

## **Critique of Dominance: An Anti-hegemonic Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The burden of race, class and gender has a strong influence on Morrison's novels. This research paper delves into the lives of black women who are affected due to racial and gender discrimination and class restrictions. In her exploration of the black women, Morrison exhibits the modes of practice through the categories of gender and race. Racism, which is constant in the lives of the characters, whose past, present and future form continuity in the cycle of frustration from which the townfolk cannot easily escape, affects them psychologically. This dark racial reality has made the African-Americans victims of a cultural and psychic split that has resulted in developmental inhibition and the need for pathological defence movements. Her novels show how slippery it may be to enlist the politics of everyday life and to criticise, oppose, subvert or escape the racialised and gendered nation-orders.*

**Keywords:** *Anarchism, Anarcho Feminism, race, gender*

Feminism is interpreted as a critique that centralises the oppression of women due to their sex based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Therefore, on one hand feminism can be comprehended as an analysis of patriarchy and on the other hand as an ideology consigned to women's liberation. Feminism is also a term that denotes various social theories and political movements based on the belief that rights, privilege, status and obligations should not be determined by gender. Different approaches to feminism offer different analyses of the causes and nature of oppressions upon women leading to possible solutions. Feminism as an ideology has branched out on various theoretical intersections like Marxist feminism, anarcho feminism, radical feminism, liberal feminism, postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism etc. The effect of feminism has led women, all over the social world, to identify with the feminist stand, voicing against the otherness. *Sula* and *Beloved* of Morrison can be examined using the tenets of anarcho feminism.

Anarcho Feminism focuses on critiquing society based on race, gender and social class. In the beginning, anarchism and feminism were basically different expressions. In the end of nineteenth century and at the beginning of twentieth century Mary Wollstonecraft, Lucy Parsons, Voltairine de Clayre and Emma Goldman made the connection between anarchism and feminism. Anarchism is fighting in its bases with every kind of authorities and their

authoritarian systems, also against the authority of man over woman and against patriarchy. Anarcho feminism is against all types of oppression and dominance. As Vandiver says, “Since anarchy is opposed to all forms of domination, anarchy without feminism is not anarchy at all. Since anarchy declares itself opposed to all anarchy, all rulership, true anarchy is by definition opposed to patriarchy, i.e. it is, by definition, feminist. But it is not enough to declare oneself opposed to all domination; one needs to try to understand domination in order to oppose it” (40). Peggy Kornegger, author of an influential anarcho-feminist, argues that anarcho feminism is based on “critiques of dominance” and “sought to replace power relations with equality” (Epstein 168).

In this sense, Morrison can be considered Anarcho feminist since she opposes race, gender and social class in her novels. *Sula* focuses on race and gender through the lens of black women and the unique experiences they face as black and female in a patriarchal racist society. Morrison in *Sula* addresses the problems within the black community. The town of Medallion, Ohio, is a white city that forced the blacks into the hills on the outskirts of the city. Furthermore, whites limit the employment opportunities for blacks by only hiring them in servile positions with low wages, which forces many of the men to find work outside the town. The blacks are once again excluded from access to social mobility, when the government hires whites and white immigrants to build a tunnel in 1927. When Nel, the best friend of Sula looks back on the history of the town in 1965, she understands that some progress occurs on race. However, by 1965, most of the blacks have left the hills and rich whites have taken over, building new homes and planning a golf course, which would erase the history of the black community that existed in the city. As Nel reflects back, she says: “The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn—and the rich white folks” (166).

Though Nel criticises the well-to-do blacks for leaving the Bottom in the 1940s and 1950s for the white, many poor blacks are left in the valley. In the 1960s, rich whites started moving in and established a suburb in the place which was once a black community. When Nel looks back at the black community’s past with nostalgic eyes she views a real sense of community in the previous decades. The area fostered a sense of community because every family knew each other. Parents and children interacted with other families, and despite the problems of poverty, racism, and sexism, the black community was united for the most part.

Morrison highlights the huge flaws within the black community as well. Nel’s mother,

Helene, a New Orleans-raised Creole of colour, is disappointed with her daughter's flat, Negroid nose she inherited from her father. Helene also looks down on many of the darker-skinned inhabitants of Medallion, despite being a part of the community. She joins the most conservative Protestant church and initially disapproves of her daughter's decision to befriend Sula because of her perceived lower-class origins. So problems of colour prejudice are still entrenched within the community.

Paradoxically, the black community accepts the social outcasts and the mentally ill more than the white society. Sula, though accused of being evil, remains a tolerated presence in the city. Shadrack, the insane drunkard and WWI veteran who establishes the National Suicide Day is also accepted. Tar Baby, a white alcoholic is also tolerated in the community. These people are allowed to stay in the black neighbourhood though they are considered as social outcasts, mentally ill and evil. Surprisingly, black folks do participate for the funeral service of Sula, and sing gospel songs for her despite their previous hatred for her.

Issues of race are interwoven throughout the fabric of the novel. The dewey's lack of development is one of the examples of racism. Each of the deweys has physical characteristics completely distinct from the others. Yet they appear to look alike, reminding the reader of the stereotype, all niggers look alike. Also their growth is stopped at a particular height which suggests that living in a racist society thwarts the natural development of African people. Also, Tar Baby's and Ajax's arrest symbolises just one more incident in which African people or anyone associated with them are routinely arrested and beaten. Ajax calls the cycle of oppression as the natural hazards of Negro life.

*Sula* foregrounds the conflicted status of race and gender in post-slavery American culture. The inhabitants of the Bottom represented a political system which has enslaved, emancipated and enfranchised the people. Responding to the interrelationship between gender, class and race, Morrison creates situations which concentrate on the ways in which black women attempt to structure their own social orders but who are limited by their class and race identities.

Morrison's *Beloved* highlights the relationship between black and white and the way colour affects the character in the story. As a result of racial prejudice the characters of darker colour undergo more hardships than the other characters. Morrison in the following lines project the savagery of white racism:

White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. . . . But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them

to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. . . . The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (234)

Taking the time period of the novel into consideration, it is obvious that there will be issues of slavery and segregation, which are both problems that revolve around race. Since Morrison has based her story on the real life of Margaret Garner, the reader is able to see racial issues on a deeper level. Through the character Sethe, Morrison tries to address the race issue present in the United States.

It is the belief of the white people during this era that most black families do have single mothers, males who abandon the family and one or more illegitimate children. Segregation occurs because of these beliefs and because white parents instill a sort of fear of the black race in their children. Also, there is overlying issue of white superiority from the slave days and the idea of ownership. Millie Tran says, “The lasting effects of slavery induce the white characters to acts of violence and feelings of superiority that degrade and dehumanize the blacks”. Grounded on the theory that slaves are not human beings, but animals, the schoolteacher and his nephews abuse the power of the institution of slavery. Moglen rightly comments, “Schoolteacher, the slave-master who inherits Sweet Home along with Sethe, Paul D, and Halle, beats one of his blacks “to show him that definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined”” (qtd. in Keating).

Morrison also addresses this race issue through the painful realities experienced by Sethe at Sweet Home, under the watchful eye of the schoolteacher. She remembers how he regarded them as simple-minded farm stock and ideal creatures to experiment on: “Schoolteacher’d wrap that string all over my head, ’cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth” (226). By using string, the schoolteacher measures the body parts of the blacks and studies them. This action of physical measurement becomes a form of oppression, as it subjugates the slaves into biological specimens. Ryan Smith says,

The science of the time, now identified correctly as pseudoscience... forms an integral part of the system of interlocking oppressions as it synthesized a number of areas under the guise of science, reason and proof. Races were seen as distinct and hierarchical, women were diagnosed with phantom medical and mental problems, lower classes were deemed naturally less fit to survive economically, and so on.

One day, Sethe overhears a lesson being instructed by the schoolteacher to his nephews. During his instruction, the schoolteacher directs his nephews to categorise Sethe’s

characteristics. As she walks past the tutorial, Sethe hears him say, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (228). In this manner, the schoolteacher continues to reduce Sethe and the slaves to animals. Sethe recognises schoolteacher’s words and realises it as almost a greater threat to blacks than the material conditions of slavery itself. She discerns that his instructions promote an unspeakable terror and violence. By teaching his nephews this lesson, schoolteacher is ensuring the racial attitudes of the next generation.

By ordering his nephews to rape Sethe, the schoolteacher displays his aggressive nature of dehumanising the slaves at Sweet Home. Sethe is still haunted by the memory of the horrible act of cruelty and degradation. She powerfully states, “ I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that. . .” (83). The nephews hold her down, and attack her like some sort of animal that needs to be captured and subdued.

While the schoolteacher provides an example of a more direct and vicious version of bigotry, Mr. and Mrs. Garner play the roles of the kind and humane slave owners. But their attitude towards the blacks cannot remain untainted by racism and slavery. The Garners exemplify a more enlightened mentality about slavery, yet the slave’s humanity and status is still subject to their whim. Baby Suggs’ treatment by the Garner’s at Sweet Home is seemingly fair: “[Lillian Garner] never pushed, hit or called her mean names. . . . nobody knocked her down” (164). The Garners’ special kind of slavery allowed the slaves to feel less threatened by their masters. Though their paternalism demonstrated more compassion, it only masked their true beliefs about their slaves. They considered the slaves not to be men at all, but “niggers” (12). By referring to the slaves as “niggers,” Garner exposes his contempt and his overall loathing of them. Therefore, though the Garners’ actions are accepted as more humane, their view of the blacks does not differ from the rest of the slave owners.

One of the first white characters the reader sees interacting with a black character outside of Sweet Home is Amy Denver. Not only does Amy nearly save Sethe’s life near the Ohio River, but she also delivers Denver, who is named in her honour. Amy’s actions, such as helping Sethe, massaging her feet, redefining her wounds as a “chokecherry tree” (93) with “tiny little cherry blossoms” (93) are seen as benevolent and almost altruistic. In these scenes, Amy serves as the antithesis to the cruel white characters. However, her conversation with Sethe is littered with racist epithets and fraught with dehumanising remarks, as she casually mentions her “old nigger girl . . . don’t know nothing. . . . just like you” (94). She sarcastically asks her, ““What you gonna do, just lay there and foal”” (41)? By using the word “foal,” Amy

degrades Sethe to a horse and it's only when she sees Sethe as helpless does she finally help.

When first introduced, Mr. and Miss Bodwin, the brother and sister appear to embody hope and a chance of freedom for the blacks. The Bodwins helped the blacks whenever they are in need of a place or some other help: "the Bodwins—the white brother and sister who gave Stamp Paid, Ella and John clothes, goods and gear for runaways" (162). They have a particular stake in Sethe's life by taking Baby Suggs from Mr. Garner and giving her a job in their home. Miss Bodwin even reminds Mr. Garner, "We don't hold with slavery, even Garner's kind" (171). The overall sentiment of the black community is that "for every schoolteacher there would be an Amy; that for every pupil there was a Garner, or Bodwin, or even a sheriff" (222).

Amy's innocence and her willingness to help Sethe, the Garner's empathy and care, and the Bodwins' abolitionist attitude may seem kind, but they are only a diluted version of the schoolteacher's blatant and violent racism. This becomes clear when Paul D warns Sethe, "It don't matter, Sethe. What they say is the same. Loud or soft" (231). Although the white characters all express different degrees of superiority through verbal or physical means, both result in the subjugation of the blacks. The schoolteacher and his nephews illustrate the extremity on the spectrum of racism, through their violence and shameless studying of the slaves as animals. Additionally, the Garners' benevolent actions toward their slaves at Sweet Home are negated by their arrogance and ultimately still rob the slaves of their humanity. Finally, the Bodwins fail to comprehend the implications behind the statue, that it is analogous to the physical, mental, and emotional attack by whites and slave owners and thus, fail to be the exception amongst the white people. Though the whites' belief in their own superiority enables them to treat the blacks as innately inferior creatures, Morrison reverses this cycle by presenting the perspectives of the blacks and ultimately depicts the whites as being inhumane themselves.

Morrison focuses on the hardships of women. She is candidly writing about the innermost experiences of women; openly critiquing the redundant patriarchal values; and, giving vent to an uninhibited expression to the feelings and desires of women. If women are dominated today, it testifies not to the weakness of women but to the strength of sexism. As women do not belong to the dominant part of hegemonic society, their capacity to make decisions and craft opinions, is limited. Like the female characters in the novels, many women today long for freedom and cry for independence. In this situation, if sexism is to be subjugated, women should fight their way back to independence. Consciousness raising is important to change women's feelings of isolation and loneliness. In order to attain power, women have to draw inner strength. They must attempt to critique hegemonic power.

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