

Chapter III

Mourning a Forgotten Past: *Sula*

Sula, Morrison's 1973 novel begins with a sense of loss and disruption of "intimate things in place" (Morrison, Interview with Robert Stepto 11). In the interview, which was conducted by Robert Stepto, an African-American literary critic, Morrison describes her relationship to place thus: "I felt a very strong sense of place, not in terms of country or the state, but in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town" (10). *Sula* mourns the disappearance of the life-giving, nurturing and sustaining force of the community of Bottom, that in spite of its "fantastic variety of people and things and behaviour" (11) had strong cohesiveness in it. The novel inaugurates in a mode of memory of what once was called Bottom:

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and black berry 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. (3)

Morrison's narrator thus opens her story with the sacrifice of a place to suburban town, with words of extirpation-- "beeches," "oaks," "maples" and "chestnuts" are being torn away and the rambling, "faded buildings" are being levelled smooth by the razor of the late capitalist enterprise in the post 1965 Integrationist era.

Place occupies an important place in Toni Morrison's novels. When she wrote her second novel *Sula*, she intended, as she said in the interview, "to focus on neighborhoods and communities. And the community, the black community . . . it had seemed to me that it was always there, only we called it the 'neighborhood' . . ."

(11). Her fictional project is to rescue those qualities of "resistance," "excellence" and "integrity" of black people, especially of black women, that are disappearing with the urbanization of the 20th century post industrial era. Her novels present a world which is tied up with the bond of "community values." The characters' lives are richly interwoven with their collective response to the community's value system, which Morrison calls "village values" in her essay "City Limits, Village Values." She writes, "These community values (I call them village values) are uppermost in the minds of black writers . . . when a character defies a village law or shows contempt for it, it may be seen as a triumph to white readers, while

Blacks may see it as an outrage" (38). Urbanism with its priority of individualism over social responsibilities seems to have had its most devastating effect on those, who are historically racialised and who belong to a marginalized group. The second paragraph of the opening section of the novel mourns:

There will be nothing left of the Bottom (the foot bridge that crossed the river is already gone), but perhaps it is just as well, . . . just a neighbourhood where on quite old days people in valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes . . . and it would be easy for the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids . . . even though the laughter was part of the pain. (4)

The narrative is a commemorative act for an extinct community; a painful remembrance of a past displaced and forgotten by 1965 post integrationist era.

The place that Morrison has chosen for her novel *Sula* has an unusual history, related to its origin. "A joke. A nigger joke" (4). The beginning of the novel juxtaposes the end of the neighbourhood of Bottom with the story of how they came to be, how a "good" white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottomland to his slave if he

performed some very difficult task. After the slave had completed the work he asked the farmer to keep the promise. The farmer told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him a piece of valley land, though he had hoped to give him a piece of the bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought the valley land to be the bottomland. The master said, "Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile." "But it is high up in hills," said the slave. "High up from us," said the master, "but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven--best land there is." Thus the blacks populated the hills "where planting was back breaking" (5) and thus the black community of the Bottom was born in a white master's inversion of truth, which was altered years later, when it was felt necessary to earn their own right. The History of the Bottom, as Hunt says, "its people and its eventual destruction is in microcosm the history of African Americans, and the African diaspora" (47). The joke within the bottom community is a manifestation of black people's broken promise and unfulfilled desire, and these are determinative in the world of *Sula*, because the life, which began in the form of a "nigger joke," ends with a collective, self-immolating protest at the tunnel:

Their hooded eyes swept over the place where their hope had lain since 1927. There was the promise: leaf-dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches, the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers. All there in blazing sunlit ice rapidly becoming water. (161)

The "nigger joke" thus not only names the place, but also provides a "rationale" that the black people are powerless to face an exclusive, capitalistic control of white hegemonic world.

In her desire to demystify the generalized and historicized proposition regarding the capacities and integrities of the black people in America, Morrison wants her readers to witness their everyday life in her fictional world, without having any predisposition in them. She says in "The Site of Memory," "What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along" (121). As a black woman writer of the 70s, Morrison not only seeks to redefine the tradition of black people, but also to differentiate her art as a

counter-tradition and counter-myth to the historical representation of blacks. Divided roughly into two equal parts, with each chapter headed by a year, except the first one, *Sula* appears to proceed in linear movement from 1919 to 1927 and then from 1937 to 1941, with "1965," as the final chapter of the novel. But the events of various chapters do not necessarily occur during the years indicated; rather these allusive, broadly referential dates serve as public markers for the narrative of private loves and grief. In this novel as in other novels of Morrison, "historic time is best understood through the duration of private lives, where personal experience in turn acquires its significance only within a historical process" (Grewal 44). Regarding the tradition of black women's writing Hortense J. Spillers said, "I would want to say that "tradition" for black women's writing community is a matrix of literary *discontinuities* that partially articulate various periods of consciousness in the history of an African American people" (251).

With *Sula* we enter into a fictional world deliberately inverted to reveal a complex reality that helps to set a new agenda for the study of black people, especially for that of black women, that transcends the boundaries of conventional social standards. The novel parallels two distinct matrilineal genealogies of class and colour: Eva,

Hannah and Sula Peace who categorize the working class history of black women during the period from 1895-1940 and the light-skinned Rochelle, Helene and Nel Wright who represent bourgeois ascendance to that privileged social status that rests on disavowal of their own black origin. Nel comes of such a family that is run with extreme care and strict observation of codes of conduct, required for the maintenance of the standard of a refined class within the general or average class of black people. Helen's grandmother took Helene away from Sundown House and raised her ". . . under the dole-some eyes of a multicolored virgin Mary," (17) and counselled her to be on guard constantly for any sign of Rochelle's (her mother's) "wild blood," who is a Creole whore. Helene escapes New Orleans' sultry atmosphere and the shadow of her prostitute mother by marrying Wiley Wright and moving to Ohio, where she sets a standard for communal rectitude, that she later imposes on her daughter Nel: "Under Helen's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18). Nel's trip to New Orleans brought for her a new consciousness of her identity. The trip which had been "exhilarating" but "a fearful one" was a "real trip" for her and "now she was different." Lighting the lamp she looked in the mirror for

a long time. She whispered: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (28). Her awareness of her separateness and her "new found me-ness" (29) gave her strength to ignore her mother's objection and she made friends with Sula.

Sula is raised in a household of independent women. She lives in an enormous house, "the creator and sovereign" (30) of which is Eva Peace, her grand mother. After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage Boy-Boy, Eva's drunkard and philandering husband left her. She knew that children needed her and that she needed money to get on with her life. In her helpless and bitter condition the community people did not turn against her; the Suggs brought her a warm bowl of peas and Mrs. Jackson told her to fill up her bucket with milk because she had "a cow still giving" (32). But Eva knew that things could not run in this manner and so she left all her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying that she would be back the next day. Eighteen months later Eva returned with one leg missing but with notable prosperity, to reclaim her children and built her own home. Precisely how Eva loses her leg becomes the topic of speculation in the Bottom, though it is suggested that she sacrifices it in a train accident for an insurance settlement. Whatever the case, Eva's experience changes her from a passive victim to an active manipulator. She

used her hatred for Boy-Boy to "strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities" (36). It is not that those Peace women did not love men. They loved men simply for their "maleness." It was such love that Eva bequeathed to her daughter. She fussed interminably with newly married brides for not getting their men's supper ready on time; she instructed them how to launder shirts, press them and many such things. Hannah, after her husband Reku's death, had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbours. Her sexual passion is not for the possession of other people, but "sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and definite commitment" (43-44). In her conversation with Betty Jean Parker Morrison said, "Hannah, is sexually selfish. But she is not a selfish person. . . . Hannah is uncomplicated and really and truly knows nothing about jealousy or hostility . . ." (63). Sula inherits from her maternal lineage her grandmother's arrogance and her mother's self indulgence. Once, coming from school Sula found her mother in bed, making love with one of her "daylight" lovers and at that moment Sula learned the lesson, "Sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44).

Nel and Sula have their different upbringings that made them totally different from each other. Still both felt attracted to each other: ". . . toughness was not

their quality--adventuresomeness was--and a mean determination to explore everything that interested them. . . . In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things" (55). Both of them strengthened their union to create for them "something else" in such a world where "all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, . . ." (52). Sula's understanding of her relationship with Nel results from self-understanding and self-intimacy but Nel's marriage to Jude interrupts it. After marriage Nel freezes into her wifely role, becoming one of the women who had "folded themselves into starched coffins, . . ." (122). Yielding to Jude's need for "the hem--the tuck and fold," to hide his "raveling edges;" (83)--Nel discovers a feeling stronger than her friendship. Marrying a man who believes that the two can make one whole and complete Jude, Nel virtually kills her possibilities for an emergent independent self. Her definition of self is regulated by codes of moral conduct, defined by patriarchal laws, drawn for women:

"Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them, and the flick of their tongues would drive her back into her little dry corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breath of the snake and the fall" (120). This strict adherence of Nel to

"community law," that decides paraphernalia about good woman and bad woman results in her separation from Sula because Sula was living an "experimental life" that feels ". . . no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118). She comes to understand differences between her and Nel: ". . . she and Nel were not one and the same thing" (119). On her way of finding a life of her own "She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be--for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand" (121).

Sula's knowledge of marriage is very nominal because her maternal heritage is an unbroken line of man-loving women, who exist as sexually desiring subjects rather than as objects of male desires. So she is not well prepared for the possessiveness of somebody, she feels close to. She did not think of causing Nel any pain when she slept with Jude, and later she explained to Nel, "Well, there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That's all. He just filled up the space" (144). After Nel finds Jude and Sula in sexual act, ". . . down on all fours naked" (105) she laments, ". . . now her thighs were truly empty . . . and

dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (110-111). Her sexuality does not mean for her own pleasure, but for the pleasure of her husband and in obedience to a system of ethical judgment and moral virtue, enacted within the institution that sanctions sexuality for women. In contrast, sexuality for Sula is neither located in the realm of moral abstractions nor expressed within the institution of marriage that legitimates it for women. Rather in her case, sexuality is in the realm of sensory pleasure, which leads through self-exploration to self-intimacy, as she is in her "post-coital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" (123).

Since Sula does not conform to the female roles, as prescribed by the community law of the Bottom, she is perceived as an outlaw by the society. The community is averse to the free sexual behaviour of Eva's daughter, Hannah but tolerates the hypocritical behaviour of Helene Wright with her "dazzling" and "coquettish smile" (21). Hence it will never accept Sula's search for "herself," (121) for self-fulfilment. Barbara Christian's comments are noteworthy in this case: ". . . as a woman, her desire to make herself rather than others goes against the most

basic principle of the community's struggle to survive" (54). Eva's arrogance and dominance on the people, whom she rented, can also be tolerated by this community law. The critical difference that lies between Eva and Sula is that the former had her power thrust on her by bitter circumstances while the later wants to find and exert the power of her own life, a choice that the older generation of women did not have. It is a choice that the Bottom as a community does not accommodate. Her refusal to play a stereotype creates the portrait of a young woman suffering and fighting for the right to choose her own life: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Blackburn notes in *New York Times Book Review*, "... Sula becomes a threat as her life unfolds against the rest of the black community's daily life of hardship, humiliation and scrabbling for survival" (7). The people of the Bottom, who are only concerned with weaving the next ring of "the web," just for staying alive, cannot embrace the possibility of freedom in Sula's search for self-fulfilment. The spark of her revolutionary zeal cannot create turmoil in her neighbours' self-complacent attitude of life. They consider Sula's self-affirmative definition of life as something sinister. Her act of putting her grandmother in Sunnydale, an old-age home is an act of self

preservation, which the Bottom community considers scandalous:

But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing--the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men. It may not have been true, but it certainly could have been. She was obviously capable of it. In any case, all minds were closed to her when that word was passed around. It made the old women draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her--just to get the saliva back in their mouths when they saw her. (112-113)

The community people's unwillingness to "take from Sula what she has to offer them--the leap into living, the insistence on knowing oneself, the urge to experiment and thus move forward" (Christian 54) resulted into "free reign" and "idle imagination" for Sula. The author says,

Had she paints or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage

her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form she became dangerous. (121)

Sula's energy and intelligence remain unrecognized by the Bottom community, who started despising her, considering her a personification of evil: "So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps." Because Sula was a "bitch in the town," things began to happen there in a quite different, rather constructive way: Teapot's Mamma, "an indifferent mother," (113) turned out to be "the most devoted mother: sober, clean and industrious" when she had reasons enough to blame Sula for hurting her son; wives became more "cherishing" for their husbands when Sula had bruised their "pride and vanity" by "discarding them without any excuse" (114-115). It is not only that the people of the Bottom suddenly became "good," but they all got integrated in forming their opinion about Sula that she was a "devil." Thus Sula, the "pariah" serves herself as an essential yardstick for measuring the degrees of goodness for her neighbours. By providing herself as the most necessary ingredient for their daily food of rumour and gossip Sula tightened the

bond of cohesiveness among them. The community people's conviction of Sula's evil brought a mysterious change among them: "They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117-118).

Morrison, in her interview with Anne Koenen has described Sula's "unusualness" in the following words:

I thought she had a serious flaw, which led her into a dangerous zone which is, and it really is dangerous, not being able to make a connection with other people. . . . Sula's behaviour looks inhuman, because she has cut herself off from responsibility to anyone other than herself, she is afraid of that area of commitment. (68)

She does not attempt to connect things as she looks at things in an absence of relation. She perceives things without making any attachment, offered by relations.

Patricia McKee says, "Sula does not attach one thing to another. With no interest in acquisition, or accumulation, or drawing anything like others' attention towards herself, Sula simply doesn't function in terms of combination or collection or accretion" (50). Her death brought a "restless irritability" among her neighbours, who expected that now Sula was dead a brighter day would come. But there was something wrong: "A falling away, a dislocation was

taking place" (153). This sense of "dislocation," "a falling away" of the promise and hope of the people took the most devastating form at the construction site of the proposed tunnel. For most of their lives these people failed to recognize what was there, was not really theirs own, but what could have been theirs if they had been there. It was Sula who had occupied these "absences" and maintained an orderly cohesiveness for the Bottom. In this sense Sula's character can be studied as a constructive evil, designed purposefully for the well-being of the community. She herself had acknowledged her gift to Nel at her death-bed: "Oh, they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me" (145).

Though concerned with the history of a segregated community *Sula* mourns "the cultural death," "the social death of the female self" (Grewal 44). The Bottom community is governed by patriarchal laws, restrictive to any departure from its rules and regulations. Chronicling the history of the Bottom through a feminist perspective *Sula* exposes the bitter reality that if collective marginalization brings about a group's cohesiveness, it also makes the group critical of radical deviation from its norms, especially when such deviation is made by the women of the society. Sula's assertion of female selfhood, that seeks freedom from structural roles of gender, is seen as a

divisive, centrifugal force that reacts against the centripetal force of a culture in which black woman has been historically seen as bearing the burden of her status quo. The tensions between a beleaguered community and the heretic Sula are expressive of "the counterpressure exerted by the black nationalist ideology on feminist articulation of black femininity" (Gates, Jr., 20). R. Radhakrishnan poses a vital question of the asymmetric position between the two: "why is it that the advent of the politics of nationalism signals the subordination if not the demise of women's politics? Why does the politics of the 'one' typically overwhelm the politics of the 'other'?" (78). The community people's revolt against the economic oppression, by joining the National Suicide Day procession, is no more productive than Sula's revolt against Bottom's structural roles of gender. The early and unexpected death of Sula uncovers the sordid reality that women's causes especially that of black women's always remain under the veil by age--long blind historical process of cultural politics, in which Nationalist Movement works as one of its most active agents. Unlike many white women, the black women had greater access to the public sphere of work but that could not provide them greater control of their lives, because their life is organized by the "imperatives of structure" (Grewal 52). They accept the power and control

of their men culturally as well as ideologically. Nel's early assimilation of her "self," her newly identified "maleness" (28) into her husband's Jude's self, diminishing all the probabilities for developing into an independent self because "the two of them together would make one Jude," (83) can be read as the project of a nationalism assimilating and erasing the claims of feminism. Such assimilation is emphatically rejected by Sula but whose feminist consciousness gets stifled in its nascence by the demand of a Black Nationalist movement. While overturning the historic erasure of feminist concerns by the politics of nationalism, the novel does not, however, replicate the errors of nationalism by advocating the priority of feminism over other concerns. The feminist concern in *Sula* includes the collective concerns, the dissipated desires and aspirations both at individual and collective level: the desire of Ajax to fly a plane, the desire of Jude for "camaraderie of the road men," the desire of Nel and Sula to have an exhilarating experience of self discovery, the desire of Eva for her son's maleness and the Bottom people's desire in "to wipe from the face of the earth" (161) "the unfinished sign of their economic disenfranchisement" resulting in their drowning in which "identity is collective" (Ryan 400-401). On the other hand, Morrison, in her essay "City Limits, Village Values,"

quotes Robert Elias to point out "individualism" as one of the important features of black writing: "A devotion to self assertion can be a devotion to discovering distinctive ways of expressing community values, social purpose, mutual regard or. . . affirming a collective experience" (38).

The final chapter titled "1965" begins with a sense of disenchantment, caused by capitalism's modern, urban technological arrangements of life: "Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed" (163). Nel mourns the post integration disintegration of community. The narrator goes on saying, "She hardly recognized anybody in the town any more. Now there was another old people's home. . . . Every time they built a road they built a old folks' home. You'd think folks was living longer, but the fact of it was, they was just being put out faster" (164). The novel is a regretful reproach to black people's detachment from their ancestors, the benevolent and wise "old people" who are not just parents but are "sort of timeless people" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 343). Blacks suffer their predicament in the Post-integration era with its multinational or commodity capitalism that erodes their cultural identity and replaces their cultural production with commodity consumption:

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. . . . Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by. (166)

These lines that come shortly before the novel's conclusion are reiteration of the devastating change, depicted in the novel's opening lines. The Bottom, which in the beginning was referred to as "neighborhood" is later simply called it a place. The Bottom as a place/ community, in the sense of small organic neighborhood, daily defined by people's interaction, does no longer exist now. The previous "dropping by," the social visits, that meant each others' sharing of, is now replaced by "separate telephones," the modern technology that may facilitate gossip, but denies women the possibility of sharing domestic toil. The novel comes to its end with Nel's belated recognition of Sula. She realizes that Sula had been the only partner in all her struggle, "'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.'" The author concludes, "It was a fine cry-- loud and long--but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174).

Thus Morrison, while rewriting the history of black women, has followed individual lives closely because it

helps her to reconstruct a history that is not predetermined. The people of the Bottom are located in a marginal social structure and the location of black women within this marginal group has been the most unsatisfactory. According to McKee,

Morrison activates the spacing of representation and realizes what is missing when representation occurs. Whereas many post structuralist theories of representation assume absence or lack to be part of the structure of human experience, Morrison works against such a generalization, to realize experiences of missing that are particular component of African American life, and more particularly, of African- American women's lives. (40)

The images of communal life in Bottom are the fragments Morrison shores against its ruins because as a creative historian her project is "to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories" that she had heard. (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 113).