CHAPTER 2

Black Conservatism and Sula’s Radicalism

Sula is one of the most challenging novels of complexity which has been deliberately created by Toni Morrison. The main reason for such a bold trend is that in this novel there are three issues which get mixed up. The novelist has her own order of priorities in these issues but lays her hand only on two. The three issues which get mixed up and simultaneously juxtaposed are Race, Gender and Class, and Tradition.

The novelist has clearly stated that her primary interest is in the first two issues. Therefore, for the novelist, the black community and the black women with their problems seem to occupy paramount importance. The message of the novel is that the black community must be free and the black women must come out of the shackles of life. It is worthwhile to know what the problems are in complicating these issues. The problems are not themselves very complicated as one can easily perceive the nature of the problem. The entire black community works in total subordination to the white race. The Bottom hill in the valley land of Medallion represents the pain and problem of the black community. They suffer because they work under the white masters. This suffering is related to the basic problem of their livelihood. However, the novelist is not interested in their economic problem chiefly. She takes pains in studying the behaviour of the black community and especially the mental
make up of black women, several varieties of complicated psychology are found among women. The novelist is in search of an ideal black woman because basically her stance as an artist is in the new tradition of feminist parlance. The question who is an ideal black woman and who is not is certainly answered. This dialectical process sets the whole theme of the novel. The condition of the black community in the Bottom hill of the city of Medallion is thoroughly analysed in the following lines:

“See those hills? That’s bottom land, rich and fertile.”

“But it’s high up in the hills,” said the slave.

“High up from us,” said the master, “but when God looks down, it’s the bottom. That’s why we call it so. It’s the bottom of heaven – best land there is.” (SULA 5)

The novel starts with a nigger joke. It is not a joke in the ordinary sense. But it is a piece of irony and sarcasm. The Bottomland in the hill was the place where negroes lived. Down the hill in the valley, the whites live who treated the blacks as their slaves and inferiors as it was part of the white man’s mental consciousness to look down upon the blacks. Even when the negroes lived in the hills up above the valley where whites lived, peculiarly running contrary to the logic of geographical location, the whites, branded the black habitation of the hill as bottom. In spatial and physical dimensions the white man’s description of hill land as Bottom is untrue because the
hill land is high and the bottom land is low and deliberately the ideas of high and low are put upside down in order to display and demonstrate before the blacks the racially held white superiority. Even when the negroes lived on a high hill they called it bottom only to look down upon the blacks. Bottom in the vocabulary of the white is a sign of lowness. In geographical sense between high and bottom high is always regarded as high and bottom always as low. Though the negroes are placed and located on the high hills, the whites intentionally called it bottom, just to tell the blacks that they are inferior and their high hill for them is low. The whites have a feeling that though the negroes live on the high hill their minds are undeveloped and uncultivated and so there is nothing wrong in describing their place of habitation as Bottom.

For the novelist the interest lies in the study of cultural psychology of the whites which dismisses the blacks with contempt and scorn. As an artist she is pained to notice this tragic phenomenon which meant pleasure for the whites and torture for the blacks. Will this scene of tragic spectacle come to an end? The novel is attempting an answer to this question. Toni Morrison does not stop with this small nigger joke but she elaborates upon this joke by referring to an episode which has become the biggest joke for the whites. What engages our attention in this episode is that the white men will never make a concession to the blacks because of their cultural setting, mental psychology, consciousness of racial superiority. This is
classically brought out by the novelist in a business agreement entered into between the white master and a black slave. The white master gave a false promise to a black slave that he would give a fertile piece of bottom land if he finished certain work assignment with zeal and sincerity. At the end of the bargain, he gave a land in the hill and called it bottom land. The negro was not convinced and he persisted in requesting the white master to fulfil his promise. The white master took to a strange inverted or perverted form of reasoning to convince the slave that the land he received in the hill was actually a bottom land. The question how it can be a bottom land when it is in the hill is answered by the white master intelligently. The white master tells the negro slave that God when He looks down from above the hill land becomes bottom land for Him. Therefore, the white master is equally persistent in saying that the hill land must be treated as a bottom land by the negro. The negro was not convinced because it was not true for him that the hill land would become bottom land just because God looked below and saw it. But the negro slave had no alternative except to accept the reply as he was helpless to make any form of resistance. What the novelist wants to convey is that this was a practical joke played upon the blacks by the whites. Toni Morrison says that this nigger episode is only an exhibition of a trick and an expression of truth. The critic Carmean hints at the pattern of inversion of values by the whites in order to cheat the blacks:
Beginning with the end of the Bottom, Morrison introduces a pattern of inversion which she quickly succeeds with others. This includes the anecdote about the origin of the Bottom as a “nigger joke,” when a white slave owner rewards his diligent slave with poor, hilly land where living is always difficult. (32)

A few more details can be cited to describe the behaviour pattern of the black community. One such detail is the declaration of National Suicide Day by Shadrack, a retired run away soldier from the war.

A critical remark about this incident is made by Carmean who is of the opinion that National Suicide Day serves as an artistic device for finding an objective correlative for the inner fears of the blacks in facing death either in the war or on the tunnel. “Thus National Suicide Day, Shadrack’s means of imposing order over fear, not death, becomes the structure which eventually assumes its own independent importance” (33).

What operated in the mind of Shadrack is a fear psychosis arising out of consciousness and awareness of death arising in the midst of war. His sentimental preoccupation with death has led him to devise a mock suicide scene for the purpose of overcoming the fear of death. This can be looked at from another level. Symbolically, this scene can stand for a psychological necessity on the part of the black to resist the white oppression by an imaginary dramatic device of this
kind. What it shows is that the blacks are not allowed to live. In not being allowed to live, they are not allowed to die. But they are allowed to live so that they can do hard work and undergo hardship in the hands of the white masters. Instead of living imperfectly and inadequately there is a feeling among the blacks that it is better to die by embracing suicide. But this incident is connected with a partly historical and a partly imaginary detail of description. The negro slaves are destined to draw their livelihood by building a tunnel. They do the work with disdain and chagrin because they are involved in their work much against their will. Their destiny drives them to do the work but their mind refuses on account of undergoing oppressions in the hands of white masters. Instead of being subjected to ignominious conditions of work some of the workers prefer to commit suicide. Those who rebelled against their work are killed by the whites. The suicide drama of Shadrack is different from the actual suicide of the blacks. While the one is symbolic, the other is real arising out of anguish and anger. But both have the same motive and they get expressed under different backgrounds. The average attitude of the black is to continue to live amidst all imperfections and injustices. Whatever may be the condition of living if one is allowed to live, that itself is accepted by a black as an expression of freedom. Therefore, the normal black attitude is not to die. There are four instances which can be quoted from the novel in order to highlight and depict the average behaviour of the black community.
The following passage reflects the general feeling of the people in taking no serious notice of the National Suicide Day:

As time went along, the people took less notice of these January thirds, or rather they thought they did, thought they had no attitudes or feelings one way or another about Shadrack’s annual solitary parade. (SULA 15)

By and large people showed their interest in leading a very normal life casually without bothering about any problem.

A different kind of observation is made by Reverend Deal. A large section of people took interest in wine and women and they completely ignore such dramatic demonstrations for a call for an imaginary rehearsal of the Suicide Day.

Generally, people show interest in joy and happiness of life in listening to cow bells and attending wedding. Therefore, wedding festivity and cowbells sounds were of greater importance to the black people than Shadrock’s spirited call for gathering people to see the imaginary demonstration of suicide.

There is a reference to the process of childbirth. It is an event which is incorporated into the life of the people. A talk about childbirth seemed more absorbing to the people than Shadrack’s call for symbolic suicide.
All the above instances cited from the novel display a kind of indifference to the National Suicide Day and the characters shown in the four passages evince interest in their own preoccupations. The average black is interested in the normal routine celebrations of birthday, and wedding day drinking and womanising are also accepted by them as usual normal activities and their main interest is not to offer any resistance to the normal routine life they lead. The blacks may live as slaves. Though they know that it is a tragic thing it drives home the fact that one has to accept it as a pattern of life in the course of time. So the main intention of the blacks is to show his thirst for living however tragic it may be. Somehow he wishes to live and this instinct does not induce in him a different line of thinking which is connected with resistance of white man’s oppression. The novelist brilliantly portrays the actually traumatic mental conditions of the blacks. A large bulk of black Negroes come under the line of non-resistance. Therefore, the behaviour pattern of the blacks is conditioned by this mental psychology which shows no interest in any form of opposition to the traditionally established forms of life which are determined by the whites. At the same time, the novelist is not in agreement with this average black line of thinking of a humdrum life with no capacity for resistance.

The study of the behaviour of the black community is a race study. But now the focus of the artist is shifted on to the gender. Toni Morrison creates in the minds of blacks the urge to envision a
new form of life. An average black is not prepared for this new vision because the usual thinking is that such a thing is impossible and there is no use of day dreaming about it as he is content to lead his normal humdrum routine life. Mostly, the men folk in the black community are interested in their own life and their time is spent in indiscriminate drinking and womanising. Such a mode of life is conceived as a life of freedom by the blacks. There are many instances which can be taken from the novel to prove the validity of this argument. Boy Boy, husband of Eva leads a life of his own by abandoning her, but Eva is not a moral rake. She kills her son Plum advancing the argument that she is not in agreement with her son’s way of living which is not up to her dignified moral expectation. For her, the racial problem does not arise. Her daughter Hannah sleeps with all kinds of men and spends her time in such wild amusements. Sula is to follow the archetype of her mother in sleeping with all kinds of men. Nel is a close friend of Sula. Nel’s mother Helene Wright wants to be like a typical white. Nel also wants to share affinity with the white man’s view of a life-version which includes respect for family and values. It is said that Nel’s grandmother was a prostitute. The idea of black emancipation from the whites never consciously strikes anyone. There are some hints but they are not fully developed. Now the shift from the race to the gender in the artistic focus of Toni Morrison is very significant. For the novelist, the gender consciousness deserves greater attention and closer study. Sula seems to be the only voice for the novelist’s
feministic consciousness. All the others are deviations from this feminist stance. No other character in the novel can be made to represent Sula for this kind of feminist consciousness. Family ties should not be broken. The ideas of family togetherness and social cohesiveness are the values of the whites. The respect of the blacks for this ideal almost seems to be like an axiom running through the black families. Eva, Hannah and Helene Wright are women who want to preserve the family ties at any cost in such relations and involvements. The question of black liberation never arises except with Sula who looks at this problem not from the angle of race but from the standpoint of gender.

For Sula, the racial questions are subordinate to her mode of feminist consciousness which prominently raises a banner of revolt against Patriarchy, Phallocentricism and Androcentrism. These are classical and modern concepts according to post-modernism. They propound the view that man is a creator of ideological schemes of life and women is only a sharer and follower of such values. Man is in the centre and woman is in the margin according to Patriarchy, phallocentrism and Androcentrism. According to the novelist Sula represents the post-modern view of Gynocentrism which puts woman in the centre. Sula’s radicalism must be conceived as a revolt against the conservatism of the blacks. Her main interest is to demolish the established values of the whites. She offers stiff resistance to the domination of the blacks by the whites. The entire black community is
soaked in superstition. Sula’s entry into the village after ten years is not relished by the blacks. Placing of the broomstick before the house is visualised by the blacks as a way of averting the bad omen arising out of Sula’s entry in the village. Radicalism of Sula is the only remedy for the black belief in such conservatism. Sula creates a revolution in the society as she looks forward to a new future. Sula thinks that the life of the blacks does not lie in the systems of the institutions which the whites have created. Here protest is only a way for the preservation of a new pattern of black concept of life. All her life is a struggle to achieve it. Sula’s determined sensibility in voicing forth these concepts in her life allows her to wage a war against the established values of the white race. Sula does not indulge in a direct attack on the whites but her life style is a great blow to the white value system. It is in this life style of Sula in which the novelist is interested. But to what length does the novelist travel with Sula is a question to be explored fully. An answer to this question forms a running commentary on the very theme of the novel itself.

The creation of a character like Sula meant to shock the black folk forms a new perspective. Sula is projected as a problem woman to black race. She must be taken as a warning signal if one studies the response of the black community to her. One knows how desperately people in the black community are, less advanced and more uninformed. Still they all think uniformly that Sula is a threat to the normally settled order of their community. For them Sula is not at
all a model to be followed. People refused to accept her wholeheartedly because of her dubious character and different frame of mind concerning black men and women. To follow the established norms of life is the line of thinking of an average black in contrast to Sula who only shows a resistance to this idea. Though she has a new vision of life she knows that it can never be propagated with mass approval. Therefore, there seems to be a no meeting point between the black community and Sula. They hold different views on how one should live and conduct oneself in life. Creation of a new point of view is the work of a genius. Mechanical imitation of the established view of the white is the work of an average man. It is with this vision of life that the novelist makes a distinction between the black community and Sula. Sula is living in the future while being rooted in the present. Whereas the black people are living in the present and they are contented with it for the moment. It takes time for less advanced and less informed people to keep pace with the new idea of thinking. Therefore, Sula is more often misunderstood than being understood in the right sense. To expect the black community to study Sula is a far distant dream. Even her close friend Nel seems to be at odds with Sula. The main idea of the novelist is to put Sula in the right context and in the right perspective.

Race, gender, class and tradition are the immediate areas of attention for the novelist. In a sense, the novel is a graphic description of the actual life conditions of the black community. Bottom of
Medallion is not simply a place. It represents a character and a consciousness. The so-called inanimate place can not be accepted as inanimate as long as it propagates the values of life. Thus it becomes a living character.

All the characters in the novel form an integral part of the black community in the Medallion. The only character who feels that she is like a dropout in that atmosphere of Bottom is Sula. She wants to snap her ties with the black community which is steeped in ignorance whereas Eva’s sense of belonging to the community is felt to be immense. This contrast must be kept in mind in order to study the independent nature of Sula. “While Eva’s relation to the community is central to her life, Sula dismisses herself from the ties and codes that bind the people in Bottom” (Sokoloff 432).

All the characters constitute the microcosm of the black community. The blacks’ consciousness of ill treatment in the hands of the whites is a widely felt matter. But it is not seriously attended to by any character for the purpose of remedy and redressal. Sula also does not think of racial emancipation of the blacks from the whites. Her awareness of the problem proceeds from different angles of perception, unlike the other characters found in the novel. The intention of the novelist as an artist must be grasped fully. The living condition of the people in Bottom and the relationship between father and mother, mother and daughter and between the lover and the
ladylove and their attitudes to marriage, families, sex are subjects which are modified and conditioned in the light of the perspective of the white race. These are social questions which need full-length explanations.

The behaviour of the black community is based upon this mandatory valuation of the whites. Moreover the instinct to follow the established norms of the whites about all forms of life is there in every character except Sula. Resistance to this white mandate is not shown by any black character. It is this fact which precisely pains the mind of the novelist. But no one can blame the character unnecessarily for the acceptance of the valuation of the whites. The reason is that for an average black the instinct to follow is greater than the instinct to break. The objective of the novelist is to break the established norms as far as she is obliged to create a character who will respond to her new idea of life. For a detached observer, the problem in the Bottom is fundamentally a racial one. Still the novelist encounters the problem fundamentally as a racial one or much more than that. If there is any problem in the novel that does not arise from a racial angle, it is an offshoot of a complex life which represents a human predicament common both to the whites and the blacks. In a sense, all problems are basically life-related problems and not racial ones as they emanate from the same source which are amply addressed to in the novel.
As an artist the novelist labours with this motive that the valuation of the white race must be opposed. Only then the black race will have their cultural individuality. In order to strengthen this idea of resistance and opposition she creates a character only to project her as a character of contradiction. The issue of not creating Sula as a woman of harmony and understanding is to be closely analysed. A solution to this issue will answer all the problems possibly raised in the novel. In fact, Sula can be treated as a mouthpiece of the novelist. It is only a self projection of the novelist in an artistic form. If one understands Sula in depth, one understands the various shades and nuances of the novel. Sula is the key to unlock the riddle of the entire novel. A statistical cultural survey about black life can be made using Sula as a point of reference. Sula distinguishes herself from others. An analysis of this takes one into the realm of all issues.

A particular line uttered by Hannah may be taken as a preface for analysing the psychology of Sula “...I love Sula. I just don’t like her” (SULA 57). The first word ‘love’ shows the mother’s attachment to her daughter Sula. The second line ‘like’ is a value judgement made by Hannah about Sula. No character in the novel wishes to retain a life of individuality and Hannah is not an exception to this phenomenon. Hannah wants Sula to be very much like her in the way of leading a life. Hannah’s life is an embodiment of passive acceptance of the existing pattern of life which is indirectly imposed upon them by the whites. Sula may not consciously be aware of this
phenomenon of imposition. She does not want to be like Hannah because she wants to lead an active life. But this awareness of her individuality does not stem from a racial postulate. She just wants to be an individual because others are following the established line of thinking like a herd. Her behaviour is an enigma to Hannah. The novelist projects her attention on the moral degeneracy prevailing in the atmosphere of Medallion. It is a kind of lapse and imperfection which are related to the biological impulses of man.

Eva seems to be morally a righteous character. In addition to Eva, Helene Wright and Nel are equally noble characters and, barring these three characters, everyone else is morally defective from one angle or the other. The entire Medallion community looks for some order. This demand for order imposes upon them an obligation to follow the existing pattern of life. Chastity and moral righteousness are treated as virtues by the Medallion community although moral lapses are not tolerated kindly. The first principle of Sula is to resist this jaundiced vision of life projected by the black community. Sula’s behaviour with Nel’s husband Jude and her passion for indiscriminate sexual satisfaction does not conform to the established pattern. Sula represents the postmodernist view which states that the ideas of good and evil are not absolute. Therefore, what is good is evil and what is evil turns into good. It is in this vein that the character of Sula is judged by the post modernist consciousness in contrast to the traditional moral standards. She thinks that her life must be the
making of her own and it should not be one of fabrication or making in the hands of others. The peculiar consciousness of the black community as embodied in Eva and Hannah is that Sula must conform to the traditional pattern of community life which is based on an acceptance of order.

The artist deliberately creates a character like Sula to demonstrate that what is happening in the Medallion is not all right and the entire social gamut needs change and refurbishment. According to Sula the woman lives only when she realises her identity as an individual. In this respect none of the characters in the novel come up to her expectation. A life lived in accordance with the community mandate is not a life at all to her. For Hannah, sexual gratification is much more than fundamental human relation. “Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus’ death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbours” (SULA 42).

The character of Hannah is found in the following lines. Hannah’s love for husband is less as an interest. She moves round the question of sexual fulfilment without any moral scruple. For Eva sex is based on ethics. But for Hannah it is based on desire and its fulfilment:

With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her
daughters… The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. (41)

Sula does not agree to this axiom of her mother. The problem with her is that she does not see a dichotomy between human relationship and sexual satisfaction. Sula thinks that Hannah’s yardstick in the matters of sex is expediency oriented and not truth based. Matrimonial bonds and marital ties are no longer relevant to Hannah and the same holds good for Sula but with a difference. For Sula marriage is an obstacle to the realisation of womanhood but for Hannah and Eva this ideal is unacceptable. While Hannah treats sex as a kind of cheap satisfaction, Sula regards it as a kind of real emotional fulfilment.

Sula believes in the depth of sincerity in any human relation irrespective of traditional discrimination between good and bad, chaste and unchaste. She is of the opinion that the entire traditional community in the Medallion is passing through perpetual babyhood or infancy.

Any idea of reaching adulthood is based upon the conscious realisation of assuming a serious responsibility. Whether Sula or Medallion is at fault is answered by the novelist by saying that it is the Medallion community which is culpable and not Sula since the Medallion community is imitating a mechanical pattern of life. Sula sees in this activity a pattern of perpetual babyhood. To outgrow this
involves a realisation of serious responsibility but two different views prevail. The Medallion people think that Sula is irresponsible as she does not conform to a traditionally settled order of life. The maturing of a new vision of life is impossible for them because the traditional forces act like a heavy weight upon them. The idea of tradition is so deep seated that the village looks upon the return of Sula after years of absence as an ill omen.

Every character in the novel looks upon Sula as a stranger, one whose presence is nothing but peril to the village. That is why the novelist associates her presence with the arrival of bad omens which are embodied in symbols like robins whose supernatural power of horror is very much feared by people. They also see unnaturalness in Sula witnessing her own mother being burnt to death. The supernatural fear is so great that the entire village places a broomstick before every doorstep of the house in order to circumvent a great ill-omen which is likely to daunt or frighten the village as the belief goes that the broomstick has a power to reduce the intensity of horror. A daughter witnessing the mother being burnt to death is something that shocks her family members and the village people in their age old traditional scale of values. But Sula thinks that this is nothing but an instance of superstition which has no meaning at all. For normal human minds burning is something which unsettles the mind of the beholder. But Sula remains cool without being affected.
The people in the village associate the coming of Sula with the arrival of a bird which betokens an ill omen. According to Sula, none of them lives in the real sense since they are forced to be conditioned by traditional forces. The following passage illustrates the impact of the effects of the omens in the minds of the people:

Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion. The little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere, exciting very small children away from their usual welcome into a vicious stoning. Nobody knew why or from where they had come (Sula 89).

Marriage is unnecessary. If it is made, full freedom should not be denied to the woman. If freedom is denied to the woman then certainly marriage can be dispensed with. Woman is a means to a man. Sula reverses this idea and says that woman is not a channel to something else nor a means as she is a distinct individual with a clear responsibility. She sees in Ajax an avenue for emotional and biological fulfilment. He surrenders himself to her instinct but their association never inhibits her freedom. The longing to see Ajax seems to be an irresistible feeling in Sula. The following lines bring out this riddle governing sula and Ajax. “[Sula] has finally internalized the assumptions about woman’s role and behaviour in relationships with men, and she has ended her journey toward selfhood” (Wade–Gayles 1984: 198). Woman must be subordinate and subservient to man. Eva
and Hannah are examples of this view. Sula thinks that a woman must be fully free. She need not be subordinate to man even in marital relationship.

The maleness of the character must be thinned and the femaleness must be increasingly realised by specific identity and individuality. Learner popularises a phrase “double jeopardy” which is a banner for representing racism and sexism. The white race does not take cognisance of the existence of the black race. There is no distinction in the black population. Moreover, their existence as a race is only for the menial service of the white race. In all other respects they are worthy of being ignored. As a result of this motive of exploitation they are left uncared for and so they are left unnoticed. Leaner brings out this view in the following lines:

Belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American Society – Blacks and women – they have been doubly invisible. Their records lie buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted. (Lerner xvii-xviii)

Man must not be allowed to dominate. If this trend is allowed to continue, Sula thinks that a woman must show her capacity for resistance. For Sula, sex and marriage are not connected. A biological feeling need not be connected with a traditionally instituted valuation
of life. Sex is conceived as an expression of freedom by Sula. Her relation with Nel’s husband Jude creates no moral problem for her. Nel sees a competitor in Sula as far as her marital life is concerned. But Sula’s spirit is different. The following lines bring out Sula’s attitude to sex clearly. “As Sula grows up with a definition of sex as non–competitive and non–threatening” (Lownsberry and Hovet 128).

Marriage is only an institution. It is a dead entity. But the biological feeling is a real force. So long as it springs from the depth of sincerity, it has no element of falsity about it. Hannah respects marriage and family ties but her sexual behaviour pays scant respect to the moral sacredness and marriage and family ties. For her, sex is an avenue for some emotional satisfaction. For Sula, sex is certainly an avenue for emotional satisfaction but for her the human relation matters even in sex. But for Hannah sexual satisfaction is more important than human relation. Eva, Hannah, Helene Wright and Nel never believe in the freedom of the woman. They follow what has been described as inter-generational mirror as discussed in the earlier chapter with reference to The Bluest Eye.

Eva and Hannah know that men are unreliable because their perception of life is based upon experience of disappointment and frustration. Sula remains unsupported by such experiences and therefore she behaves immaturesly with regard to Ajax. One knows that Ajax is not a noble man. He is a cheat. Sula’s expectation is not
fulfilled. Where Eva and Hannah succeed in real life, Sula fails because her exposure to life is limited. But she is living ahead of all the people and ahead of all the times.

Eva’s life is a life of risk and danger and it brings in only serious misfortunes. For the purpose of family welfare, she loses her leg. It is a real sacrifice made for the family. It deserves real appreciation but Sula does not make any such sacrifice:

Abandoned one November by her husband Boy Boy, Eva struggles to feed her three starving children until, sensing futility, she leaves them with a neighbor and disappears. Eighteen months later, Eva returns, with one leg missing but with notable prosperity, to reclaim her children and build her own home. Precisely how Eva loses her leg becomes the topic of speculation in the Bottom, though it is suggested that Eva sacrifices it in a train accident for an insurance settlement. (Carmean 34)

A profound interest in family welfare is central to Eva’s preoccupation with life. Wade–Gayles brings out this idea in the following line. “The rest of the portrait of Eva as a mother is less positive, revealing a desire to manipulate her children’s lives and the lives of others as well” (99).
In the real sense of the term Eva is a daring woman. The following incidents portray this quality in her. She kills Plum and when Hannah was being burnt she jumps into fire and saves her. Sula remains indifferent to such things but the actions of Eva speak of her heroism. Her act of killing Plum is based upon a moral argument.

To put an end to drug addiction of Plum she decides to put an end to his life. That one cannot be stopped without the other is her conclusion. Sula remains inattentive to such an act. She makes no judgement because she is not interested in making judgement about such things. Eva’s jumping into fire is a great act of heroism comparable to any such thing narrated in the Greek episode. The greatest irony is that Sula remains supremely indifferent to her dying mother just by watching it mechanically.

If one comes with the traditional yardstick, one will condemn Sula and uphold the dignity of Eva. But Sula’s interest in life is different from Eva’s. For Sula father and mother are not fixed relations as husband and wife are not fixed relations. It is from this perspective her activities must be judged. She could have participated in the activity of saving her mother Hannah but she did not do it. Either it can be treated as an enigma or it did not occur to her to act on the spur of the moment. Her mental psychology is tuned in a different way and it looks for a long range perspective which has nothing to do with meeting with such emergencies and exigencies as exhibited in the episode of Eva killing Plum and jumping into fire for the purpose of
saving Hannah’s life. Sula envisions a new cultural sociology and a
different psychology for woman. Her interest in this vision of a new
cultural sociology is more important than meeting with any such
exigencies. The death of Chicken Little is analysed in the light of this
perspective. Two characters are found in the scene. They are Nel and
Sula. The conversation that follows between Nel and Eva closely adds
to the meaning of the above perspective:

“But Miss Peace, I’m visiting you. This is your room.”

Nel smiled.

“What you say your name was?”

“Nel Greene.”

“Wiley Wright’s girl?”

“Tell me how you killed that little boy.”

“What? What little boy?”

“You. Sula. What’s the difference? You was there. You
watched, didn’t you? Me, I never would’ve watched.”

The one you threw in the water

“You’re confused, Miss Peace. I’m Nel. Sula’s dead.”

(SULA168)

A difference between Nel and Sula is seen in the following lines
where Sula was simply watching the Chicken Little getting drowned.
Instead of watching it she had seen this scene, according to Nel
Sula’s attitude would have been more serious in this matter. That Sula remains unattached to this scene of death without any moral problem is something that shocks Nel. “But Eva didn’t say see, she said watched. I did not watch it. I just saw it” (*Sula* 170).

Watching is standing in a detached way and it is surveying the act of dying from the standpoint of an external observer. Seeing is a deeper activity than watching. Seeing is involvement and not attachment. Nel uses these phrases watching and seeing in order to signify the peculiar type of psychology embedded in Sula’s psyche.

Sula develops sexual relationship with Nel’s husband Jude. For Nel it is a betrayal of trust on the part of Sula. But Sula thinks that Nel’s judgement is based upon using tradition as a yardstick to measure and judge her activity:

“We were friends.”

“Oh, yes. Good friends,” Sula said.”

“And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.”

“What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucking him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145)
For Sula there is no such thing called morality. It is only the making of a man. To do what the inner instinct says is more valuable than what tradition says:

She emerges as an embodiment of a metaphysical chaos in pursuit of an activity both proper and sufficient to herself. Whatever Sula has become, whatever she is, is a matter of her own choices, often ill-formed and ill-informed. Even her loneliness – “My own Lonely” – she claims in typical Sula bravado, as she lies dying. (Spillers 213)

Sula does not believe in family ties. She is envisioning a new type of meaningful relationship. There is no family in the traditional sense as Morrison herself portrays her in the novel:

…she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. (SULA 118)

Her basic tenet is that where freedom is denied there can be no relationship in activity of any kind. All traditional family ties deprived freedom and according to her what stands as an obstacle to freedom must be removed. If the family ties stand in the way of freedom Sula’s warning is to ignore it. This creates a shock to the Medallion black
community scheme of life. Sula is forward-looking while the Medallion community is the other way now living in the present with the mind conditioned by the past. This influences Sula to think that they are non-existent. She lives in the present looking forward to the future.

Everything is in order when it is in accord with the past. This is the view of the Medallion. A thing need not be in accord with the past in order to be in order. In that case Sula says that disorder is order for her. What is wrong with the Medallion community, according to Sula is that there is no possibility of rethinking about any aspect of life. Any such radical thinking is unwanted in the Medallion community as its respect for established order rules out any form of expression of revolutionary activity. It is here that Sula distinguishes herself from others by her formidable courage.

She is preoccupied with actual conditions of life in which there is so much falsity arising out of an acceptance of mechanical imitation. The characters other than Sula are worried about the white man’s oppression with regard to building of a bridge and payment of wages. Sula’s boldness is seen in these lines:

Nel blinked, but acquiesced. …Sula reached into her coat pocket and pulled out Eva’s paring knife. (SULA 54)

They long for an escape from the above racial condition of confrontation but they resort to a way of life in which there is no
conscious questioning of a white man’s system of values. They are average people who cannot claim to be heroes on any account. With them there is no time or energy to think about racial question in a revolutionary way and so for them the problem of living is more important than any such racial question or problem. Sula challenges the white boys with Eva’s knife in her pocket. Nel is afraid of being teased by the boys. But Sula emboldens Nel with her knife to protect her. The tendency of Nel to escape from the situations in which the white boys tease her is the usual attitude of any black. But Sula is an exception. Sula looks at life from a different standpoint. Her perception is far deeper. She thinks that the black race is deprived of freedom in all matters of social life. She believes in the dignity of the human being. Sula thinks that it is in the act of woman gaining freedom, the question of racial emancipation more comprehensible.

She believes in freedom and she thinks that this freedom provides an answer to all related questions. Though her freedom does not specifically include freedom from the white race, it is indirectly implied. Woman’s freedom is put on the top of the pedestal in Sula’s scheme of life. This goes deeper than finding an answer to a racial question. Characters like Eva and Hannah never depended on their husbands for their recognition and survival. Similar spirit is shown by Sula in her independent standing:
Thus, Eva and Hannah act as role models to Sula. Theirs is a woman – centred universe, and the values that rule their house are the ones that are particularly beneficial to women (Washington 4–5).

The blacks are the followers of the white man’s values and the black women are in a more shameful situation than the white women. The blacks in imitating the white man’s system of values are worse in their treatment of women. Ill-treatment here implies man’s denial of freedom to woman. For Sula, denial of freedom is equal to denial of life. So long as this situation prevails, there is no living for her in the actual sense. She is making a preparation for a new way of life. The people of Medallion who lag behind Sula are not in a position to keep pace with the thinking of Sula.

For Sula experience of life is an essential experience of loss and disappointment. She loses Chicken Little, Nel and Ajax, living the life of an idealist and necessarily obliged to lead a ruined life. Everyone wants to disown Sula including Nel. The act of disowning is based upon the act of assuming responsibility. They think that Sula is a bad influence of Medallion not knowing what she is looking for. She could infuriate the women of the town. “for she would lay their husbands once and then no more” (SULA 115).

For the Medallion, to be good is less risky and to be evil is fully risky. Sula challenges this pattern of life, because for her evil and
good are relative terms. To Sula no good can come out of existing condition of life in which there is neither sense for living nor a condition for real living.

Many characters are false and hypocritical. For example Jude, Ajax and Hannah are insincere in their expression of emotions. Their mere acceptance of a traditional pattern of life does not make them noble characters. The key word for Sula is false and insincere expression of human emotion. She is more seriously concerned with this real problem of human emotion than with any form of life in a traditional sense. That civilization is great which allows a woman to live freely. Applying this axiom one can judge that neither the white nor the black race is superior.

But the black people according to the novelist and Sula have a chance to review their life especially because they are caught in a racial cultural context in which a white man has imposed everything on the black race. Any struggle by the blacks for the emancipation from the white race is conceived as a struggle for freedom. Any attempt at emancipation is equal to an attempt at a total revaluation of life. Sula sees that one struggle leads to series of struggles and there will be total freedom at the end of all struggles. It is in the process of struggle a new black vision of life is born. In this vision of life woman will be allowed to walk freely with man. Man will be dispensed with or he will be put in his place making him realise that for woman freedom is the
breath of her life. Sula may be wrong but she is certainly not false. She knows that any enthusiasm in living is dependent upon one’s capacity to retain identity and individuality.

This is the principle from which Sula proceeds. Therefore, she meets with challenges and oppositions. She is forced to leave Medallion only on this ground. Her stay makes for social unsettlement while her departure makes for cultural order. But there is one character whose behaviour is exceptional and who is given a chance by the novelist to do rethinking about Sula. Nel and Sula are not characters of identity sharing affinity with each other. But some unknown spirit draws them together which arises out of a sincere response to life and reality. In this sense a spiritual friendship is seen emerging in them. The following line illustrates this idea. “As a result they develop a “spiritual bond” with each other.” (Naylor and Morrison 578). It is Nel who makes a confessional statement:

Although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it ...It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home ...Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself (SULA 95).

Nel is an exceptional character in this novel. Her attitude to life is conventional. She respects family, and marriage as she believes that faithfulness and loyalty are virtues which are supposed to be
cultivated by anyone whose interest in life is real and genuine. For a long time she has been looking at the life of Sula and even her questionable relation with Nel’s husband. Amidst all these feelings which create traditional conceptions of life in Nel, there is a ray of awareness and illumination in Nel to analyse patiently the revolutionary attitude of Sula. Nel has nearly concluded that Sula’s way of life is unacceptable. But Sula’s return to Medallion after years of absence created a change in the atmosphere and in the mental outlook of Nel. The change is reflected in the external atmosphere in the month of May and it is equally reflected in the internal mind of Nel. Nel confesses that she had a cataract which did not enable her to look at life freely. Usually a surgery is required to remove the external physical cataract. But Sula performs a physiological, psychological and sociological surgery to remove Nel’s mental cataract. Nel at last realised that Sula is after all struggling for an expression of life which is free from all taboos and restrictions created by the white society. Nel thinks that conversation with Sula is education by itself. The novelist says that the entire black community needs this kind of education to look at what has happened to them as a result of the white oppression. Every black according to the novelist has the mental cataract. A mental cataract is not an optical cataract. Nel realises the importance of this mental surgery and therefore she says that her mental cataract is removed by the coming of Sula.
Sula is really interested in Nel. Other’s interest in Nel is nominal and peripheral. Nel herself knows this and therefore she looks to Sula for psychological relief. Her own mother is a kind of disappointment to Nel. The individuality of Nel is brought out in this line. “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.” (SULA 28). Although Sula had illicit relation with Jude, she initially took it very seriously. Nel liked Sula because there was an element of genuineness about her every activity and she expressed no element of falsity in any of her action. What is important to Nel is warm and genuine response and this she gets only from Sula. Along with Sula, Nel realises that human conditions are tragic not because they are really tragic but because they are made so by a pattern of life in which there is no sincere expression of any human emotion. For them, to pull on with existing conditions of life, however tragic it is, is more important than reviewing whether it is worthwhile or not. Hannah and Helene Wright have expectations about Sula and Nel. They seem to have no real love for them. Nel is not able to free herself from the clutches of Helene Wright. But Sula is free mentally even while she stays with her mother Hannah. This freedom to Sula comes from her mental awakening which may have cost her life. For the novelist and the readers it may be a tragic end but for Sula it is otherwise. She knows that her struggle is based upon a genuine cause for freedom.

Without coming to terms with the actual strategy of Toni Morrison as a novelist it is impossible to make a correct full-
fledged estimate of the novel *Sula*. The title of the novel and the main character of the novel are closely interconnected. The space that Sula occupies is less than that of Nel in the novel. The yardstick to measure the significance of Sula’s character is not in terms of space but it should be in terms of some other criterion which the novelist has in her mind. One of the characteristics of post modernism is structurelessness or shapelessness. The idea of having different streams of thinking is permitted in a postmodernist work of art. In the traditional work of art there is a demand for unity of work of art, which is based upon a work of action. But a single unified action is impossible in the presence of different streams of thinking signifying different discourses in a postmodernist work of art. In any traditional work of art a character must represent a unified attitude to life. But in postmodernism a character negates the old ideal of consistency and unified attitude to things. A clear reading of the novel indicates that Sula is least understood by anyone. The reason is that the novel projects two different worlds where one world represents the old ideal of conformity, consistency, order and obedience to tradition. In the same novel there is another world created, peopled by a lone character i.e. Sula. The novelist’s depiction of the two worlds within the existing world is an instance of typical postmodernist strategy.

Grounds are very carefully built up by the novelist in order to lay emphasis upon the character of Sula whose intention is to liberate the first world peopled by many characters from slavish adherence to the
tradition of the white race. Therefore, there is a constant friction and in fact a head-on-collision between many characters and Sula herself. Sula is fighting a lone battle and therefore the strategy and responsibility of Toni Morrison as a novelist assumes greater importance. Structurally, the novel achieves a victory in the depiction of Sula as a character of disorder, indiscipline, chaos, lawlessness and anarchy. The greatest fascination for the novelist in the character of Sula lies in these peculiar characteristics which are condemned by the world peopled by many characters. There is a total breakdown of communication between Sula and other characters excluding Nel.

The only character who comes close to understanding Sula is Nel. But Nel also mistakes Sula’s relation with Jude as an instance of infidelity. It is clear that this act of Sula is not to displease Nel but only to appease her natural human feelings. Nel believes in traditional morality and therefore she is at a loss to know Sula. But towards the point of Sula’s death Nel realises it. The ultimate purpose of Sula was something else different from what she thought about her in her earlier years. Nel is the only character who ultimately sees in Sula the presence of a new messenger to the black community. Sula tells her that it will take time for people in the society to recognise her radical forward looking outlook. This is evident in the following line. “…Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me.” (SULA 145)
The following lines bring out the confessional mood of Nel. Her anger with Sula was born out of her friends’ illegitimate sexual contact with Jude. But Sula’s death touched Nel very deeply. The absence of Sula made her ignore the search for the presence of Jude. Sula’s death pains Nel more than Jude’s presence:

“Sula?” she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees.

“Sula?”

…I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest…(SULA174).

A much longer part of the novel is devoted to the responses of the other characters towards Sula. The courage with which Sula faces the opposition in the world is something remarkable.

Eva advises her granddaughter Sula to have a home and children where traditional standards prescribe a principle that home and children are part of an ordered life. Sula totally disapproves of the idea of home and child bearing. In fact the conversation between Sula and Eva must be watched very carefully. Actually, it is a heated debate and according to Eva all problems for Sula come from lack of fixity and stability. Home, marriage and children give fixity and stability to a man’s life:

Furthermore, to Eva and to people in the Bottom, children are part of the order of things, the literal outgrowth of a
The 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. (Galehouse 8)

These lines reveal Sula’s boldness in challenging her grandmother’s advice of accepting marriage on the basis of the choices made by the parents. Choice of someone else according to Sula can never be the choice of the individual involved in the situation. One’s destiny of marriage need not be decided by the choice of somebody else:

“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

“Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man.”

“You did.”

“Not by choice.”

“Mamma did.”

“Not by choice, I said. It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself.” (SULA 92)

It is to be proved whether Sula is at home with this thinking of Eva. Certainly she does not want to rot in life like any other character hoping for marriage, home and children. She has seen with her vision
that certain very serious things have affected the black community. What has happened to them is so serious that according to Sula one day the black race will perish if it remains without the knowledge of what has happened to them. The entire black community is governed by ideas about life derived from the white race. This is the greatest danger that has befallen the black race. Sula feels that such unawareness of this danger will one day make the black race dead and extinct.

Sula’s main function is to deliver a death-knell to the values of the old world which is peopled by many characters who act in the spirit of servility to the white race. Liberating the black race from the imperialism of the white race should be the ideal of any man born as a black. Any person who is not alive to this need of the liberation of the black race from the white race, according to both Sula and the novelist does not live at all. It is this awareness of the black emancipation which makes the character of Sula very fundamentally central to the novel although she occupies a limited space. It is in the light of this proposition of Sula the conversation between the grandmother and the granddaughter must be observed. The purpose of the conversation is to focus the attention of the readers on the marked difference between Eva and Sula. Eva has no problem. For Sula living a life without a problem is the biggest problem. A demand for a comfortably settled life is what Eva aims at. Sula indicates three objections to this demand. Eva does what her ancestors have done. It is therefore
obligatory for Sula to do what Eva has done for herself. It is interpreted by Eva that it is obedience to tradition which makes for a patterned life. Sula gives a very brilliant reply that nothing has been ever done by any black by a “choice” of his or her own. Parental guidance is accepted as a basis for approval of choices made by individuals. What Sula understands from Eva is that individuals are not endowed with maturity to make choices independently in regard to any aspect of life. Life is full of goals and objectives according to Eva. Three such principles are noticed in the talk between Eva and Sula. Black marriage is a conformity to the white idea of patriarchy, woman is subservient to man and the duty of a woman is to have home, family and children. All these three widely acknowledged goals namely Patriarchy, Phallocentricism and Androcentrism look upon man as the guardian of the social fabric in which woman is projected to be passive recipient of the benefits done for her honour.

Sula’s observation is that choices of life are not exercised by black people. But peculiarly the choices exercised by black people are not their own. They are choices of life imposed by the white upon the black people. All black characters like Eva, Hannah, Nel, Helene Wright and many other characters in the black community have accepted these choices unquestioningly without realising that such choices of life are not opted by the blacks on the basis of self awakening, awareness and discrimination. It is to this sorry state of affairs that Sula wants to draw people’s attention. Eva uses the word
“choice” innocently without being critical of what the implications of the choices mean. To Eva they mean nothing whereas for Sula it means many things to which a black must get awakened one day or other. Sula operates in a black social context where she sees with precision that the entire black race is in a state of shameful backwardness. Her main duty is to awaken them to the tragic state of social and racial backwardness in which her own brethren have fallen. If Sula has followed blindly what Eva has said, the problem would have been solved in a simple way. Her problem is not a personal one. She is deeply concerned with the destiny of the black race which is found in a state of thorough ignorance and backwardness. Therefore, she turns down the request made by Eva to exercise the choice in favour of marriages, job, spouse and children. In this respect one draws the conclusion from the conversation that Sula wants to remain without any family commitment because her commitment is more broad based, in that it is applicable to the whole of the black race and it is not restricted to a small family life. If life is confined to a small family, Sula thinks that it can only develop attitudes of uncritical thinking which, in the end, generates blind following of the white race.

The four page prelude to the novel Sula clearly explains the purpose for which Sula has been created. The last paragraph in the prelude ends with the reference to the episode of how a black nigger has been cheated by a white master. The land Bottom referred to with the first word capitalised is the actual place where the blacks live. The
actual bottom of heaven with the word put in a small letter is a reference to a blissful habitation of the whites. By a strange inverted reasoning, the hill land offered to the nigger by the white master becomes the bottom land on account of God seeing it from above. Sula wants to give a funeral to this kind of joke and to this kind of inhuman treatment meted out to the blacks by the whites. The last paragraph in the prelude is a telling account of why a character like Sula is created in order to fight against this injustice. The entire conversation between Eva and Sula must be watched, viewed and judged in the light of this episode.

The following line gives a clue to judge the conversation between Eva and Sula. “They were mightily preoccupied with earthly things” (SULA 6). Eva’s preoccupation with earthly things is what prompts her to request Sula to have spouse, home and job.

There is a need to analyse and scrutinise this issue very carefully whether Eva is right or wrong, or whether Sula is right or wrong. Eva is not totally wrong in her demand made to Sula for family and home. A problem-free life is what Eva wants. She does not care to think that whether the ideas of family and human are her own ideas or whether such ideas are imposed on her by the whites. Eva does not bother to go along this critical line of thinking because the reasons are obvious. It does not occur to Eva that the entire labour force of the black race exists for the convenience and welfare of the white race.
Somehow Sula has thought about it and so she wants to adopt an individualistic line of analysing and investigating whether what has been followed as family life is acceptable or unacceptable. Family, home and children constitute life both for the white and the black. Sula knows it but she argues that the blacks spend their major lifetime in serving the white. Amidst such conditions of slave labour service no life has been lived fully according to Sula. These blacks are looked upon as physical labour units by the whites. They are not recognised by the whites as living vital beings. To reach a true condition of life has to come through struggle. Therefore, Sula feels that till such times come blacks are obliged by circumstances to follow the white frame of family life. When blacks become full beings, then they will create a new scheme of life in keeping with the roots of black heritage. Sula lays emphasis upon the need for a new vision of life. A counter argument may be advanced in this regard. There is nothing wrong in a black marrying, having home and breeding children.

Until the black race gets liberated from the white race all ideas have no value and efficacy as far as Sula is concerned. When the black race achieves total emancipation from the white race, they will have the genius to devise their own ideas of family, home and children. Till such time whatever happens to the black race is the outcome of what has been imposed upon them by the white race.
The black race is placed in a social context to secure transition from one state of slavery to another state of freedom. Therefore, the novels of Toni Morrison portray this notion of transition in the depiction of characters. In this sense, Sula must be conceived as a character in a transitional view of life. Other characters appear in other novels to complete the process of transition. The character of Sula is placed as a character of transition. The black people are neither liberated nor are they willing to get liberated. It is in this awkward condition Sula functions in the society. The entire Medallion is in direct opposition to what Sula does because what she does is different from what they are accustomed to do. It is in this tragic context Sula is placed. She is a lonely figure fighting a lone battle against all such opposition. The greatest irony is that the black people do not know that the battle Sula waged against them is with a good motive. But it is the battle for their freedom and emancipation. All the black characters misconstrue the whole purpose of Sula’s battle. It is in this perspective that the character of Sula must be viewed.

In the running conversation between Eva and Sula some lines uttered by Eva are given below in order to find out and discover the withstanding capacity of Sula:

“Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee.”
“Mamma must have skipped that part. Her day wasn’t too long.”

“Pus mouth! God’s going to strike you!”

“Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?” (SULA 93)

When Sula sarcastically replies that mamma’s life was not in accordance with the assurance given in the Bible Eva says that God will strike Sula. But Sula retorts by saying “Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?” (SULA 93).

It is a very critical question put by Sula to Eva. If God could see Plum being allowed to be burned, then the same God as well remain silent and inattentive without striking at Sula. God remained a God of silence in the matter of Plum. Therefore, the same God can choose to be a God of indifference to Sula also. Eva thinks that Sula’s non-compliance with her request for family and her impolite reply to the question will lead to God striking at Sula. When Eva curses Sula for her impudent reply, she even goes to the extent of saying that Sula must have been the one who must have been burnt. This remark of Eva induces Sula to come out with a clear response and reaction.

There is a very quick wordy emotional exchange between the two. When Eva says that Sula must have been burnt, Sula suitably replies in the most post-modern way that she is lighting the house
metaphorically. It means that Sula is planning to illumine the black minds which remain without knowledge and capability. Sula observes that her duty is to fire the black minds with the flame of knowledge and awakening. Eva does not realise this purpose of Sula and so she replies in a very literal way saying that “Hell fire” does not need lighting and it is already burning in her. It is in the Biblical tradition that Eva’s reply to Sula is covered and couched. Sula is of the opinion that what is burning in her is her own. But for Eva the words “Hell fire” and burning have the Biblical literalness which means a horrid reality to which a sinner is exposed. Hell fire is burning in hell for the purpose of purifying corrupt minds. Sula distorts the biblical reference. She says that fire is burning in her to awaken knowledge in the ignorant minds of the blacks. Eva is in the biblical tradition meaning fire as having a dual function of punishment and purification. What Sula aims at is far different from what Eva looks for. They are obviously at cross purposes with each other. According to Eva all the indifferent audacious responses of Sula have no reverence for her reference to following a life style which is shown in the revealed religion of the Bible. Sula is not in a mood to act in a respectful spirit. There is no need to call the action of Sula one of irreverence and disrespect. What is at stake is that Eva is not prepared for any review about what she speaks at length on the verdict of the Bible.

In the conversation, Eva’s use of words makes a reference to the Christian theology including the sociology and psychology of the
religion which is the ultimate doctrine of life for her as enunciated in the Bible. The unsolved problem is why God remained silent while Plum was being burnt. How the God which did not punish Eva for burning Plum punish Sula for saying that Mamma’s life was short although he lived in close adherence to the word of the Bible. Sula repudiates the rational and moral relation between disobedience and punishment as stated by Eva. The mission of Sula is to question all the things which have been accepted and taken for granted. Sula reveals her highest critical sensibility when she states that whatever is burning in her is her own. According to Eva “Hell fire” will burn in a person who questions the word of the Bible in leading life. But what Sula asks for in terms of clarification is nothing but developing a capacity for a critical reading of the Bible. Sula is at a loss to know that it is easy for a person like Eva to remain self-contented without showing in her mind an option for reconsideration or re-examination of the entire issue without any reference to the external standards which are derived from the Bible and mandate of the white race. To remain without being alive, or unalive to the reality of the blacks’ need for a new vision of life amounts to a life which is equal to the existence of stone. Sula is a character of challenge while Eva is a character of conformism.

The question is not disrespect for Eva as is mistakenly understood but the problem is that Sula has no respect nor sympathy for the mental state in which Eva is placed without questioning the
established values. Sula cannot forgive this type of uncritical sensibility found in Eva. Sula’s respect for grandmother is immense. But this does not prevent her from pointing out the uncritical mind of Eva. The need for a new response to life is what prompts Sula to question Eva’s basic Biblical assumptions. But one has to evolve a new response to life amidst severe criticism, opposition and struggle.

No one in the black community ever realises that Sula is working for the ultimate emancipation of the blacks. The fate of Cain in the Bible awaits Sula with its own limitations. Still Sula is born with a rose mark on her face somewhat similar to Cain. “The rose mark over Sula’s eye gave her glance a suggestion of startled pleasure. It was darker than Nel remembered” (SULA 96).

It is a remark made by Nel which indicates the black mark in Sula. Two references are evident in Cain which can be likened to the condition of Sula. Cain killed Abel and he is cursed to be a homeless wanderer. Sula according to the view of Medallion is a curse to the village and so she is kept out. What is important is that Cain has been cursed and ignored in the Biblical tradition. But Toni Morrison reverses the Biblical axiom that Sula need not be cursed in the similar way as she is paving the way for a new pattern of life for the black race. Her condition of being driven out of the village is similar to the condition of Cain wandering like a vagabond. Sula is living far ahead of her times and other characters in the novel are not able to keep pace with her
vision of thinking. Sula only pities their condition because the blacks do not know what ultimately free and enduring life means to them.