

The dialectic of individuality and community in toni morrison's sula

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Birthmark as a symbol of identity: The dialectic of individuality & community in Toni Morrison's Sula

Toni Morrison's fiction occupies a very important role in Afro-American literary canon. Like many other Afro-American writers, her novels also depict the themes of identity, racism, freedom, slavery, gender bias etc . . . Writers follow different strategies to highlight their themes in their works. The art of using various techniques in the fiction makes a writer popular and attract the attention of many scholars to search for the hidden meaning of these techniques in the text.

Morrison is such a prolific writer to use several symbols in her novels to reveal the sufferings of black people in general and black women in particular. Every symbol in her novels can be connected to the theme of identity. Black women face racial and gender oppression not only in White community but also in their own Black community. Morrison highlights the role of black community rather than self, for the demarcation of black women's identity.

Morrison's Sula is an eponymous novel. The main character of this novel, Sula Peace is strong and an independent character. But her strength, individuality and free nature is misunderstood by the community. The step by step downfall of Sula's identity due to community's misperception is referred by many symbols in the novel. One of such symbols is birthmark on Sula's eye. Henderson points that

Sula's birthmark, potentially a sign of an individual self, however fragmented and multiple, is rather an indication of relationship, being one of a series of <https://assignbuster.com/the-dialectic-of-individuality-community-in-toni-morrisons-sula/>

marks, brands, or emblems that Morrison employs in most of her novels, not to distinguish individuals, but (as blackness itself is a mark) to symbolize their participation in a greater entity, whether that is community or race or both. ().

If Sula's birthmark is considered a physical feature, then it is only a physical distinguishing mark from other characters and does not signify any meaning. When this birthmark is viewed through other character's perception, it suggests many meanings and one can understand the society's role for the downfall of Sula's individuality.

Shadrack, a war veteran who invented Suicide's Day in black community, views Sula's birthmark as " tadpole". As he is able to live according to his own defined rules, he is able to see Sula's independent nature. Shadrack's perception is rightly quoted by Henderson that "... tadpole represents potential transformation and rebirth"(). Shadrack is the only person in the novel, who identifies Sula's radical power and feels that Sula has great potential to live independently and can get an identity which is a hard task for black women in the community.

What Shadrack thinks about Sula is right; she frames her own rules for her life and lives according to them. She never follows community's standard rules for women like staying in the community, marrying and having children. Due to this, community starts viewing her differently by giving different meanings for her birthmark.

Sula's birthmark seems to be a "stemmed rose" to her mother Hannah Peace. Rose is most frequently used symbol in most of the Morrison's contemporary women's writings. According to Henderson opinion rose "is a symbol that has been appropriated by black women writers from Frances Harper, who uses it as a symbol of romantic love, to Alice Walker, who associates it with sexual love".

If only the rose symbol is taken, its referential meaning can be understood as per Henderson's opinion. But Morrison's use of rose along with stem extends its meaning. Sula sleeps with many men including white men. Community has the standard notion of understanding the relation between white men and black women is that "... all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable". () But Sula develops an unusual relation with white men.

If rose signifies Sula's sexual love, the stem indicates her eccentric nature. Rose's stem has thorns. Thorn will prick, if it is touched. Sula's strange behavior may perforate the standards of black community. As soon as the community knows about Sula's free movement with white men, community fears about its values and starts avoiding her.

Sula's birthmark is viewed by Jude (Nel's husband and Nel is Sula's best friend) as "rattle snake" (). Wang Lei in his, "The Uncanny object a in Toni Morrison Fiction" relates this symbol "... to the serpent which inveigles Eve out of the Garden of Eden"(206). According to Wang Lei's opinion Sula entices Jude to leave his wife Nel. Sula never plays any tricks with Jude. She does not have any special feelings towards Jude. Sula says about her

relationship with Jude that “ I just fucked him” (). This clearly indicates that she freely chooses any men for sex. Free choices of men by black women are atypical characteristic trait in black community. They feel that if they talk with Sula they may be tempted like Eve and may lose their identity in the community. Everyone becomes dumb, never interacts with Sula.

Sula’s isolated life evidences the society that she is different from them and that’s why she has “ evil birthmark”(). Christopher Okonkwo notes, “ In Sula’s over reaching eccentricity-for which the Bottom designates her evil ...” (). This remark is aptly given by Christopher. Sula loses her identity as a woman and gets the identity of evil. Society takes some measures to avoid the effects of evil. “. . . they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps” (). Society becomes very cautious to overcome the effects of evil.

Sula never acknowledges all these things and ignores about all in the society. This further makes society to watch her closely and starts gossiping more and more about Sula. A series of common actions; Teapot’s sudden fall on the ground, Mr. Finley’s death, Sula’s only one time sexual relation with men, are seriously observed by the society. It blames Sula for all these actions and gets to a conclusion that her birthmark “ ... was not a stemmed rose, or a snake, it was Hannah’s ashes marking her from the very beginning” (). Henderson says that “ ... the community closes ranks against one who transgresses the boundaries prescribed for women” (). As per Henderson’s opinion, Sula’s identity came to an end. Ash comes after burning. Society burns Sula’s identity with its over critical attitude.

Morrison uses birthmark symbol to highlight the identity of an individual, at the same time she also uses this to express the society's role in framing one's identity. Identity can not be formed individually; society also plays a major role in framing one's identity. Sula's self identity fails to get recognition from the society. As Bell Hooks says that due to her free nature Sula "... seems powerless to assert agency in a world that has no interest in radical black female subjectivity, one that seeks to repress, contain and annihilate it". (Bell Hooks 48). Sula is finally annihilated because of society's negligence.