


**EXPLORING THE TAPESTRY OF WOMANHOOD:
Gynaecological Narratives in Sula at the Intersection of Motherhood,
Friendship, and Sexuality**

Komal Badve

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, in the Foreword to her novel *Sula* (2005), clearly states her purpose in writing the text. Her authorial intent is evident as experimental, revisionist, and deliberate; she aims to challenge the prevailing perception of women as "naturally disruptive" and critiques how canonical literature often depicts women as monstrous, their births labelled as criminal or "an illegal one" if not supervised by the dominant patriarchal gaze (Morrison xiv). *Sula* (2005) thus emerges as a politically aware text where Morrison explores how escaping from the orthodox and heteronormative patriarchal regime impacts "not only a conventional black society,... (but also) female friendship" (xv). While racial identity plays a crucial role in Morrison's examination of unequal power dynamics, she infuses her text with universality through her focus on mother figures and female friendships. These ideas become essential thematic threads, setting the tone for the book and this essay. The monotonous moulding of black society according to convention and the ripple effect on women's relationships form the foundation for studying gynaecological narratives in the text.

The primary objective of identifying these narratives is to analyse the discourse around the black female body. This critical analysis of Morrison's text seeks to highlight how the body becomes a crucial narrative agent through which women articulate their experiences and choices in a rigid society. In shaping the study of gynaecological narratives, this essay will first analyse Morrison's representation of motherhood and the social process of being a mother and caretaker through the character of Eva Peace. The paper will then delve into Morrison's depiction of female sexuality and friendship, focusing on the characters of Sula Peace and Nel Wright. By centering these themes, this essay aims to examine how Morrison represents pain, suffering, and ultimately liberation through bodily and emotional expression. Analysing the text to highlight these thematic strands allows for commentary on the literary and stylistic devices employed by Morrison, which ultimately pave the way for a gynaecological rationale in *Sula*.

CONTEXTUALISING BLACK FEMINISM

To establish a contextual framework for approaching gynaecological narratives, it is essential to briefly consider the discourse around black feminism and womanism. Patricia Hill Collins, in her essay "*WHAT'S IN A NAME? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond*" (1996), presents critical understandings of these two terms, which are often used interchangeably.

At the outset, Collins acknowledges how literary works by black female figures like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde in the 1980s played a crucial role in developing "a self-defined, collective black women's standpoint about black womanhood" (Collins 9). However, the widespread dissemination and subsequent popularity of their texts had downsides. The growth of

black women's voices through literary texts began to reveal shortcomings, fueled by capitalist forces that hindered their progress. Educational institutions marked the growth of black women's writing but did not see a proportional increase in the enrollment of female students of colour. Print media and movies introduced black female voices to the public arena but reduced them to fetishized commodities in the economy, limiting their impact. This phenomenon raised questions about finding a unifying voice to acknowledge the diversity within a tumultuous political context.

Furthermore, Collins reviews the concepts of womanism and black feminism as theorised by Alice Walker. Walker's use of "womanist," distinct from "feminist," creates a nationalist approach that supports a sense of black moral superiority over whites due to black suffering. Her idea of womanism provides marginalised communities with a moral vision that grows from their oppression. Collins also provides an overview of black feminism within the global feminist movement, highlighting issues such as women's global poverty, political rights, and matters related to marriage and family. Adding "black" to feminism emphasises the inclusion of African American women in the broader struggle for emancipation and expression. However, Collins identifies a gap in addressing the notion of sexuality within black feminism due to differences in politics between white and black women's feminisms.

In summary, Collins emphasises the importance of finding a voice that represents the diverse experiences of black women. She argues for an approach that considers gender as a structure of power that works with race, opening avenues for understanding dynamics between black people.

ANALYSING THE TEXT

In an attempt to uncover gynaecological narratives in *Sula*, this paper examines two separate representations of female characters. The discourse of motherhood is explored through Eva Peace, revealing a nurturing yet practical character who sets boundaries and asserts autonomy. Representations of femininity and sexuality are studied through Nel and Sula, highlighting their differing modes of expression. Their tender friendship becomes a central focus, redrawing the lines of orthodox black society through their individual choices.

DE-ROMANTICISING MOTHERHOOD

Aptly describing Morrison as a revisionist writer in their critical essay, Ghasemi and Hajizadeh write about how the author's representation of black motherhood and mother figures radically subverts two assumptions regarding the same. The first being that her revisionist tenor plays a major role in "correcting the historical records concerning black maternity" which exploit the individuality of black women by moulding them in the cast of motherhood (Ghasemi and Hajizadeh 477). The second assumption that Morrison diverts from in her writing is the socio-cultural narrative that understands motherhood as strictly linked to "biological maternity" (477).

In light of this rationale, Morrison's revisionist act of sketching Eva Peace's character becomes poignant. This is because the narrative provides the readers with a detailed backstory, making them aware of how Eva actively redraws the lines of conventional motherhood. Apart from being a biological mother, she also emerges as a social one. This duality and transition represented by her

character is the central idea that this essay seeks to chart in its identification of gynaecological narratives. Consequently, the unconditional love associated with motherhood comes shaded in twisted hues; the narrative legitimising Eva's actions at every turn.

Eva's identity as a caregiver is very obviously associated with the house that she has spent building and growing over five years. The text describes her as the "creator and sovereign" of her house, and it is under her benevolent reign that this space grows through the addition of multiple flights of stairs and an abundance of rooms (Morrison 30). Her strategic placement at the topmost floor solidifies her status as a ruler, as she sits in her wagon looking over the people inhabiting her house. Thus the text legitimises her symbolic status as the mythical black mother and caretaker. As stipulated by Eva, then, the house emerges as a welcoming and sheltering space that accepts not only renovations but also takes care of "her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of borders" (30). Therefore the text, in portraying motherhood through Eva, initially paints a picture symbolic of the stereotypical traits of a black mother. These traits, as Ghasemi and Hajizadeh state, are ones representative of matriarchy, selflessness, and a notion of self-sacrifice. But this initial description is followed by the invocation of her past, thereby effectively undercutting the notions of conventional motherhood.

Upon being deserted by her husband, Eva's struggle to survive is depicted through the gradually depleting resources available to her. Her dire situation and the narrative of struggle are built upon the basic need for and scarcity of food. Thus "\$1.65, five eggs, three beets, and no idea of what or how to feel" make up the sum total of her dwindling possessions (Morrison 32). Presenting the readers with a picture depicting the strenuous economy of food, the text effectively juxtaposes the demands of her three hungry children with her inability to supply them with the same adequately. The narrative further goes on to extend Eva's economic disability to a physical one. In a turn of events, Eva leaves her children with a neighbour for eighteen months to fend for her family. The description of her return makes her the possessor of "two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg" (32). While her comeback might seem a little anticlimactic, owing to Morrison's matter-of-fact style of expression, the narrative infuses Eva with a newfound yet subtle sense of stability. This is to say that, although disabled, she transforms her shortcomings into opportunities through the material wealth that surrounds her. For instance, the wooden leg supporting her, as well as the ever-growing, flourishing, and welcoming space of her house, adds to the economy of her motherhood. These signifiers further add complex layers of meaning to the revised notion of black motherhood that she represents. Her figure thus makes available to readers a representation devoid of any glorification, strongly rooted in reality and hardships, even if it is on one foot.

Furthermore, Eva's dynamic with her son Plum stands out in understanding her peculiar nature as a mother figure. The first instance that elaborates upon their relationship presents the readers with a graphic description of Eva inducing a forced excretion from Plum's infantile body. Only a baby, the text describes Plum as crying incessantly because of his bowel movements having stopped. Eva, in an attempt to relieve her child of the pain and gain some peace herself, lubricates her fingers with the last remaining bit of lard and tries to probe out his stools. After having successfully freed him of pain and herself of his cries, the silence that follows brings with it clarity for Eva. This clarity pushes her to leave her children and make money for the upkeep of her family. The narrative thus presents this episode as a point of identification between mother

and son. Morrison's writing deftly translates the solace of a child into a moment of coherence for the mother, establishing a strong bond between the two. But in an ironic inversion of the love shared by the two, the text highlights how the same bond proves cumbersome to Eva.

The narrative, in writing about a Plum now grown up and back home from war, depicts him as an addict, with the mention of "the bent spoon (turned) black from steady cooking" indicative of his habit (45). Eva, in realising the vegetative state his body is in, remembers that she has "three quarts of wood alcohol" and proceeds to use it on him. Plum's death becomes a testimonial to Eva's boundless love for him. By her own admission, she could not watch him decay any longer. The text does not attempt to hold Eva responsible for her act, as it pays tribute to her actions with her demeanour post-Plum's death. Eva, as the text states, "felt righteous and, after taking a bath, felt so light she seemed to "take off" on her toes". Thus, in representing Eva's love for her son as an act of euthanasia, the text affords the reader a view of a mother figure who is not bound by convention or ideology. Instead, she acts out of love. This love, unlike what convention may dictate, is not restricted to her life as a mother but flows on into her various other roles, as elucidated earlier in the text.

Finally, Eva's relationship with her granddaughter Sula serves as a commentary upon her motherhood as well as Sula's perspective of motherhood. Sula's nonchalance and straightforwardness in a discussion with Eva regarding her unwillingness to be a mother leads to Eva's "sigh of relief" as she recollects the time when her son Plum was going to be born. Sula's refusal to be shackled by motherhood, thereby throwing away societal expectations, is in stark contrast to Eva's life as a mother. This contrast stands out even more because Eva had acted out of love for her children, which culminated in Plum's death, and she cherishes her role as a mother. Eva's appreciation of Sula's standpoint then places her as an important character in Sula's life. Through this, Eva's experiences come forth as pivotal to Sula's understanding of motherhood. Thus the idea of gynaecological narratives transcends the boundaries of one character, feeding off each other's experiences and explorations.

FEMININITY, FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS AND LIBERATION

Further considering Morrison's exploration of sexuality, the paper will briefly analyse the dynamic between the characters of Nel and Sula. The text in introducing them and their "ripening sexuality" invokes the image of a sultry yet exuberant summer (Stein 147). Through graphic descriptions of flowers and plants either resting on fences or swaying in the wind, Morrison draws upon the fertility of nature, deftly portraying the girls' nascent sexuality and coming of age. But this lush description is soon undercut as the text depicts how their sexualities come to be moulded in polar opposite ways. As the girls grow up, their ideas of womanhood come to be shaded with hues of convention or otherwise, as their circumstances make clear.

Considering Nel's character first, one sees a conventional notion of womanhood emerge, moulded by the institution of marriage and associated discourses of loyalty and commitment. The text implies her emotionally distant upbringing under "stern and undemonstrative parents" and an attempt to dull her personality, erasing any "sparkle or splutter" she might possess comes

forth as a successful venture on their behalf (Morrison 83). Thus mellow, kind, and mostly unassertive unless supported by her friendship with Sula, Nel is an amicable character. Additionally, the text's description of Jude deciding to marry her reinforces her characteristics. His search for someone "who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest" ends with Nel, implying that she could satisfy his ego without being overbearing herself (82-83).

Her traits, no doubt a result of her upbringing, thus represent an ideological subscription to culturally prescribed and accepted modes of femininity and sexuality. Moreover, the social institution of the family constantly oversees the moulding of her character. While the family she was born into fits her into the socially acceptable cast of femininity, her family by marriage legitimises her sexual awakening and subsequent role as a mother and caretaker (Stein 147).

While Nel's life is seemingly complete in the simplicity of her marriage and household, the narrative undercuts this discourse through Sula's trajectory by stating that "hers was an experimental life" (Morrison 118). As Stein states, Sula in shunning the "obligations and restrictions of marriage and motherhood" rises as a liberated character (Stein 148). Since the nature of this liberation is unguided, it is primarily through her unbridled exploration of her sexuality, wherein her character confronts the feelings of alienation or detachment (148). Thus while Nel's femininity is defined by the security of her marriage, Sula's sexuality is far removed from the same. Instead, the one point of security that the text preserves for Sula, is her friendship with Nel. This understanding of sexuality eventually leads the text to explore the complexities of loyalty, friendship and loss. Sula, and Nel's husband Jude, break Nel's trust through an act of sexual union. Here surfaces the tussle between conventional and radical modes of behaviour through the expressive medium of the body. Sula in sleeping with Jude, breaks Nel's emotional trust, but severing these ties surfaces as a complex act when one considers the text's description of Sula. This is to say that in presenting her as a character with "no centre, no speck around which to grow" the text breathes an unending life of freedom, experimentation, and fluidity into her (Morrison 118-119). Owing to this liberating yet directionless mode of life, through Sula the text puts forth the shattering of the conventionality of marriage as a result of the disregard she exhibits for bonds of commitment and loyalty, which prove to be restrictive for her.

Through this the text sets in stone the narrative of unconventionality that surrounds her character, and stays true to it. This loyalty exhibited by the text, in maintaining Sula's disloyal nature to dogmas which translates into her expressiveness, is further reinforced when she is denied a conventional ending with her partner Ajax. The narrative describes her bond with Ajax through the notion of "possession or at least the desire for it." instead of love (131). It is through this idea of possession wherein the readers see Sula acquainting herself with a grounding or centre apart from her dynamic with Nel. But the actualising of the same is denied to her when Ajax deserts her and she is left with "nothing but his stunning absence", owing to her paradoxical submission to unconventionality (134).

In keeping with the complexities represented by Sula, the significance of her death at the end also emerges relevant. Her emotionally precarious and explorative relationship with Ajax, creates the discourse of sexual liberation through bodily expression. Sula's death adds another layer of meaning to her brand of liberation which signifies a movement beyond the physical body. As Stein states in her criticism of the text, the episode of Sula's death proves crucial in understanding

the "private nature of...heroism" (Stein 146). Through her death the text presents readers with a poignant example of how the black female body surfaces as a site for Sula's character to find solace. This is to say that, in defying convention, and taking an inward turn through death, Morrison presents readers with how Sula's staunchly individualistic character finds solace within herself and her body. Moreover, this search for solace is further solidified through Sula's very last words regarding death which read, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (Morrison 149). It is in the writing and expression of these words that Morrison not only highlights Sula's escape from an orthodox and rigid phallogocentric regime, but the readers are also made aware of the author's attempt to immortalise her character through her friendship with Nel. Thus in death, we see how the text brings about yet another inward turn for Sula, since Nel for her is an extension of the self.

The text describes their blooming and innocent, yet comforting friendship as school girls, founded on the common ground of being "daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers" (52). The inseparable quality of their bond is expressed in an almost defensive tenor in that the two never fought since "cruelty to one was a challenge to the other" (84). But in a fateful turn of events, the joyous occasion of Nel's wedding separates them. Her marriage, symbolic of her turn towards conventional womanhood, diverges from the libertine life Sula chooses. Nel is taught to expect stability through marriage and family, but Morrison undercuts this narrative when Jude and Sula break her trust. Almost a victim of twofold betrayal, the ideals of love and loyalty fail her; not only in marriage but also friendship. The former in keeping with Morrison's revisionist mode of writing expresses the hollowness of the heteronormative institute of marriage. But the latter, her friendship with Sula, proves to have redeeming qualities.

Nel, at the end of the book, finally lets out "a fine cry—loud and long—" endless in nature, mourning her friend's death" (174). This act symbolises a reconfiguration of her "imaginative and emotional capacity" which is finally realised through her dynamic with the late Sula. (Stein 149). Finally it is the endlessness of her cry, which only moves in "circles and circles of sorrow", wherein the text ends with a reinforcement of Sula's expressive life through Nel (Morrison 174).

CONCLUSION

This essay began with an overview of the thematic strands of motherhood, sexuality, and friendship in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. It placed these thematic strands within the broader context of black feminism and womanism, highlighting the importance of studying gynaecological narratives in literature as a means to understand the intersection of the female body and cultural forces.

The subsequent sections of the essay delved into the de-romanticization of motherhood as depicted through the character of Eva Peace. Eva's role as a mother is complex and multifaceted, defying traditional stereotypes of motherhood. Her character challenges the notion that motherhood is solely about selflessness and sacrifice, instead showing how it can be a site of autonomy and power.

The essay also explored the theme of female sexuality, focusing on the character of Sula Peace. Sula's unapologetic exploration of her own desires and her rejection of traditional societal expectations around female sexuality serves as a powerful commentary on the agency of women in expressing their desires and choices.

Additionally, the essay highlighted the importance of female friendship in the novel, particularly the bond between Sula and Nel. Their friendship provides a source of stability and support in a world that often marginalizes and oppresses them. It underscores the significance of female relationships as a source of empowerment and resistance.

Overall, the study of gynaecological narratives in *Sula* allows for a deeper understanding of how women's bodies and experiences are shaped by and shape the cultural and social forces around them. Through the characters of Eva, Sula, and Nel, Toni Morrison challenges conventional narratives about motherhood, sexuality, and friendship, offering a nuanced and complex portrayal of the lives of black women. In doing so, she contributes to the ongoing discourse of black feminism and womanism, highlighting the need for intersectional and multifaceted approaches to understanding the experiences of black women in literature and society.

REFERENCES

Collins, Patricia Hill. "What's In a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 26, no. 1/2, 1996, pp. 9-17.

Ghasemi, Mehri, and Giti Hajizadeh. "Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Revisionary Tale." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2012, pp. 1-8.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage International, 2005.

About the contributor:

Komal Badve is an alumna of Sophia College for Women, Mumbai, with a BA in English Literature (2016-2019). Having graduated from the Manipal Centre for Humanities, MAHE, with an MA in English (2019-2021), she has worked as a Teaching Assistant at the Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune (2022-2023). While pursuing postgraduate studies at Manipal, her dissertation topic was "Gynaecological Narratives in Contemporary Indian Literature - Studying The Discourse Around The Female Body". The thesis sought to explore how literary texts in representing the themes of reproduction, fertility and/or infertility created a discourse around the female body. She is currently pursuing a second masters in Health Humanities at University College London, and her research interests include the history of medicine with a focus on women's reproductive health, as well as global health systems.

