

## Toni Morrison's *Sula* : A Cultural Study

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**Abstract.** The research paper is about the study of the way of life, customs and beliefs of the people against the background of certain time frame. The story moves around the central character Sula. The study of the central character automatically and inevitably becomes important to understand the culture of the areas to which she belongs. Here Toni Morrison's main concern of cultural study is 'The Bottom'. Besides Sula, Nel, Sula's friend is the second important character that is very important with regard to the study of the culture of the character and that of the particular place - 'The Bottom'. Morrison's insight into the cultural aspect is not limited only to the afore-mentioned two characters rather she extends her interest to the whole lot of the people who make a complete society in 'The Bottom'. The paper is an attempt to show how Morrison minutely and painstakingly discusses all these things. It is also an effort to bring the cultural descriptions to the surface through such actions, situations, twists that go on in the novel. Things described in the novel are bound within a certain time frame. The novel is a sort of biography of the people of 'The Bottom'. It is a record of 46 years i.e., from 1919 to 1965.

**Keywords :** Cultural study; human behaviour; racism; birthmark; ill-omens; menstruation; superstition.

Rita A. Bergenholtz observes, "Attempts to define Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* are as numerous as they are diverse. The text has been read as 'black woman's epic', a study of female friendship, an 'antiwar novel', a 'fable', an exploration of the 'feminine psyche' and 'a prime postmodernist text'. If one were to single out one particular interpretation and agree that it were somehow superior, somehow right while the others were wrong, that person would fall into the trap of binary thinking which is also what Morrison's text is 'about'." (Bergenholtz, 3) *Sula*, a great fiction of Toni Morrison stands apart for its highly true and lively description of the culture of the Blacks. She impregnates the novel with information of almost all the aspects of the culture of the Blacks. The term 'Culture' includes a wide spectrum of meaning of the words like the customs, ideas, belief, habits, living style, capabilities, human behaviour, thinking and so on of a society in a country. Online Cambridge Dictionary defines culture as "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time" (dictionary.cambridge.org). Online Merriam Webster Dictionary defines culture as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social groups" ([www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com)). Hence, 'Culture' is an umbrella term that may be understood at social and individual level. At social level it is about the behaviour and norm found in human society, and at individual level it is about knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, habits and personal traits of a person. The

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culture of an individual contributes to the formation of the culture of a society. It is the commonness of the culture of individuals that forms the culture of society, and therefore the study of the culture of society is the study of each and every individual of society.

*Sula*, too is impregnated with the cultural information of the individuals. It is about the culture of the Blacks who live in 'The Bottom' in a small valley called 'Medallion' in 'Ohio', a Midwestern State in the north central United States in the great lake region. Morrison uses the word 'Black' to describe African-Americans. History has been the best and most authentic witness to all the events that have taken place in the universe. It is the fact that America, too, was once stigmatized with the slavery system. Negroes were brought in as slaves. It is only the 19<sup>th</sup> century Civil War between the North and the South that brought this to an end.

Born on 18<sup>th</sup> February, 1931, Morrison has been the native of Lorain, in Ohio in the United States. She knows well the history of the formation of America since its discovery by Christopher Columbus. She, herself, belongs to a black-family, and she knows well how in the beginning, the Blacks were reduced to the position of slaves, and how they have been the most deprived and despised ones. Morrison gives the hint of the deprived and despised condition through how the White played a cruel joke upon a slave and gave him a hilly piece of land worthless for farming, and through the term 'Slave' used for the Blacks. With the passage of time, the White have realized the beauty and the importance of 'The Bottom' so they have bought it, forcing the Blacks to move out so that the White may make there a golf course.

*Sula* is the biography of the Blacks who live there in 'the Bottom'. It is the record of their culture in the form of fiction leaving apart the chapter 'Introduction'. It lays its beginning in 1919 and continues for 46 years ending in 1965. The span of 46 years is divided into twelve sections. It is the record of the customs, living style, thinking, ideas, knowledge, work, beliefs, trust, and so on in the society of the blacks.

Sula is the major character, around whom all the actions move and after the name of the character, the novel gets its title *Sula*. Secondly, Shadrack, who is the veteran of World War-I has witnessed the destructive impact of war upon mankind. The war has impressed his mind with the sense of fear. He is one of *the Blacks* natives of 'The Bottom'. To get rid of his fear, he finds a way out. His sense of fear creates yearning for death, and therefore, announces to institute January 3 of every year to celebrate as 'National Suicide Day'. He believes that this celebration will help to fight the fear of death. Everyone in 'The Bottom' knows that Shadrack is eccentric, still the natives accept him as one of them.

*The Blacks* have no better position. They have spent their life with subdued identity and inferior status in society. Morrison takes her readers in the

year 1920 and describes an incident that happens to Helen and Nel while they are on the train to New Orleans. Helen has her own murky past. Helen's mother Rochester was a prostitute. To save Helen from any impropriety, her grandmother Cecil had raised her under her strictest guidance. Helen is married to her distant cousin Wiley Wright and gets settled in Ohio. Helen, too, has raised her daughter Nel with proper manner and behaviour. Helen comes to know that her grandmother Cecil has fallen ill. She leaves for the South to pay a visit to her grandmother with her daughter, but at the same time, she is worried about racism in the South. She is chastised and humiliated when she accidentally gets in the compartment reserved for the White. The inhuman attitude of the White is shown when Nel comes to know that the 'Coloreds', the Black passengers are not allowed to use bathrooms. If they feel any urge for the call of nature, they are forced to use the field adjacent to the train tracks. Though it appears awkward, very soon they do it comfortably. Cecil had died before Helen and Nel reached.

It is at this point, Nel meets Sula, the central character, after whose name the novel gets its title. Sula is the daughter of Hannah who has bad reputation in town. Eva is her grandmother who has been abandoned by her husband Boy Boy with her children on their own. She gets her leg cut off to get the insurance money to feed her family and to build a house for them. Pearl, Hannah and Plum are her children. Pearl marries and moves away to Michigan. Hannah, a widow and her daughter Sula and Eva live together. Plum's mental condition is not very well. He has been a soldier who is depressed due to the destructive consequences of war. To relieve himself from the nightmarish memory of war, he takes to pain killers and drug, and remains asleep in a room the whole day. Eva cannot bear this painful sight. Moreover, Eva loves him most among her children. To relieve him from unbearable pain, she burns him to death while he is sleeping in the bed but before putting him to death she sits on the bed crying and holding him for the last time.

The bond of friendship between Sula and Nel has grown stronger. Both share their feelings with each other. Both react with mixed feelings of embarrassment and pleasure when Ajax calls them 'Pigmeat'. They are now twelve year old, young enough to understand the desire of the body. They now feel their inclination towards opposite sex. Nel and Sula are opposite complementary or two opposite halves. Nel has got sand like complexion whereas Sula is earthy brown. Nel is innocence and purity personified whereas Sula has mysterious appearance. Nel is soft by nature whereas Sula is bold. Sula has got birthmark, shaped like a rose on her eyelid, giving her more mysterious look. Hannah's statement that she loves but does not like Sula hurts the latter. It throws light on the inner feelings of both Hannah and Sula.

Morrison reflects one of the most inhuman faces of apartheid. Sula and Nel's whimsical behaviour causes the drowning of a black little boy 'Chicken Little'. When the swollen body comes on the surface of the river found by a white

man, he neither brings the body out of the river nor cares to report about it to anyone. The White man hates to touch the body because the child is a dead 'nigger' boy. The body is left inhumanly for three days making it unrecognisable. When the body is brought to the parents it creates a very painful scene while Nel and Sula remain in grave silence and listen to everyone silently.

the Blacks of The Bottom also believe in superstition. They relate things superstitiously to ill-omens. Hannah tells Eva that she dreamed of a red wedding dress, a frightening image of blood and violence. Firstly, they relate it to the bothering acts and the start of the menstruation of Sula but later this is related to even more violent accident of Hannah's death on fire. Eva makes a fruitless effort by throwing herself out from the window upstairs to save Hannah. Eva gets critically injured. She is taken to hospital and somehow, she escapes narrowly. Sula was only a spectator while all these things were happening. Another example of their superstitious belief is the changing shape and colour of the rose-like-birthmark on her eyelid. They take this change for a fearful omen of bad things to come.

Nel returns after ten years. She is changed. She is dressed like a movie star. The Bottom is pervaded with the plague of robins. The natives of the Bottom consider the arrival of both robins and Sula as ill-omens. After that, Sula is blamed for sickness, accidents and bad weather. She is blamed even when the little child Teapot falls on Sula's step by her own mistakes Sula looks at a man while he is sucking the Marrow out of chicken bone, and he chokes to death. Sula is blamed for his death. Very soon the air of the Bottom becomes thick with the rumour that Sula does not age nor will she lose her teeth nor can the insects bite her. People relate so many strange things to her. Her birthmark on her eyelid and crooked fingers are supposed to be evil signs. They also discuss that Sula does not even belch when she drinks beer. Even Shadrack bows his head to Sula in politeness. People in the Bottom become happy when Sula dies. They associate her death with good signs. Negroes get work in the construction of the Tunnel. Some old people decide to build Eva a house. But this moment of happiness does not last long. People start falling ill due to a terrible freeze. They remain shut inside and become jobless. Poverty increases and the people start fighting with one another. Shadrack appears on January 3 to organize a parade for the celebration of Suicide Day. The big procession moves towards the White part of the town. They lend in riot. They start breaking things. When they are in tunnel loose rocks and gushes of water cause their death. Shadrack stands above the tunnel ringing his bell and watching the tragedy of death unfold below.

Nel's desire for marriage shows the urge of her social security. She is such a girl who has finally moulded herself as per social custom after entering married life. Her wish to get married also reflects her desire to get a new identity of her husband. Nel's long suppressed desire to enjoy the grand celebration of her marriage is fulfilled. On the contrary, Sula finds this marriage as the end of the 'me-ness' of

Nel. Now Nel has no identity. She is not now the other half of Sula. Nel is separated from Sula now. On the one hand, She is happy with this grand marriage celebration, on the other while Sula has decided to leave the Bottom for long.

The second part of the novel starts after two years, to be precise in 1937. Sula returns after ten years in 1937. She is changed now. She wears clothes like movie star; she is more frank for she has visited colleges and big cities. Her relation with her grandmother Eva is worse than earlier for Eva accuses Sula of watching her mother, Hannah, burn to death. When Sula and Nel meet first time, they rekindle their friendship but when Nel disapproves Sula's leaving 'the Bottom', it hurts Nel, although both talk frankly about sex and old times. Their friendship does not remain so strong as it was earlier. To the shock of Nel, she catches her husband Jude and Sula together, naked in their bed. This incident shatters Nel's life. Jude leaves Nel for good out of shame. It is at this point she understands Chicken's Little mother's agony on her son's funeral. This act of Sula and Jude snaps the thread of trust, friendship between the two. Even the people of the Bottom depreciate Sula for her betrayal. Her humiliating behaviour with her grandmother Eva and then putting Eva by force in the nursing home multiply the indignance of the people towards Sula. People call them by 'Cockroach' and 'Bitch'. Sula has also developed physical relation with Ajax who brings her food and household items. Ajax is comfortable with this unconditional relation. Their relation comes to an end when he doubts Sula's design of permanent commitment with him. He leaves her and she is again left with her loneliness. She sings to comfort herself and falls asleep.

Morrison narrates the story after three years. Nel goes to serve Sula out of common concern while the latter is fallen ill. Nel realizes that Sula has no money even to buy her medicine. Sula's explanation about her being individual and Nel's being losing her individual existence irritate Nel who leaves Sula angrily. This proves to be the last meeting between them. The painful memory of Chicken Little's death reels over and over within her mind. It haunts her. Shadrack's word - 'always' - rings in her mind. She tries to reach the world while she is in her bed but she fails and breathes her last breath. She is lying motionless without any soul in her bed. K. Zuaditu-Selassie states:

Sula's death at such an early age and without reference to a previous illness alerts the reader that a major spiritual transgression has occurred to cause her death...In African culture, it is not uncommon to examine a series of events precipitating the death of a person who predeceases there is a search for the signs, not the cause. (Zuaditu-Selassie,62)

Margret Washington asserts that in traditional African societies, “Punishment and retribution for breachers in morals and ethics were not the province of a future would judge but were dealt with on earth”. (72)

The novel unfolds the gap of twenty years. Nel is now fifty five years old. Things have changed in the community, the Blacks have got the jobs once held by the Whites. The Blacks are moving towards the valley. Nel pays a visit to Eva but the latter accuses Nel of the death of Little Chicken, though she tries to make Eva understand that it was only an accident but for Eva there is no difference between Nel and Sula. They are one for Eva. Nel feels that Eva was full of spite. At the end, Nel realizes that she misses Sula, not her husband Jude.

*Sula* stands apart for its minute description of the action, beliefs, faiths, superstitions and so on of the Blacks who live in ‘the Bottom’. Morrison has very realistically and impressively presented the culture of the Blacks, and it is all through the natural development of the plot of the story that starts, develops and matures in the certain time frame of 46 years. To be precise, it starts from 1919 to 1965. As a whole, Toni Morrison deserves accolade for her technical efficiency that helps her show the cultural aspects of the people of the Blacks realistically, naturally, and impressively.

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