative of himself as a pathetic victim of racism is mocked by the narrator as a whiny tale that peaked somewhere between anger and a lapping desire for comfort. Sula exposes Jude's complicity in his victimization, and offers a startling perspective on the black man as the envy of the world, which defamiliarizes the contemporary nationalist discourse on the black man initiated by the Moynihan Report. This discourse, constructing the black man as the number one object of racism, assigned the black woman the subsidiary role of healing the black man's damaged masculinity. Unlike Nel, who willingly fulfils this prescribed feminine function Sula refuses to offer milkwarm commiseration for the woes of the black man. Rejecting the image of the black man as the prime victim of racism and its concomitant image of the black woman as nurturer, Sula brackets the issue of racism and opens the space for a new articulation of black masculinity and femininity. Sula's deliberate misreading of Jude's narrative is a double-edged gesture: her refusal to be the hem of the black man's garment displaces the masculinity emphasis of Black Nationalist discourse, but her negation of Jude's victim identity accords with the Black Nationalist goal of fashioning a new black identity free of the oppressive past. In this instance, the novel first employs a black feminist perspective to undo one element of Black Nationalist ideology (its masculine emphasis), and then
aligns this feminist critique with another element of Black Nationalist ideology (its denial of the black victim type and its affirmation of a new black subject). This double move exposes the contradictory construction of the black male in Black Nationalist discourse, as both the helpless victim of racism and the new revolutionary subject.

The novel's treatment of black male-female relationships exhibits a similar uneasy adjustment to the terms of Black Nationalist discourse. All the major black male-female unions in Sula end with male desertion, and with a bleak vision of heterosexual femininity as characterized by loss and absence. For example, during his brief marriage with Eva, Boy Boy is rarely home, and when he ultimately abandons Eva, her attempt to rebuild her life without him mysteriously involves a lost leg. This pattern of desertion and loss is repeated in the narratives of Nel and Sula. Jude leaves Nell with no thighs and no heart, and Ajax leaves Sula with anything but his stunning absence. Heterosexuality in the novel is insistently associated not just with loss, but with death. Reflecting upon lives of the women in her community, Sula observes that those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins. Sula’s own heterosexual experiences cause her to weep for the deaths of the littlest things. The description of Nell and Sula’s adolescent erotic play
powerfully establishes the symbolic connection between the vagina and the grave, between heterosexuality and defilement.

Nel and Sula's union constitutes the novel's strongest challenge to Black Aesthetic discourse. As we have already seen, one of the functions of black women writers, as prescribed by the Black Aesthetic, was to depict black male-female relationships as necessary, complementary unions. *Sula* often summons the heterosexual cliche of men and women as the two halves of each other's equations. Sula's craving for the other half of her equation is occasionally placed in a heterosexual context, as, for example, when she describes herself through the traditional metaphor of the feminine as an empty space filled by a man. Jude filled this space up. More frequently, it is a woman, Nel, who constitutes the other half of Sula’s equation. For Sula, Nel is the closest thing to both and other and a self. The Nel-Sula union significantly but not entirely displaces the heterosexual formula of a man and a woman forming a complete person.

Nel and Sula's first meeting is structured like a typical romantic, heterosexual encounter. The very fact that their fantasies are described as ‘Technicolor visions’ indicates their conventional nature. Nel imagines herself in a fairy-tale heroine's posture of waiting passively for a prince. Sula, as the active prince galloping on a horse, completes the heterosexual union of the active and the passive, the masculine and the
feminine principles. This romantic fantasy is, however, disrupted by the simple fact that it is a female, Sula, who occupies the masculine place. Even more significantly, the heterosexual union of prince and princes yields primacy to the union of two female friends who can share the delight of the same dream. This scene certainly supports Barbara Smith's (1982) observation that, set within a heterosexual frame, Nel and Sula's erotic fantasies betray their hidden desire for a famine rather than a masculine lover.

In the first part of the novel, Nel and Sula’s complementary union is explicitly distinguished from the oneness of the heterosexual couple, Nel and Jude. Whereas Sula helps Nell to define herself and to see old things with new eyes, Jude likes to see himself taking shape in her eyes. While the Nel-Sula union preserves the difference of each, in the Nel-Jude union, both of them together would make one Jude. The friendship of Nel and Sula is ruptured in the second part of the novel, which deals predominantly with the heterosexual conflicts between Nel and Jude, Sula and Ajax. Sula's affair with Ajax provides the most striking instance of the novel’s capitulation to heterosexual conventions. With Ajax, Sula becomes like all of her sisters before her and lapses into the expected role of the black woman as nurturer when she asks Ajax to lean on her. The Ajax incident simply cannot be made to cohere with the presentation of
Sula's character in the rest of the novel. Her affair with Ajax drastically reduces Sula's feminist difference from the heterosexual women of her community. Precisely because it lacks any plot preparation or psychological plausibility, the Ajax episode appears to be a compromise gesture that gives heterosexuality its due. The whole sequence of events from Sula's first meeting with Ajax to her death seems to square her down to size, to render her transgress character readable according to an acceptable fictional code of feminine characterization. The uncomfortable nature of this compromise is evident in the incoherent resolution of the Ajax incident. In an abruptly linked causal chain, Ajax's desertion of Sula leads to her awareness that there are no more new experiences in store for her, which leads to her death. Maureen Reddy (1988) remarks that Sula's death, of a mysterious wasting disease, is reminiscent of the deaths with which unconventional nineteenth-century fictional heroines were punished. While evoking this conventional ending, however, the novel plays a significant variation on it. Sula does not feel the shame and contrition of her literary predecessors; she dies proudly, convinced that it is she rather than the conventional women of her community who is really good. In her conversation with Nel just before she dies, Sula herself points out the difference between the ending of her own unusual plot and the endings of most conventional black
women's plots. She says she knows what every Black woman in this country is doing. They are dying. Just like her. However, the difference is, they are dying like a stump. But, she is going down like one of those redwoods.

Readings of *Sula* as a feminist, novel emphasise that Sula's characterization seems sharply discontinuous from earlier representations of the black woman in fiction. Most of these readings are silent on the Ajax incident, for it seems to detract from the novel's presentation of Sula as the embodiment of a radically new black femininity. That most readers are baffled by Sula's inconsistency is apparent from the strenuous critical attempts to translate her character into a familiar ideological form, whether feminist or nationalist. For example, Roseann Bell (1976) in her review of *Sula* turns to nationalist ideology to clarify the radical newness of Sula's characterization. It should not be surprising that *Sula* is regarded as an important statement on contemporary discussions on the Black Aesthetic, for Sula's character suggests a positive way of freeing our fettered minds from the oppressive tentacles of a past which ... prevents us from progressing and projecting a new vision. Bell is partially right, in that the newness of Sula's character cannot be fully appreciated without reference to Black Aesthetic theories of the radical black subject. However, the contradictory newness of Sula is not fully readable within
an exclusively nationalist or feminist ideological frame; instead it provides yet another example of the novel's selective and critical appropriation of both ideologies.

As Bell's comment indicates, Sula does share one central emphasis of Black Nationalist discourse: its affirmation of the newness of the ideal black subject. As we have already seen, Sula rejects the old image of blacks as victims and reaches for an identity free of the past of racial oppression. In fact, the temporal opposition of Black Nationalist discourse is enacted in the novel's opposition of Sula and the black community. While Sula perceives the present moment as a possibility, the black community of the Bottom clings to an isolate, static vision of the past. In a contemporary review of *Sula*, Sara Blackburn (1973) observed that the setting of the novel seems somehow frozen, stylized and refuses to invade our present. The novel’s opening chapter, in particular, conveys this frozen impression by situating the Bottom in a remote, inaccessible past: In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood. This impression of temporal distance is strengthened by the nigger joke that traces the origin of the Bottom all the way back to slavery. Encapsulating the folk philosophy of the Bottom community, the nigger joke perpetuates the
history of racial exploitation, casting the white slave master as an omnipotent manipulator and blacks as his innocent dupes. The black community in *Sula* is deeply invested in this image of themselves, for the role of the victim offers them a way of safe resignation. Preserving their victim status protects them from the rigours of creating a new identity free of their oppressive past. The black community’s tenacious attachment to a static past is perfectly expressed in Nel’s statement. She says Hell is change.

Exactly contrary to her community’s philosophy is Sula's conviction that the real hell of Hell is that it is forever. Sula's conception of time as a medium of ceaseless change gives rise to her sense of self as sheer risk and imaginative possibility; Sula dares ‘the free fall’, creates herself anew every moment. The temporal continuity valued by her community appears, through Sula's eyes, to be nothing but repetitive sameness. Sula's entire life challenges this sense of sameness; even her death seems to result from her awareness that she has exhausted all new possibilities. Shadrack, mistaking Sula for a typical member of her community, offers her the promising word “always” to convince her, assure her, of permanency, but the only ‘always’ that Sula ultimately accepts is the finality of death.
The opposition between Sula and the black folk community of the Bottom, however, cannot be read in straightforward Black Aesthetic terms as an opposition between a new present and an oppressive past. While privileging newness and change, Sula embodies, specifically feminine newness that cannot be easily assimilated into Black Aesthetic ideology. Sula rejects the reproductive function so valued by her community. When Eva advises her to become a mother, Sula replies, ‘I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself’. These emphases on feminine self-creation at the expense of nurturance of children are crucial to a correct understanding of Sula's radical newness. In *Sula*, an important element of Black Nationalist discourse - its natural, reproductive definition of black femininity - is displaced from the new Sula to the black community, which otherwise represents an ideology tied to the oppressive pass and resistant to change. This incongruous yoking of the old and the new, of elements both essential and inimical to Black Nationalist ideology, exposes the limits of the newness valorised by this ideology. Employing a black feminist perspective on reproduction, the novel makes visible the point at which the ‘new’ Black Nationalist discourse regresses into the past.

Sula’s refusal of reproduction is her greatest point of difference from her community; it is what renders her evil and unnatural to the people of
the Bottom. Sula’s return to the Bottom is heralded by an unnatural plague of robins, and her death is followed by an untimely frost in October and a false spring in January. These natural disorders symbolically parallel the disorder that Sula's unnatural refusal to be a mother unleashes on her community. Barbara Christian (1985) persuasively argues that the problem of physical survival faced by the novel's black community determines their definition of women as mothers, as guarantors of temporal and natural continuity. On the barren topsoil that the white slave master gives his slave, and where the Bottom is established, the black community daily confronts the malevolence of the natural elements. Their struggle for survival against natural disaster and their consequent, obsessive fear of death, explain the community's perception of Sula as an unnatural witch. Sula’s subversion of motherhood and her commitments to temporal discontinuity cause the black community to construct her as a scapegoat and to defend with renewed vigour their conception of motherhood as the primary feminine function.

The novel's critique of reproductive ideology is accomplished not only through Sula's character, but also through several portraits of black women who live by their community's valuation of reproduction as the sole outlet for feminine creativity. Helene Wright, whose daughter, Nel,
is her sole purpose for living, supervises Nel’s upbringing so closely that she drives her daughter’s imagination underground. Her obsessive preoccupation with her children twists her maternal love into something so thick and monstrous she was afraid to show it lest it break loose and smother them with its heavy paw. Eva Peace, in the early part of the novel, is the stereotypical strong black mother whose life is entirely dictated by her concern for her children's survival. When Eva finds that her excessive maternal love has led her to a cold, dark, stinking outhouse using her last piece of food to relieve her son's constipation, she abandons the role of mother altogether, leaves her children with a neighbour and goes away to find a better life for herself. Upon her return, Eva maintains a careful distance from her children, and burns her son because he expects her to nurture him again. That Eva chooses to kill her son rather than play mother all her life powerfully dramatizes the unhealthy consequences of the Bottom community's prescription that black women centre their lives around reproduction.

However, if the novel analyzes the black community’s commitment to a reproductive definition of femininity, it does not unreservedly endorse Sula's absolute rejection of motherhood. To an extent, Sula's refusal to be a mother is a liberating feminist gesture that initiates a new exploration of black femininity outside reproductive parameters. But,
Sula's radical redefinition of herself also depends on her denial of her mother. It is her accidental discovery of the failure of the maternal bond (Hannah's remark that she does not like Sula) that motivates Sula's invention of herself. While conceiving reproduction as the black woman's primary revolutionary contribution, Black Nationalist discourse constructed the mother as the undisputed enemy of all revolutionary ideas. Sula's rejection of reproduction is problematic precisely because it repeats the Black Nationalist gesture of constructing a new and free identity in explicit opposition to the mother. The novel's treatment of reproduction thus produces a contradictory interlocking of black feminist and nationalist ideologies. Sula's feminist critique of the institution of motherhood exposes the limits of black nationalist 'newness'; this feminist critique is then itself questioned because, when taken to its logical conclusion, it demands a denial of the mother that disturbingly recalls Black Nationalist discourse. Black Nationalism and feminism are both distinguished from and folded back into each other, in a difficult dialectic that clarifies the troubling implications of both ideologies.

In a similar set of double moves, the novel questions both the black community's affirmation of reproduction as a means of ensuring temporal continuity, and the temporal discontinuity that results from Sula's rejection of reproduction. Sula's new identity entails a complete disregard
for her ancestors, as, for example, when she enjoys watching her mother burn or when she shocks the sentiments of her community by sending her grandmother away to an old people's home. In her essay ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', Toni Morrison (1984) writes:

If we do not keep in touch with the ancestor, we are, in fact, lost.

…When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers; to show that nice things do not happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connections. (P.344)

Morrison's remarks may be almost exactly applied to Sula, whose total self-reliance is suicidal because it lacks a historical connection with the ancestor. With no grounding roots in the past, Sula’s radical difference proves to be meaningless and is ultimately reduced to the very sameness she tries to challenge. Sula’s newness so sharply departs from the past that it cannot revitalize her community's old ways; the encounter between the new (Sula) and the old (the community), far from producing a dynamic exchange, remains locked in a state of absolute contradiction. We are told that the black community's exposure to Sula changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways, but this change paradoxically works against change, only confirming the black community's adherence to their old, conservative ways.
The sterile confrontation between Sula and her community obliquely discloses the inadequacy of the nationalist conception of the radically new black subject. Showing that such a subject cannot be politically effective, the novel questions the absolute dichotomy between the oppressive past and the revolutionary future in black nationalist discourse. *Sula* elaborates but fails to choose between two antithetical views of historical change: the black community's passive fatalism and the black nationalists' belief in sudden, stark historical change. The narrator mocks the black community's hope that their condition will change on its own, a hope that keeps them mired in their oppression. The first time that the entire Bottom community joins Shadrack’s Suicide Day procession, they are driven by the same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers; ... kept them convinced that some magic government was going to lift them up. However, if this passive hope is suicidal, so is the black community's single act of rebellion against their oppression: their expression of anger at their exclusion from productive labour (the construction of the tunnel) results in collective suicide. The construction of the River Road in 1927 holds out the false promise of black employment, but is eventually built entirely by white labour. The same pattern is exactly repeated in 1937 with the construction of the tunnel. This presentation of history as circular repetition compels a
critical reconsideration of the Black Nationalist vision of historical change as a clean, decisive break from the past cycle.

The novel directly engages the Black Nationalist conception of the 1960s as a period of unprecedented advancement for black Americans. The chapter ‘1965’ opens with the lines, ‘Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed’. The narrator concedes that some progress has taken place: more black Americans are integrated into white society and hold better jobs. This appearance of change is, however, thrown into doubt by the contradictory statement, ‘The young people had a look about them that everybody said was new but which reminded Nel of the deweys’. This puzzling comparison of the new young people of the 1960s with the deweys is not developed or explained. The only possible overlap between the two is that they both embody a plural name. Perhaps it would be overworking this brief, incidental comparison to suggest that the new people of the 1960s share the deweys' commitment to a plural, collective identity that erases all singularities and differences. The mention of the deweys in the context of the 1960s is even more startling because the deweys' stunted growth is utterly incongruous with the black nationalists' conception of the 1960s as a period of remarkable progress for blacks.
We must, of course, remember that the connection between the deweys and the new people of the 1960s is drawn by Nel, and we know that Nel is unlikely to appreciate even real changes, given her conviction that ‘Hell is change’. Although the narrator's stance cannot be exactly identified with Nel's, the narrator unmistakably shares Nel’s scepticism and regret about some of the changes that occurred in the 1960s.

By Black Aesthetic standards, the novel's inability to represent a new, revolutionary black community would certainly constitute an imaginative and political failure. The black community presented in the novel is moored to the oppressive past and is, therefore, problematic from a Black Aesthetic standpoint. When we are first introduced to the Bottom neighbourhood, in the beginning of the novel, it has already become a thing of the past. The narrator's description of the Time and a Half Pool Hall, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, Reba's Grill, and singing and dancing in the streets, vividly conveys the sense of a real place that Nel finds so lacking in the Bottom.

Racial and economic oppression appear to be necessary conditions for the existence of a distinctive black culture. In the chapter ‘1965’, the communal practices that characterised the earlier black neighbourhood have disappeared as a result of the increasing economic integration of blacks into the white US economic system. However, the novel does not
uncritically affirm this kind of community contingent upon oppression segregation. If the forced exclusion of blacks from labour and production generates a distinctive folk culture, it also precipitates their collective suicide at the end of the novel.

Moreover, the folk culture of the Bottom, like the folk culture presented in *The Bluest Eye*, keeps the black community trapped in its oppressed condition. The nigger joke, a folk survival mechanism, helps the community tolerate their difficult predicament but it does not offer any means of resistance or transformation. That the folk culture of the Bottom is geared toward survival rather than change is also apparent in the community's perception of evil as an uncontrollable natural phenomenon that must be allowed to run its course. This black folk philosophy, explicitly justified by the narrator as a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones, can be read positively, either as resilience, or negatively, as slackness. The novel characteristically balances both interpretations in tension, and disallows our choosing between them. The black community's philosophy of evil results in an admirable acceptance of difference, evident in their treatment of Sula: they regard Sula's difference as evil, as a natural aberration, but they allow her to survive. The naturalistic philosophy of the Bottom folk, however, fails to discriminate between different kinds of evil, placing
racial oppression in the same class of phenomena as floods and disease. They greet all evil days - whether caused by Sula, a natural disaster, or political factors - with an acceptance bordering on welcome. Such a world view inevitably keeps the community mired in its oppressive situation and obstructs the development of a new political creed directed at change and resistance.

If the black folk community of the Bottom is both celebrated and criticized, so is the radical, new identity of Sula. Kimberley Benston (1984) writes that the new black subject of the 1960s, based as it is on absolute temporal discontinuity, necessarily defaces communal reality. Sula's character clearly demonstrates that a wholesale rejection of the past can only produce a singular individual alienated from the community. Throughout the novel, Sula verbally constructs and satirizes several collective things, such as her discourses on black men, on the black community of the Bottom, and on conventional black women. Sula's vision of her community as 'a drawn-out disease is certainly liberating, in that it allows her to explore her own self outside all the constraining racial and sexual conditions that determine her community's construction of identity. However, Sula's denial of her community is countered by the novel's structure and mode of narration, which, beginning and ending with the Bottom community and intertwining the
stories of Shadrack, Nel, and the Peace family, forces us to read Sula's story as part of the story of an entire community. Even if Sula sees herself as a distinctive individual pitted against her community, the reader is compelled to read her story. Sula's singular conception of herself also has been thematically criticized for its lack of social grounding.

The opposition between Sula and her community thus plays havoc with the Black Nationalist articulation of the opposed terms of individual and community, past and present. In Black Nationalist discourse, the individual and the past are absolutely negated, while the community and the present are absolutely affirmed. In *Sula*, these oppositions refuse to remain in the places that black nationalist discourse allots them: the undesirable term 'past' is aligned with the valued term 'community', and the temporal discontinuity celebrated in lack nationalist discourse is shown to produce the singular individuality decried by black nationalists.

The characterization of Sula in opposition to her community also topples the one remaining opposition, between absence and presence that structures Black Aesthetic discourse. While the black nationalists celebrated the new black subject as presence, *Sula* figures the new black subject as absence, and attaches the value of presence to the static world view of the novel's black community. The folk rituals of the Bottom are
calculated to assuage the community's fear of process. An example of this is provided in Chicken Little's funeral, which is the community's resounding statement against the stupidity of loss. As Keith Byerman (1985) expresses it, the funeral transforms an absence into a presence by asserting the permanence of communal structures and rituals. This need for public rituals that confirm temporal and communal stability explains the black community's easy acceptance of National Suicide Day, a ritual that meets the community's need to control their fear of death.

While it clearly derails a linear movement of time, the novel does not unreservedly endorse a cyclic temporal vision. If the oppressed condition of the Bottom community originates with the linear hierarchy of tops and bottoms, the circular repetition of history keeps them trapped in this condition. One example already cited is the River Road that raises and defeats hopes of black employment in 1927, followed by an exactly repetitive pattern in 1937, with the construction of the river tunnel. To give another example, the nigger joke at the beginning of the novel comes full circle by the end: the topsoil of the Bottom actually becomes more valuable than valley land, in an ironic fulfilment of the slave master’s false promise. But this circular reversion of value works against the black community, for the value of Bottom land begins to increase just as the black residents of the Bottom begin to move down to the valley.
This circular repetition of history, which reinforces the economic and racial exploitation of the black community, is not, however identical to the circular movement of the novel’s structure. Toni Morrison has suggestively characterized the structure of *Sula* as more spiral than circular. As opposed to the tightly closed circles that structure *The Bluest Eye*, the circular movement of *Sula* is accumulative rather than exactly repetitive. The beginning and closing points of the novel's spiral do not quite overlap, thus leaving open the possibility of transformation. The novel at first offers an incomplete rendering of an event, withholding its meaning from the reader. Later chapters curve back to the earlier event, filling out its implications. The reader is usually refused interpretive access to the novel's major events the first time they are narrated. For example, Eva's burning of Plum is incomprehensible when it is first presented, in ‘1921'. We discover Eva's motivation two years later, in the chapter ‘1923’. Similarly, Sula's slashing her fingertip puzzles the reader in ‘1922’, and is partially explained in ‘1937’. This circular movement, spiralling back to transform past incidents and to add new layers of meaning, resolves, at the level of narrative structure, the novel's thematic opposition between past and present.

The collective construction of meaning elicited by *Sula*'s spiral structure is clearly contrasted with the authoritative transmission of
meaning that the novel attributes to white American culture. The nigger joke illustrates the slave owner’s monopoly on meaning; the white master possesses the sole right to assign values in a dualistic, hierarchical scheme that bolsters his own politically powerful position. Perhaps less obviously, *Sula* suggests that the structural dualities of Black Nationalist discourse endorse a similar hierarchical construction of values. That the oppositions of Black Nationalist ideology are fundamentally top/bottom opposition is clear in that each privileged term derives its value from an absolute negation of its other. *Sula* undermines this hierarchical binary structuring by refusing to valorise any one term of an opposition at the cost of de-valuing its opposed other. Individuality and community, past and present, absence and presence: all these terms are both preserved and cancelled in *Sula*.

The gender construction of Black Nationalist discourse retains intact the white middle-class definitions of masculinity and femininity. The feminine pair of Nel and Sula unbalances, even as it cannot fully dismantle, the hierarchical gender opposition of Black Nationalist as well as white US middle-class ideology.
3.2.2. Analysis of Black Female Characters in the Novel

The foundation of Sula’s character is, as Morrison writes, a lack of foundation, a structurelessness that affects every thought every section and every interaction that Sula has. Formed of a creative formlessness, Sula seeks only her own counsel, leaving her indifferent to or uninterested in any kind of quotidian morality. She is in the truest sense of the world, selfish. Since she has no ambition, she does not project herself, or her action, into the future, which suggests that she has no sense of, or sensitivity to, cause and effect. Since she does not place the events of her life into a larger context, or even consider them in relation to one another each experience stands alone. Indeed, to “verify herself” would be to sum up, to suggest that there is an ego that anchors or fixes her, she has no such thing.

Faced with such a protagonist, many are discomfited. It is not easy to identify with Sula, and when, in the second half of the novel, she sleeps with her best friend’s husband, some readers might wash their hands of her altogether. Inevitably, this particular, climactic incident generates form readers the morally driven query: “How could she do that to her best friend?” The question is instructive for a few reasons. First, it reveals how difficult it is to accept Sula as Sula’s protagonist. One assumes that she is the focus because of the book’s title, but most readers
find it easier or as easy to identify with Nel—the best friend, the compassionate woman, the good girl. Certainly, Nel fills as much textual space as Sula, if not more. Second, if one accepts that the book is about Sula, one also assumes that Sula will be either “good” in a traditional sense or will at the very least, grow, change, and gain self-knowledge as the novels progress. This transformation does not happen. Instead, Sula, is developmentally complete by the middle of the novel; she does not question herself and she has no revelations or regrets, yet she manages to propel the story forward by the sheer unpredictability of her action. On the one hand, these attributes make Sula heroic. She contextualizes herself by herself; her disinterest in children, a spouse, a job, and a home is, ultimately, a gesture toward creative agency and authority that the other characters in the novel do not make. On the other hand, Sula’s individuality, as Morrison conceives it, cannot help but collide with other characters and with the practicalities of the narrative itself. The “how could she do that to her best friend” question, then, is important because it is the wrong question, wrong because it assumes a moral universe in which Sula does not trade. A better question or questions would be: Is it possible to contain in language a character who is conceived as “uncontainable”? If so, how does the writer construct a
character and customs around her? Can such a protagonist sustain a novel?

These questions cannot be answered via a standard feminist or race reading of Sula. Although members of the Bottom community chastise Sula for failing to live up to their notions of womanhood and blackness, Sula does not see herself in conjunction with any of their ideals. This distinction is important. Since neither of these readings can completely contain or account for Sula’s uniqueness, and since most critiques of the novel fall into one of these two categories, *Sula* can benefit from being viewed through different sets of lenses. It consists of some formal including characterization and narrative structure, and some extra – textual including Morrison’s own thoughts on Sula as expressed in articles and interviews after the novel was published. In keeping with the tenor of her protagonist, Morrison’s narrative tactics in Sula tend toward the abstract and unobtrusive; Morrison’s draws Sula’s character largely by suggestion, indirection, and absence. To set up the story, Morrison opens the text with the kind of prelude, pointing out the important characters and preparing readers for the events to follow. In these four pages, Morrison establishes a tone that encourage the reader to view Sula as a parable; the reader senses that there is moral and / or spiritual lesson to be learned from Sula's fundamental abstraction from people and place.
and that this lesson may be atypical. Outfitting Sula with a birthmark allows Morrison to strengthen Sula's connection to the natural world and lends her character a certain biblical resonance, complicating the dialogue between good and evil that the text teases out. Morrison also employs two characters as foils, casting Sula in brash relief against Shadrack and Nel, on the one hand, and the rest of the Bottom community, on the other. And last, Morrison invokes the supernatural, exposing, in the second half of the novel, the irrational influence Sula claims over her community and the formal limitations that an otherwise realistic narrative imposes upon Sula’s character. Nel emerges as the other key player in this scenario, assuming narrative responsibility where Sula shuns it. Sula's resistance to the notion of progress complicates her role as protagonist and compels Morrison to relieve her of her formal duties.

Shadrack and Sula have one significant interaction. Sula visits his house on the day that Chicken Little dies and, in her haste to depart, leaves behind the purple and white belt to her dress. Shadrack saves the belt. Here, Morrison verifies the implicit, existential bond between the two characters and, in their brief interaction, makes their differences and the effect they each have upon the Bottom more readily apparent.
Both Shadrack and Sula are outcasts. Both witness death first-hand: Shadrack in the war and Sula at home. Moreover, perhaps because of their experiences, both face their own mortality and the precarious constriction of the self in direct, disturbing ways. As a child, Sula lead to confront fear head-on. She cuts off her fingertip in front of a group of boys who are terrorizing Nel to show them that if she could do such a thing to herself, she could easily do something equally terrifying to them. By adulthood, fear is effectively exorcised from her life. Her ten-year absence from the Bottom fine-tunes an already-thriving existential wanderlust, ultimately allowing her to sustain self-exploration while staying physically put. By her late twenties, Sula no longer needs physical upheaval to prompt internal quest. Conversely, Shadrack tries to keep his thoughts at bay, and acting out his fears eases his mind. The best he can do is control fear by allotting it a certain time and place and, in that way, imposing order on the disorderliness of existence. Morrison notes that Sula’s (feminine) solubility and Shadrack’s (male) fixative are two extreme ways of dealing with displacement—a prevalent theme in the narrative of black people. Shadrack clings and Sula releases, performing for the townspeople two familiar (displacement) narratives: the lunatic, and the evil/sensual woman.
Perhaps because of his genders, his war history, and his solitary ways, Shadrack is incorporated into the Bottom routine. Cedric Gael Bryant (1990) notes that since Shadrack's madness involves only a different way of structuring the community's sense of time and ritual, rather than an actual disintegration of order, he is assimilated more easily into the community's life than is Sula, who, in contrast, challenges the community's collective identity. Bryant goes on to argue that Shadrack is also less threatening than Sula because eventually his madness—his wild exhortation that the community literally act out its most anarchistic, self-destructive fantasies every January third—while at first frightening ceases to be dangerous once he has been assigned a place in the Community’s life. Shadrack's assiduous isolation serves as a silencing, protective shield around his person, while Sula's independence, because it manifests itself randomly and sporadically, lays her open to the Bottom's scrutiny. By analysing Shadrack's character, we conclude that Sula is neither mad nor social.

Sula fails to inhabit the social place that has been forged for her, and she bears the stamp of her difference in the form of a birthmark over her eye. The rose mark on Sula’s eye has many rich associations, and, certainly, Sula's social prickliness and sensual vibe are captured in this symbol. Yet the birthmark is also interpreted in Sula as a copperhead, a
tadpole, a scary black thing, and the ashes of Sula's mother, whom Sula watches burn to death in the backyard. This physical inscription identifies Sula as touched by something out-of-the-ordinary, perhaps menacing, perhaps powerful. A natural, biological stamp, the mark appears over her eye, signifying a break in the sequence of her face, which alters the nature of her eye. Mae G. Henderson (1989) argues that Sula's is "a marked nativity- a biological rather than cultural inscription, appropriate in this instance because it functions to mark her as a 'naturally' inferior female within the black community". Henderson's reading stumbles over the fact that, while there are many women in the novel, only Sula is marked. Clearly, then, Sula's birthmark distinguishes beyond gender and beyond a simple cultural inscription. Unlike clothing, tattooing, or other, more contrived, means of self-presentation, Sula’s permanent, "natural" adornment comes unencumbered by invention or economic signification. It eroticizes her, setting her apart from the rest of the community.

Like Shadrack's name, Sula's birthmark has biblical resonance. Carolyn Jones (1993) argues that the birthmark functions like the mark of Cain, publicly setting Sula apart from the community's actions and ideals. Jones cites the Genesis Rabbah, which says that God "beat Cain’s face with hail, which blackened like coal, and thus he remained with a
black face”. Certainly, Sula shares with Cain social isolation, ostracism, and a profound absence of guilt. For example, when Nel visits Sula on her deathbed and asks Sula why she slept with her husband, Jude (Judas, the traitor), Sula says, “Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it”. This is Sula's spin on "I am not my brother's keeper.” But Jones's reading is also worth expanding to include consideration of Cain's vagrancy. Cain is subsequently cast out of his community, his orders to roam the earth a physical/spiritual sentence that effectively banishes him from home. A vagabond, he is "marked" so that his community will enforce the segregation that the Lord decreed (not unlike Hester Prynne and her scarlet "A"). Like Cain, Sula is a kind of vagabond, leaving the Bottom for a full decade to wander through the country before returning home as an adult. Even in the Bottom, Sula is best classified as a drifter; she lives day to day, resisting employment, companionship, even assistance, until she has no one and nothing left. (Indeed, Shadrack and Sula, although both are housed, are the town vagrants, culturally and communally dispossessed-Sula by choice, and Shadrack by default.) For Sula, then, her birthmark) could denote a double mark against her (even as a young girl she equates whiteness and in maleness with freedom and triumph), yet she bears it as a mark of liberation. The difference between Cain and
Sula is that Sula segregates herself from the laws of her community which, in turn, gives her the chance to write her own life: God’s “sentence” becomes self-authorship.

Nel is Sula's other foil in the novel, and her task is far greater than Shadrack's. As Sula's childhood confidante, Nel functions much like a sister, someone whose presence Sula never fundamentally questions. Some critics go further, arguing, as Barbara Smith (1982) does, that Sula can be read as a lesbian text. She mentioned that *Sula* works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison’s consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institution of male-female relationships, marriage and the family. Insofar as Sula is about communication between characters, Smith's reading is apt. Much of the inventiveness of the novel stems from the ultimate subordinate of heterosexual romance. In addition, the only real epiphany in Sula belongs to Nel and occurs in relation to her estranged love for Sula. Yet some argue against Smith’s analysis. For example, Alisha R. Coleman (1993) maintains that Smith has misread the emotional intimacy drawn between these two female characters. Coleman's psychoanalytic reading asserts that the friendship between Sula and Nel makes Sula a feminist novel in which the two women
complement or complete one another, generating two halves of a personality that combine to form a whole psyche.

Interestingly, both of these readings are bolstered by the notion that the solitary Sula is somehow incomplete; each interpretation assumes a potential dyad with Nel, when it is precisely Sula's studied belief in her own completeness-as-one that distinguishes her. Morrison herself has noted that each character lacks what the other has.

There is no question that Sula and Nel complement each other, yet their characters are fundamentally, finally discrete. Sula dies without ever approaching the kind of intimacy of which Nel is capable and, although Nel does eventually gain insight into Sula’s world, it is achieved only decades after Sula's death. Furthermore, Morrison has stated that, in *Sula*, she was interested in doing a very old, worn-out idea, which was to do something with good and evil, but putting it in different terms. In traditional terms, of course, Sula is evil and Nel is good. Conversely, Nel becomes for readers just what she becomes for the Bottom—a reliable, likable, accessible woman. In this way, Nel is the reader's segue to Sula, her importance undeniable and two-fold: she helps draw out the peculiarities of Sula's actions and temperament, and she carries the novel in a way that Sula (because of her said actions and
temperament) cannot. Ultimately, the real reciprocity between Sula and Nel is the shared responsibility of serving as protagonist.

Despite dramatic differences in upbringing, there are similarities that draw Sula and Nel together. Rather than complete one another, as Alisha R. Coleman (1993) argues, the girls feed one another, peer parenting in the absence of balanced parenting and local role models. Up until Nel’s marriage to Jude—a man who believed that, with Nel, the two of them together would make one Jude—Sula and Nel are kindred spirits. It is upon Sula’s return to the Bottom after her ten-year absence that the differences between Sula and Nel are tested and the extent of Sula’s otherness made manifest.

As an adult, married with three children, Nel is utterly contained by the Bottom’s sensibility. Morrison reflects that Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not. She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all or ignores them. Bryant (1990) puts it another way and sates that Nel lays claim to the pathetically small domain of the Bottom and her own house. In contrast, Sula’s concern is with dominion—that is, sovereign authority over the self, which in effect, makes the world her domain. Nel’s knowledge and experience is local, parochial, with no frame of reference outside her hometown. Sula’s is another matter.
Sula is an outcast from the start. When she comes back, she is armed with a college education and an edgy cynicism. Her status as a woman without a man and a woman without children simply does not translate into a life that the Bottom understands. Sula’s grandmother, Eva, speaks for the whole community when she tells her granddaughter to have some babies, that it will settle her. When Sula responds defensively, she says: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

Eva, grandmother of Sula and mother of three children Pearl, Plum, and Hannah (Sula's mother) who outlives all her children although she sacrificed so much for their lives. When Nel visits Eva in the old folks' home, Eva is constantly making the motions of ironing pleats. She is still making Hestian order; but the image of ironing is also probably an allusion to Tillie Olsen's story, “I stand hers Ironing," in which a poverty stricken mother stands and irons while pondering over her lost child, her eldest daughter who has such artistic potential. The passion for physical and household order, that contains and mutes the tragedies of life, is still there in Eva but now in a mad form. She had been the principle of household management, an unrecognized logos in itself.

Eva becomes the sibyl that gives Nel the spiritual and psychological truth that Sula and Nel were and are one. Just as Pilate's dead father speaks to her in Song of Solomon, so does Plum now tell the truths that
are passed onto Nel. Eva seems a fully individuated and admirable old woman even at this point. She is Hecate, the Medium, the Sibyl, that still mothers forth the daughters but now in a psychological and metaphysical sense. She is an unfrocked priest, the aggrieved Demeter whose whole line is lost to her but nevertheless gives the gift of completion to other women.

Eva is a portrait of archetypal feminine strengths that goes beyond the author's intentions. Eva has built a life and home as best as she could, when the only act of free will open to her was self-mutilation or letting her babies die. And she does not really cause any of her adult children's deaths; she merely hastens death to save them from misery. Her life has been economically, socially and historically determined in the narrowest way; but in spite of it all, her character is one of fierce protectiveness, gracious reality, magnanimity, deep intelligence and great coverage. And her sharp tongue is salt with wisdom.

Eva is like Eve, the first woman, has been the reigning matriarch of her own family/community for years and she is powerful and independent and fierce in the role. Even though she is not part of a couple herself, to reject simply the notion out-of-hand is incomprehensible, even to her. It is the accepted template for women’s lives, even though it is, more often than not, a failed or malfunctioning
model. Furthermore, to Eva and to people in the Bottom, children are part of the order of things, the literal outgrowth of a concept of womanhood that is valued by what it produces and tends. To Sula, however, being a wife and a mother are not pre-requisites for selfhood. Her own business – the business of being, of living – is not dictated by family or community.

In her essay, “Feminism and Critical Theory,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) addresses the Marxist conceptions of “use-value, exchange-value, and surplus-value” in terms of feminism and Freud, examining childbirth and child-rearing as the kind of women’s work that is not subject to communal compensation.

Spivak notes that the idea of a womb as a place of production is avoided in both Freud and Marx, and that in rereading Freud, feminists should make available the idea of womb-envy as something that interacts with the idea of penis-envy to determine human sexuality and the production of society. Spivak’s reading of women’s work has interesting implications for Sula. From the vantage point of the Bottom, the adult Sula opposes community customs surrounding gender, race, vocation and generating a tension that is threefold. Her disinterest is interpreted as selfishness; she believes in self-nature as an end in itself, whereas foe Eva, Nel, and the other women in town, mothering, care-taking and
running a household are non-negotiable women’s work. Eva’s chastisement (and, by extension, the town’s judgment) is very specific: it is all right if Sula ends up alone, but it is all right for Sula to cultivate aloneness. Yet from sleeping with married men to not wearing underwear to church suppers, Sula does just that. Her resistance to what the Bottom silently (but aggressively) perceives as her duty, not only to her sex but also to her race and community, calls into question the perpetuation of existence as the Bottom knows it. And in rejecting a commitment to community, woman-to-women bonding, and a taking care of kin, Sula’s world is interpreted by the community as too close to white. The rumours that Sula sleeps with white men, and Sula’s decision to place Eva in a white-run home for the elderly, are the final nails in Sula’s social coffin. Without the racial element, these actions would be injurious; with it, they are unforgivable.

Sula is aware of the impact that she has on the Bottom, and nowhere is this knowledge more pointed – or poignant – than in her deathbed rave to Nel, which assumes the form of a half-humorous, half–haunting incantation. Sula’s ironic speech about the town’s hatred comes across as a kind of spell, a final reckoning that she sets into motion just before her death. In it, she articulates the unlikelihood of ever being understood on her own terms and, in the process of this articulation, underscores the
unreadiness of the Bottom to entertain any other world-view than its own.

Nel, who is on the receiving end of these words, is nearly struck dumb. Sula’s soliloquy projects the profundity of Sula’s imminent absence and, at the same time, predicts a dual apocalypse. The first apocalypse is the end of Sula’s life (these are close to her last, spoken words), and the second, a time when all kinds of couplings—men and men, men and women, women and women, old and young, animal and object, black and white—are foreseeable and acceptable. That is, Morrison ruefully suggests, the end of the world. And, indeed, the end of the Bottom world is nigh, since it is soon after Sula’s death that many of the Bottom folk are drowned in a tunnel (another water-related catastrophe) and, soon after that, that the Bottom itself is levelled to make way for a golf course.

Morrison strengthens Sula’s supernatural affiliation by granting the reader access to Sula’s thoughts after she has died. Sula’s death is not heroic; she does not die trying to do the impossible. If anything, she dies just as she had lived: unrepentant and alone.

The ending of the Sula completes the parable that Morrison’s prelude began. Through Sula and Nel, respectively, Morrison narrates the good side of bad and the bad side of good. Sula lives according to her
own design and, for that independence, die early and alone on the second floor of an empty, run-down house—but as she said that her loneliness is hers. Nel survives, but it is only on the final page of the novel that she begins to understand that it is Sula, and not Jude, who she has been missing for decades. The parable is seemingly complete: One must strive to strike a balance between self-knowledge and narcissism. Nel should have known herself better, Sula should not have known herself quite so well, and the people of the Bottom should have recognized the good that their perception of Sula’s evil fostered.

3.3. Conclusion

In the present chapter, we realized that the character Sula embodies a connection between feminine archetypes that has been held down, repressed even within the feminine collective unconscious. The novel teaches us that women too need to be in touch with their lawless side, the roving woman. Thus, we saw the novel leaps into unknown space, beyond the boundaries of self that male-authored literature has set for us, where the knowledge will take us, no one can be sure of and Morrison’s last image in the novel reflects this. We cannot say that Morrison’s treatment of Sula is intentionally a portrait of a woman for us to respect, then hate, then pity. But we find instead that Sula probably emerged first
as a character from Morrison’s imagination, then began to craft herself striking out to balance herself with animate quality of life in the Bottom, and connecting herself to its past that Morrison acknowledges as important.

Morrison uses her characterisations of Sula and Nel in order to examine thoroughly the viability of African-American female stereotypes and effectively offers enough proof as to why they must be challenged and dispelled. They not only mask the true nature of what it means to be a woman but also set her alone when in fact the collective conscience defies the imposition of any such stereotype. In Sula and Nel, the bad and the good wife are undoubtedly negated in favour of friendship, identity and true black womanhood.

Toni Morrison takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women as represented by her fictional characters. Like the other contemporary black women writers, Morrison calls attention to the single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women which is that their literature is about black women. While this account for their lack of recognition, their works make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written. The heroic image of the black woman finds expression in the heroic voice of the black women writers. Refusing a place as a
stepdaughter in the literary tradition, they have worked assiduously to influence and determine the direction and shape of a literary canon which has considered women’s writing as insignificant, even anomalous. Thus, *Sula* is an attempt at this mission. It invites a concerted effort to change the black woman’s oppressive conditions.