

# **SULA : A PORTRAYAL OF BLACK AMERICAN WOMAN AS HEAD OF THE FAMILY**

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***Abstract:** In a world of patriarchy, the head of a family is usually the male. However, under certain circumstances, such as the depression era of the 1930s that the Black American family had to face, the mother is forced to become the head of the family. Through a brief look at history, actually the function of Black American woman as the key person of upholding the family ties and sustaining the family's livelihood has been carried out ever since the Blacks arrived in America as slaves. Through one kind of cultural studies approach, i.e. an American studies approach, the article discusses this event through a close analysis of the female characters described in the novel 'Sula'.*

***Key words:** Black American women, head of the family, Sula*

## **INTRODUCTION**

People who apply an American Studies approach believe that works of literature can be used as a 'mental evidence' of understanding a particular culture of a certain country. The Americanists, Smith (1980:5) and McDowell (1948:82) are of the opinion that works of art and the culture of a society often have a relationship between each other because they function as a 'micro culture'. Consequently, a prose analysis of a particular novel enables an overview of the society, history, politics and even the economic situation of the author's origin. Similarly, Abrams postulates his literary theory as follows:

First, there is the *work*, the artistic product itself. And since this is a human product, an artifact, the second common element is the artificer, the *artist*. Third, the work is taken to have a subject which, ... [to] use the more neutral and comprehensive term, [is the] *universe* ... For the final element we have the *audience* ... to whom the work is addressed ... (1979:6).

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In other words, within a work of literature, there is a relationship between the work of art and its writer, its society, and its reader. Just like the analogy of a cloth, which is interwoven from a number of various elements or threads, the analysis of a novel can reveal the multidimensional factors that influence the writing of the novel at the time.

Putting into practice Nash, McDowell and Abrams' theories above, the analysis of a novel entitled *Sula*, written by Toni Morrison, is interesting to discuss because of the outstanding portrayal of a Black American culture that tries its best to survive the Great Depression years.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE WRITER**

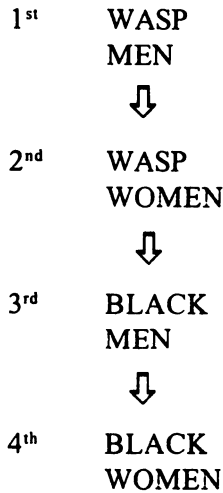
The author of *Sula*, Toni Morrison, was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931. She is a Black American woman who grew up in Loraine, Ohio, an area just outside Cleveland. It was a growing northern industrial town (*New Standard Encyclopedia*, 1996:M536) which most Black Americans felt was an ideal place to live, in comparison to the southern part of America whose plantation area had forced the Blacks to live a life as slaves.

History records that there was a great wave of migration in 1915, which peaked during 1916 and 1917. The Americans labeled those years as the year of the "Great Migration" (McPherson et. al., 1972:185). In three years, 300,000 to 400,000 Blacks were known to migrate North. Much of the impetus for the migration came from the long-standing traditions of slavery injustice and lack of opportunity in the South. The dimensions of the Great Migration have been shaped by the special economic circumstances of the war years. On the one hand, depression and crop failures arose in the South, and on the other, newfound industrial arenas opened up a great opportunity for blacks to work as 'free' people in the North as a result of the declining immigration from Europe and the demands of war.

The northern setting of Ohio like that described in *Sula* was known as an area that accepted and humanized the free Black Americans. It is unlike the South, where they were treated like slaves. Through reading *Sula*, Morrison seems to want her readers to recapture that Black American folk heritage, whose sufferings and sorrows made them outcasts or a minority, even though nowadays, all Blacks have received their freedom and equality.

Morrison was the first Black American Women writer ever to receive a Nobel Prize for Literature (*New Standard Encyclopedia*, 1996:338a). As

Although she received the Nobel Prize in 1993 for her novel *Jazz* and not *Sula*, this proved that Morrison was a person who deserved special recognition. In America, it is not often that a Black woman writer can be fortunate enough to be awarded a Nobel Prize. It is, indeed, a very rare occasion because the American structural society has put Black women in the last strata (Muhni, 1997). Even in comparison to WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Puritan) women who are directly underneath the WASP men of America, the Black women are positioned in a much lower strata:



It is, consequently, regarded as extraordinary for a Black woman, being in the very last strata like Morrison, to receive such a great acknowledgement in literature.

Being a Black woman naturally entails Morrison to talk about the condition of the women in comparison to the Black men, as well as the general black people's relationship with the WASP or white society. As an example, in *Sula* Morrison described that in the Great Depression era of America, the Black men had less opportunity in the work force than the women. One reason was because the women were forced by socio-economic conditions to become the breadwinner of the family. George and Barbara Perkins support the idea that *Sula* "treats woman as the central characters" (1988:526). Consequently, some may see the novel as a feminist castration of Black men.

early as the first chapter, Morrison described the relationship between the Black and the White societies. We are told that the White master had promised freedom and a piece of Bottom Land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. On the surface, it seems as though these White masters were very generous, but in fact, they just wanted to trick the Blacks into accepting the worst land available. The following quotation shows this:

A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started. Not the town, of course, but that part of town where the Negroes lived, the part they called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills ...

The Nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter (Morrison, 1977: 4-5)

Although there are more examples of how the Blacks were ill-treated by the Whites, this article specifically wants to discuss how and why the Black Women were forced to become the breadwinners and the heads of the Black families. In addition, it tries to see whether this dominant role may show a substantial difference to the up bringing of the Black American family of today.

## **THE BLACK MATERNAL FAMILY OF *SULA***

Before discussing in depth just how dominant is the role of women in *Sula* as well as whether this is also found to be true in reality, I would like to bring the discussion to the structure or format of the novel. This is because Morrison uses a peculiar name for the title of her book and a number of specific years for her chapter headings.

### **A. Meaning of the title and years as chapter headings**

The novel *Sula* was published in 1973. It is Morrison's second novel. It has a special attraction because the title does not refer to an ordinary American name. There is an assumption that the name entails an African heritage, which foreshadows the focus of the novel's discussion, i.e. about a Black American woman's experience. In addition to this peculiarity, the use of the years as chapters of the book i.e. 1919, 1920, 1922, 1923, 1927, 1937, 1939, 1940, 1941, and 1965; suggest a kind of diary, which reflected someone's personal experience. Johnson, is of the opinion that Morrison's style of using the years is because of the fact that she is a member of the "novelist of

memory” (1989:382) writers, thus it is not surprising for her to use years rather than names or phrases as her headings.

As discussed earlier in this article, McPherson (1971:57), however, believed that the years suggested the Great Migration period. Wills also interpreted it in the same fashion. She said that the years suggested the period of the heavy Black migration to the cities, especially in the Midwest region where the Black neighborhoods developed because there was a sizeable surge in the Black population. Wills (1983:114) explained that the years depicted the period where the Blacks as a social group were first incorporated into the modern capitalist system as soldiers. Checking this information with the novel, it is quite interesting to find that one of Morrison’s chapters does tell about a character named Shadrack who became deranged because he joined the American army.

During the Great Depression years, Morrison described the men as ex-soldiers, who were powerless to gain a job and be the breadwinner of their families, thus the Black Women began to rise in status (Wills, 1983:115). Most White employers only needed the women to help with household chores and the raising up of their children. This is the reason why according to Scanzoni (1977:30) the years “from 1949 to 1962” show that the proportion of black families headed by women show an increase from “18.8 to 23.2 percent”. Consequently, Morrison deliberately used the years as chapter headings in *Sula* to show the future generations of the past experience of the Black Women. According to Goldman’s theory (1973:100), the novel is also an illustration of the belief that the social, political, economic and intellectual conditions of a country can undergo a fundamental change. How did Morrison capture the Black Women’s experience in *Sula*? The following section will discuss this further.

## **B. Two contrasting black families**

### **i) Sula’s unstable family**

In the novel, two types of families are described. One is Sula’s own family, who was described as living in a household, which was constantly in a condition of disarray. Sula had Hannah, an openly promiscuous mother and Rekus, as a father who could not be her male role model because he died before she could even remember him. Her mother and grandmother had a constant flow of gentlemen callers and her mother’s daily lovers raised her. They “...simply loved maleness, for its own sake” (Morrison, 1973:41)

because they could not depend on the men that should have headed the family. Thus, Sula lived in her grandmother's house "... where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink..." (Morrison, 1973:29).

Sula had an aunt named Eva, at times called Pearl, who at fourteen married and moved out to Michigan. Sula's other relative was an uncle named Ralph who was nicknamed Plum. He had left to become a soldier but upon his return he made a great mistake in his life (i.e. decides to live on drugs to kill the pain he suffers as a war veteran), so that Sula could not have him as her male role model either.

The lady of the household, who was the most influential member of Sula's family, was her grandmother, Eva, who during her young married life, had no other choice but to become the head of the family because her husband, BoyBoy, left her for another woman. As a husband, BoyBoy could not find a decent job and became an irresponsible man. He often abused his wife, as he considered that Eva's wage as a cook and housemaid for the Whites should have been enough to raise their three children as well as provide Boyboy with money to buy things he needed. In the depression years, factories and households during that time had more job vacancies for women who could be paid a lot less than their male colleagues. Unfortunately, when Eva did have the money, BoyBoy misused it for drinking and womanizing. When BoyBoy finally left Eva, he left her nothing but "\$1.65, five eggs, and three beets" (Morrison, 1973:32). To overcome this great economical and psychological suffering, Eva decided to cut-off her own leg so that she could get insurance money to feed and keep her children alive. Therefore, it became clear why Sula's family had to be headed by a woman, as well as why Eva and Hannah only loved men for their 'male' sake. The condition, however, caused negative consequences towards the building of Sula's personality. Here, Scanzoni (1977:41-42) elaborated that a child growing up in a home where the father is absent often finds difficulty in understanding how the dominant society expects adult males to behave, and how sex-role behavior is developed into highly aggressive behavior.

In relation to Scanzoni's criteria above, it becomes clear why Morrison decided to develop Sula's character as a tomboy who was unafraid of men, and when finally meeting her sexual partner Sula turned into an aggressive woman. This aggression in sex was not a peculiar behavior for Sula because she had her own mother, who earned a living as a prostitute to imitate. She

was taught that sex had nothing to do with love or even friendship because it is no more than an act in which two people of the opposite sex engage in order to make each other happy.

### **ii) Nel's stable family**

The other family described in the novel is Nel's. She was Sula's best friend. Nel's mother was Helene, who was taught by her grandmother, Cecile, to be ashamed of her prostitute mother, while being raised with religion, "under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary" (Morrison, 1973:17). Her father was Wiley Wright, who during his younger years was a dedicated church member. Nel's family was described as believing that the church was an important element in keeping a stable family. Scanzoni explained the condition that "Churches became and have remained until the past twenty years or so, [was] the most important agency of social control among Negroes" (1977:49). In contrast to Sula's family, Nel was brought up by her two parents and considered to live in a more stable family surrounding, even though she barely saw her father who was in port only three out of every sixteen days working as a ship's cook on the Great Lake lines. Thus, as a consequence, most of the household rules were laid down by her mother who was an active choir member in church. Religion taught Nel the basic grounding to drive "any enthusiasms" or wild imagination underground. It became the reason why Helene disagreed with Nel's friendship with Sula, who was considered as a "wild" girl. Yet, it was because of their differences that Nel decided to continue her relationship with Sula.

Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they set about creating something else to be. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers...they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for (Morrison, 1973:52).

Thus, similar to Ramaswamy's statement, the two girls needed each other's presence because, "the two halves make a whole"(2003:3).

Later in the story, however, because Nel lacked the ability to express herself (which was caused by her conventional upbringing), she lost her husband, Jude who left out of embarrassment for being caught making love with his wife's best friend, i.e. Sula (Morrison, 1973:105). Consequently, Morrison described Nel's adult life as being the family's financial provider.

Why did Morrison elaborate so much on this Black woman-headed family in *Sula*?

## **THE BLACK AMERICAN WOMAN-HEADED FAMILY**

### **A. Historical sketch**

The black complexion of the Black Americans in the 1980s used to be the symbol of pride in being the strongest and most masculine race. However, the White Americans, as a means for racism later misused that blackness. Hence nowadays, they want to be acknowledged as African-Americans or Afro-Americans, because they want to show their pride in their African heritage.

During the slavery era, the Blacks were termed Negroes. They were the largest racial minority in the United States. The *New Standard Encyclopedia* (1996:B264), recorded that “the Blacks in the United States are descendants of persons abducted in Africa and sold into slavery from the early seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century”. This slavery system has shaped the society of the Black family. It was in the slavery time that “the nuclear family was often broken up by sale”(Norton et al., 1982:78) and because of this, the children naturally became the responsibility of the mother. In other words, it was as early as slavery time that the Black mothers had to function as the ‘father’ of the family as well. It was she who became the provider head of the family and eventually became the key person in maintaining the future of the family. Even when the mother decided to marry someone else and had children with this new husband, it was not a guarantee that the White master would not decide to sell the new father of the family, since selling the best farm worker was a way to gain quick money. Thus, it would leave the mother the responsibility of taking care of the children from both her ‘sold’ husbands. Consequently, it would be the mother who knew which child was from which father, and a family’s record or track of the whereabouts of the grown-up children lay in the mother’s hands. In this condition, the Black family can be regarded as following a matriarchal system. This is in accordance to the theory of Black sociologist, E. Frazier below:

...under the impact of slavery, emancipation, and urbanization, some black families managed to develop stable, father-centered structures; others fell into a pattern of matriarchy, illegitimacy, immortality, desertions, and casual family discipline ... (cited in McPherson et al., 1971:364).

### **B. Socio-economic factors**



As the Black family continued to exist in the World War I and World War II era, according to Schleisinger (1948:29) most of the Black men became involved in the army to fulfill a political agenda. Their involvement heralded a stage where the mother was consequently forced to take full responsibility for the family's well being. For those fathers who did not join the army, the Great Depression era did not offer much work for them. Factories and companies of all kinds were at their stagnant period due to over production of goods which people could not afford to buy anyway. Because of this, the people of the middle and lower classes of Black society suffered insufficiency of food, clothing, and lodging. In relation to this, there is a Black folk rhyme found on page 11 of *New Essay on Ellison's Invisible Man*, which can be used to refer to the hierarchy of the work force system:

If you're white, you're right.  
If you're brown, step around.  
If you're black, get back! (O'Meally, 1988)

which means to say – if you are Black then you will be the last to be hired and the first to be fired! Thus, the Black men could obtain no other job but the army.

Johnson and Schwartz also agreed, “the employment opportunities for blacks were restricted” (1988:99). To add to the dilemma, these men often felt discouraged by the fact that the ‘American Dream’ - the dream that there would be equal opportunity for work in the urban area – had turned into failure. Scanzoni (1977:33) reflected on this situation by saying:

When the black man migrates, it is most because he is currently unemployed or else works irregularly, and thus “dream” of “something better” in the city.... In reality, the actualization of these dreams is minimal. Concurrently, while disillusionment is setting in, the husband's provider-role in the lower-class black family is being undermined.

So as a consequence, the Black women tended to take up the position as the family's economic provider. This was supported also in the condition whereby the “Black females found much greater access into the opportunity structure of work” and that “almost one-fourth of Negro families are headed by females” (ibid, 1977:7). In addition, the “Negro wife had become accustomed to hold the family together by hard work and responsible decision-

making” (ibid, 1977:240). Consequently, the mother was given a dominant role in establishing a stable family.

It is for the above reason, then, that when the Black men returned from the war, having only gained a minimal access to any kind of occupation, they became dependent on their wives for financial support. Leslie and Korman stated that “the men were not encouraged to assume responsibility for wives and children, and many did not” (1985:251). In Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* it was portrayed that “a mother alone can raise children properly”, however, just for the sake of making equality in the household, “the children are better off when there’s a man around to provide or threaten punishment” (1967:97). Upon this idea, Genovese, in his book entitled *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1976:500) commented that:

A remarkable number of women did everything possible to strengthen their men’s self-esteem and to defer to their leadership. What has usually been viewed, as a debilitating female supremacy was in fact a closer approximation to a healthy sexual equality than was possible for whites and perhaps even for many postbellum blacks. The man did not play the provider for their families in a full and direct sense, but they did everything they could to approximate it (1976:500).

The Black American family was therefore, conditioned to be geared towards a maternal one. However, it does not entail a matriarchal system, it was and still is in a patriarchal one, because ideally, when the situation permits, the father takes on the role as head of the family. The establishment of a Black woman-headed family has grown out from the Black men’s lack of opportunity in the work force when compared to the women. Because of this, it had become a culture in the Black society for the women to be the economic provider. It is unfortunate to note, however, that those men who saw themselves as being hopeless in finding a job, took the situation for granted – and as a result tended to lope and hang around a street corner like that shown in Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner* as well as in *Sula* below:

Old men and young ones draped themselves in front of the Elmira Theater, Irene’s palace of Cosmetology, the pool hall, the grill and the other sagging business enterprises that lined the street. On stoops, on crates and broken chairs they sat tasting their teeth and waiting for something to distract them.

Every passerby, every motorcar, every alteration in stance caught their attention and was commented on (Morrison, 1973:49).

Szwed explained this phenomenon as a “personal release [which] is emphasized in this life organization of the individual like polygamy, drinking, and drug taking” (1973:123). Interestingly, Morrison managed to also capture the above situation throughout the novel. The example of the Black man who took to polygamy and drinking was BoyBoy, whereas the one who took to drugs was Plum.

### **THE SUFFRAGES AND STRENGTHS BLACK WOMEN FIND**

The idea of the Black woman as head of the family in today’s era where a number of women project their rights as a feminist can be interpreted as successful achievement in having the final decision of the family. After all, within the Black society, wife employment is defined as more of a “right” than merely an option (Scanzoni, 1977:229). However, if this is referred back to Sula’s grandmother’s experience in obtaining this position, it actually entails suffrage.

First, Eva had to leave her children in her neighbor’s care so she could find some way out to save her family. Second, she had to come back with just one leg because she had to sell the other one to obtain insurance money. Next, she had been forced to set alight her only son, because he turned into a junkie and did not grow up to be the man she had hoped he would:

Eva stepped back from the bed and let the crutches rest under her arms. She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight (Morrison, 1973:47).

The reason for killing Plum probably entailed that deep in Eva’s mind she had hoped Plum would someday realize a patriarchal role in the family. This is a role that, ideally, the black family ought to have.

The suffrage, however, had in turn strengthened the kinship of the Black family. In fact, just like that portrayed in Sula’s family, it is the grandmother that actualizes a system of kinship. Scanzoni explains:

Within the black lower class it has been quite common for

several generation, or pars of the kin, to live together under one roof... a maternal grandmother is the acknowledged head of this type of household [and it is because of her existence that] has given rise to the term "matrifocal" ... (1977:134).

To Leslie and Korman (1985:263), in their book entitled *The Family in Social Context*; the sufferings brought by the Great Depression had also brought five characteristics of family strengths: strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, strong achievement orientation, adaptable roles, and strong religious orientation.

The characteristics above enabled the actualization of the stability and survival of the Black family. In Sula's family the first characteristic i.e 'strong kinship bonds' could be seen in the way her grandmother made an "augmented family" a term coined by Leslie and Korman (1985:262), whereby the grandmother extended the family to include relatives as well as non-relatives as her roomers, boarders, or lodgers of the house on a long-term basis. Sometimes, these roomers could be cousins that were just passing through, or stray folks or many newly wed white couples, which shows that as an economic provider, Eva was keen to look for financial stability by working. It also shows how she could adapt a changing role from house owner to worker by, for example, receiving the rent money and, at the same time, a payment for washing the lodger's clothes.

In the case of 'strong achievement orientation', the augmented family has allowed Eva to get rid of the loneliness felt at times over the loss of her husband. Fortunately, this loss was eventually abolished for good, when she finally met her husband again some years later with his new wife. Page 36 of *Sula* (Morrison, 1973) proves just how strong Eva had become upon the realization that she could no longer wish for BoyBoy's return – let alone depend on him:

Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, and the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities.

In the case of 'strong religious orientation', this is more applicable to Nel's family whose great-grandmother and mother rested upon the importance of church life to maintain a strong personality and search for a better guidance

in life, ever since the many absences of Nel's father could no longer be predicted in the long run. In the case of economic stability, the church was said to also show cooperation among the Blacks. The church, Scanzoni said, "was the first mechanism to begin to instill economic rationality of the American culture variety" (1977:49) and became a "refuge in living in a hostile white world" (1977:50). It was also through church teachings that the dominant pattern of a "stable family" was idealized with the "institutionalization of the male as head and provider" for the black American culture (Scanzoni, 1977:50). Because of this, in contrast to Sula, Nel decided to marry to another church member named Jude. Although in the end, Nel's marriage was not successful in maintaining a dual parent system, from this at least, it could be concluded that actually the Black American culture saw a patriarchal system as their ideal family unit.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although seen through the history of slavery and in *Sula* the Black family was dominated by the women's role as head of the family, in reality it was not the ideal one. The women, such as Sula's grandmother Eva and Sula's friend Nel, had been forced to assume the responsibility as head and economic provider due to the fact that their husbands left them. In fact, Scanzoni commented that, "among Negro families with a female head, separation and divorce are the most common reasons for the husband's absence"(1977:31). Yet, the absence of the father or husband in the Black family had consequences towards the personality of the wife or child and entailed suffering to the women as head of the family. This is because the Black woman-headed family was actually suffering from three kinds of oppression: being black, being workers and being females (Staples, 1987:82). However, although experiencing suffrage, the women had been able to find strength through their strong kinship system, strong work orientation, adaptable roles, strong achievement orientation and strong religious orientation. In the case of the children, the personality of the child, i.e. Sula, was affected and became an aggressive person, especially in sexual activity. The reason for this was because she had often seen her own mother easily have sex with Black men. So as a consequence, she did more than her mother, i.e. had sex with a number of single or married black or white men. She never knew how society expected adult males to behave and in reflection she never thought of having a serious relationship with one of them so she just

fooled around with the men.

In the novel, Morrison actually dealt with two contrasting families: Sula's family being a portrayal of an unstable one and Nel's (before she got married) being a stable one. Thus, although a male headed the majority of the Black families, in *Sula*, it can be seen that under the circumstances of family instability such as in the husband-wife relationship, work opportunity and economic conditions - the Black family can be geared to a woman-headed one. This condition appeared not for the reason that the mother was 'selfish' but as stated by Gatlin, it was so the mother could "give her children a better chance in life, such as a college education" (1987:33). In other words, because of the dominant role the Black women were given, the family was considered to have a 'Black maternal family' or 'Black woman-headed family' and was 'matrifocal'.

Thus, after carefully analyzing the novel, by first looking at the micro culture of i.e. the biography of the writer, the universe she attempted to create and the audience she wanted to reach, and finally, in comparing it to the real conditions of the Black society in the particular years of the early 1920s to 1960s from history books; the macro culture of the Black American culture can be learnt after all. In other words, the novel *Sula*, became proof of a 'mental evidence' of the Black American culture.

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