CHAPTER III

ASSERTION OF BLACK FEMALE IDENTITY

- SULA

"In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood.

Toni Morrison
Sula
It is with ‘The Bluest Eye’ (1970) that Toni Morrison’s reputation and public literary life gets inaugurated. After writing it “Morrison became a frequent reviewer in the New York Times and an authoritative commentator on black culture and women’s concerns” (Furman 22). In Sula (1973) Morrison returns to the concerns of girlhood explored in her first novel but this time it is to explore the potential of female bonding. She uses paired female characters, themes of friendship, love and a vivid sense of community. On one hand it depicts “a disordered world where the ideal and the real are confused” (Das 59). On the other hand it depicts the effects of racism which has been a major concern in all of Morrison’s novels. Racism in all its myriad forms, whether blatant or subliminal, is a part of Sula as well. It gets interwoven with the focus of the entire novel which is on one special bonding relationship that of central black women characters – Sula and Nel.

Divided into two roughly equal parts, with a prologue followed by chapter titles consisting of dates, Sula appears to move in a straightforward progression from 1919 to 1927 and then from 1937 to 1941, with “1965” as the novel’s epilogue. But the events of various chapters don’t necessarily occur during the dates indicated. The text “spirals and laps back on itself, accruing sometimes changing or contradicting meanings as it goes. This demands the reader’s concentrated effort, for Morrison here dramatizes her talent for using languages” (Carmean 31). On the surface Sula is about the experience of the citizens of the Bottom, a black community in Medallion, a fictional Midwestern town. In the first sentence of the novel the narrator indicates that it is a community which does not survive: the Medallion City Golf Course is built where the bottom once stood.
In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. (Morrison 03)

This statement explaining why the community is destroyed is juxtaposed with the tale of its birth; its origins rest in a “nigger joke” [04], a slave’s inability to understand a white farmer’s duplicity. As Christian notes, Morrison’s juxtaposition of the Bottom’s birth to its death indicates that this novel “will be concerned with the community’s philosophy of survival” (Christian 49). The Bottom’s residents devote their time as well as energy to surviving an inhospitable environment, characterized by both poverty and racism, and most importantly, the presence of evil and their fear of death. The Bottom is more than a setting, however. The “nigger joke” based on deceit and motivated by greed, becomes an important structural and thematic thread in Sula. Behind the scenery, as it were, is the white man, controlling the literal disposition of the land and the slave’s perceptions of it through the manipulation of language:

A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy – the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn’t want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give his valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he
thought valley land was bottom land. The master said “Oh, no! 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.”

So the slave pressed his master to try to get him some. He preferred it to the valley. And it was done. (05)

Immediately following the description of the Bottom’s beginning come the tale of the origins of National Suicide Day, a holiday intended to free the community from its fear of unexpected death. The chapter is titled 1919 which introduces a survivor of both physical and psychological wounds suffered during his involvement in World War I. The holiday’s only celebrant, Shadrack, establishes the holiday to rid people of their death fears, for Shadrack “Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day” (07). These are the subjects of the opening pages of Morrison’s Sula. First the community is presented, an indication that it will be of importance to the novel. Then Shadrack appears a character the community will tolerate because he poses no threat to its survival. After this the novel depicts the events that occur between 1920 and 1965. Though, this structure is misleading. Christian links this structural pattern to that of some old African folktales: “The then is now; the now is the then; and the teller spins ever-intricate webs of connectiveness, until the web is completed or broken” (Christian 155). The chapters which comprise the first part of the novel are devoted to exploring the development of Nel and Sula’s friendship, while the second part of the novel depicts the divergence of their paths, however reconciles them at the novel’s
Morrison ventures to create a black woman heroine in Sula who consciously embraces the role of pariah, shattering the image of the conventional black woman who conforms to the norms of black community.

Morrison sketches a very daring and adventurous character in Sula, who breaks all bonds of blood, ties of community and human relationships in her quest for self, but is doomed, for life and experience. So desensitized and hardened that she loses the capacity to feel. She is depicted as a failure in her attempts to create “herself” living according to the dictates of her mind, but she is a triumphant personality in the end, when the realization dawns on Nel and the black community unconsciously accepts her ways and Nel realizes that she had been missing Sula. (Xavier 95)

The first family the reader is introduced to belongs to Nel Wright. She lives with her mother, Helen Wright. Helen herself the daughter of Creole whore was removed from her mother’s brothel by her grandmother, who counselled her “to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” (17). Helen is taught early that she must learn to control her instincts and behave in ways that are acceptable in society. As a mother, Helen raises Nel with a strict approach and strong conduct of societal values.

Under Helen’s hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground. (18)
Nel is created in her mother’s image. As Christian observes, Helen is “the image of the lady” in the novel (Christian 75). Her sense of decorum and self-control are always present. As her last name “Wright” [17] suggests, Helen spends her life trying to do the “right” thing. Only a brief glimpse of Nel’s family life is given. Nel and Helen are depicted journeying to New Orleans to visit Helen’s dying grandmother. The beginning of the journey is doomed as in their rush to catch the train; Helen and Nel mistakenly enter the coach for whites only. When Helen proceeds to correct her mistake a white conductor roughly chastises the apologetic Helen. He calls her “gal” [20], in racist manner then rudely directed her to the “COLORED ONLY” [20] coach. Helen’s reaction to the conductor leaves the other passengers stricken and Nel too felt ashamed.

Then, for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand, certainly no reason that Nel understood then or later, she smiled. 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, Helen smiled. Smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor. (21)

Nel sees the judgemental “midnight” [21] eyes of the two black soldiers who witness her mother’s passive subservience. She notes the hatred with which the passengers view her mother.

Nel sat opposite, facing both her mother and the soldiers, neither of whom she could look at. She felt both pleased and ashamed to sense
that these men, unlike her father, who worshiped his graceful, beautiful wife, were bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile. In the silence that preceded the train’s heave, she looked deeply at the folds of her mother’s dress. There in the fall of the heavy brown wool … If this tall proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequalled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look, if she were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too. (22)

This incident is an evidence of the racial treatment black people receives in America. In a way Helen becomes a victim of the race differences. Firstly she is forced to use the open fields since there are no restrooms for “colored women” [24]. Secondly, she is condemned and shamed by black men, her own race people, for her behaviour with the white conductor. It is through Helen that Morrison reveals the nature of black women who felt ashamed of their blackness. The humiliating trip has a fitting conclusion; Helen’s grandmother is dead by the time they arrive. Nel and Helen meet Rochelle on arrival. Rochelle, Helen’s mother, soon indicates that she must leave. Helen becomes angry for losing the chance to see her grandmother alive and becomes furious “seeing instead that painted canary who never said a word of greeting or affection or …” (26). Rochelle casual treatment of Helen’s stands in direct contrast to Helen’s strict upbringing of Nel. The trip though helps Nel to discover her own uniqueness: “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” (28). This trip represents Nel’s only departure from the Bottom. Her later adoption of a lifestyle very similar to Helen’s prevents future journeys, both geographical and psychological.
The reader is then introduced to the family of Sula. Morrison indicates the importance of family in the development of the individual. Just as Nel’s actions are influenced by her mother, Sula too reflects her maternal heritage. The chapter “1921” is devoted to the revelation of the characters of Eva Peace, Sula’s grandmother, and Hannah Peace, Sula’s grandmother and Hannah Peace, Sula’s mother. Morrison acquaints the reader to similar situations which would mark Sula’s future. An opportunity is presented to the reader to observe these women responding to situations which Sula will face later in the novel. Eva Peace is a true matriarch, “directing the lives of her children, friends, strays and a constant stream of boarders” (30). Having only one leg, Eva presides over the house from a wagon on the third floor as “the creator and sovereign” (30). Morrison shows both Eva’s remarkable strength and emotional vulnerability. It is BoyBoy, who departs after five years of marriage to Eva, leaving her and the children destitute as well as emotionally susceptible. Eva asks a neighbour, Mrs. Suggs, to care for her children until next day, and disappears for eighteen months. She returns with one leg and enough money to build a new house and provide for her children. Her missing leg is speculated upon by the community that either she “struck it under a train” or “sold it to a hospital” (31) in order to make money. Eva’s actions are assessed as:

Maternal abandonment is, of course, a cardinal sin in a society that perceives motherhood as a sacred calling, but Morrison shows clearly that Eva’s decision represents courage and vision. For in her absence from her children, Eva prepares herself for a lifetime of service to their survival. (Wade 98-99)
This incident serves to illustrate the power inherent in Eva. As her name suggests (Eve), she is the primal mother, willing to make any sacrifice for her children. Eva is “… an archetype of a Great Mother” (Gosavi 71). Eva provides a kind of sustenance by nourishing and protecting her family. Eva “spends all her life in hating her husband BoyBoy but she is not a man hater. She is a woman with mysterious power. She teaches “man-love” to her daughter”(72). She projects both the sides of the coin – as a great mother who does not hesitate to sacrifice her own son, Plum, when she puts him on fire after rocking him to sleep.

Eva held him closer and began to rock. Back and forth she rocked him, her eyes wandering around his room … Eva lifted her tongue to the edge of her lip to stop the tears from running into her mouth. Rocking, rocking. Later she laid him down and looked at him a long time … Plum on the rim of a warm light sleep was still chuckling. Mamma. She was sure somethin’. He felt twilight. Now there seemed to be some kind of wet light travelling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell. It wound itself – this wet light – all about him, splashing and running into his skin. He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep.

Eva stepped back from the bed and let the crutches rest under her arms. She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight. Quickly, as the whoosh of flames engulfed him,
she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey to the top of the house. (46-48)

Eva’s image of a ‘Great Mother’ can be well recognized when she tries to save her first-born Hannah from burning.

Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter’s body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame upon her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpane. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure. She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah’s smoke. Stunned but still conscious, Eva dragged herself toward her firstborn, but Hannah, her senses lost, went flying out of the yard gesturing and bobbing like a sprung jack-in-the-box. (75-76)

Thus Eva not only represents an image of ‘Great Mother’ but also that of destructive-Eve.

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 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)
Eva, though sacrifices herself for her children, finally outlives them all.

Hannah is Eva’s daughter and she shares Eva’s love of physical involvement with men. After her husband Rekus dies when Sula is three, Hannah moves back to Eva’s house “forever” [41]. There Hannah entertains endless succession of lovers, most of whom are the husbands of her friends and neighbours. Yet her behaviour differs from Eva regarding the men:

Her attitude towards sex reveals her independence of spirit. All the women, ranging from wives to whores, are incensed by Hannah’s behaviour. She, however, does not care how other women react to her acts. Devoid of jealousy or possessiveness, she effortlessly allows her friendship and affairs to run their courses. The men treat Hannah with devotion akin to that accorded to Eva by her gentlemen callers.

The men, surprisingly, never gossiped about her. She was unquestionably a kind and generous woman and that, coupled with her extraordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner, made them defend her and protect her from any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill. (44-45)

Hannah, same as Eva, finds “man-love” [72] to be a major source of physical and emotional satisfaction. She never bothers to remarry. She, “gives Sula an unconventional image of womanhood and motherhood through her “sooty” lifestyle” (Samuels-Weems 36). Hannah, who had not found Eva to be a loving mother, comes up short on the nurturing yardstick. She has a damaging impact on Sula due to this. She confesses that she has an obligatory love of a
parent for her child and she “just don’t like her” (57). Indirectly, Hannah teaches Sula that no one other than one’s own self could be counted upon.

With an inherent power (that like Eva) Sula is first depicted with her girl friend Nel. The reader is told that it was “in dreams that two girls had first met” (51). They fulfil each other’s needs.

So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grown on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead; Nel’s because he wasn’t), they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

Sula’s appearance is striking because of her birthmark “that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose” (52). She has otherwise a plain face. Again, the similarity between Sula and Eva is obvious; both physically appear different than others. The fact that Sula’s individuality is symbolized by her birthmark suggests that it is her maternal ancestry which makes her unique. Eva and Hannah both symbolize the most unconventional and free womanhood. They are role models to Sula. “Theirs’ a woman centred universe and values that rule their house are the ones that are particularly beneficial to women” (Washington 11). Unlike the character of Pecola Breedlove in The Bluest Eye, Morrison has portrayed Sula as a character of considerable strength. Sula is a young black girl who has been
nurtured on the fantastic courage and self-reliance of other black women. Like Eva, Sula is first depicted as willing to deface her body, before she is depicted as a murderer. When a group of white boys continuously torment Sula and Nel on their way home from school, Sula use Eva’s paring knife to cut off the tip of her finger.

Sula squatted down in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground: her lunch pail, her reader, her mittens, her slate. Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in a cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate.

Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (54-55)

Sula’s action stuns the boys, as does the question she poses to them. She has learned the value of self-control from her mother and grandmother and turns the knife upon herself to illustrate that control. Morrison creates a rebel in Sula. She seeks love and respect in her own freedom. She is thoroughly independent and an “emblem of black woman’s strength who provides definition of a total black female self” (Gosavi 74). Sula is born in a family where the home is woman dominated. While her grandmother Eva is tied to the community, Sula defies each and every norm set by the community. She does not want any constraints on her life and conduct. “Sula is a memorable novel and heroine.
She is a marvellously unconventional woman. Sula Peace’s life is one of unlimited experiment” (Parikh 17).

Like Pecola of *The Bluest Eye*, Sula grows into adulthood aware that her mother has evaluated and found her lacking. Whereas Pecola’s flight from her mother’s assessment is a journey into madness, Sula’s flight is a journey toward a life which is self-directed. The incidents which binds the two girls Sula and Nel forever is the death of “Chicken Little”. While playing at the river, Sula swings a small boy, Chicken Little, in a circle until he slips, sails over the water, and drowns. Sula panics as Nel reveals that someone (Shadrack) has watched from the other river bank. She runs to the only house standing at the other side, belonging to Shadrack. Sula suspects that he might have witnessed Chicken Little’s drowning. Shadrack appears to utter only one word “Always” [62]. He is not clear in his conveyance which makes Sula run away to Nel. Sula knows Nel will share in the guilt for what has transpired, always. Nel supports Sula by saying “You didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault” (62-63). The girls are not implicated in the death of Chicken, however. By the time the body is discovered by a bargeman and brought back to the Bottom, the community has directed its attention to the funeral and grieving at hand. The incident becomes a bonding secret between Sula and Nel which sets them apart from the bewildered community. They become so intimate to each other that both turn into their ‘other’ self. They serve as a shadow for each other. Just like her grandmother Eva, Sula is also responsible for the death of a ‘boy’. Plum dies in fire, Chicken Little drowns in water. Plum’s death is Eva’s final show of motherly love. Chicken’s death represents Sula’s initiation into a world where one’s actions are irrevocable. Morrison parallels this drowning of Chicken to various omens of the events to come that like the burning of Hannah. Morrison says in an interview “A black person in particular would know, if I’m going to list strange things, to expect something dreadful” (Tate 124).
First the reader is told that Hannah has seen herself in a red wedding dress in a dream. Eva is so familiar with the dream book that she knows the number of the entry is “522” [74] without looking, she also knows that the dream symbolizes an impending death and the colour red, fire. Next the reader is told of a strong dry wind tearing through Bottom, shaking houses, scaring the community. The wind is dry, devoid of moisture. It symbolizes the powerful changes which cannot be avoided and will soon rock the foundations of Eva’s household. The other events too presage Hannah’s death. Sula begins to irritate the boarders and causes turmoil in the house. Her behaviour though is considered due to her adolescence:

… Sula was acting up, fretting the Deweys and meddling the newly married couple. Because she was thirteen, everyone supposed her nature was coming down, but it was hard to put up with her sulking and irritation. The birthmark over her eye was getting darker and looked more and more like a stem and rose. (74)

The darkening of the birthmark of Sula suggests her passage into adulthood, an adulthood which would become incomprehensible and more mysterious to those around her. As she grows, her behaviour changes from that usually considered feminine. Thus, the rose stands here as a symbol of flowering individuality of Sula and necessarily femininity.

Eva’s loss of her comb constitutes the remaining omen. Nothing was ever misplaced in Eva’s room, primarily because it had so few visitors. This misplacement or loss of comb symbolizes the unusualness of event to come. It is only after Eva finds the comb in her blouse drawer, she sees Hannah burning near a yard fire;
She couldn’t find her comb. Nobody moved stuff in Eva’s room except to clean and then they put everything right back. But Eva couldn’t find it anywhere. One hand pulling her braids loose, the other searching the dresser drawers; she had just begun to get irritated when she felt it in her blouse drawer. Then she trundled back to the window to catch a breeze, if one took a mind to come by, while she combed her hair. She rolled up to the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning. The flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance. Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter’s body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpane. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure. (75-76)

While going to the hospital Hannah dies but Eva survives the fall. Lying in the hospital, Eva, “mused over the perfection of the judgement against her” (78). Having caused Plum’s death by fire, she loses Hannah to the same fate. She appears resigned to accept this judgement. Eva is disturbed because of an image attached to this event.

She remembered something else too, and try as she might to deny it, she knew that as she lay on the ground trying to drag herself through the sweet peas and clover to get to Hannah, she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking. When Eva, who was never one to hide
the faults of her children, mentioned what she thought she’d seen to a few friends, they said it was natural. Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was interested. (78)

With Hannah’s burning and Chicken Little’s drowning, both cases show Sula’s odd behaviour. She attempts no rescue to either victim. Sula’s reaction suggests an emotional detachment from the suffering of others. It also indicates her ability to stand fearless when faced with what the community fears most, the spectacle of death. Sula’s this interest in a spectacle is further illustrated in depiction of Nel’s wedding to Jude Green, a waiter at Hotel Medallion who hopes to work with other men in road building to establish a sense of camaraderie with them. From Hannah’s dream of wedding dress, Morrison moves to depiction of real wedding. It is in chapter “1927” that Morrison shows Helen Wright, mother of Nel, preparing for her daughter’s wedding: “Her only child’s wedding – the culmination of all she had been, thought or done in this world – has dragged from her energy and stamina even she did not know she possessed” (79-80).

Jude Green marries Nel as a necessary step for his development. When the men of the Bottom learn of New River Road that is too be built, Jude sees the opportunity for a job which is better than a meagre waiter’s job and provides a sense of pride too. He wants to marry Nel along with the dreams of the job. yet ironically, his pursuit of her grows after racist hiring policies deny him the job for which he wished.
So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man’s role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. (82)

Jude thinks of his marriage as necessary for his development but he never stops to consider what it will do for Nel’s psychological growth. Nel accepts his proposal as Jude chooses her and thus fulfils her mother’s dream of hosting an elaborate wedding and the community’s expectation that Nel accepts. She is all set to assume the traditional female role of wife and mother.

Jude reasons for pressing Nel into marriage reinforce our sense of the Bottom’s definition of woman. As his helpmate, Nel is a buffer between his desire for his own autonomy and the restrictions the outside world places on him. Her marriage to him will replace the need he so intensely feels to have some impact on the world and thus enable him to accept his state. (Christian 163)

Sula, the inseparable friend of Nel, encourages Nel to marry. She “was no less excited about the wedding. She thought it was the perfect thing to do following their graduation from general school. She wanted to be the bridesmaid. No others” (84). Sula actively participates in planning of the affair. Her love of a spectacle is blatant, yet it does not imply a sense of obligation toward its participants. Morrison describes deep relationship these women hold towards each other. Sula and Nel’s connection, “their friendship was so close,
they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other” (83). Therefore, in spite of this, Sula leaves Bottom and along with it Nel. While the reception is held and the people are engaged in dancing, playing, gossiping, etc. Sula departs alone. This signifies the death of girlhood friendship of Sula and Nel. Nel has opted for the traditional role of wife positively sanctioned by the community folks. While Jude becomes the centre of universe for Nel, Sula is free to meteor into her own unexplored dimensions of the self. Sula’s departure symbolizes her breaking away from the community along with all its customs, values and traditions. She struts and smiles as she leaves. “Even from the rear Nel could tell it was Sula and that she was smiling; that something deep down in that litheness was amused” (85).

Sula returns to Bottom after ten years. Morrison narrates events from 1927 which marks Jude and Nel’s wedding to straight away in 1937 which heralds Sula’s return to Bottom. Chapter titled 1927 concludes with an indication of Sula’s return. “…It would be ten years before they saw each other again and their meeting would be thick with birds” (85). She returns in a manner reminiscent of Eva’s return years ago, “dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see” (90). Her arrival significantly is accompanied by the plague of robins. They swarm, defecate and die all over the community, portents of evil events to come.

Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion. The little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere … Nobody knew why or from where they had come. What they did know was that you couldn’t go anywhere without stepping in their pearly shit, and it was hard to hang up clothes, pull weeds or just sit on the front porch when robins were flying and dying all around you. (89)
Following Sula’s return, Nel briefly rediscovers another way of seeing: “It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed” (95). But she is alone in celebrating Sula’s reappearance.

From the beginning, Sula irritates the Bottom with her individuality, her refusal to accept a women’s role. Without calling attention to the fact, Morrison gives Sula license to act as she pleases. Significantly enough, Sula can be said to behave “like a man”. She’s adventuresome, she trusts herself, she’s not scared. And she is curious and will leave and try anything. (Carmean 38)

Eva sets the tone for the community’s attitude toward the prodigal Sula: “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It “settle you”. To which Sula replies, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). And “in her first act of rebellion against the community’s order, the arrogant and belligerent Sula ironically dethrones Eva from her position of arrogance and presumption and force ably has her removed to a nursing home” (Bjork 74-75). Sula’s putting of Eva in a nursing home represents her break from the influence of one of the most significant women in her life. With her mother admitted to a nursing home, Sula is freed from the influence of her family. Sula has free reign and is under no influence of older women who reminded her of what she is and what she is not. By her act Sula firmly announces to the community at large her contempt for Eva’s pronouncements and indicates that she is different.
Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, 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. As willing to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life – (118)

Having broken Eva’s grip on the household and her life, Sula next estranges the third important woman in her life, Nel. At first Nel’s world changes on her friend’s return:

It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy. Sula, whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself. (95)

Nel re-sees in Sula her other self – a self which she has long buried in respectability that was expected of her. It is clear that Sula’s entry back into her life turns refreshes Nel which again is marked by playfulness in her lovemaking with Jude. When Sula visits Nel’s house, Nel’s children delight in seeing their mother laughing as a result of Sula’s humour. It is here that their difference in attitudes gets shaped. Sula and Nel have clearly taken two different roads in life. Sula expresses her disdain for Medallion by indicating that half of the town needs “killin” and that the other half is “drawn-out disease” [96]. In response to
which Nel suggests “You been gone too long, Sula”, to which she replies, “Not too long but, may be too far” (96). Sula’s answer here implies that it is not the time she has spent away that has shaped her views but instead her distance from the customs and values of the Bottom, whereas Nel has spent her years interwoven with the community traditions. She has conformed to the traditional role of wife and mother. Her life is fulfilled in strengthening the ties with the community and preserving the tradition. It is difficult for Nel to comprehend how Sula sent Eva away to a nursing home. Sula’s “quest for complete independence, to be free of all bonds of attachment and fear of punishment as that inflicted on plum, that induces her to put away Eva in the old folk’s home” (Xavier 100).

“I am scared of her, Nellie. That’s why…”

“Scared? Of Eva?”

“You don’t know her. Did you know she burnt Plum?”

“Oh! I heard that years ago. But nobody put no stock in it.”

“They should have. Its true. I saw it. And when I got back here she was planning to do it to me too.” (100-101)

Later when Sula betrays Nel by luring Jude away from her, it is the same resolution to be free of all bonds of attachment and her incapacity to understand the value of human relationships that is at play. Nel is devastated that Sula steals Jude away and as a result he abandons Nel and his children.

“All those days and years, Jude, you knew me. All those days and years, Jude, you knew me. My ways and my hands and how my
stomach folded and how we tried to get Mickey to nurse and how about that time when the landlord said … but you said … and I cried, Jude. You knew me and had listened to the things I said in the night, and heard me in the bathroom and laughed at my raggedly girdle and I laughed too because I knew you too, Jude. So how could you leave me when you knew me?” (104-105)

Yet this is precisely why Jude leaves. His marriage has become confining to him. Sula is a way out for him. Her birthmark resembles a copperhead or a rattlesnake to him which tempts him. The snake represents an opportunity to escape the monotony of his marriage. Sula functions as ‘snake’ in the scene, providing the temptation Jude awaits. For Sula it is not a deliberate calculated act to break up the marriage of Nel and Jude. It is one of her explorations to satisfy her sexual curiosity.

She does not understand the meaning of human relationships, nor does she have the capacity to feel the pain she causes to others. She becomes blind to life and senseless to human emotions in her quest for the self which is her greatest flame. But Sula is never to be blamed, her actions are not deliberate, they are just the workings of the mind in its quest for self where the heart has stopped to feel. Numbness caused by pain of past experience settles in her and she lives by the dictates of the mind.” (Xavier 100)

In a way Sula does things with self-interest i.e. when she travels town to town, when she takes Jude from Nel or puts Eva in a nursing home. Sula has no
identification except Nel. She always follows her own longings. She does what she wants. She stands for feminine freedom of thought. According to a view of Holloway:

It seems to me Sula itself is in fact an image of feminine psychology and metaphysics that will help carry the human psyche further into the light of conscious articulation and self-knowledge. (Holloway 62)

Nel judges Sula according to traditional views that stipulated Sula’s action as morally erroneous and not a proper conduct for a best friend. But in Sula’s mind, she did nothing improper because she has always dismissed society’s conventions and, in turn, she is shocked that Nel reacts just like the traditional wives them once criticized. She comments: “Now Nel was one of them. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web … She had given herself over to them” (120). Sula believes that Nel has assumed the conservative feminine role she loathes and is now against her free life style. Sula is unable to perceive the pain she causes Nel.

Through her portrait of Nel, Morrison shows the despair and anguish of the abandoned wife. Without Jude, Nel envisions a future devoid of joy. She has simply not been taught to anticipate life without a man. Although Sula’s actions are controversial, she behaves as she usually does: acting on her desires and not forcing herself to follow any social conventions. In her analysis of Sula, Bakerman mentions, “the pattern of failure is set … they [Sula and Nel] will be unable to cope with the pressures of society except by damaging themselves” (Bakerman 551).
The community is unified in its opinion that Sula is evil. The plague of robins, Eva’s institutionalization, and Sula’s abandonment of Jude soon after she has stolen him from Nel are the facts which fuel their anger and indignation. She is also blamed by the black people as she sleeps with white men. She faces a kind of alienation. The rumour about her reaction to Hannah’s burning also resurfaces among the people of the Bottom. The women are not alone in their criticism. Unlike Hannah, Sula gets no support from the black men.

But it was the man who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing – the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men. (112)

The community is united in its reactions. Women, children and men ostracize her. And thus arming themselves with superstition and ritual, they prepare to outlast her: “So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on the porch steps” (113). Sula is blamed for the unpleasant occurrences. When Mr. Finley dies, Sula is blamed. He is sucking chicken bone, he sees Sula and chokes. Her peripheral life makes Sula a scapegoat for Bottom’s citizens. Sula provides a contrast with her wickedness. So the people improve their behaviour in an unconscious effort to prove their goodness. Teapot’s mother, Betty, suddenly starts taking care of him when previously she felt no obligation to do so. Women start taking better care of their husbands. Sula becomes a pariah because:
Her willingness to reject them makes her evil to those in the community who never express their own “freedom of will”. Sula is evil because she unlike Nel for example does not live “totally by the law” nor surrender “completely to it without questioning anything sometimes”. She is perfectly willing to think the unthinkable. (34)

Sula becomes the recipient of the hatred for the various reasons: the way she uses husbands of other women, she doesn’t look her age, she attends church suppers without wearing underwear, etc. Even their interpretation of Sula’s birthmark changes: “it was Hannah’s ashes marking her from the very beginning” (114). The people are convinced that Sula is evil against whom their faith in themselves and their values will be tested.

Sula simply does not understand the attitudes of the other women in the Bottom. Eva’s burning of her own son, Plum, is not a motherly act for Sula. She cannot conceive that kind of extreme love. Likewise her incest with Jude is done unawares. She does not and cannot comprehend that Nel is possessive of her husband. So Sula is surprised at Nel’s reaction as she herself has no knowledge of marriage or the feelings it may inspire. She is genuinely disappointed in what she sees as a change in her friend. Her return to Bottom is to be with Nel in a way. Ironically though it is Ajax, who brings her in contact with the possessiveness she had eluded throughout life. Ajax is the same man she and Nel had strolled past on the way to the ice cream parlour years earlier. Sula is the aggressor upon Ajax’s first visit:

She took the bottle with one hand and his wrist with the other and pulled him into the pantry. There was no need to go there, for not a
soul was in the house, but the gesture came to Hannah’s daughter naturally. (125)

This incident is Sula’s initiation into the love for man, her maternal ancestors loved so deeply. Ajax becomes a regular visitor, bringing unusual gifts for Sula – blackberries, fish, jacks, gelatine, ice, etc. His gift selection is based on true nature of Sula as “he senses the artist in her and showers her with gifts that reflect his sensitivity to her free-spirited soul” (197). His pursuit of Sula is linked to his belief that she resembles his mother, an evil conjure-woman adored by all his children. He suspected “that this was perhaps the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him” (127). As Christian notes:

They love each other; in that they find another version of themselves in each other, at least for a while,” (Christian 171)

Yet this relationship inspires the unusual. Ajax is the man Sula tries “to nail” [127]. Unlike others, Ajax listens to what Sula has to say. He succeeds in lifting Sula to such emotional heights as never experienced before by her. It is here that “Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it” (131). Sula begins tidying up the house, setting the table, waiting for him and putting ribbon in her hair. It becomes Ajax’s cue to move on:

Ajax blinked. Then he looked swiftly into her face. In her words, in her voice, was a sound he knew well. For the first time he saw the green ribbon. He looked around and saw the gleaming kitchen and the
table set for two and detected the scent of the nest. Every hackle on his body rose, and he knew that very soon she would, like all her sisters before her, put to him the death-knell question “Where you been?” (133)

Ajax’s departure leaves Sula adrift like Nel. She too suffers. Though unlike Nel, she realizes how she would eventually have affected Ajax, “…soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold …” (136).

She knows that the relationship would have ended eventually, for had he not left, her insatiable curiosity would have compelled her to dig deeper and deeper into his psyche until she hurt him. (Gates, Jr. 91)

His departure enables Sula to learn the blues so familiar to other women of Bottom. Having now tasted of abandonment, Sula’s experience in life is complete. It comes as no surprise then that the death of her relationship with Ajax, the focal point of this chapter, precipitates her own death.

Unlike the people of black community who feels justified about Sula’s nearing end, Nel becomes closer to her friend. Their final conversation becomes significant. Nel asks Sula why she has slept with Jude, and Sula can only answer that Jude temporarily filled “the space” [144] for her. Nel demands a greater response, “What about me? Why didn’t you think about me? Didn’t I count? I never hurt you. What did you take him for if you didn’t love him and why didn’t you think about me?” (144). Sula counter a similar question for Nel: “What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were
such good friend, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145). Sula further suggests perhaps she, and not Nel, was the “good one”, [146] again refusing others to define her life. Sula’s ailment is not made clear except her feeling hot as on fire. She avoids discussing it with Nel, leaving reader with the impression “all the songs have been sung” and she is now content to go “down like one of those red-wood” (143).

What becomes clear in her final conversations with Nel is that having lived life on her own terms, she has not avoided pain or denied feeling, but refused merely to school or order her feelings to suit conventional practises. As she says to Nel, the cult of womanhood that urges prescribes and proscribes emotions and behaviour is not worth following. (Matus 65)

The death of Chicken Little is not the only traumatic incident that returns to Sula as she lies dying. One of the most horrifying incidents in the novel is the death by burning of Sula’s mother, Hannah Peace. At this point, more than any other, the reader is convinced of Sula’s strangeness. She admits “I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147). But just before her admission of being thrilled, Sula says, “I didn’t mean anything” (147). These lines are ambiguous. One way to interpret it is to see Sula declaring her innocence. Her looking was pure curiosity, not spiteful pleasure. Morrison describes Sula’s death, the agonising pain she suffers and her last thoughts about her life. She experiences a recurrent nightmare.
I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing.’ Then she had the dream again. The Clabber Girl Baking Power Lady was smiling and beckoning to her, one hand under her apron. When Sula came near she disintegrated into white dust, which Sula was hurriedly trying to stuff into the pockets of her blue-flannel house-coat. The disintegration was awful to see, but worse was the feel of the powder – its starchy slipperiness as she tried to collect it by handfuls. The more she scooped, the more it billowed. At last it covered her, filled her eyes, her nose, her throat, and she woke gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke. (147-148)

In dreaming of the Clabber girl Baking Powder Lady who disintegrates in white dust, Sula relives her mother’s death, completing in dream-form the transformation from the burning flesh she witnessed to the white ashes. “If anything, Sula’s artistic sensibility – the interestedness, curiosity, aesthetic wonder – leaves her more vulnerable to pain than others who see more restrictedly and conventionally” (Matus 67).

Sula’s only peace from the agony of her illness is found in facing the boarded-up window from which Eva had once jumped. This window represents both the finality of the past and the inaccessibility of the future. Here, Sula realizes that she is no longer breathing and died: “Sula felt her face smiling. Well, I’ll be damned, ‘she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (149). Sula’s desire to share even this experience with Nel reveals again the intensity of their bond.

Sula, never reaches real self-understanding because she has no abiding self to understand nor anyway of creating a self. She needs Nel to
verify herself and to be whole, as her post-death musings (surely the
oddest feature of the novel) suggest … Nel finally does reach self-
understanding, and it is Sula who leads her to it. (Reddy 37-38)

The community’s interest in Sula continues beyond her death. All feel
that “a brighter day” [151] will follow. The construction of the tunnel across the
river holds the promise of jobs for the black men of Bottom. Along with it the
news of new old folk’s home to be built also comes as “sign” [151] of goodness
and prosperity after the death of evil Sula.

Some said that the very transfer of Eva from the ramshackle house
that passed for a colored women’s nursing home to the bright new one
was a clear sign of the mystery of God’s ways, His mighty thumb
having been seen at Sula’s throat. (151)

Yet, evil Sula’s end (death) does not result in the prosperity that the
Bottom people hoped for. A freezing rain created a frost ruining the harvest.
Fowls died of chill, cider turned to ice and for days on end people were
housebound. Illness appeared and the situation got worse. All the women begin
to resent their roles as wives, mothers, and children, roles which they eagerly
embraced as if in defiance of Sula. Without Sula, the life alters undesirably.
Morrison here suggests, as she did in The Bluest Eye that the community’s
well-being is in part dependent on the iconoclastic individual, who because of
her indifference instils a sense of togetherness and righteousness in those
around her.
Sula personifies the strange world beyond Medallion, Ohio, and an evil, in part, because her values are foreign to the homogeneity of this black community. Sula embodies a xenophobic anxiety over otherness and, by her very presence, forces the community to examine its own self-image constantly. (Bryant 741)

Even Shadrack is affected by the unusual weather and Sula’s death. He reminisces about the only visitor he has ever had. “He had said ‘always’ to convince her, assure her, of permanency” (156). Because Sula is dead, he knows that the permanency he promised was not to be. His faith in the National Suicide Day is shaken. “His rope was improperly tied; his bell had a tinny unimpassioned sound” (158). This ritual is transformed by Sula’s death. Many people of the Bottom join Shadrack in his parade, heading down to tunnel which proved to provide no more employment for black men than did the New River Road. The mob becomes enraged and its participants take to smashing the bricks at the lip of the tunnel. The tunnel collapses destroying them as well, as its racist construction had this dreams. Death by water is the fate of those who cannot escape. National Suicide Day becomes a reality. The ringing of Shadrack’s bell after the tunnel accident is the death knell for both.

Shadrack’s energies have always been directed at coexisting with evil and chaos by using the qualities creatively, unlike the community’s efforts of separating themselves from evil by the false promises of a better life in the larger world. (Bryant 743-44)

In the conclusion of the novel Nel visits Eva and the chapter is ‘1965’ which is after a gap of twenty five years. Her sense of duty and membership in a
community service group bring her in contact with the remaining of Peace family member. The old woman appears disoriented and she accuses Nel:

“Tell me how you killed that little boy.”

“What? What little boy?”

“The one you threw in water. I got oranges. How did you get him to go in the water?”

“I didn’t throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula.”

“You. Sula. What’s the difference? You were there. You watched, didn’t you? Me, I never would’ve watched.” (168)

Eva reiterates her belief that Nel and Sula have always been exactly alike:

Although less alive than Sula, Nel outlives her, but one senses at the end of the novel that in beginning to Sula again Nel is at the beginning of the process of becoming a whole person. The assertion of Sula’s grandmother that do difference existed between the responsibility of Sula and Nel for the drowning of Chicken Little when they were girls forces Nel to re examine the past and to re-evaluate her secret pride that she was calm and controlled when Sula was uncontrollable. She must face the fact that Nel had cried about the death of the boy but she had remained calm, that is, unfeeling. (Sargent 235)
Nel’s scrutiny of her own reaction precedes the thoughts she devotes to the Bottom. She finds Eva’s attitudes to bear a similar to those held by others in the Bottom. Eva manifests, according to Nel, the spite typical of the Bottom residents who remain unforgiving of Sula. Nel also recognizes with Eva’s assistance in this case that it has been Sula, not Jude, who has allowed her space to explore herself freely.

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” It was a fine cry – loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

Morrison here at the close of the novel “invokes the image of the concentric circles in the cries of sorrow that Nel emits for Sula as she discovers in a delayed reaction the loss of her girlhood friendship – her other half. The concentric circles recall an earlier image of loss in the water that closes over the head of Chicken Little. Nel and Sula’s life are linked by bonds which are very powerful for either to resist. Sula dies thinking of a comforting return to a womb – like sleep. Sula’s death not only brings loss and pain to Nel but also self-awareness. Though Sula dies and it seems she achieved nothing, it is she who achieves her selfhood and defies the models set by the culture or community. Sula’s impact on Nel and the community is substantial. Sula benefits the community as a result of her honesty and refusal to compromise her. This in turn results in the community reassessing its values. There is an
increase in concern for others as well as a bonding that was earlier absent. Morrison says:

I found that community to be very nurturing for Sula. There was no other place in the world she could have lived without being harmed. Whatever they think about Sula, however strange she is to them, however different, they won’t harm her. (Tate 130)

Morrison thus acknowledges the bottom as a community which has the capacity to embrace and encompass different kinds of women. The existence of families, as different as the Peace and Wright clans – shows the community’s tolerance. Characters are diverse – Hannah and Helen, Sula and Nel, Eva – make Bottom their home. Helen’s adoptions of values are inherited by Nel, just as Eva’s strength and Hannah’s sensuality are inherited by Sula. Each girl reflects her maternal heritage. Nel believes in tradition familial ties whereas Sula resists human ties. Still the friendship forged by Nel and Sula is unique in the tradition of black female novelist. Never before had the friendship between two black women occupied so central a role in a novel. Morrison has stated: “Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexuality in Sula” (Tate 118).

To conclude, Sula and Nel’s rare friendship lies in their ability to transcend the differences in their family background and life styles to share a single vision. Nel represents the attitudes of the Bottom; her priorities are easily understood. She has devoted her life to her husband and her children. Sula, however, is her own priority. No set of values or norms govern her behaviour and therefore Sula represents the daring, the impulsive side of human nature. It is only through Morrison delineates the black women’s strife’s and struggles
when they desire to put their self forth right. Via Sula and Nel, Morrison celebrates sisterhood in larger sense of the term. The black sisterhood is what Morrison aims at and believes in. Sula and Nel’s images counterbalance each other. They seek refuge in one another and are stronger in facing the world. They are two bodies and one soul. Morrison digs deep into the human psyche. Also the ‘black experience’ is celebrated. The Bottom not only concerns with the place but it also deals with the sociological, psychological and economic flight of the black people. In Sula, Morrison shows that though the women face hardships, they can be raised as ‘selves’ in the community.

The greatness of Sula lies partially in its commitment to the complexity of women’s experience of caring exploring the degenerative and generative version of female morality, Sula exposes the paradoxes of women’s individual efforts to participate in the collective life. (Gillespie 29-30)

The novel rekindles emotions and responses toward something as simple as the everyday Bottom neighbourhood.

The Bottom is important because it is an instance of the forgotten, a part of the fabric of an un-remembered past, which, if not memorialised in its limitations and shortcomings, remains an unassimilated history and an impediment to a historicized narrative of African American experience and therefore to future envisioning of community. (Matus 71)
The dynamics of women bonds changes the black women characters. The characters care about each other but their ways are unconventional and wrongly interpreted in case of Sula. She is judged as lacking consideration and affection in her behaviour and manner. Although Sula and Nel benefit from women bonds, the community falls apart as it is being destroyed to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course. Even when Nel realizes the value of her bonding to Sula, it is very late. Sula dies first and Morrison lets the reader know that she is too tied up with Nel and wants to tell Nel that it doesn’t hurt, to die, i.e. and in spite of death Sula and Nel are bonded forever and Nel keens for Sula. As Stein deduces:

Nel’s rebirth, years after Sula’s death, allows her to continue this process of growth and discovery that Sula began long ago when she left Bottom. (Stein 149)

It is in Sula that Morrison uses the character Sula to represent the black woman whose power resides in her ability to seize control of her circumstances and create a universe suited to her changing needs.
REFERENCES


