International Journal of Research in Education: Theory and Practices
E-ISSN 3048-8486
Volume 2 Issue 2
Mar-Apr 2025, PP 140-151

Defying Conventions: Autonomy, Morality, and Existentialism in Toni Morrison's Sula

Research Scholar Mrs. V. Gayathri, Dr. N. Vijayakumari
Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, Tamil Nadu, INDIA.

Abstract. Toni Morrison's Sula (1973) is a radical exploration of Black female identity, autonomy, and moral ambiguity within a racially segregated society. By centering on the character of Sula Peace, a woman who defies conventional expectations of marriage, motherhood, and communal belonging, Morrison challenges traditional representations of Black womanhood. Unlike the self-sacrificing maternal figures often found in literature, Sula asserts her independence, embracing an existence free from social constraints. Her rejection of prescribed roles leads to her vilification within her community, reflecting how Black women who defy respectability politics are ostracized. This paper examines Morrison's critique of gender norms, morality, and societal expectations through Sula's character, analysing how the novel deconstructs the binaries of good and evil, stability and chaos, conformity and rebellion. Additionally, it explores the complex female friendship between Sula and Nel, highlighting how patriarchal forces condition women to prioritize male relationships over sisterhood. Morrison's existentialist undertones are also discussed, particularly Sula's rejection of redemption, her embrace of personal freedom, and her defiance in the face of death. By integrating Black feminist thought, existentialist philosophy, and psychoanalytic theory, this study argues that Sula is not merely a novel about rebellion but a profound meditation on self-definition and the price of autonomy. Morrison's portrayal of a woman who refuses to conform, even at the cost of social exile, ultimately forces readers to question whether true liberation can exist within a society that demands obedience.
Index Terms- Black female identity, autonomy, gender norms, existentialism, moral ambiguity, female friendship, societal ostracization.

I. Introduction: Subverting Norms in Black Female Identity

Toni Morrison's Sula (1973) is a radical literary intervention that challenges the stereotypical narratives of Black womanhood, morality, and communal belonging. Unlike traditional depictions of Black women as either self-sacrificing mothers, devoted wives, or tragic figures, Morrison presents Sula Peace, a woman who refuses to conform to societal expectations, embraces her desires without guilt, and ultimately becomes an outcast within her own community. Her rejection of motherhood, marriage, and domestic respectability marks her as a pariah, illustrating how Black communities regulate and punish women who step outside prescribed gender roles.

Set in the Bottom, a segregated Black neighbourhood, the novel follows the intertwined lives of Sula and Nel, two childhood friends whose bond is deeply intimate yet ultimately fractured by betrayal, societal pressures, and divergent paths. While Nel chooses stability, social acceptance, and a traditional role as a wife and mother, Sula rejects these norms entirely, embracing a life of freedom and independence, yet paying the price of exile and loneliness. Morrison explores how Black communities enforce rigid moral expectations on women, suggesting that true autonomy often leads to condemnation rather than liberation.

This paper examines:

- How Sula's radical autonomy challenges societal definitions of morality and respectability.

- The dynamics of female friendship, betrayal, and the limits of solidarity.
- The impact of Black communal expectations on individual identity.
- The existentialist undertones of Sula's rejection of conventional happiness.

Through these themes, Morrison redefines Black female subjectivity, rejecting binaries of good vs. evil, respectability vs. disgrace, and instead presents a woman who chooses self-definition over communal belonging.

II. Sula as a Radical Disruptor: Rejecting Morality and Respectability

Toni Morrison constructs Sula Peace as a radical and existentialist figure, a woman who lives without seeking approval and refuses to conform to socially imposed gender norms. While the women of the Bottom are expected to define themselves through marriage, motherhood, and religious virtue, Sula rejects these roles outright, carving out an identity that exists outside traditional respectability politics. Unlike other Black female protagonists in Morrison's novels, Sula does not suffer as a victim of systemic oppression—she actively chooses to defy the moral structures around her.

Through Sula's character, Morrison interrogates the boundaries of morality, autonomy, and female agency, demonstrating that true independence often results in social exile. The Bottom's community perceives Sula's refusal to conform as a threat, turning her into a scapegoat for their fears and frustrations. This section explores how Sula challenges traditional gender norms by portraying a protagonist who defies societal expectations of femininity and domesticity. The community's rejection of Sula serves as a manifestation of patriarchal control, illustrating how women who do not conform to prescribed roles are marginalized. Through Sula's characterization, Morrison critiques the rigid policing of female behaviour, exposing the ways in which societal norms restrict women's autonomy and individuality.

1. The Meaning of Sula's Nonconformity

Sula's radical autonomy is expressed through her refusal to participate in the societal institutions that define womanhood in the Bottom. She embodies a complete rejection of convention, positioning herself as an individualist in a world that demands conformity.

Marriage as Ownership: Sula's Rejection of Domesticity

For most women in the Bottom, marriage is synonymous with stability, social validation, and duty. A woman's worth is determined by her ability to keep a home, please a husband, and raise children. However, Sula resists this institution, perceiving marriage as a form of ownership rather than partnership.

Traditional Black Women in the Bottom	Sula's Perspective
Marriage is a source of stability and respectability.	Marriage is a form of social control that limits personal freedom.
Women are expected to serve their husbands.	Sula refuses to submit to male authority.
A woman's value is tied to her ability to maintain a household.	Sula refuses domestic life altogether, choosing solitude and impermanence.

Motherhood as Restriction: Sula's Rejection of Reproductive Expectations

Motherhood is an expected rite of passage for women in the Bottom, a role that solidifies a woman's place in the community. In contrast, Sula Unlike Nel, who seeks comfort and validation in marriage, Sula actively avoids romantic attachments that

could demand emotional or physical labor from her. Morrison presents this rejection not as a rebellion against men, but as an assertion of personal freedom—Sula refuses to be owned, defined, or limited by anyone.

views motherhood as a limitation, a sacrifice of selfhood that she refuses to make.

Traditional View of Motherhood in the Bottom	Sula's View of Motherhood
Children are a blessing and a woman's primary duty.	Children would limit her autonomy.
Motherhood provides a woman with purpose.	Sula sees it as an unwanted responsibility.
A woman without children is considered unnatural.	Sula embraces her childlessness as a choice.

Morrison's critique here is clear—Sula's refusal to have children is seen as unnatural not because it is harmful, but because it is different. The women in the Bottom internalize societal expectations, making them complicit in the policing of other women's choices.

Sexual Autonomy: Sula as a Disruptor of Gender Norms

Perhaps the most scandalous aspect of Sula's life is her unapologetic sexuality. She engages in casual relationships, including with married men, without guilt or emotional attachment. Her sexual liberation is met with moral outrage, despite the fact that men in the Bottom routinely engage in infidelity.

Men's Sexual Freedom in the Bottom	**Sula's Sexual Freedom (and the Community's Response)**
Married men are expected to cheat, but their wives remain faithful.	Sula engages in sex on her own terms, disregarding societal norms.
Male infidelity is dismissed as "natural."	Sula is condemned as a corrupting influence.
Men can sleep with multiple women and retain respect.	Sula is seen as morally depraved for rejecting monogamy.

Morrison critiques the double standard that allows men to be sexually autonomous but punishes women for the same behaviour. Sula's crime is not having sex—it is having sex without shame.

Sula's Refusal to Seek Redemption: The Ultimate Act of Defiance

Most characters in Morrison's novels seek redemption, forgiveness, or reconciliation by the end of their journeys. However, Sula dies without regret, refusing to apologize for the life she chose.

Traditional Narrative Arc	**Sula's Narrative Arc**
The protagonist undergoes a moral reckoning.	Sula does not seek redemption.
Atonement is necessary for resolution.	Sula remains firm in her choices.
Community acceptance is restored in some form.	Sula dies an outcast, unapologetic and self-assured.

Morrison presents Sula as an existentialist figure, someone who embraces her own reality rather than bending to society's expectations. Her refusal to atone makes her one of Morrison's most radical protagonists.

2. The Community's Rejection of Sula: The Fear of an Independent Woman

Sula's autonomy does not exist in isolation—the Bottom's community perceives her as a direct threat. Rather than respecting her choices, they vilify her, turn her into a scapegoat, and blame her for misfortunes.

Sula as a Symbol of Evil: Community Myths and Moral Panic

From the moment Sula returns to the Bottom after years of absence, rumours begin to circulate about her being cursed or inhuman.

- She is accused of witchcraft when her presence coincides with small misfortunes.
- The townspeople believe she has unnatural powers, even though she has done nothing wrong.
- She becomes the person onto whom the community projects its collective fears and insecurities.

This illustrates how patriarchal and religious societies punish women who do not conform. By labelling Sula as "evil," the community justifies her exclusion.

The Double Standard: Sula as the "Corrupter" of Men

Even though the men of the Bottom pursue Sula willingly, she is blamed for their indiscretions.

Community's View of Men's Infidelity	Community's View of Sula's Sexuality
Men cheating is expected.	Sula seduces men and destroys marriages.
Wives should forgive their husbands.	Wives should hate Sula for taking their men.
Men's actions are not questioned.	Sula is ostracized for her choices.

This double standard reinforces Morrison's argument that women are judged more harshly than men for sexual behaviour.

3. Sula's Presence as a Disturbance to Order

The most ironic part of Sula's exile is that, once she dies, the town falls into disorder. While she was alive, people found purpose in hating her. Without her, they lose their moral scapegoat.Morrison's critique here is sharp: the community needed Sula as an outcast in order to sustain its fragile sense of morality. Her rejection of their expectations forced them to confront their own contradictions.

III. Female Friendship and Betrayal: The Sula-Nel Dichotomy

The most complex and intimate relationship in Sula is the bond between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two women whose connection is more profound than any romantic relationship in the novel. Morrison presents their friendship as a reflection of two opposing life paths available to Black women in a racist and patriarchal society. Their diverging choices—Nel's embrace of social expectations and Sula's defiance of them—illustrate the tension between communal belonging and self-liberation.

Their friendship, however, is ultimately fractured by betrayal, exposing how patriarchal structures force women into conflict rather than allowing them to support one another. Sula's affair with Nel's husband, Jude, is not just an act of infidelity—it is a

rupture in their shared understanding of womanhood and trust. Through their estrangement, Morrison critiques how women are conditioned to prioritize male relationships over female solidarity, leading to the loss of their most profound emotional bonds.

This section delves into the profound bond between Sula and Nel, presenting their relationship as an alternative to conventional romantic love. Their divergent life choices position them as foils, highlighting the different paths women take within societal constraints. The theme of patriarchal betrayal emerges as a driving force behind their separation, illustrating how external pressures disrupt female solidarity. Through this, Morrison critiques the ways in which social norms not only dictate women's roles but also foster division rather than unity among them.

1. Shared Childhood Trauma: The Drowning of Chicken Little

One of the most defining moments of Sula and Nel's friendship is their shared witnessing of Chicken Little's drowning, an event that traumatizes them both but remains unspoken between them. Chicken Little's death serves as a powerful symbol of lost innocence, forging an unbreakable yet silent bond of complicity between the two girls. Their response—neither reporting the incident nor openly grieving—reflects the societal conditioning that compels Black women to internalize pain rather than express it. This shared trauma cements their connection, as only they understand the weight of the guilt and secrecy they now carry. Through this, Morrison underscores how female friendships, particularly among Black women, are often shaped by unspoken yet deeply significant experiences, forming a sisterhood of survival in a world that offers them little refuge.

2. Sula and Nel as Complementary Opposites

Sula and Nel function as complementary opposites, their friendship thriving because they balance each other's strengths and weaknesses, forming a bond greater than the sum of its parts. Nel seeks stability through marriage, motherhood, and community approval, defining herself through responsibility, duty, and self-sacrifice. In contrast, Sula rejects social conventions, embracing independence over acceptance and refusing to be bound by societal expectations. As a result, Nel becomes the "good" woman, upholding traditional values, while Sula is cast as a pariah, condemned for defying moral norms.

Morrison does not position one path as inherently superior to the other; rather, she highlights the painful choices Black women must make in a world that demands conformity. Nel's path offers belonging, but at the cost of personal freedom, while Sula's pursuit of self-liberation comes at the price of loneliness. Their friendship symbolizes this duality—two halves of a whole, ultimately fractured by a society that refuses to allow Black women to exist beyond rigid, binary roles.

3. The Emotional Closeness of Their Bond

Morrison presents Sula and Nel's friendship as an emotional bond deeper and more enduring than any romantic or familial relationship, suggesting that female connections can provide greater fulfilment than marriage. Nel finds more joy and security in Sula's presence than she ever does with her husband, Jude, while Sula values Nel's companionship above all other relationships, including those with men. Their connec-

tion is so profound that when they part ways, each experiences a profound sense of loss, as if losing a piece of herself. Through this portrayal, Morrison challenges the conventional expectation that women must seek fulfilment through men, instead highlighting Black female friendship as a powerful site of emotional sustenance, self-discovery, and identity formation.

2. Betrayal and the Fracturing of Solidarity

The turning point in Sula and Nel's friendship occurs when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, Jude. This moment is not just about infidelity—it is about the breaking of female trust. Their friendship, which had once existed outside of patriarchal structures, is now destroyed by a man's presence between them.

Nel's Perspective: Betrayal as a Violation of Trust

From Nel's perspective, betrayal is not merely an act of infidelity but a profound violation of trust and sisterhood. For her, marriage symbolizes stability, respectability, and social belonging—values she has carefully built her life around. When Sula sleeps with Jude, Nel feels as though her very identity has been stolen, not just as a wife but as a woman. She does not view this act as a simple sexual transgression; rather, it represents the breaking of a sacred loyalty between women, a breach that wounds her more deeply than Jude's departure ever could.

Nel's pain is not centered on losing her husband but on losing Sula, emphasizing that their friendship holds greater significance than romantic love. Her reaction underscores the depth of emotional investment women place in their relationships with each other, even in a society that often forces them into competition. Through this, Morrison challenges traditional narratives of betrayal, shifting the focus from male-centered conflicts to the fractures that occur between women when their trust is broken.

Sula's Perspective: Betrayal as a Meaningless Act

From Sula's perspective, betrayal is an arbitrary concept, shaped by societal norms that she refuses to accept. To her, sex is a fleeting physical act, devoid of emotional attachment or deeper meaning. She does not comprehend why Nel equates sex with betrayal when it was never intended to hurt her, nor does she understand why women feel the need to be possessive of men, especially when men move freely between partners without facing the same scrutiny. Most of all, she questions why female friendship should be seen as secondary to male relationships, rejecting the idea that romantic or marital bonds should take precedence over the deep connection she shares with Nel.

Sula's response reflects her radical philosophy—one that dismisses the constraints of morality, attachment, and traditional loyalty. She sees herself as liberated from societal expectations, embracing a worldview where personal freedom outweighs obligations to others. However, her inability to grasp the depth of Nel's pain reveals the limitations of her ideology. She fails to recognize that for Nel, their bond was built on trust and shared commitment, not just individual autonomy. In this way, Morrison presents Sula's independence as both empowering and isolating, showing how her defiance of social norms ultimately distances her from the very relationships she values most.

Morrison's Critique: How Patriarchy Divides Women

Morrison uses Sula and Nel's estrangement to expose the ways in which patriarchal systems condition women to see each other as competitors rather than allies, ultimately weakening female solidarity. Women are often taught to view one another as rivals, particularly in the context of relationships with men, reinforcing the idea

that romantic love holds greater value than deep female bonds. This conditioning is evident in Nel's response—while she mourns the betrayal, her greatest loss is not Jude, but Sula, highlighting that the most profound relationships in women's lives are often those with other women.

Morrison further critiques how society expects women to forgive men for their transgressions while holding grudges against each other. Jude, despite being an equal participant in the betrayal, fades into the background of Nel's pain, whereas Sula remains the true "betrayer," demonstrating how women are socialized to hold each other to higher moral standards than they do men. Through this dynamic, Morrison challenges the patriarchal notion that a husband is inherently more valuable than a friend, illustrating how such beliefs erode female friendships. By revealing these societal constructs, she urges a reexamination of the ways in which women are forced into division rather than encouraged to cultivate enduring solidarity.

3. The Irreparable Loss and Nel's Realization

In the years following Sula's death, Nel comes to a profound realization—her grief had never truly been for Jude, but for Sula. She had believed she was mourning the loss of her husband, yet in reality, it was the absence of her closest friend that left an unfillable void in her life. She now understands that while she had never deeply loved Jude, her bond with Sula had been one of profound, irreplaceable love.

This revelation culminates in the novel's final, haunting moment when Nel cries out, "Sula?"—a heartbreaking acknowledgment that her greatest loss was not her husband, but her friend. With this, Morrison dismantles societal expectations about love and loss, challenging the notion that a woman's most significant relationships must be romantic or defined by men. Instead, she asserts that female friendships can be just as, if not more, defining than marriages—yet they remain fragile, easily fractured by patriarchal forces that pit women against each other. Nel's belated recognition of this truth underscores the tragedy of their separation, reinforcing Morrison's critique of a world that undervalues the sustaining power of women's relationships.

IV. Sula and Existentialism: The Embrace of Death and Meaninglessness

Toni Morrison's Sula can be interpreted through existentialist philosophy, particularly in Sula's refusal to conform to societal expectations, her rejection of traditional morality, and her acceptance of life's impermanence. Unlike most literary heroines, Sula does not seek redemption, does not fear isolation, and does not attempt to justify her choices. Instead, she embraces self-definition, personal freedom, and an unwavering confrontation with mortality.

Sula's character closely aligns with existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, who argue that meaning is not inherent in life but is instead created through individual actions. Morrison presents Sula as a woman who refuses to define herself in relation to others, rejecting societal guilt and embracing death with the same detachment with which she lived.

This section examines Sula as an existentialist figure who refuses to adhere to conventional morality, embracing life's inherent meaninglessness rather than conforming to societal expectations. Unlike those around her, Sula does not seek validation through community, marriage, or duty—she defines her own existence on her own terms. Her rejection of imposed moral frameworks allows her to live with an unapologetic freedom that unsettles those who adhere to traditional norms.

Even in death, Sula asserts her autonomy. Her passing is not framed as a moment of tragedy or redemption but as a final act of self-possession, devoid of regret or the need for societal absolution. Morrison challenges the expectation that female characters must undergo redemption arcs or conform to external moral judgments. Instead, Sula remains committed to herself, refusing to seek forgiveness or alter her path for the sake of others. Through this, Morrison presents a radical vision of female agency—one that defies expectations of sacrifice, suffering, or repentance, positioning Sula as a woman who refuses to be defined by anything but her own will.

Sula as an Existentialist Figure

Existentialism challenges conventional ideas of morality, religion, and meaning, arguing that individuals must define their own values in a world without inherent structure. Sula embodies this philosophy by rejecting socially imposed constraints, embracing personal freedom, and facing death with unflinching acceptance.

Her Rejection of Morality as a Social Construct

Unlike Nel, who internalizes the town's rigid moral code, Sula perceives morality as an arbitrary system designed to enforce conformity rather than an absolute truth. She does not see the world in binary terms of good and evil; instead, she believes that human actions stem from self-interest rather than intrinsic virtue or vice. Her affairs with married men, her disregard for social expectations, and her refusal to seek redemption exemplify her rejection of the moral framework that dictates the lives of those around her.

Her Commitment to Absolute Freedom

Sula aligns with existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who argue that true freedom comes from rejecting societal expectations. She refuses to be defined by her family, relationships, or community, instead choosing to live entirely on her own terms. Unlike Nel and the other women in the Bottom, Sula does not seek validation, stability, or acceptance—her actions are dictated by personal autonomy rather than obligation. Even her sexual relationships are acts of self-expression, unburdened by traditional notions of love, commitment, or belonging.

Her Unwavering Acceptance of Death

Sula's approach to death further solidifies her existentialist nature. While most people fear mortality or seek comfort in religious or moral redemption, she faces death with remarkable indifference. Her final moments are devoid of regret or reflection; she acknowledges death as an inevitable part of existence, embracing it as naturally as she embraced life. Morrison contrasts this with conventional female characters, who are often expected to atone for their transgressions before death. Sula, however, remains steadfast in her refusal to conform, reinforcing the existentialist idea that death is the only certainty and must be met without fear.

Existentialist Concept Sula's Embodiment of the Concept

Morality is a social construct Sula does not believe in inherent good or evil.
Freedom is the highest form of existence Sula refuses marriage, motherhood, or social expectations.

Authenticity over conformitySula never alters herself for others.

Death is inevitable and must be accepted Sula faces death without fear or repentance.

Through Sula's defiance of social norms and her commitment to living and dying on her own terms, Morrison challenges traditional narratives of female morality, redemption, and conformity. Sula stands as a radical figure, a woman who refuses to be bound by external expectations, embracing an existence defined entirely by her own will.

The Meaning of Sula's Death: Defying Redemption

In many literary traditions, female characters who defy social norms are ultimately punished—whether through death, regret, or forced submission. Morrison, however, rejects this trope, presenting Sula's death not as a tragic consequence of her rebellion, but as a final assertion of her existentialist philosophy. Rather than seeking absolution or conforming in her final moments, Sula remains unapologetic, reinforcing the idea that she has lived life on her own terms.

She Does Not Apologize or Seek Forgiveness

Unlike traditional "fallen" heroines who repent before death, Sula refuses to express regret or seek redemption. She does not ask for Nel's forgiveness, nor does she attempt to make peace with the community that shunned her. She remains steadfast in her belief that she has lived authentically, untethered by the expectations of others. Her refusal to conform, even in death, cements her status as an existentialist figure, demonstrating that she will not betray her own truth for the sake of moral or social absolution.

Her Death Is Not a Tragedy—It Is an Assertion of Autonomy

In conventional narratives, the death of a rebellious woman often serves as a cautionary tale, reinforcing societal norms by punishing nonconformity. Morrison, however, subverts this expectation by framing Sula's death not as a moment of suffering, but as an act of self-acceptance. She does not face death with fear or despair but with clarity and understanding. Having lived without regret, she embraces death as a natural extension of life rather than a punishment for her defiance. Morrison suggests that dying without apology is the ultimate affirmation of a truly free existence.

****Sula's Final Thought: "Well, I'll Be Damned"**

Sula's last words are not a plea for salvation or a moment of revelation; instead, they reflect her existentialist worldview. Her final thought is not one of regret, fear, or punishment—it is simply a recognition of death as another part of existence, no different from any other moment in her life. This aligns with the existentialist idea that life and death hold no inherent meaning beyond what an individual assigns to them. In the end, Sula remains true to herself, refusing to conform to expectations even in her last breath.

Conventional Female Redemption Arc Sula's Subversion of the Trope

The fallen woman repents and seeks forgiveness before death. Sula refuses to apologize, believing she lived authentically.

- Death is framed as punishment for nonconformity. Death is simply another moment in Sula's journey.
- The heroine realizes the error of her ways. Sula does not view her life as a mistake—she embraces it fully.
- The community reclaims or forgives the rebellious woman. Sula remains an outcast, unmoved by social judgment.

Through this subversion of the traditional female redemption arc, Morrison reclaims the narrative of women who refuse to conform. Rather than presenting Sula's death as a moral reckoning, Morrison makes it a final moment of existential truth—an acceptance of life's meaninglessness and the triumph of individual will. Sula does not beg for absolution, nor does she regret the life she has lived. In doing so, she embodies the ultimate act of self-determination, defying a world that demands women seek validation, even in death.

The Community's Moral Hypocrisy: How Sula's Rejection Validates the Bottom's Identity

Morrison critiques not only Sula's role as an individual disruptor but also the community's complicity in enforcing oppressive norms. The Bottom, a segregated Black neighborhood, upholds rigid expectations for women, demanding domesticity, self-sacrifice, and religious virtue. While the town condemns Sula for rejecting these roles, her defiance paradoxically strengthens their own moral identity. She becomes a scapegoat, someone against whom the community measures its virtue, reinforcing how social norms depend on the existence of outsiders.

The Bottom's Enforcement of Gender Norms

The Bottom imposes strict expectations on women, defining their worth through motherhood, marriage, and religious piety. Women are expected to prioritize family, endure hardships, and uphold traditional morality. Sula, however, rejects these roles entirely—she refuses marriage, dismisses motherhood as restrictive, and embraces sexual freedom without shame. Rather than questioning the limitations of these norms, the community casts Sula as an immoral outcast, using her defiance to reinforce their belief in respectability.

The Town's Hypocrisy: Secret Admiration for Sula

While the town publicly vilifies Sula, many secretly admire her autonomy. Women claim to despise her but find comfort in comparing their own sacrifices to her perceived recklessness. Her existence makes their self-denial seem noble. Men, though intimidated by her independence, are also drawn to her, fascinated by her refusal to submit to control. Morrison highlights this hypocrisy—Sula defies moral conventions, yet both men and women in the Bottom are fixated on her precisely because of her defiance.

Sula's Death and the Town's Unraveling

Ironically, when Sula dies, the community does not find peace but begins to decay. Without her, women lose their sense of virtue, dissatisfaction grows, and life in the Bottom becomes stagnant. Morrison suggests that Sula was never the true source of disorder—the town itself was. Her death exposes the emptiness of their moral superiority, revealing that social order often relies on the existence of an outcast. In the end, the Bottom's decline proves that Sula's presence was essential, not as a villain but as a mirror reflecting the town's contradictions.

V. Conclusion

Toni Morrison's Sula stands as a radical challenge to the rigid expectations placed upon Black women in a patriarchal and racially oppressive society. Through the character of Sula Peace, Morrison interrogates the cultural, moral, and existential frameworks that seek to define and confine women's identities. Sula's refusal to conform—her rejection of marriage, motherhood, and social respectability—positions her as a figure of ultimate self-determination, yet also marks her as an outcast. Morrison does not portray Sula as a cautionary tale; instead, she presents her as a woman who fully embraces her autonomy, even at the cost of communal exile.

The novel critiques the ways in which Black communities, shaped by both systemic racism and internalized patriarchal structures, regulate female behaviour through rigid moral codes. The Bottom's collective rejection of Sula reveals how communities often need a scapegoat to validate their own adherence to societal norms. By making Sula the object of moral outrage, the town affirms its own perceived righteousness, reinforcing a system in which women are valued only in relation to their service to men, family, and tradition. Morrison highlights this hypocrisy, exposing how nonconforming women are not feared for their actions, but for their refusal to seek validation or redemption.

Central to Sula is the deeply complex relationship between Sula and Nel, a friendship that transcends conventional romantic or familial bonds. Their divergent paths—one choosing conformity, the other defiance—illustrate the limited choices available to Black women in a world that demands either submission or isolation. Their final estrangement, and Nel's late realization that she has grieved for Sula more than for her husband, reinforces Morrison's assertion that the most profound and defining relationships in women's lives are often with other women, yet they are frequently fractured by societal pressures.

Morrison also situates Sula within an existentialist framework, presenting her protagonist as a figure who rejects traditional morality, refuses to seek external validation, and embraces death with the same detachment with which she lived. Unlike traditional female protagonists who undergo redemption arcs or seek reconciliation before death, Sula dies unapologetic, defying the expectation that women must seek forgiveness for living life on their own terms. Her last moments, marked by curiosity rather than regret, affirm her existentialist philosophy—she does not see her life as a failure, but as an experiment in radical freedom.

Ultimately, Sula is not just a novel about an unconventional woman; it is a powerful critique of the oppressive structures that dictate Black female identity, morality, and communal belonging. Morrison forces readers to reconsider the binaries of good and evil, virtue and vice, order and chaos, and instead embrace the complexity of human existence. Through Sula, Morrison does not argue that all women should live as she does, but she does insist that women should have the right to define their own lives, free from the moral judgments of society. In doing so, Sula remains a groundbreaking exploration of Black female autonomy, resistance, and the high cost of self-definition in a world that demands conformity.

References

1. Primary Source
2. Morrison, Toni. Sula. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.
3. Secondary Sources on Toni Morrison and Sula
4. Bouson, J. Brooks. Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
5. Dubey, Madhu. Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
6. Gibson, Donald. Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. New York: Amistad, 1993.
7. Mbalia, Doreatha D. Toni Morrison's Development of Black Feminist Aesthetic. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991.
8. Rigney, Barbara Hill. The Voices of Toni Morrison. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991.
9. Tally, Justine. Toni Morrison's Sula: A Cultural Reading. London: Icon Books, 2001.
10. Critical Studies on Race, Gender, and Black Feminism
11. Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge, 1990.
12. Hooks, Bell. Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
13. Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984.
14. Spillers, Hortense J. Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
15. Walker, Alice. In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
16. Philosophical and Psychological Theories Used
17. Freud, Sigmund. Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.
18. Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1952.
19. Erikson, Erik H. Identity and the Life Cycle. New York: Norton, 1980.
20. Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism Is a Humanism. Translated by Carol Macomber. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
21. Nietzsche, Friedrich. Beyond Good and Evil. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1989.