"Mamma did you ever love us ?” Associations and Rejections in Sula

The real hell of Hell is that it is forever. Sula said that doing anything forever and ever was hell.

Toni Morrison, Sula

The workings of the human heart are the profoundest mystery of the universe. One moment that makes us despair of our kind, and the next we see in them the reflection of the divine image.

Charles Chestnut, The Marrow of Tradition

Sula dramatizes the post- 1965 era which is considered displaced and elapsed past in the history of slavery. The story of the novel is patterned around the friendship of two girls-Nel Wright and Sula Peace. The former adopts the social structure laid for her, but the latter defies these set patterns and lives a life on her own terms and conditions. Yet the story is not only about the two girls. It also dramatizes the journey of Eva Peace, her daughter Hannah Peace and her granddaughter Sula Peace. Running parallel to this story is the story of Nel Wright, the daughter of Helene Wright who is raised by her grandmother. The fabric of this novel is woven around these three generations which are headed by a female member of their family.

The book is divided into an introduction and two parts- the first one details the years when the two girls grow up in their twenties and the second period is of their forties, when the two girls are grown- up women. Their stories are integral to the narration of their community’s survival. Like The Bluest Eye, Sula also presents its theme in the motif of reversal in which the set socio- cultural order is turned upside down as a result of psycho-social forces. Through the storyline, Morrison calls its readers’ attention to a world where whites are shown equivalent to the overwhelming and irrepressible evils of life, where Blacks have come to the state of self-defacement, and coloured people’s attempts to express themselves prove destructive at social, economic and political level. On the surface level, Sula appears to be a story of the citizens of Bottom, a Medallion Black community. But the major emphasis is
on the story of Shadrack and Sula who seem to be important people of the community which thinks that “what Shadarack was all about [and] what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about” (6), creating a new field for critical opinions in Afro- American study.

The history of Afro- Americans makes it clear that role of mother is sacred to their community. Sula portrays a distinct and special relationship between mothers and daughters. Eva and Hannah, Hannah and Sula, Helene and Nel- the three major pairs are central to the theme of the novel, displaying a wide range of emotional powers for a critical exploration. Though the comparisons are striking, they are alike between each pair. Each daughter can be seen inheriting a distinct feature of her mother. These characters become significant because they historicize oppressions of black women at different levels and prove how their relationships- be it with their mother, man or child are finally distorted by forces of racism and poverty.

The book examines the mother- child relationships at Bottom, which correspond to the middle class Wright family, and in its poorest domain it is done through the household of Eva Peace. Most of the female characters in Sula transgress the defined boundaries of the traditional mythical role of a mother in African- American community. But, what is worth noting is that even liberated women are yearning for freedom and if they fail to acquire it, they pass on this disability quietly and unconsciously to their daughters.

As has already been stated in the earlier chapters, during slavery, mothers lived without any assurance that they would be allowed to raise and nurture their biological children. Daughters and sons were lucky if they lived with their parents. But the tradition of considering motherhood as a sacred task ensured a safe motherhood by supporting the practices of ‘othermothering’ and ‘community mothering’ in black community. Children were taken care of by biologically unrelated older women of the community or grandmothers and great grandmothers, when their mothers went to work in the fields and could not devote the required time due to the hostile conditions to their children. Mother- daughter roles and maternal functions extended beyond the biological bonds and blood relations. There were many mothers to a black girl child and many daughters to a black mother.
Sula tries to construct and define these mother-daughter relationships under the clear lens of set notions of motherhood. The female characters in this novel are given a chance to shape and rearticulate their subjectivity on their own terms. Morrison has tried to challenge the idea that in African-American context, motherhood can damage their identities as it can do just the opposite. Thus, these mother-daughter bonds deeply affect the characters’ subjectivities. It is often displayed in instances when daughters in her fictions try to understand their mothers to recognize themselves as daughters in an attempt to solve the intricacies of their relationships. Simple, yet portrayed with complex interactions, these depictions and their nuance-layered presentations cannot be solved by using the pre-conceived stereotypical images and notions of mother-daughter relationship.

Mothers in Sula are neither marginalized nor romanticized. Eva Peace, the first mother-figure is introduced as an abandoned wife. Her husband BoyBoy leaves her, and she is left with “1.65$, five eggs, three beets and no idea of how and what to feel. The children needed her and she needed money to get on with her life” (32). Overwhelmed with her feelings of helplessness and anxiety for her children’s needs, she manages to “postpone her anger for two years until she has both time and energy for it”. (32). She is helped by her community members during these days because she does not have enough means to provide sustenance to her family. Left alone with her four children, Eva Peace takes the responsibility to take care of the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of her family. With her authoritative position as a mother, she can be defined as a “symbol of power”.

Eva understands and acts according to the demands of the situation. She leaves her three children with Mrs. Suggs, who is her neighbour, and also helps her with “a bowl of peanuts” everyday when she is left with nothing to feed her children. Eva returns to her people with a missing leg after eighteen months. Mrs. Suggs plays a little, yet significant role from the point of view of African-American traditions of mothering. She reminds us of Baby Suggs in Beloved. A parallel can be drawn between the two characters in their role as ‘othermother’ to Sethe and Eva’s children during their absence.
Stanlie James in her essay “Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformations” defines othermothering “as an acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal” (45). Such complementary practices of mothering give a broader dimension and great status to mothers in West-African societies. The practice of ‘othermothering’ remains central and crucial to African-American tradition of mothering for the survival of black people. Mrs. Suggs’ help by taking responsibility of Eva’s children proves a great help to her while she is away from them, busy making arrangements for their survival.

As a mother, Eva can go to any extent to ensure the physical well-being of her children. When her son Plum is a baby, her attempts to save him are one of the marked struggles of her life. It is winter and, “he stopped having bowel movements” (33). She massages his stomach. Mrs. Suggs gives her some castor oil, but nothing works. He “cried and fought so they couldn’t get much down his throat anyway. He seemed in great pain and his shrieks were pitched high outrage and suffering away…he gagged, choked and looked as though he was strangling to death”(33-4). Eva resolves to take a last step for her son’s relief. She is resolved, and:

Deep in darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby down over her knees, exposed his buttocks and had shoved the last bit of food she had in the world….up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernails snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. (34)

Eva finally realizes that she cannot afford to rely on others. She will have to struggle on her own and she decides to leave her children for some time. When she comes back with her missing leg, not much is known about the reason of this loss. From the beginning, she is portrayed as a harsh and practical woman and a heroic character by her courage to lose and gain. She is not scared of any aftermaths. When she comes back, she returns with all modes of sustenance. She clears her debts to Mrs. Suggs, builds a house on Carpenter’s road and rents it later. Eva’s independent
status makes her rank and position equal to that of the head of a family. She attains a primary status, not secondary in her family as well as society.

Miriam Johnson in her article “Strong Mothers, Weak Wives” writes, “Women play roles of cultural and social significance and define themselves less as wives than as mothers” (225). Johnson continues, “As per Matrifocality, mother have some degree of control over the kin unit’s economic resources and is critically involved in kin-related decision making processes…” (226). In matrifocal cultures, a woman’s role as mother is emphasized more than as a wife. Such society is characterized by the idea of gender equality. A black woman’s life is not defined by her role as a wife because there is no male-figure in the family. The role of a mother becomes a ‘symbol of power’ and it empowers these women to become heads of their kin-unit systems. When they are abandoned by their men and left alone to struggle with their children, they bear the social and economic responsibilities by experiencing gender equality in sharing responsibilities in their family unit. While elucidating and theorizing in support of this idea, Patrica Hill Collins writes:

African American mothers have long integrated their activities as economic providers into their mothering relationships. In contrast to the cult of true womanhood, in which work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of Afrocentric definitions of Black motherhood. (1993: 48)

Like other black women, even Eva “could not afford the luxuries of motherhood as non-economically productive, female occupation” (49). Her role proves that in black people’s culture and community, motherhood is emphasized over wifedom and these women’s roles as economic provider means that the role of a wife is less operative than the role of a mother. The reasons for Eva’s missing leg remain a mystery throughout the novel. This kind of portrayal with unrevealed facts is similar to many other interpretations of maternal acts in Morrison’s novels, which are not openly discussed and revealed but are left open for various analyses by the readers.

Psychoanalysts focus on “good mothering” as essential to the development of a child’s personality. According to their theories, it is a mother who takes care of all
the needs of her child and ensures the survival of an infant. Mae Henderson mentions that “African-American women are many times confined to the dominant discourse’s stereotypes as sexually promiscuous, matriarchs and lazy welfare mothers” (32). *Sula* defies these pre-ordained images of black women under the binary distinctions by portraying black mothers as fluid characters who are complexly developed and therefore distinct from the preordained stereotypes.

The case of Eva Peace falls under the same category. Although she attains relative autonomy, builds a house, rents a room as source of income and becomes the head of the household, she is not reduced to the traditional mother-figure. She is not a perfect and selfless mother but a woman who also respects her personal aspirations and desires in comparison to the other Peace women who “simply loved maleness for its own sake” (41). She not only perceives herself as a matriarch, but also remains honest in her dignity to her sexual desires. She loves her children above herself and still she recognizes her own needs and fulfils them without being simply promiscuous. After BoyBoy leaves, Eva and her daughter develop a liking for every man except BoyBoy. There are no clear reasons for such behaviour of the Peace women. Eva enjoyed the company of men but refuses to be dominated by them or give up to her bodily desires. Her interaction with the men of her community satisfies her desire to gain little pleasure in their appreciation of her abilities displayed in winning small games, or when she keeps her say by refusing to agree to what they say. She has a strong narrative voice which maintains its authority through her control in her family and community. She maintains it throughout the story, and continues to present herself as a ‘good mother’.

In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow discusses the importance of “maternal care” by observing that most analysts assume physiology as an explanation to a woman’s child-care responsibilities. It becomes essential for her to bear and fulfil these responsibilities because it is her biological destiny to bear, deliver, nurse and rear her children. Eva also accepts her destiny and does all possible attempts at all risks to provide them a safe and secure place called ‘home’. Her maternal disposition creates a different atmosphere for her in which she is aware of her maternal responsibilities, despite of the fact that she is located within a community that is critical of a woman who tries to maintain her position through her
authorial voice. With her decisions and consequent actions, she challenges and defeats the governing conceptual belief that women, as mothers, can exist in and exercise their rights and duties only in a curbed and delegated province. Andrea O’Reilley remarks that “Eva in particular, distresses readers because the maternal power she claims upsets comfortable notions of maternal powerlessness” (165).

Eva’s economic and social burdens force her to deviate from the dominant ideologies and prevalent perceptions of motherhood. Thus, sex-segregated roles do not apply to a black woman and this is evident in Eva’s case also. Being a black woman, she has to act as head of the family and work for the needs of her children. Such powers and opportunities of empowerment provide an impetus to mothers to exercise their liberation and pronounce their enabled state. Eva is a black mother, so it is her destiny to make proper arrangements for the physical survival of her children, which is her foremost objective and utmost priority. According to O’Reilley, “Securing food and shelter and struggling to build and sustain safe neighborhoods is what defines both the meaning and experiences of black women’s motherwork” (32).

As an African-American mother, Eva’s roles and responsibilities also transgress her household boundaries. Collin’s theory of black motherhood accentuates a female’s standpoint to self-delineate and appreciate models of communal motherwork. Through this enterprise of collective efforts to preserve and empower children, black mothers participate in the tasks of ‘community mothering’ and ‘othermothering’. As mothers, they are enabled to share the responsibilities of child care, disclose maternal passions and contribute to the fulfilment of maternal concerns, after liberating themselves from all kinds of patriarchal influences and interferences.

Morrison’s portrayal of Eva as an ‘othermother’ and ‘community mother’ further confirms her commitment as a nurturer and preserver. Her decision to rent her newly owned house glorifies her role as the creator of a safe haven for her community where people live with a sense of safety and security. She has not only toiled for her children, but has also extended her care and concern to her folks by contributing to their basic need for survival. Her role is similar to Baby Suggs’ in Beloved who also shares a homeplace with the freed slaves and extends her loving hand to her
community. Glenn De Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek further remark on her extended role and note that

Eva’s efforts extend from her immediate family to the larger community.....Eva’s house becomes a kind of extended family where she performs her matriarchal role...The house becomes a kind of social center for men...Eva takes homeless waifs...she becomes a connective force in the community, her traditional goodness a generative force for those around her.(35)

Such critical analyses help to view her as an influential and persuasive mother who is free to exercise her control over the people of her family and community, irrespective of their association or non-association to her.

Protection and preservation of the coming generations is another responsibility that is entrusted to black women because they are the facilitators in their journey towards liberation. They have to inculcate feelings of nurturance and self-love in their daughters as well as their sons. According to Sara Ruddick, preservation and nurturance of offsprings is the first and foremost duty of every mother. “Preserving the lives of children”, Ruddick writes, “is the central, constitutive, invariant aim of maternal practice” (O’ Reilley, 32). Though nurturance and training are two other fundamental demands of a mother’s role, she argues that it is ‘preservative love’ which best describes the significance of maternal love in African-American community. Nurturance has thus become a naturalized discourse of universal and normal experiences of motherhood. Thus, the preservative love of Eva puts her under the umbrella of “Good Mother”\(^1\), and her mothering becomes essential to the integral dimension of motherwork.

In most African-American literature, writers have focused majorly on mother-daughter relations. Not much has been written about mother-son relationship. The question that is frequently raised by black mothers while raising their sons is “how can they help ones develop the character, personality and integrity a black man-child needs to transcend these forces?”(King,19). The pivotal theme of their relationship is the survival of black man. The two notable exceptions, Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell, in their study on black mothers and sons have
contributed a very significant observation that mothering manifests itself in two diametrically opposed modes of mothering: “mothers who whip their sons brutally ‘for their own good’ and mothers who love their sons to destruction through self-sacrifice and over-indulgence” (9).

In *Sula*, Eva and her son Plum’s relations can be critically evaluated under the above mentioned binary poles of critical evaluation. She reminds us of Sethe in *Beloved* who has empowered herself with the authority to take back her daughter’s life because she has given her that life. Eva’s mothering also transcends all extreme emotions. Her decision to burn her son to death challenges all constructs of the dominating ideologies of motherhood. Eva, like Sethe, exercises her freedom beyond her maternal rights by burning her son because she knows that by doing so, she is relieving him from a slow death that he will suffer due to his drug addiction. Her action is a step towards her son’s eternal peace to release him from all painful aftermaths.

The opening and closing of this scene express the dichotomy of maternal love, which is a very common behavioural response of black mothers which is exhibited when they have to decide the best for their child in extreme situations. When Morrison prepares us for the scene, Eva’s motherly love and affectionate expression heightens the warmth of this intensely tragic scene where a son is cuddled like an infant in his mother’s arms. We are given a slight indication of Eva’s guilt by her behaviour. The scene resonates with her memories of that night when she saves her son from acute bowel pains and realizes and fulfils her duty as the only caretaker of her child. On the present night, she is determined to do something which is within the sole jurisdiction of a mother. She is cradling and ‘rocking’ him, controlled by a distinct emotion that is revealed in usual outbursts of maternal anguish. Her anger is actually a manifestation of her love, because for black mothers, violent actions are often attempts to assert their authority over their loved ones. Plum, in his mother’s arms:

Opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of blessing, some kind of
baptism, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said….where the kerosene soaked Plum lay in snug delight. (47)

A close reading of this scene posturizes Plum in a consecrated realm of relief, the “great wing” of Eva is a preservative for Plum, “blessing” for him, preserving him by her love. The combined images of Water and Light conglomerate to accord a sacred sanctity to the scene and it maintains the idea that Eva has succeeded in providing reincarnation to Plum. In comparison to Sethe in Beloved, "The images of ritual and renewal promise a rebirth from death. Eva kills Plum so that he may be reborn…When a child is in pain, the first desire and duty of the mother is to put an end to child’s suffering” (O’Reilley, 149). The quote supports the argument that it is the power of Eva’s love which permits her to salvage her son by all necessary and possible means.

The mother-son relation also juxtaposes Plum’s weak manhood with Eva’s strong womanhood and motherhood. It is not only the relational binary of strong-weak individuals which is echoing the novel, but also a constant reminder of her failed mothering to Eva. When Plum suffers from severe pains in her childhood, the dreadful night and its darkness generate a sense of guilt in her mother who holds herself responsible for her son’s pain. Eva thinks, “Something must be wrong with my milk” (33). Milk, breasts and womb are symbols of a woman’s fertility and maternity and focus on her primary role as a mother. She counters this moment, replete with introspected thoughts of failed mothering for the second time when she is killing her son. But this time, her decision categorizes her under the two extremes of good and bad and successful and unsuccessful mother. If that night she justifies her “good mothering”, this night she is not holding her son Plum, but her futile mothering in her arms. Plum’s futile masculinity reminds her of her husband BoyBoy. Her excess love proves disastrous for her son. Her attempts to bequeath everything to Plum spoil him damagingly. When he returns from war, “his hair had been neither cut nor combed in months, his clothes were pointless and he had no socks…..Eva waited”(45) for a long time, but it proves no good. A black mother is the “heart in the hand” that enables the children to “face forward with feet on the ground and be themselves”(O’Reilley,19). But it proves wrong when Eva experiences her
motherhood as a site of oppression. She cannot bear Plum’s “infantile fixation” and then decides to get rid of her son who has badly failed in his maleness.

In her novels, Toni Morrison shows that men reach a state of completion through their identification with the ancestral memory that they embody. In *Maternal Thinking*, Sara Ruddick writes: “Many mothers find that the central challenge of mothering lies in training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and whom the mothers can actively appreciate” (104). Eva’s high spirited maternal care and her determination and resolution to be the pillar of her household for her children’s survival does not allow her to accept any proofs of her botched maternal care, unsuccessful fostering of values and broken connections to one’s heritage. She refuses to accept the shadow of her futile mothering and finally stamps her victory by conferring salvation upon her son. Plum’s weak personality and his tendency to depend on some external support, in turn, spoil his sense of self-belief and to add to it, he finally loses his masculinity without his mother.

Literally and symbolically, this murder soils and crushes the image of “good mother”. While combating these dualities in the minds of a mother, Eva finally sweeps off all doubts and ambiguities. “Any doubts she may have had in going forth with her intended murder are put to rest when, feeling thirsty, she sips what she sees as a strawberry drink, only to find out that it is water stained with blood” (47). Water is a symbol of purity and running life, but here it has been tainted by Plum’s addiction as he has tainted his life. Red is the colour of death and blood, similarly, red water foreshadows the event of Plum’s death. By her act, Eva as a mother actually demarcates the boundaries for her son. She is convinced that he is trying to crawl back into her womb, which is suggestive of an unbreakable and natural attachment between mother and child. The mother’s harsh decision to act as a sole authority over her son’s life overpowers her concerns as a mother and she prefers that he should die as a human rather than live as an adult infant.

To use Carl Jung’s terms, Eva is both a “loving and terrible mother” (82). Michele Pessoni elaborates on this phrase and writes: “Eva is no passive receptacle...[nor she] is indifferent destroyer swallowing up life, but a maternal force who desperately loves her son and wants to preserve rather than destroy his
manhood” (444-5). In her effort to maintain her authority, she destroys her body. O’ Reilley has made a strong and convincing argument that the scene of a son’s murder distresses the reader “precisely because Eva claims a maternal power that upsets her comfortable notions of maternal powerlessness, particularly that which pertains to black women, who are expected to be powerless in a racist and sexist culture” (119).

In his book *Symbols of Transformation*, Carl Jung has briefly examined the incest taboo as it appears in myth. Contrary to Sigmund Freud, he believes that the “basis of the ‘incestuous’ desire is not a cohabitation but….the idea of becoming a child again, of returning to the parental share, and of entering into the mother in order to be reborn through her” (223-4). When Eva responds to Hannah’s questions about the reasons behind Plum’s death, there is a surreptitious indication that he had a desire to lie down with his mother. While developing the idea of this kind of desire, Jung mentions that it is first hidden in the child and secondly, it is an ever longing desire which is figurative of a longing for rebirth. But there is no explanation to the functioning of this desire from a mother’s perspective. Eva sees no other exit and escape for her son except his death.

Eva adequately answers Hannah’s questions but “it was like two people talking at same time “(71). Her agony and pain echo her hardships and her grief that voice her helplessness on the weakness of her son. She replies as if she is justifying her action as a strong and resilient matriarch who lives with a single aim to provide basic necessities to her children in the wake of harsh struggles of life:

He give me such a time. Such a time. Look like he didn’t even want to be born. But he come on out. Boys is hard to bear…..It was such a carryin’ on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared….After all that carryin’ on, just getting’ him out and keepin’ him alive., he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well….There was space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin’ back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time….I had room in my heart but not in my womb….I birthed him once, I couldn’t do it again….I couldn’t birth him twice.(71)
It is not only Eva’s maternal anguish on her weak and emotionally crippled and physically maimed son, but the distressed belief of a mother who can view her son’s future destruction behind his weak and faintly smiling face. She tries to justify her act and neatly adds: “But I held him close first. Real close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy”(72). It has rightly been said in Meher Pestoneji’s *Sadakchaap*:

> After you’re born  
> You cannot fit back  
> Into Mother’s womb  
> You have no choice  
> But to bump, bruise, bleed  
> And still crawl on and on…..

In her book *Mother- Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch further elaborates on such articulation and exercise of a mother’s anger as Eva’s and writes:

A mother cannot articulate anger as a mother; to do so she must step out of a culturally circumscribed role which commands mothers to be caring and nurturing to others, even at the expense of themselves…..To be angry moreover is to create a space of separation, to isolate oneself temporarily; such breaks in connection, such disruptions of relationship again challenge the role that not only psychoanalysis, but also culture itself assign to mothers. (170)

Marilyn Frye adds on anger and further comments that “By determining where, with whom, about what and in what circumstances one can get angry…, one can map others’ concepts of who and what one is” (Hirsch,94). If Eva’s anger is marked by her isolation from her defined roles, then there is also a subdued emotion of anger and frustration because of her husband who has abandoned her and left her with poverty, scarcity and unfed children.

Such analysis of maternal love and subdued anger raises all possibilities of confronting the social and cultural status of an angry and abandoned mother. Eva’s frustrated and subdued range of emotions can be well interpreted when we examine this murder as a perfect demonstration of her controlled anger.
Eva is frequently questioned about the measure of her maternal love, either by her daughter or granddaughter. Hannah questions her mother, not only for Plum’s death, but also about her dead expressions of love for her daughter. She asks:

Mamma did you ever love us?....So she all right. ‘Cept Mamma. Mamma the only one ain’t right. Cause she din’t love us.

“You settin’ here with your healthy- ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes of maggot if I hadn’t.”

“I didn’t mean that Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin’ ‘bout something else. Like. Like. Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know play with us?”

“…I’m talkin’ ‘bout 18 and 95 when I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake eyed ungrateful hussy…Don’t that count? Ain’t that love?” (68-9)

For Eva, there is no moment in her life when her children’s thoughts do not haunt her mind. Many theories have been propounded by critics on this discussion regarding the meaning of mother-love between Eva and her daughter Hannah. Dayle DeLancey argues that

Eva must withhold some love from her children because she has neither time nor the energy to give it. The rigors of improving her family existence have led Eva to adopt a severe manner that distances her children from her. The struggle for survival has given her love for her children a hard edge which has nearly destroyed her relationship with them. (17)

Eva’s possessive and domineering attitude drives her to an edge where she can think about nothing, but only words like “survival”, “existence” and “sacrifices” hold their meaning for her because she wants her household to have a place in her community. The journey of Eva’s motherhood marks her as a traditional mother in the beginning, but very soon the meagre modes of sustenance and deteriorating condition of Plum and Hannah shake her to the brutal realities of life. She regains her status as a dominant matriarch by distancing herself from her children and returns to them after arranging for all possible ways of assured survival and living. While commenting on this transformation and redefinition of Eva’s love, critic Trudier
Harries argues that “Eva chooses over self-sacrifice, borders on immortality, and therefore becomes free” (34).

Hannah has raised two specific questions to her mother Eva, “Did you ever love us? Did you ever play with us”? (69) Hannah’s questions can be answered within the normative discourse of natural and traditional expressions of love and care. According to her, if her mother plays with her, she loves her. If her mother spends time with her, she loves her. Hannah, as a child, is unaware of the racist practices and ideologies which affected her mother’s love and caring. She could not decipher the understood codes of unconventional love. Playing, caring, expressing love— they all are natural and traditional forms that articulate a mother’s love for her children. But as De Lancey argues, “Eva has no time to lavish traditional displays of affection upon her children (17). Eva was working and she left her children for their survival. She was doing all this at the expense of times of fun that she could have spent with her offsprings. But Hannah was unable to understand any countenance of love other than the one that normative and governing ideologies accepted and expressed. Eva’s physically impaired state and her attention on her family’s economic condition snips away those precious moments and energy that she could have earmarked for her kids. But she cannot be criticized merely on the basis of her insensitive and unnatural mothering. We feel pity for her state of poverty that impels her to sacrifice her body’s part, yet degrades her to the level of an immoral and unnatural mother. Her love is interpreted as hard-edged and neither Hannah, nor anyone else is capable to see her when she is “sitting with three beets” (37), busy making arrangements for her children’s life.

Such portrayals are very commonly found in Toni Morrison’s novels. In her novels, mother-daughter relationship appears with a lack of compassion and warmth or any other natural and accepted expressions of maternal love which are often found in white ideals of motherhood. But the question that whether this is love or not is put up by the writer herself in Eva’s discourse, “Don’t that count? Ain’t that love” (69)? In 1980, in an interview with Ann Koenen, Morrison answered:

[I] t’s problematic playing with children when you don’t know how to stay alive. The children are always hostile about it, but then they carry the same
thing on. That kind of sentimental love for children is not possible except in a certain kind of loving society, where you can relish it. Children are easy marks in aggressively oppressive societies. (Taylor- Gutherie 1994: 69-70)

The novel not only redefines mother-daughter love as a culturally determined experience, but also suggests that it is a mother’s image which is reflected in her daughter. If we ponder upon Hannah’s question, it tells us that the act of preservative love also justifies Eva’s maternal love. But Hannah’s relations with her mother prove as a wedge drawn between her mother and herself. She weighs her mother’s unconditional love with her conditioned expressions of love.

A critical commentary on mothers and daughters is not restricted to Eva-Hannah relation only, but also extends to Hannah and Sula. While the question of mother-love concerning the first generation is centered on Hannah’s question, the second generation’s pattern can be visualized in Sula’s disappointment, which is similar to Hannah’s observation on her mother’s concern for her. She says: “...I love Sula, I just don’t like her. That’s the difference. Guess so. Likin’ them is another thing. Sure, they different people you know”. (57)

Hannah expresses her wish for a distinct identity of her daughter. Mother’s love is unquestionable and undoubtedly selfless and unconditional, though in some cases it may be influenced with the prevalent social discourses but still, sometimes they may not like the personality that their children assume and adopt. There may be a particular stage or moment or certain habits which may be disliked by a mother. But as a child, we need to believe in our mother’s love for us. For Morrison also, Hannah’s statement is an “honest statement at any rate”. But rather than pathologizing her statement, we criticize her as a bad or an insensitive mother.

We should consider the fact that ideologies of black mothering are very distinct to white or Eurocentric ideologies of motherhood. Black mothers aim at rearing their sons and daughters as distinct individuals to face and resist the oppressive practices in society. But as a mother, Hannah is not able to view her daughter as a person she wants her to be. Her disappointment is actually rooted in her self-centeredness and love for sexuality. The real cause of this behaviour can be traced in Eva’s love for maleness as, “it was man-love Eva bequeathed to her
daughters” (41). But Eva is a strong and dominant personality who is raised to the pedestal of a ‘community mother’ and acts as a grandmother to the three Deweys, whereas Hannah is self-engrossed in fulfilling her sensual pleasures. She never lives without men after her husband Rekus’ death and “she rippled with sex” (42). After her husband BoyBoy leaves her alone, Eva starts hating all men. In the company of males, it is not her desire but a sense of triumph. Morrison writes:

While Eva tested and argued with her men, leaving them feeling as though they had been in combat with a worthy, if amiable, foe, Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was— he didn’t need fixing— and so he relaxed and swooned in the Hannah-light that shone on him simply because he was. (43)

The above comparison between the mother and daughter is important because it also draws our attention towards the negative influences that come to a daughter from her mother’s personality. The same effects will be mentioned later while discussing Sula’s character and her attitude towards sexuality that she has inherited from her mother Hannah. Trudier Harris writes about Hannah that, “in any world but the one Morrison has created, Hannah Peace would be considered a slut” (75). She continues her argument by saying that the author does not impose such judgement on her. Instead, Morrison turns Hannah into an “acceptable embodiment of pleasure principle” (75). In constructing Hannah’s image, Morrison has created a picture of black women as ‘Jezebel’. Patricia Hills Collins calls this image as the one among many controlling images of black women which is “negative stereotypes applied to African-American women [that] have been fundamental to black women’s oppression” (46). Hannah receives all care, attention and love for which she yearns from her male admirers in her neighbourhood.

Mother-daughter relationship is very daughter-centric in all the three generations in *Sula*. But Hannah’s mothering transforms Sula’s personality and makes her an independent woman. She also proves herself as Eva’s granddaughter in the incident where she exhibits her outstanding courage and defiance by cutting her finger to scare a group of boys in order to defend herself and her friend Nel. When Sula’s personality is contrasted to her mother Hannah whose life revolves only
around her relationships with other men and her own sexuality, we can see that “Hannah’s candour helps [Sula] distinguish herself from her mother, giving her the right to live independently” (375). Her honest statement expresses her dislike for her daughter Sula and paradoxically benefits her in the outrageous development of her own self. Like her grandmother Eva, she has also learnt survival strategies and stands with her own distinct identity in her town. She is not scared of any social restraints, nor bound by any commitments, but disgracefully leads an adventurous life on her own terms. Her behaviour and distinct characteristics exhibit her masculine qualities and existentialist strategies. She proves her heroic qualities like her grandmother Eva. Keeping aside all these parameters of Hannah’s mothering, the central question regarding the mother-daughter relationship persists and cannot be discounted.

Hannah’s unmet expectations and her dislike for Sula also raise one more question—why will not a mother like her own daughter? Is there any bond that will complete and complement each of them, but which Hannah finds missing in Sula or, does Sula reflect Hannah’s imperfect and incomplete mothering? Satisfactory answers to all these questions can be explored through a psychological perspective on mother-daughter relationship. But is it not true that we try to involve a mother in mother-blame for a daughter’s psychological and emotional problems? Though there are no specific reasons and instances that are produced by the writer in this text to support this hostile parenting as the cause of Sula’s unhealthy psychological development, still the readers and critics find apposite answers to this problem in Hannah’s disconnections from her ‘motherline’ and her ancestral properties which are observed in Sula also. Eva’s role as a bread-winner of her household robs her of that time which she could have spent with her children. Further, her mutilation fills her with a physical loss which can never be compensated. Both these conditions nurture an environment that orphans her children and bereaves her from their sincere love, trust and gratitude. Eva’s loss takes its hold on Hannah, reflected in her long and oft-quoted discourse on maternal love. Hannah’s maternal failure confronts her in Sula’s silent, yet unacceptable act of watching her mother Hannah burning to death. Hannah’s death and Eva’s dreadful but failed attempts to save her daughter stamp an end to Sula’s connection with her “motherline”. Eva’s injuries towards the end of the
novel become a metaphor for those unhealed wounds and unshared pain that she carries buried inside her to the grave in the end.

Sula’s dismissal and her detachment from her ‘motherline’ boldly announce her disruption from any and every association to it. Neither the critics, nor does the text offers any clear explanations on this observation. Through our reading, we can infer that the main cause is Hannah’s comment and simultaneously Sula’s immaturity in misreading or misinterpreting it. Hannah’s statement confirms a mother’s rejection, which is very similar to Eva’s explanations of her own insensitive and untraditional mothering to Hannah. In response, Sula answers to her mother’s remark by detaching from all kinds of relationships. The narrator says that

This pronouncement sent [Sula] flying up stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye. Nel’s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts and back into the bright, hot daylight. (57)

After hearing Hannah’s confession, Sula runs with Nel to the river. A discourse between the two friends marks their initiation into heterosexuality. According to Morrison, the event finally shapes the development of her selfhood:

Hers was an experimental life- ever since her mother’s remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow. (118-9)

This ‘centre’ and ‘speck’ refers to the absence of any connection with her mother’s memory that she can authentically claim as her own property. She is unable to reclaim any spiritual or psychic reconnections to her lost and displaced maternal rearing. Non-existence of such reclamation is a major factor for Sula’s disordered and disoriented individual identity. She fails to find any pillar to hold on, any memories to claim as her own and any face to remember when she feels psychologically or emotionally crippled. She has neither any strong ancestral properties, nor any firm grounding which can teach her respect or love for her tradition.
Sula’s self-dependent attitude develops a desire in her to acquire whatever she loves the most. She has learnt this from her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva. After BoyBoy leaves Eva, she is filled with distrust for any man, but still she is always surrounded by men and prefers their company. Hannah displays the same love but exhibits it through her love for sexuality and in her overt declaration of promiscuous behaviour. She never feels embarrassed of her relations with different men. But Sula is swayed by her mother’s behaviour in her adulthood and she takes too many lovers. At an early age, she sees her mother with different men in her house. One day:

Sula comes from school and found her mother in bed, curled spoon in the arms of a man. Seeing her step so easily in the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable. So she watched her mother’s face and the face of the men when they opened the pantry door and made up her own mind. (44)

For Sula also, witnessing such actions does not give birth to any intimacy, but only fulfils her desires and pleasantly answers her curiosity. The tendency to satisfy primitive desires without cherishing any relation destroys her love for her grandmother Eva and becomes the major cause of Eva’s tragic death. Sula’s defiant attitude inculcates feelings of indifference and unconcern for her own people. Her independence turns her into a non-sensitive daughter, who is critical of her mother’s care and love. This fragmentation builds a barrier between Sula, an independent woman, and Sula, the daughter. As a woman, she takes over the daughter and this woman-daughter dichotomy emerges in many molds throughout the novel. Hannah and Eva’s death, Sula’s relations with Nel’s husband, her running away to riverside—all these scenes boldly reflect and delineate Sula’s conflicting and complex personality. When Eva questions Sula about her plans of marriage and settling with a family and children, she contests to her suggestion openly and reflects her hostile feelings towards such traditional relationships which seal a woman’s fate and identity. The roots of this aggressive behaviour can be traced in the family environment in which Sula is born and brought up.
Children in the novels of Morrison view themselves as unloved because they are deprived of these conventional representations of maternal bonds. In addition to the other roles of a mother, O’Reilley also specifies on the most important function of ‘healing’ as one of the major functions in line with nurturance, preservation and cultural bearing:

This healing takes place when these children have become adults and centers upon the recovery of displaced selfhood for those individuals who were denied nurturance and cultural bearing in childhood. These adultinally achieve selfhood by being remothered as adults. The remothering is achieved by way of spiritual or psychic reconnection with a lost mother and by way of a reclamation of a lost or displaced mother/daughter selfhood. The psychic journey of return, and reclamation while directed to a spirit of a lost mother, is often initiated and overseen by an actual mother-figure, a close female friend of the troubled women who serves as an othermother for her. (40-1)

This process of ‘healing’ soothes and directs them to their ancestral and traditional heritage by teaching them how to preserve and then claim what is theirs, but has been misplaced and lost in the darkness of oppressive societal practices.

For Sula or her mother Hannah, there are no such reconnections which can strengthen their weakened relational ties and nurture their wounded souls. But in contrast to this, Sula’s grandmother Eva deviates from the line of these other two women. She transforms her plight into her power and the faces of her children mirror a pivotal challenge which gives her a strong reason to fight, exist and live. There are no instances in the text that throw light on Eva’s childhood or family. She is a woman who has not only fulfilled the needs of her family, but also shared the responsibilities of her community by redefining the ideologies of black motherhood. Her attachment is reflected in an unusual manner when she assumes her autonomous entity through her decisive powers and thus, leaves behind her children for some months to acquire means for their sustenance. Eva’s life-risking attempt to save her daughter from burning to death is another act which justifies her ability to prove that her weakness can also be transformed into her strength. Though her frail body is burdened under the weight of crutches, her injured and bleeding body confirms her devotion to her children. It evidences that until she dies, every moment of her existence will be
devoted to her children’s life. If Plum’s death is silently accepted by Eva as a way to provide him solace, Hannah’s death is marked by her agonizing cries on her failed attempts to save the total annihilation of her mothering. Though Eva succeeds in all her attempts to secure her children’s life, she fails to nurture in them a sense of life.

Juxtaposed to Hannah and Sula, Helene Wright and Nel Wright’s relationship witnesses the effects of excessive mother-love which finally and completely possesses a daughter’s personality. Helene Wright is the daughter of a whore, born and brought up in an environment which is safe and secure from any effects of her mother’s immoral life.

The grandmother took Helene away from safe lights and flowered carpets of the sundown House and raised her under the dolesome eyes of a multicoloured Virgin Mary, counseling her constantly on guard from any signs of her mother’s wild blood. (17)

Wanda Thomas Bernard and Candace Bernard write, “Black mothers pass on the torch to their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers or othermothers, to guard future generations”(47). Helene’s grandmother provides a safe and secure “homeplace” to her where she grows up while learning all the virtues of a woman and mother. Her grandmother becomes her mother, and fulfils all the possible needs of a daughter so that she grows up learning significant maternal functions. Helene is taught to behave properly by her grandmother and there are no signs of any resemblance to her mother Rochelle. She is embarrassed by her mother’s ways and escapes her past to save her daughter Nel from the shadow of her mother. To succeed in her plan, Rochelle goes to Bottom and marries Willy Wright.

Helene’s serious attempts to protect her daughter alter her protective love to possessive love. If Eva’s insensitive mothering is misinterpreted by Hannah as an absence of love, Helene takes her grandmother’s love as a lesson to retain the sacred tradition of motherhood. She maintains her connections with her “motherline”. She feels honoured and blessed to be a daughter who belongs to such strong line of black women who are empowered to perform their maternal role in an environment which is so unfavourable to mothering. As mentioned earlier, Sula misunderstands her
mother’s desire to see her daughter as an independent being and takes it as her dislike for her. Compared to this, Nel’s absorption and acceptance of her mother’s love serves as a guiding light for her life, and provides her the strength to live in a socially and culturally accepted manner to lead a meaningful and directed life.

Helene’s attempts to distance her daughter from her mother Rochelle prove successful. She is an antithesis to her mother’s character in all spheres of life. But her possession adversely affects her daughter. Nel becomes a lonely and insecure child. Nevertheless, neither Rochelle nor Helene can be judged as bad mothers. The difference can be witnessed in their complex behaviour as black mothers, and also in their individual ways of dealing with the circumstances.

Literally and symbolically, Helene tried to compensate for her mother’s absence in her own childhood by being present for her daughter Nel all the time. Her maternal practices prove that she is a concerned mother and a perfect house-head. For Helene, “[her] daughter was more comfort and purpose than she ever hoped to find in this life” (17). In opposition to her mother’s ways, she is a conventional mother who “participates in the most conservative Black church. And held in sway” (18). She “loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and husband” (18). Nel is not allowed to be herself and Hannah keeps all checks to ensure that “any enthusiasm that Nel showed were calmed by her mother” (18). She determinedly obfuscates any outbursts from her daughter to ensure that she fails to inherit any character traits of her grandmother Rochelle. Helene’s preference for perfection and order makes her a nagging mother. From looks to appearance to behaviour and character, there is nothing related to Nel which does not worry Helene. She constantly talks to her daughter about changing the shape of her nose. “While you sittin’ there honey, go ‘head and pull your nose. Don’t you want a nice nose when you grow up? (55) Her role as a dominating mother and ruling wife satiates her desire to be an authoritative person of her family. She provides and creates her own space by merging the two entities of a woman and a mother. With her dignity and devoted care, she instills the same social and cultural values in her daughter and transmits appropriate feminine values that shape and mold her mind and infuse in her the spirit to love, cherish and nurture the typical roles of a daughter, wife and mother. Nel becomes her mother’s shadow- a dutiful daughter and a responsible mother. Her lifestyle actually shadows
Helene’s mothering and bears the successful fruition of her great grandmother’s sacrifices and parenting.

Helene is personified as the “cult of true womanhood” in her community. The cult of true womanhood is a discourse born out of the white middle- class community in United States in 1820s. It embraces bourgeois African- Americans at the turn of the century. It calls for all women to “embrace values such as piety, chastity, domesticity and submissiveness” (Guy- Sheftall, 24). bell hooks notes that many black women accept this ideology to combat the stereotype of black woman as over sexualized beings whose only purpose was to give pleasure to white man (70). She continues that by altering the focal point from sexuality to motherhood, “[black women] tried to prove their value and worth by demonstrating that they were women whose lives were firmly rooted in the family” (hooks, 70).

If Sula has adopted her mother’s attitude towards sexuality and has learnt the use of the female body, then even Helene cannot be seen as completely distanced from her mother’s ways. On her trip to New Orleans, when the conductor humiliates and kicks her out of the cabin, she apologizes to him like “a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before”(21 ). Shortly afterwards, Nel’s observations about her mother’s dress that “hooks and eyes in the placket of the dress had come undone and exposed the custard- colored skin underneath”(22) horrify her with the idea that a woman’s body is used as an object of desire. Unknowingly, Helene resorts to her mother’s ways and this attitude problematizes her relations with her mother. Helene’s and Nel’s perceptions as daughters become similar at this point when both distance themselves from their mothers as daughters. But at the same time, they are also responsible for preserving the strong bond of mother- daughter relationship. They also reflect the influences of their mothers more than they suspect it.

This trip sows the seeds of miscommunication between mother and daughter. When Nel returns from their trip to her home, she looks at herself in a mirror and is reminded of that painful and humiliating encounter with the white conductor and black men. She tries to read the disgust of life on her dead great- grandmother’s still face which is like a cold exchange of words between Helene and her grandmother and
announces the beginning of a new life: “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me” (24). In many ways, Helene can be held responsible for adopting wrong white middle-class values, replicated in her dominating attitude towards her daughter’s life, and in the foolish glance that she throws at the white conductor who insults her. The negative influences of her mothering are aptly described in her daughter’s hostile feelings towards her own home and love for Sula’s house. Morrison writes:

When Sula first visited the Wright house, Helene’s curdled scorn turned to butter. Her daughter’s friend seemed to have none of the mother’s slackness. Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it and would sit on the red velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time—still as dawn. (29)

Helene is also guilty of her severed bonds with her mother because she fails to learn her language. An inability to understand her mother’s language pictures a drastic letdown at the first and basic step of the mode of communication between any two people. Symbolically and literally, this initiates us into the novel’s primary theme of fragmented relationships between mother and daughter. Nel imagines her mother as a “custard contained in her velvet dress” (22) and it demonstrated imperatively that she has distanced herself from her maternal heritage, as a very definite ‘me’ (Marianne,180). Her search for someone on whom she can rely begins from this moment when she is filled with “power, joy and fear” (28) at this moment of self-discovery. She cannot sustain this definition of self on her own, and it is only Sula who can possibly and supposedly offer her support in bearing the burden of her mother’s orderly house.

Mother-daughter relationship often portrays an array of complex attitudes due to a misinterpretation of extreme situations they are put in. Inevitably, daughters are influenced by their mothers either by interacting with them or by distancing from them. Incapacity to understand a mother’s challenges and her cultural experiences can also lead to the risk of alienation from one’s family and culminate in a failure to develop positive subjectivities. As daughters, Helene’s and Hannah’s judgments about their mothers begin to sever the delicate mother-daughter bond. The daughters
expect their mothers to behave as conventional mothers. As mothers, they are expected by their daughters to ignore their historical, economic and cultural restraints in expressing maternal love and concern. Sula, Nel, Helene and Hannah, all exhibit their incapacity to “transcend the fate of their mothers, as well as the inability to repeat it” (Hirsch, 426). To be an independent woman, each character longs to shape her subjectivity in her own manner. Despite the lack of proper understanding and existing barriers between the two, they somehow tend to share similar traits in their behaviour. But moreover, such fences hold a negative sway over the daughters.

Nel and Helene exemplify perfect womanhood and motherhood. Despite the fact that she attempts to secure good parenting for her daughter, Helene suppresses all a daughter’s natural instincts to be a free and independent person. Nel is always looked after by her mother and fails to learn how to acquire and gain the possession of what is hers. Due to excessive compassion, love and care, she is subdued and forced to accept whatever is given to her. She cannot withstand her mother’s dominion and prefers the disordered and unrestricted movements in Sula’s house where Eva sits with nuts in her sleeves, narrating stories to her children. Her weaknesses overpower her inborn defensive power and she fails to protect her from the evil influence of Sula.

\textit{Sula} creates a series of mother-figures that are yearning for mother-care and fail to attain it. These women are daughters and mothers who look up to their mother for an emotional bonding, but find them incompetent to fulfil it. These mothers, in one way or the other, reveal the fallacy of “Good mother” as constructed in the popular discourse. In the meaning of “mother”, it is obvious that she has to fulfil all the physical and emotional needs of her children. But the three mothers- Eva, Hannah and Helene- are deficient in their roles. They fail to derive a sense of completeness through their motherhood and lack some or the other dimension of motherlove. Their mothering alters the ideology of maternal love, which is expected by all black and white mothers in their communities.

\textit{Sula} also projects a new relationship where both the girls try to find mother surrogates in each other and thus, wish to interact with the maternal archetype. In each other, they find a “maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the
female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, all that fosters growth and fertility”. (Jung, 82). Nel’s discomfort at her own house initiates her search for someone, a quest which begins from that moment when she defines herself as “me” and distances herself from her mother.

When Nel, an only child, sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back, she studied the poplars and fell easily into the picture of herself lying on flowery bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. (51)

Sula and Nel share and seek for, in each other, what they miss in their maternal archetype. Morrison describes the entire loss and longing of their life when she writes: “Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead, Nel because he wasn’t), they found in each other’s eyes they were looking for” (52). These lines convey the tragic pathos of their life and explain the strong bonds of love and affection they desire.

Nel’s longing for her lost maternal archetype is fulfilled in Sula. According to Carl Jung, archetypes are androgynous and neither masculine nor feminine. Archetypes are multiple and plural in nature. The archetype of Mother is but one of the four that make up the ‘Feminine’, according to Jung. He includes that “any woman with whom a relationship exists- for example a nurse, a governess or perhaps a remote ancestress” (81). All women, hence, have the ability to represent this idea of a “mother”. Both friends seek completeness in each other, and “their friendship is as intense as it is sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality” (53). Each girl feels estranged from her mother. In this case, Nel and Sula are both outcasts in their own houses. However, “in the safe harbor of each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things” (55).

In the beginning, Nel and Sula seem to make one identity and one personality as “their friendship was so close; they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s ” (83). Their friendship continues till their teenage until Nel
marries and Sula leaves the community to attend college. By following the routes of conventional womanhood and exhibiting the teachings of her mother Helene, Nel decides to marry at an early age and makes her own house with her husband and children. She stays with her own people and resembles her mother in her associations with the community. Hannah’s ignorance, her directionless life and careless mothering lead to Sula’s search for solace in Nel’s friendship. But Sula loses the last chord of intimacy and love when she gives up Nel to her marriage with Jude. Or to say, she is distanced from her maternal archetype.

Sula detaches herself from her community and expresses her disobedience to the norms and rules set for a woman by the community. This is her own way to show her defiance against her folks and society. Her return is marked by chaos and violence that can be first seen in her ruthless behaviour with her grandmother Eva. This happens after Eva and Sula indulge in a conversation and Eva encourages Sula to marry and build her own house to settle with her children. From Eva’s point of view, marrying and having children is a process to settle down. To this proposition Sula responds: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself”(92). But rather than investing a part of her energy and utilizing her creativity for her husband and her children, she preserves it, creates a reservoir of negative energy and defies the patriarchal and conventional roles which are expected from and conferred upon a woman. Despite her distances from her mother, Sula maintains a relationship with her grandmother Eva until she returns from her travels. In her first conversation with Eva, Sula addresses her as “Big Mamma” (92), which connotes their relation and connection. But Sula’s conversation with Eva ends in the tragically ironic manner:

I ain’t never going to need you. And you know what? Maybe one night when you are dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I’ll just tip on up here with kerosene and- who knows- you may make the brightest flame of them all. (94)

Sula makes a bold and direct reference to Eva’s role in Plum’s and Hannah’s death. This statement follows Sula’s act of locking Eva, ending in her death, that leads to the final demise of any hopes of Sula’s reconnection with her ‘motherline’.

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This kind of detachment from ‘motherline’ and maternal archetypes is a metaphorical death for Sula that foreshadows her suicidal desire.

A contrasting study of Nel and Sula is the perfect example of an analytical study of their mothers’ mothering. Nel represents the “old type” woman who “lived only for the collective values of wife and mother, and apart from marriage had no place in society” (Harding 197:118). She is maternal, submissive, sexually pure and domestic, imaging the common conventional ideologies. All these qualities ensure the suppression of self, an accepted feminine virtue which she has been taught by her mother Helene Wright since her childhood. This shows that she is born and raised in a clean, neat and “incredibly orderly house” (51) and has learnt under her mother’s manipulating hand as to how to “behave” according to social norms and traditions. Her passivity, domesticity and self-denial destroyed her life, as, in her own words, “pinned herself into a tiny life” (165).

An articulation and definition of social otherness, Sula defies the rules and roles of conventional womanhood and sets new standards of morality, thus exercising her rights in a free space exemplifying a “daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, outlawed, dangerously female,” thus challenging Nel’s existential stasis (Morrison 1989: 25). She frames and follows her own ethics and mores of life. She is like her mother Hannah who is concerned with her satisfactory impulses and reminds us of an artist who is isolated from her society.

_Sula_ revolves around the daughters’ search for intimacy which is missing in their relation with their biological mothers and they seek in other women. To an extent, Morrison has created all the women characters in an image which oscillates between the binaries of female sexuality that is conventionally accepted in a patriarchal world. Hannah and Sula can be classified as whores and Helene and Nel can be categorized as devoted and asexual mothers. But neither of them is able to integrate the multiple aspects of their personality. In the end, all women die a lonely and miserable death.

Woven with the threads of many diverse relationships, _Sula_’s story can be read as a fabric of the dark and devouring shades of maternal bonds which gravely affect the child’s personality and identity. To add to this, the novel’s story also involves other dimensions of new relationships that may develop between females.
End Notes:

1. Andrea O’ Reilley describes ‘good mother’ as one who is chaste, moral, passive, obedient, respectable, controlled, altruistic, selfless and domestic. According to Thomas Miller, mothering discourses on mothering require that good mothers “act responsibly and present themselves in a culturally acceptable and recognizable manner” (86).
Works cited:


