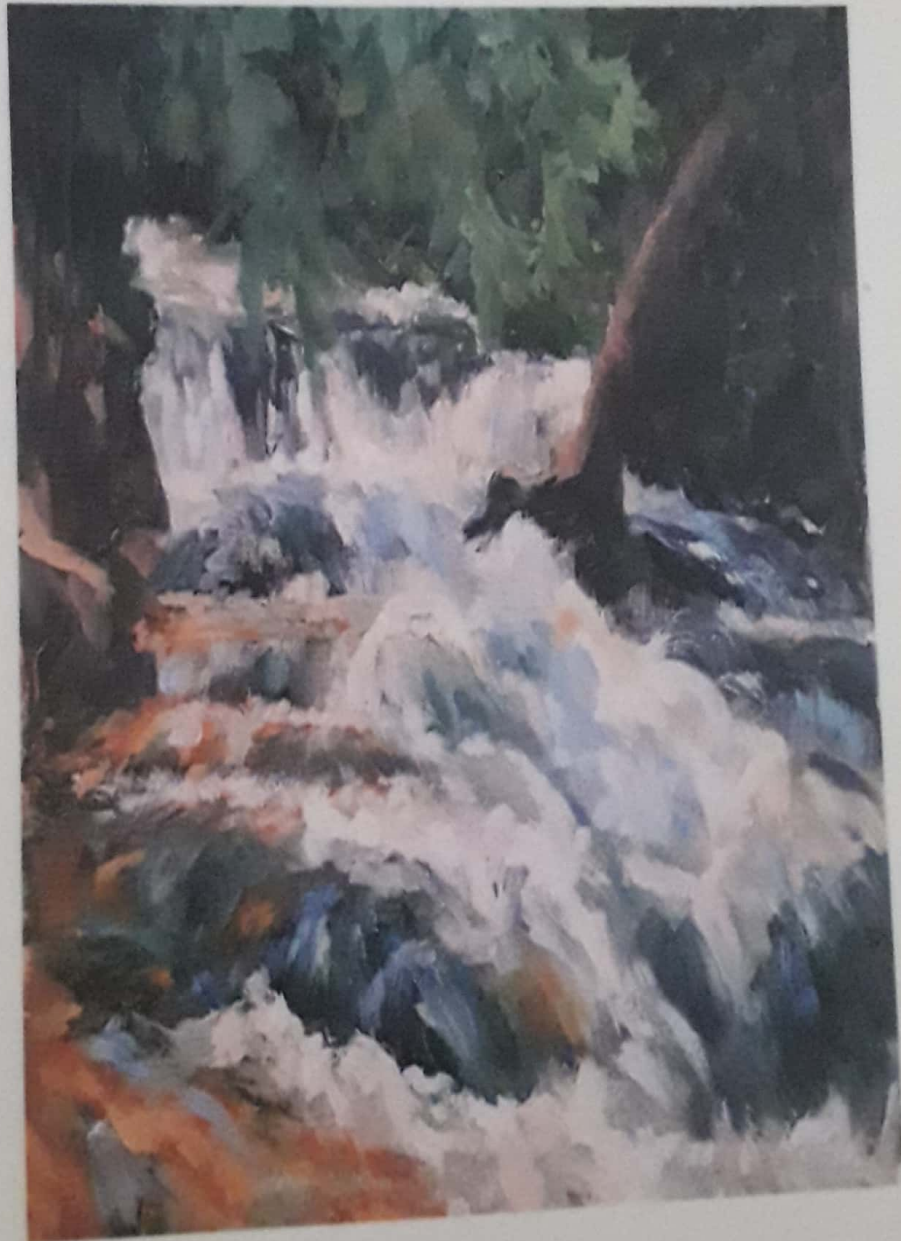


ECHOING CASCADES

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TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* – A CRITICAL STUDY

I. SINDHIYA GAAN

African American literature is literature written by, African American writers. The genre during the 18th and 19th centuries with writers such as poet Phillis wheatley and orator Frederick Douglass, reached an early high point with the Harlem Renaissance, and continues today with authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Walter Mosley being ranked among the top writers in United States. Among the themes and issues explored in African American literature is the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African American culture, racism, slavery, and equality.

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* was followed three years later by her second novel, *Sula*, 1973. *Sula* narrates the struggle of a black community in Ohio between 1919 and 1965. Primarily, it tells the story of two childhood friends, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, spiritual soul mates who have been separate by their ways when Nel Marries but reunite ten years later. In addition, it exposes the small mindedness of the black community towards Shadrack, a veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Nel's mother, Helene, the financially comfortable newcomer from New Orleans, and Sula and her grandmother Eva. The novel depicts the miserable life of black people after the World War I and their struggle with the white society.

The event of the novel opens in (1919) when African American soldiers return home from Europe after World War I. They did not receive as much respect for their service as the white soldiers, when they returned. Many began working for civil rights. Shadrack is the founder of the national suicide day (January 30). He suffers from shell shock or what we could now call post traumatic stress disorder, because of disturbing things he saw in the combat. In 1917 F, Shadrack goes to France to encounter the enemy. As he is running with other men in his unit, dodging bullets and other artillery, he sees the man next to him get killed. Shadrack sees the man's "head disappear under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet" (*Sula* 8). As Shadrack recovers in the hospital, he finds that he has no

control over his hand and other body parts: "anything could be anywhere" (Sula 8). He breaks down and cries when emerges from the hospital and realizes that "he didn't even know who or what he was with no past, no longer, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock.. and nothing nothing nothing to do" (Sula 12), Shadrack lacks a sense of self and has no clear idea of how to live in the world.

The novel opens with the destruction of the "Bottom", the black community's land to make way for suburban development. However, a tone of loss and reminiscence through the community tales about the Bottom which was once a lively community with delicious trees, a pool hall, a beauty parlor, a church, a restaurant and many black inhabitants. There is more music and familiarity among the inhabitants, and their laughter could be heard as far away as the nearby valley. While this black community literally becomes homeless, it makes the pain of dislocation with humor in its maintenance of the white man's joke that set up the community in the first place. The Bottom gets its name from cruel jokes played on slavery. A white farmer once promises his slave freedom and rich bottom land in exchange for some very difficult works. On completion of the work, the farmer has to give the slave his freedom, but instead of fertile bottomland, he has given him a hilly parcel of land worn away by erosion. The farmer tells the slave that the hilly land was indeed bottom land, for it was "the bottom of heaven" (Sula 5). The slave unfortunately does not know any better so he accepts the land. Before long, the unfortunate slave finds out the truth. He has been tricked by his master and has given a piece of land that was worthless for farming.

The master said: "Oh no! See those hills? That's bottom
Land, rich and fertile".

"But it's high up in the hill," 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." (Morrison Sula 5).

This framing of the novel encompasses the trauma of black life in white culture. For a long time, the Bottom remained inhabited by the black people in the area, the white people stayed on the rich valley floor, at the starting of the novel. However, the white inhabitants have discovered the beauty of the Bottom and have bought up the land, forcing the blacks to move out the Bottom with all its rich history.

The effect of racism upon black American life is a major ingredient in all of Morrison's novels, as she explores the difference between the race's humanity and cultural values. Racism in all its innumerable forms, whether deliberate or subconscious, is a part of every scene in *Sula*, with every aspect of the novel expressing some color of racism. Even the laughter of the bottom is a laughter born of pain a series of cruel jokes directed against the laughers themselves.

In both *Sula* and *Nel* there is a quest for social and gender identity. Morrison describes how Sula "had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both and other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not only one and the same thing" (*Sula* 55). Nel and Sula are drawn towards each other out of their awareness that their lives as black females are restricted by their community and by the outer society. Barbara Smith writes that the friendship between Nel and Sula is an example of "the necessary bonding that has always taken place between black women for the barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves". Together Sula and Nel enter puberty, together they discover boys and they become aware of their own sexuality.

Although Nel and Sula share these strong bonds, they are different from each other in several respects. Sula is emotional and adventurous and Nel is vigilant and reliable. Whereas Nel becomes a slave to sexism and racism, Sula becomes a liberated woman. The standard of womanhood that Nel represents is not the pure image of the ideal southern lady, but one based on the status of working – class black men in the society. This role is seen by Nel's community as good, while Sula is seen as evil. For Sula not only refuses the role, but steps outside the caste of women, beyond any class definition within the caste, when she insists on making herself. She is interested neither in being beautiful nor becoming

a mother. She keeps herself outside the sex, race, and class definitions of the society. Nel and Sula found the dilemma of their lives and its solution. African American women are oppressed and to escape from their oppression, they must become self-dependent.

Morrison wants to parallel between the civil rights struggle of the blacks during 1960s, when 200,000 African Americans racism demonstrated because they were denied their rights for the second time after World War II, and the demonstration of the blacks in the Bottom through the National Suicide Day. These riots and efforts bring change later to blacks, especially in the Bottom. During 1965, people began to work and gain more civil rights, and they have been wealthier in the years following the war. On the surface, this seems like a positive thing. However, they have also lost something - black heritage and identity, when they start selling their houses to the white. Blacks move to the valley that was previously all whites. Everyone in Medallion lives separately with little concern for their neighbors. The Bottom is discovered to be an expensive land that is why the whites look to expand their houses to the Bottom up. They want their houses overlook the river and an elm tree to enjoy the nice sight. Barbara Christian says that the Bottom and its distinctiveness have disappeared. Ironically black folk had moved from the Bottom only to realize too late that hill land has become valuable. In fact what the white farmer has told his slave a hundred years before 'The bottom of heaven'. Through the novel Sula Morrison shows the readers that the African American still face many difficulties when they try to assimilate into main stream society. Discrimination of African American is still strong which is clearly visible in the denied job opportunities for a African American in Medallion. Morrison visualizes the friendship between Nel and Sula. The girls realize at an early age that their situation in society is complicated, because they are blacks and females. Sula and Nel help each other define their personalities, they provide each other with production they lack, and they fight together against oppression

Morrison's Sula is reviewed as a different novel, nominated for the national book award in 1975. Toni Morrison has been highly commended for her gift of steering the character in her novel. She has created her characters deftly. The conflict between self-realization and

community allegiance is dexterously dealt by Toni Morrison. Within the crafted frame work of the novel Toni Morrison fixes the ethical standards of society. She has also designed Sula with certain symbols which are more meaningful in the novel both life death are symbolized.

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