**TRACING TONI MORRISON'S NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN *SULA***

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Abstract

In her effort to reveal the hidden and distorted history of Black people. Toni Morrison made use of her literary works as a means to pass the legacy of the past of the black people history to the young generation and proposed narrative strategies in her works. This paper is an attempt to trace the narrative strategies in one of her novels entitled *Sula.* Using objective and expressive approaches, the data were collected by perusing the work and tracing sources dealing with Morrison’s ideas and strategies of her narrative. The result shows that Morrison consistently keep her narrative strategies in *Sula.* She arranged the plot that reveals the juxtaposition of past, present and future; created the characters based on the bit of information or the bit of memory; and selecting particular historical, geographical and cultural setting for her novel and adopted Black community not only as the setting but as the theme and characters as well.

**Key words:** Morrison; Sula; black community; narrative; strategies

**INTRODUCTION**

Amongst black community, narrative has been utilizing as one of the important devices to portray slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation. Formerly it was done and written by ex-slaves so that it is well-known as slave narrative. The central focus nearly all the narratives is slavery, an institution and an external reality, rather than a particular and individual life as it is known objectively. In general, the narratives are led to have the same objective reality and the same audience. “There is an organized group of "sponsors," which have very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition” (Onley 1985. p. 52).

Traditional slave narrators tend to present the events chronologically. They obviously separated the past from the present. Contemporary African American writers still preserve narrative; however, in order to emphasize the links between past and present, they create narratives that undermine conventions of linearity and distinctions between past and present.

Toni Morrison has her own strategy in her works. Morrison is one of contemporary African American writers who asserts the existence of narrative in her novels. She argues that narrative is one of the ways in which knowledge is organized; and even she thought that it is the most important ways to transmit and receive knowledge. Above all she adopts narrative deliberately because she has a strong belief that the narratives are instructive, moral and obviously representative of the black community. She writes

Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: "This is my historical life - my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race." Two: "I write this text to persuade other people - you, the reader, who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery." With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed. (Morrison in Hariyanti, at all., 2020)

Unlike traditional slave narratives which tend to tell stories. Morrison’s narratives show her own specialty. She does not merely tell stories. She invites the reader to actively participate in non-literary of the text. She encourages the reader not to accept any data found in her narratives; instead she explains that she wants the reader to go beyond the narrative because she believes that the literary value of literature is limited. She expects that the reader does not read her narratives based on his/her literary experience. She wants the reader to respond as an illiterate or preliterate reader would. She even wants the reader to make use of his own solitary imagination (Morrison 1984, p.387).

One of Morrison’s novels is *Sula*. Since its first publication in 1973 *Sula* has been attracting public attention not only in the United States of America, but also in other parts of the world, especially those involved in the world of literature or those who are interested in Black literature. Some recent studies are such as Analysis on Character’s Behavioral Alienation in Sula (Yun, 2022), Black Feminist Spirit Against Racism And Sexism As Reflected In Sula (Que, 2010, When Communities Fall: A Critical Analysis of Toni Morrison’s Sula ( Sami Saigh, 2024); Essentialism and Self-Identity Construction in Toni Morrison’s “Sula” (Zhang, 2023); and Power And Resistance In Toni Morrison's Sula And Paradise: A Foucauldian Study (Sharmin, · 2023). The above studies focus on content analysis which is partly related to the author and the big ideas behind it. This paper, however, is an attempt to trace Toni Morrison’s narrative strategy in *Sula*

**Theoretical Background**

Toni Morrison has great concern with the hidden and distorted history of Black people. She deems it her duty in particular and Black people in general to reclaim it by revealing the hidden truth not to retreat to the past but to prepare how to handle the present and what they might be able to do for the future. It is an imperative legacy of the past. As a writer Morrison is assured that the legacy of the past could be transmitted through literature. However, she asserts that her fictions are not intended to be historical facts; instead it is a vehicle to reveal the historical truth. Toni Morrison wants the young generation of black people in particular to understand the true and complete history of Black people in the past. She deems it imperative to reclaim the history of Black people. In an "Interview with Toni Morrison" by Christina Davis (1984), she asserts:

The reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence of the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours. (p. 143)

In order to accomplish the legacy of the past, Morrison asserts the significance of having special narrative strategies by arranging the plot that reveals the juxtaposition of past, present and future; creating the characters based on the bit of information or the bit of memory; exposing different voices in each work by adopting a multi voice narrative; using simple and uncomplicated style in their writing, and selecting particular historical, geographical and cultural setting for her novels (Hariyanti, at al., 2020)

Morrison adopts historical, geographical and cultural setting for her novels. Her novels set in the years that would remind the reader of the important moments in American history especially those that are dealing the African American. She frequently uses significant references to history. These not only provide background information about the time period in which the novels take place, but the historical roots that make them seem more realistic; and undoubtedly provide cultural setting for the thoughts and actions of the character. She also makes use of particular places which are inseparable from the history of Black people. Once she said that milieu in which the ancestor really lived is of importance, without it there will be an absence of interior life. She often sets her novels in both the real places, and imaged ones. (Hariyanti, at.al., 2020)

Morrison intentionally put Black communities as the cultural settings of her novels. Culturally Black people are inseparable from their ancestor. The attachment to the ancestor is represented in the attachment to Black communities. As Benjamin (qtd in Beaulieu 2002, p. 5) points outs “Black communities are ancestral legacies that represent a wellspring of culturally inﬂected information, tropes, and values.” The ancestral legacies encountered by Morrison’s characters go beyond the return of deceased family members. The survival of the individual is dependent on the community. In black communities the individual is considered a member of a social group with responsibilities to the other members. Any effort to depart from the community will make them suffer and feel incomplete.

**Analysis**

Morrison’s narrative strategies are obviously seen in the way she constructs the plot, and placing black community not only as the setting of time and place but also providing the cultural setting for the thoughts and the actions of characters and themes as well;

**Plot**

The plot is arranged in such a way that impresses the technique of stream of consciousness in modern literature. It reveals the juxtaposition of past, present and future. In “The Art of Fiction” Morrison (1993) explains the process of trial and error by which the narrator revealed the plot was as important and exciting to her. She wants the plot to be how it happened. It is like a detective story in a sense. It puts the salient elements up front and the reader is hooked into wanting to know how that happened. She wants the story to be the vehicle that move the reader from page one to the end, but foremost she wants “the delight to be found in moving away from the story and coming back to it, looking around it, and through it, as though it was a prism, constantly turning.”

Such technique is useful to reinforce the idea that the past is alive in the present. It also illustrates the importance of memory as a potent agency to organize, make sense of, and find meaning in the labyrinth of those very dislocations and disfigurements. It is the reflection of elements and techniques recognizable in a piece of blues or jazz music, traditional music of Black people which is full of improvisation just as Morrison emphasizes that the novel should have the same qualities as music (Morrison 2008, p. 199).

Morrison puts the end in the beginning in *Sula*. It reveals the historical place in which once was inhabited by black community, the Bottom.

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs, now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. One road, shaded by beeches, oaks, maples and chestnuts, connected it to the valley. The beeches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossom to passers-by. Generous funds have been allotted to level the stripped and faded building that clutter the road from Medallion up to the golf course. They are going to raze the Time and a Half Pool Hall, where feet in long tan shoes once pointed down from chair rungs. A steel ball will knock to dust Irene’s Palace of Cosmetology, where women used to lean their heads *b*ack on sink trays and doze while Irene lathered Nu Nile into their hair. Men in khaki work clothes will pry loose the slats of Reba’s Grill where the owner cooked in her hat because she couldn’t remember the ingredients without it. ( *SULA*:1973:3)

The opening reveals the uprooting of blacks from their roots and the domination of whites over black lives. It shows what happened in Bottom, a black neighborhood in the Ohio hills above the valley town of Medallion. Medallion's white citizens moved to the Bottom and built homes, television towers, and luxury golf courses. Black residents of the Bottom moved into the valley. By placing the end of the Bottom at the beginning, Morrison believes the reader is hooked into finding out how it happened; and thus, will invite them to read from the beginning to the end of the story. She said:

I tried to represent discriminatory, prosecutorial racial oppression as well as the community’s efforts to remain stable and healthy: the neighborhood has been almost completely swept away by commercial interests (a golf course), but the remains of what sustained it (music, dancing, craft, religion, irony, wit) are what the “valley man,” the stranger, sees—or could have seen. It is a more inviting embrace… it helps to unify the neighborhood until Sula’s anarchy challenges it. (SULA, 1973, p. xvi-xvii)

**Setting**

The setting for Sula is a small town in Ohio, located on a hillside known as “Bottom”. It is set in 1919 up to 1965. Historically it is the period of black migration to the cities, when particularly in the Midwest, “black neighbourhoods” came into being in relation to towns which had never before had a sizable black population, It is also the period when blacks as social group were first incorporated in a modern capitalist system as soldiers, and the years when cultural identity seemed to flatten out (Wills , 1983, p. 114-115). It is also described by Lenore Bennett (1993) as the years of contradiction between beginnings and endings, love and hate, and despair and hope)

**Characters**

Morrison never uses characters from her life. In The Art of Fiction (1993), Morrison explains that she never uses anyone she knows in her life. She argues that she does not write autobiographies. Morrison’s characters are fully invented. They are the product of her imagination based on the bit of information she got or the bit of memory she had. The bit does not serve as a historical fact, but it serves as a powerful and rich instrument to create characters and their narratives which can move the feeling of the reader and move them to take action. She for instance wants to show to the reader “what slavery felt like, rather than how it looked.”

Characters and their actions and thoughts are closely knitted to the given particular setting. Placing the setting in the year of contradiction between beginnings and endings, love and hate, and despair and hope ( Bennett ,1993) Morrison’s “extravagantly beautiful doomed characters are locked in a world where hope for the future is a foreign commodity, yet they are enormously, achingly alive,” wrote Blackburn. “And this book is about them and about how their beauty is drained back and frozen - is a howl of love and rage, playful and funny as well as hard and bitter.” (Blackburn in Khairnar, 2021)

Sula as the protagonist was created from a bit of memory of what happened to black women in that era and Morrison’s imagination and her creativity. Once Morrison asserted: “I always thought of Sula as quite essentially black, metaphysically, black if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is New World black and New World Woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational, daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out of the house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female,” (Morrison,1974)

Morrison exposed choices available to black women outside their own society’s approval and the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community. In black communities the individual is considered a member of a social group with responsibilities to the other members. Any effort to depart from the community will make them suffer and feel incomplete. Two main characters are depicted to have different choices: “Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not. She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignore them.”(SULA, p. 83) Sula was regarded as a dangerous bitch, everyone in the society blames her for all the misdoings in their community for three reasons: first, for her rejection of the strict patriarchal society's gender norms for women; second, for rejecting the gendered stereotype that women should care for the elderly; third, due to her desire to emulate men.(Ni, 2015)

Female freedom always means sexual freedom, even when—especially when—it is seen through the prism of economic freedom. The sexual freedom of Hannah Peach was my entrance into the story, constructed from shreds of memory about the way local women regarded a certain kind of female—envy coupled with amused approbation. Against her fairly modest claims to personal liberty are placed conventional and anarchic ones: Eva’s physical sacrifice for economic freedom; Nel’s accommodation to the protection marriage promises; Sula’s resistance to either sacrifice or accommodation. Hannah’s claims are acceptable in her neighborhood because they are nonfinancial and nonthreatening; she does not disturb or deplete family resources. Because her dependence is on another woman, Eva, who has both money and authority, she is not competitive. But Sula, although she does nothing so horrendous as what Eva does, is seen by the townspeople as not just competitive, but devouring, evil. Nel, with the most minimal demands, is seen as the muted standard. each one a choice for characters bound by gender and race (SULA, p. xiii-xiv)

Shadrack was created from a bit memory of the black U.S. soldier fighting in France in World War I. There is not much information about the involvement of black soldier during WW I. African Americans, who had participated in every military conflict since the inception of the United States, enlisted and prepared for involvement. However, many of those who enlisted or were drafted found themselves in noncombative support roles. Many African Americans served under the Services of Supply section of the American Expeditionary Forces. This section comprised of stevedore, labor, and engineers service battalions and companies. The main function of these companies was to support and provide materials to other companies along the front. The soldiers who fought on the front lines were those in the 92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions. The 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, were assigned to the French Army in April 1918. In this post the Hellfighters saw much action, fighting in the Second Battle of the Marne, as well as the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. (<https://www.archives.gov/>). In *Rediscovering Black History,* Burger in Ncurrie, *(2017)* wrote: “The 369th was not the only black World War I regiment, nor the only one to fight valiantly, but it is perhaps the most famous.”

**Theme**

The struggle of Black Americans, be it slave or free ones, to survive and to be equal to the white is interesting and perpetual sources of learning. It began in 1619 when the first twenty "negars" who were sold as indentured servants but in 1661 were transformed into slave settled in Virginia Colony (Albanese, 1992, p. 193). It seems that they won their struggle. They were emancipated more than 200 years later (1863). Ironically, however, they had lived ever since in a biracial society established on the doctrine of white supremacy.

*Sula* portrays the struggle of black community, men and women in keeping their stand in a world dominated by the white.

Throughout the story Morrison depicts that the people at the Bottom have no choice and they have no idea to change. They tend to passively accept their fate:

In spite of their fear, they reacted to the oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfil itself and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. And so were they with people (SULA, 1973, p. 89).

The powerlessness of black community is represented in nearly all characters. Shadrack and Plum are sent to the war only to be discarded as insignificant beings. Disillusioned by war experiences Plum returns and behaves like a baby while Shadrack institutes National Suicide Day. On the third day of every new year, Shadrack does his annual solitary parade. At first people are frightened but as time goes along people take less notice of it and “easily, quietly, Suicide Day becomes a part of the fabric of life in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio.” The strong Jude was refused to work for a New River Road merely because he is black.

The powerlessness of the black is also obviously seen in the attitude of black women represented by Nel and Sula. Both realize that they are neither white nor men and that all freedom and triumph are forbidden for them. But they have different attitude in responding their fate. Nel tends to accept the fate passively. In response to Sula’s statement that she is able to do anything she likes, Nel said: “You don’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like men. You can’t be walking around independent like doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (SULA,1973, p.142).

Nel also realizes the suffering and the fury of black men in dealing with white community; and she feels it her duty to soothe them and to make them comfortable. This is seen in her attitude toward Jude’s proposal. Jude does not have any intention to get married soon because he is sure that his salary is not enough to have a wife. Moreover, he does not enjoy his job as a waiter at a hotel. He feels humiliated and regards it as the job of women. He needs to find a real job for men. He applies for a road builder. Upon the rejection of the white to employ him in the road building, Jude is very furious. He feels hurt and needs someone to care about his hurt. He makes a proposal to Nel. Nel accepts his proposal because she wants to soothe him and she understands that marriage will pose Jude as the head of the household and he will not be disgraceful to be a waiter for the sake of his family.

Another example of the acceptance of the fate is seen in Nel’s attitude toward the betrayal of her husband. Upon eye witnessing the betrayal of her husband with her close friend, Sula, instead of confronting them directly, she just keeps her misery by herself. She looks around to find a small place to “contain her grief”. She needs a small place to contemplate. She believes that the grief will soon be gone if she is able to cry.

Sula is presented as a black woman who tries to be different from others. She is a symbol of modern woman having total freedom to do anything. She moves from place to place, goes to bed with many men as frequently as she can. She does not believe in marriage and does not want to think about having children. She leads her life as she wishes,” exploring her own thoughts and emotion, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her… hers was experimental life”, implying the dynamic process in her life.

Sula is restless. She knows that nobody likes her. She longs to have a friend who understands and accepts her as she is. She moves from town to town only to find that all are the same. Whenever she talks about her private thoughts, she finds no good responses. She is back the Bottom only to find that even Nel who is believed to be her friend behaves the same like others.

Sula’s sexual activity evokes different responses from black community. Black men blame her for her willingness to sleep with white men. It is unforgivable for them because all unions between black women and white men are supposed to be rape. As for women, they are not jealous at her, instead they are offended and furious because Sula does not want to make love with their husbands more than once. Sula’s rejection is considered to underestimate their husbands. It ruins the pride and vanity of men; and it will be the duty of the wives to rebuild their pride and vanity.

Sula is, in fact, a symbol of black community. Her restlessness is the restlessness of black people. In one side, she wants to be different but on other side she is afraid of the change. It is Shadrack who understands her. He always says “always’ whenever he meets her to convince her of permanency. Her lovemaking is symbolic. Morrison does not present lovemaking merely as a device to devote biological need of people, but it is used metaphorically as a means to show a process of self- discovery, a social and psychological process of change. At first Sula regards lovemaking as “a creation of a special kind of joy.” She rejects the idea of sex as healthy and beautiful; but she likes to think it wicked. As her experience multiplies; however, she realizes that not only is it not wicked, but she feels need not to conjure up the idea of wickedness in order to participate fully. During the lovemaking she feels it necessary to build a tight cluster hard to break. As she lies under someone, however, she experiences an outraged and hopeless feeling that she is under the domination of men; the cluster does break. In her panic to hold it she “leaps from the edge into the soundlessness and went down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the ending of things: an eye of sorrow in the midst of all that hurricane rage of joy.” (*SULA*,1973,p.126) In the centre of soundlessness, of solitude, she feels alienated, symbolizing the alienated feeling of black community.

Sula’s lovemaking with black Ajax is used by Morrison to show the process of the black to find out their own capacity. There are some steps to find their capacity. During her lovemaking with Ajax, Sula thinks of how to dig the “gold” and “the fertile soil” in the black Ajax. First she will rub the blackness to find the gold leaf underneath; second she will scrap away a knife at the gold leaf to see alabaster; and third she will break the alabaster and through the breaks she will at last see the loam, the fertile land symbolizing the capacity of black people.

The lovemaking is also used to reflect the relationship between black and white people. The attitude and the experience of Sula in her lovemaking metaphorically reflects the effort of the black to get involved in bourgeois society of the white. Such an effort results in the realization of their awareness to reach their ideal or drive them back to their previous position and find their difference from the white. It leaves Sula, for instance, to “the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself and joined herself in matchless harmony,” (*SULA*, 1973, p.127) and relieving Shadrack on his recognition of his being black: “There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so uniquivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real, that he did not exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more.” (*SULA*,1973, p.13)

The death of Sula is the death of black community. Her death is followed by two promising news for the black. The government seems to favour the employment of black workers and there will be construction of old people’s home and the blacks are free to occupy it. This seemingly promising news, however, takes great price. Indeed, the black begins to experience changes. It is now common to see black people working in any places used to be solely for the white. However, they begin to forget their own community and the white takes advantages over the situation. Morrison depicts the situation vividly:

In the meantime, the Bottom had collapsed. Everybody who had money during the war moved as close as they could to the valley, and the white people were buying down river, cross river, stretching Medallion like two strings on the bank. Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom anymore. White people were building towers for television stations up there and there was a rumor about a golf course or something. Anyway, hill land was more valuable now, and those black people who had moved down right after the war in the fifties couldn’t afford to come back even if they wanted to. Except for the few blacks still huddled by the river bend… only rich white folks were building homes in the hills. Just like that, they had changed their minds and instead of keeping the valley floor for themselves, now they wanted a hilltop house with a river view and a ring of elms. 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 keep talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn—and the rich white Afolks. Maybe it hadn’t been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren’t any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephone and less dropping by (*SULA*,1973, p. 165-166).

It is painful because “the old is better than the new, the past is better than the present situation; and “the world was full of beautiful boys in 1912. Even the whores were better.” This is an invitation and a challenge for the young generation of black people to think about their future. The destruction of the black community is not only from outsiders but also from black people themselves.

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