

## EMOTIONAL EXTRICATION IN RELATIONSHIPS AS DEPICTED IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the impact of emotional extrication in familial and social relationships as portrayed in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. Toni Morrison shows how the characters in *Sula* undergo emotional disentanglement from others, causes of their emotional disengagement and its effect on the families and society. Emotionally disconnected people turn out to be a threat to the society. This paper also aims to give a brief account of how the black people perceive persons and events and how their perceptions define their attitude to others. *Sula* is an in depth study of relationships and it makes us aware of the dangers of deranged relationship and lack of emotional correlation in familial and social bonds.

Keywords: Emotional extrication, rejection, perception, relationship dilemma, camaraderie, pleasure, apathy.

Relationship is one of the most integral parts of our life. Lack of proper connection spoils one's personality. Emotional estrangement in familial and social relationship is a great concern of African American writers. Toni Morrison is one of the greatest African American

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novelists who probe into the mind of the characters and recount the true emotional life experience of the African American people. *Sula* is the masterpiece of Toni Morrison which exposes the limitations and expectations of Black people's lives in Medallion. It is the story of Sula peace, her childhood experiences and her quest for pleasure and freedom. In her search for liberty and enjoyment Sula becomes a threat to the society. Most of the characters in *Sula* fail to make emotional association with in the family and society. *Sula* also examines the predicament of the people of Medallion and how their experiences figure their perception. Toni Morrison shows the consequence of emotional disconnection in family and society in *Sula*.

Sula is brought up in a big family governed by her one legged grandmother Eva, a strong lady with unusual power and vision. Eva is abandoned by her husband "after five years of sad and disgruntled marriage" (Morrison 32). Even when they were together he had no proper association with Eva and his children. He did whatever he liked, kept relationship with another woman and always abused Eva. He even leaves her with three children and Eva hates him and the resentment she keeps in her mind transforms her personality and perception. For a brief time she entrusts her children with Mrs. Suggs and returns after eighteen months with sufficient money but with one leg which she keeps as a lifelong secret. People assume different stories about her lost leg and admire her commitment towards her children. Eva builds a giant house and while sitting in a wagon on the third floor she directs the lives of her children and boarders.

Sula's childhood friend Nel also experiences rejection by her husband. Nel's shock at her friend's betrayal and the following rejection of her husband create an existential crisis and relationship dilemma in her mind. Nel feels emotional disconnection from her husband when she sees him together with Sula in bed. But Nel finds it difficult to accept the fact that her husband left her and doubts, "Could he be gone if his tie is still here?"(Morrison 104). Still she remains as a devoted mother to her children. Jude's rejection also brings a break in Nel's camaraderie with Sula but when Nel hears Sula is sick in bed, she prepares her mind to visit Sula. Though Nel wants to forgive her friend she is incapable of doing it fully. Nel attempts to convince Sula about her erroneous doings. Nel blames Sula for taking others husbands and doing whatever she wants. But Sula defends herself and argue "Every man I ever knew left his children" (143). The words of Sula confirm the plight of a married woman in the black community. The emotional disengagement of husbands with their wife and children and the desertion appears to be a common phenomenon in Medallion.

Lack of emotional attachment in familial relationship results in one's life an excessive thirst for pleasure. Though Eva feeds her children and controls their lives, she fails to love them the way they require it. Eva's daughter Hanna fails to recollect any memories related to her mother's love. For she asks Eva, "Mamma did you ever love us?"(Morrison 67). Eva tells her that she loves her children and add, "Not the way you thinking" (Morrison 67). For Eva

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feeding and loving are indistinguishable. The adult life of her children shows the impact of lack of emotional attachment they experience in the family. Hanna's life is an instance for this for she seeks out only pleasure in her whole life and fails to make any genuine relationship with others. After her husband's death she longs only for "some touching everyday" (Morrison 44). Her craving for love does much harm to the black community but unfortunately the black people in Medallion mysteriously like her and do not criticize her wrong doings.

Sula craves for pleasure in her whole life for she does not experience actual love from anyone in her family. Though Sula is endowed with every comfort in her big family, she feels lonely and isolated. Sula's big mama Eva fails to show any affection and even her mother Hanna does not like her. She confirms her mother's emotional detachment from her when she overhears her mother saying, "You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her" (Morrison 57). For a brief time Sula fills this gap by turning to her friend Nel. Sula's friendship with Nel helps in, "pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot day light" (Morrison 57). But her rapport with Nel also ends in betrayal. Lack of connection in her family creates in Sula a relationship dilemma that she fails to make any true relationship with others. As Melanie R Anderson argues in her book 'Spectral beginnings in *Bluest Eye* and *Sula*', "In life she denigrates connection. She cuts off her grandmother from the community and she helps isolate Nel" (Anderson 35). Thus Sula leads a care free life and she fails to recognize the emotions and feeling of others.

Emotional disconnection based on race in the society is also detectable in *Sula*. White people consider this gap as an advantage to oppress black people in diverse ways. Even the white boys show arrogance towards black people in Medallion. Morrison shows how the white boys entertained themselves "by harassing black school children" (Morrison 53). In an occasion Sula and Nel is harassed by these white boys and Sula solves the problem by slashing the tip of her finger. The bargeman's reaction while seeing Chicken Little's dead body in the river side also reveals white people's aversion towards blacks. As Morrison says "He would have left him there but noticed that it was a child, not an old black man, as it first appeared, and he prodded the body loose, netted it and hauled it aboard" (Morrison 63). He is not ready to go back even two miles to handover the body to black people in Medallion.

White people's emotional disconnection from black people based on race is apparent in all the spheres of the black people's lives. When the New River Road building works progress, Jude and some young black men rummage around for work. But the white men decline to offer labor for the young black men and instead they choose a few old black men for some trivial jobs. Though it delights them, "still it was a shame to see those white men laughing with the grandfathers but shying away from the young black men who could tear that road

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up” (Morrison 81). These rejections develop only anger and hatred in black men towards white people. Jude’s tale of some personal insult done him by two white men also concludes his observation of the society that “a Negro man had a hard row to hoe in this world “(Morrison 103).

The black community in Medallion has a peculiar way of perceiving people and events. Their establishment of relationship with others is defined by their perception. The shell shocked war veteran Shadrack comes to Medallion broken and crazy after his unpleasant experiences in War and he institutes National Suicide Day. People of Medallion turn away from this lonely, drunken, funny outrageous man and once they understand his nature they accept him as part of the society unconsciously for they accept his crazy idea of Suicide Day and simply absorb it “into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (Morrison15). Tar Baby, a boarder in Eva’s house is also lonesome without any association with the society. Tar Baby is the nick name given by Eva to the white alcoholic man who comes to reside in her big house. He seems to be crazy because “He was a mountain boy who stayed to himself, bothering no one, intent solely on drinking himself to death” (Morrison 40). He hates himself but seems to be quiet, introvert and always looks for a place to die. He keeps emotional detachment from others in the society and is the first to join with Shadrack’s National Suicide day.

The Deweys adopted by Eva also keeps a certain distance from everyone in the society. They are not similar in appearance but Eva gives them a plural name ‘Deweys’. They are immature beings, “inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves” (Morrison 38). They are naughty and are not emotionally stable. At school their teacher wonders because “they spoke with one voice, thought with one mind and maintained an annoying privacy” (Morrison39). Eva’s only son Plum also fails to keep a healthy bond with others. He fights in the World War I and returns home after some wanderings as a heroin addict. People of Medallion welcomes him and waits for him to tell his experiences of war but “They waited in vain for his telling but not long for the knowing” (Morrison45). His experience in war breaks him and he keeps aloof from everyone in his family and the society. Eva notices Plum’s emotional immaturity and existential crisis and so determines to end his life by pouring kerosene on his body.

Sula experiences familial and social disconnection throughout her life. Being an only daughter of Hanna Sula has no one to share her feelings and emotions. In her disordered big family she is surrounded by emotionally unstable people like Tar Baby, Deweys and her uncle Plum. Her big mama likes only male friends and their company. Hanna is also not emotionally steady for she longs only for momentary pleasure from strangers and her preference is for the husbands of her neighbor women. The family environment and fragmented relationships make a constant effect on Sula’s personality. As Morrison argues

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Sula's problem is that "She had no center, no speck around which to grow" (Morrison 119). Sula is raised in an emotionally disconnected environment for she lives in her own world and shared no intimacy with any one in her family. She feels no attachment towards her mother and even she does not experience any emotional struggle while witnessing her mother burn alive.

As childhood friends Nel and Sula shares a deep intimacy for each other. Nel finds comfort in Sula's company because she feels boardom in the stillness and tidiness of her home controlled by her austere mother Helen Wright and Sula also acknowledges Nel's friendship. As Morrison says, "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers, they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (Morrison 53). Nel and Sula experience an emotional disconnection from their family members but their friendship makes them attached to each other. This detachment and close alliance also destroy their innocence when they fail to recognize Chicken Little's death as their fault. Nel feels no guilt and she even tells Sula "It ain't your fault" (Morrison 63). After Chicken Little's death Sula becomes disturbed in her mind in keeping the secret to herself. In his article, 'Centrality of the Past in Toni Morrison's *Sula*', Badode opines "the finger cutting and drowning episodes demonstrate Sula's increasing sense of detatchment from herself and others" (Badode 92).

As soon as Sula gets married, Sula leaves Medallion and returns after ten years accompanied by the plague of robins. She decides to reside alone and takes Eva to an old age home to enjoy her own freedom. She does not keep alliance with the black people around and show no concern about what others thinks or speaks of her. She lives as an independent women "and seemed to need the services of nobody" (Morrison113). Sula feels no obligation "to please anybody unless their pleasure pleases her" (Morrison 18). She becomes an outcast in the society by herself. In the article 'Alienated Self: Searching for Space in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Bluest Eye*' Swain and Sarbajit Das opines, "She prefers to be a social outsider than to play any social role" (Swain&Sarbajit94). But indirectly Sula's presence becomes a blessing for the people in Medallion for they become more responsible while observing the irresponsible life of Sula. In his article 'Toni Morrison's Beloved&Sula: An Ecocritical Study' Pattnaik argues, "Sula's existence ironically inspires goodness in the neighbourhood and the women get conscious of their husband and children (Pattnaik613).

Black people in Medallion regard Sula as an evil woman and hate her when they hear about Eva's fate. When they discover Sula's illicit relationship with Nel's husband Jude, "they forgot all about Hanna's easy ways (or their own) and said she was a bitch" (Morrison112). They reject Sula and allegedly claim that "Sula slept with white men" (Morrison 112). It may not have been true, but they suppose she is competent of doing that and "all minds were closed to her when that word was passed around" (Morrison 112). Even the small children in Medallion, "look away from her in shame" (Morrison112). They simply disregard the fact that the same unification occurred in their families and their skin color is evidence. The

people of Medallion compare their lives with Sula's outrageous life and try to establish fraternity around. In 'Orderliness of Order: Madness and Evil in Toni Morrison's *Sula*', Briant argues, "While Sula lives, community members unconsciously use her to order and improve their relationship to one another" (Briant734).

When Sula dies no one shows interest to visit her dead body and it is really strange that "none of the women left their quilt patches in disarray to run to the house" (Morrison 172). Their coldness towards Sula is bizarre because "Even when China, the most rambunctious whore in the town, died, even then everybody stopped what they were doing and turned out in numbers to put the fallen sister away"(Morrison 172). Only Nel partakes in the funeral service of Sula and wonder when she "found herself the only black person there" (Morrison173). Nel notices some black people at the end of the cemetery, "Not coming in, not dressed for mourning, but there waiting" (Morrison 173). The society shows indifference to Sula even after her death.

Through the novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison reiterates the requirement of emotional attachment in familial and social relationships. Emotional estrangement devastates one's personality and it creates anarchy in the society. Toni Morrison conveys the message that family has significant role in forming one's personality for a healthy family forms a better person. *Sula* is a plea for all the children who are distressed due to poor emotional attachment in families. *Sula* also demands a change in our attitude to others in the society. Since lack of communication and emotional detachment are major issues of the contemporary society, Toni Morrison's message of emotional association has great significance. *Sula* successfully demonstrates the effects created by emotional estrangement in family and society. Toni Morrison persuades the readers to nurture empathy to extend our sensitivity towards others and genuine human bonding in family and society.

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