

Critical analysis of the themes of sexuality, family and characterization in morr...

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A Critical Analysis of the Themes of “ sexuality, family/home and characterization” in Morison’s “ Sula” Introduction In Toni Morison’s novel “ Sula”, the themes of sexuality, family/home and characterization have played a crucial in the development of the novel. as a foil to other relationships such as male-female relationship, heterosexual relationship, etc. If the theme of ‘ friendship’ in the novel is explored from a feminist perspective, it ultimately reveals that the male-view about the propriety of a woman character is grossly biased by the male-counterparts’ personal interests. This is to say that women are essentially objectified in the male-domain of Bottom as a product to be consumed. In the very first place, women are sexual products that, once used, can immediately be left behind. This male-female relationship is essentially a consumer-consumed relationship which is utterly in contrast with female relationship. This relationship is more of a friendship based on a sense of fellow-feeling and integrity that the male-female relationship lacks. Home/family: A Patriarchal Institution In the novel, family and home appear to be complementary to each other. Sula gets support from her family and its member. In this sense Sula’s is symbol of safety and security. In the patriarchal society in Bottom, home the very symbol of safety and security turns into a place of sexual violence. Also in the novel a home or a family is presented as a symbol of a woman’s subservience and inferiority to her male counterpart. Indeed Tony Morison shows that a family or a home is the miniature of patriarchy where the gender identity of a girl is constructed. Primarily Sula’s family is a source of consolation, comfort and affection. Such sign of affection and love is evident in Hannah’s assertion of love for Sula: “ You love her, like I love Sula.

"I just don't like her" (Sula 57). In the same manner, the women of the community of Bottom love their children and husbands; meanwhile, it is also evident that they do not like them since both their husbands and children are some necessary parts of their lives, but neither of them renders a sense of completion. Indeed such husband-wife relationship in the families of Bottom reveals a totally different aspect of patriarchy. The relationship between a husband and a wife in Bottom can be compared to the relationship between a host and its parasites. But a women's relationship with other women is totally different from such host-parasites relationships. Female relationship or friendship exists because of the inherent symbiotic benefits that they receive from it. Sexuality in the Novel Whereas female friendships are based upon affinity, the heterosexual relationships depend on the neediness of the men in Bottom. Though the traditional male-expectation in Bottom is that a woman must remain under the supervision of their parents or husbands, Nel did not care for Jude till the last moment of her camaraderie with Sula. The difference between Nel's friendship with Sula and her relationship with Jude is that though Jude needs Nel more than she needs him, he maintains a make-belief superiority to Nel. Though Jude is superfluous to Nel's life, social conventions of Bottom hide this fact from her. He needs to marry Nel in order to prove his manhood when he was denied to work with the white road laborers; he needs Nel for mental support during odd days, and to bear his children in order to prove his masculine abilities. Yet Nel does not have the feeling of completion from her relationship with Jude because society imposed inferiority of Nel to Jude hinders her from feeling so. Indeed objectifying and possessing a woman as a wife are two

primary features that construct the basis of male-female sexuality in Bottom. These two features keep a woman away from feeling their individual existences in the society. As a result, Sula is found to have physical relationship with a number of men including some whites. Eventually she abandons them after having sex also. But her friendship with Nel continually exists because both Nel and Sula feel their individuality in such relationship that also helps them to feel their self-worth. Unlike the male-female relationship, they do not feel themselves as property in their friendship. Whereas Jude views Nel as a “ product of male desire”, in Sula’s eye, Nel is an individual. In her relationship with her male-counterparts, she continually feels that she is being owned by them. Therefore, in reflection, she also objectifies Ajax as a mixture of gold foil and alabaster. She describes her as a Greco-Roman statue instead of a real man. This view of Sula about Ajax is essentially the reflection of the male-view about women. When Ajax abandons Sula, her sense of being owned further becomes intensified, as she describes herself as a “ torn-off paper doll” (136). Characterization in the Novel In the novel, Sula is a developing character. Indeed her character develops through both conflict and companionship. Unlike Nel or other women in Sula is in direct conflict with the male-expectations of the community. She has tried to possess Ajax, but she becomes frustrated after being failed. In contrast to her relationship with Nel is free of such power conflict for owning other. Neither Nel nor Sula tries to own and subdue each other. Indeed in Nel-Sula friendship, both of them are complementary to each other, as the narrator says, “ their meeting was [. . .] fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on” (Sula 51). The underlying bond of Nel-Sula

friendship is of a platonic one that is based on both love and liking. In fact, Nel and Sula are “two throats and one eye” (Sula 147). Again the narrator explains Nel’s ecstasy at the return of her friend to Bottom after ten years, “It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy” (Sula 95). After Sula elopes with Jude, Nel mourns his absence because of the necessity of him in her life. But once she visits Sula’s grave, she feels that she has missed Sula also because the certification of her individual existence ends at the break-up of their friendship. Nel loves her husband but does not like him because he does not admit her individual existence. But she loves and, at the same time, likes Sula because she feels her individuality in her relationship with Sula. Thus Sula is both a necessity and a passion in Nel’s life. Even though Nel’s friendship with Sula has ended, she longs for other females’ companionship because she still misses her complement as well as the courage to exist through one’s will. Conclusion In Morison’s novel “Sula”, ‘friendship’ as a theme has been manipulated to work out other themes such as love, womanhood, patriarchy, etc. In the novel, ‘female friendship’ itself is a self-evident feminist theme. Nel as well as other women in Bottom long for female friendship since male-female or husband-wife relationship does not prove to be enough to fulfill their expectations. Friendship among the female essentially turns into a parameter of individuality and independent existence. Also Friendship appears to be a source of inspiration and courage in patriarchy where men shake off their female counterparts as well as their responsibilities

immediately after having sex with them. Once their husbands evade from their duties and responsibilities, having a friend encourages looking forward with new hopes. Works Cited Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Plume, 1988.