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The Death of Me: Friendship, Fragmented Selfhood, and the Illusion of Morality in Sula

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Abstract—*This paper examines Toni Morrison's Sula through the lens of fractured subjectivity, intra-racial patriarchy, and the ideological interpellation of black womanhood. Focusing on the relationship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, the essay argues that Nel's failure to mourn and her emotional paralysis are rooted not in Sula's betrayal, but in Nel's own disavowal of self—what the narrative symbolically frames as her refusal to confront the "gray ball" of suppressed identity. Drawing on theories of melancholia, subaltern speech, and intra-communal sexism, the paper explores how Morrison dismantles binary moral structures and exposes the cultural scripting of black women into roles of silent caretakers. Nel's internalization of her mother Helene's performance of middle-class respectability, her submission to Jude's masculinist needs, and her loss of "me-ness" illustrate the psychological cost of moral conformity. In contrast, Sula's experimental life—though socially condemned—represents a radical, if flawed, attempt at self-definition. The paper contends that Morrison constructs female friendship not only as an emotional refuge but as a potential site for identity formation and ideological resistance. Ultimately, Sula reveals that healing and autonomy for black women require more than personal virtue—they demand a confrontation with cultural myths, internalized shame, and the collective silence imposed by history, community, and self.*

Keywords—***moral binaries, female subjectivity, fractured self, mourning and melancholia, docility***

I. INTRODUCTION

In her 1973 novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison constructs a layered meditation on black womanhood, friendship, and the psychological toll of conforming to rigid social conventions. The story centers on the lifelong bond between Sula Peace and Nel Wright—two black women whose intertwined lives unfold within the racially segregated town of Medallion, Ohio. Their relationship, while intimate and sustaining in childhood, unravels in adulthood under the pressures of gendered expectations, respectability politics, and internalized oppression. Critics have long debated the moral dimensions of the novel, frequently asking whether Nel, the seemingly upright and conventional woman, should be valorized over Sula, the rebellious and defiant "pariah." But Morrison resists such dichotomies, destabilizing notions of "good" and "evil" and urging readers to reject the comfort of binary thinking.

This paper argues that the dissolution of Nel and Sula's friendship is not merely the result of personal betrayal but a reflection of the corrosive effects of patriarchal and racist ideologies on black female subjectivity**.** Nel's internalization of her mother's rigid moralism and her community's narrow definitions of womanhood lead her to suppress her desires and forsake her autonomous self. By contrast, Sula's pursuit of freedom and refusal to be confined by social roles, while alienating, represents a radical—if imperfect—mode of self-actualization. Their bond, once a space of mutual affirmation and resistance, ultimately collapses under the weight of a society that denies black women the right to both relational and individual wholeness. Through close analysis of the novel's language, structure, and symbolic motifs—such as Nel's "gray ball" of self-deception and the motif of "custard" shame—this essay contends that Morrison's portrayal of female friendship becomes a

vehicle for critiquing the inherited myths that fracture black women's lives and identities.

Blurring Binaries: The Danger of Either/ Or Thinking

In Morrison's multi-faceted fiction, love and friendship are one of the themes which form the core of the narrative. Sula and Nel's friendship traces many conflicts which stands in the way of many women and especially black women in a world in which, because of their race and gender, "had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (Morrison,1982, p. 52). Throughout the story Sula and Nel realize that their existence and survival depend on their mutual understanding and support of each other in a world which denies their long-awaited privileges and freedom.

A question which seems to have engaged many readers since the publication of *Sula* in 1973 is the issue of good and evil in the novel. Frequently we ask ourselves who was right: the conventional Nel or the unconventional Sula; Sula who slept with Nel's husband Jude or Nel who remained serene following Chicken Little's problematic death. This is a difficult question for both Sula and Nel and for readers of the novel; Sula who was seen as a 'pariah' in the eyes of the community and watched her own mother burn to death or Nel who turned to 'custard' after Sula had a one-hour-stand affair with Jude. Morrison has not remained silent on this issue. Morrison comments that in *Sula* she "tried to posit a situation where there was a so-called good and a so-called evil people. Nel and Sula are symbolic of this condition. And of course, you can't always tell which is which" (Parker 62).

In fact either/or orientation is dangerous in reading *Sula* as in all of Morrison's fictions. As Deborah E. Mcdowell avers:

> the narrative Sula instantly blurs and confuses … binary oppositions. It glories in paradox and ambiguity beginning with the prologue that describes the setting, the bottom, situated spatially in the top. We enter a new world here, a world where we never get to the "bottom" of things, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/ and, full of shifts and contradictions" (80).

Mcdowell is right in that we cannot simply attach a label to complex dilemmas in the novel which demand a certain flexibility of perspective and an orientation towards a "both/ and" orientation. As Hamidizadeh et al (2018) argue in their reading of Paradise Lost, ideologies often mask internal contradictions that only become visible when we attend to what is suppressed or denied within the text. Morrison's Sula resists neat dichotomies such as good/evil or moral/immoral, instead revealing how dominant ideologies fracture the self and distort ethical clarity. For instance, how are we going to interpret the ambivalent act of Eva's murder of her son or her vague self-mutilation? In the first instance Eva herself has difficulty relating to her daughter Hannah why she killed Plum. We read that " When Eva spoke at last it was with two voices. Like two people were talking at the same time, saying the same thing, one a fraction of a second behind the other" (Morrison,71) the phrase "one a fraction of a second behind the other" clues a certain ambivalence; the one voice talking "a fraction of a second behind the other" is interpreting for itself the ambiguous and shocking act. Following the same argument Barbara Christian (1985) points to the fact that Morrison's work "does not yield to easy generalizations and nicely packed clichés and Morrison's works "resist the trends of the times without discarding the truths upon which they are based" (pp. 91-92).

In the same line, Sula questions Nel's right to claim that Nel was the good person. She asks her how she knows that Sula is the evil person. Sula raises the possibility that she can be the good person, because throughout the novel sula is not only known as 'evil' and a 'pariah' by the townspeople, she is both abandoned and partly despised by her lifetime friend. Now Nel in the image of a good woman has come to see her friend and has tried hard like a good woman to hold at bay that rage, which has long been burning in her heart. Nel who, like " the good church woman", goes to see old people and who clings to her responsibilities as a good mother and a good wife, working hard as a hotel chambermaid for "respectability" tries to forget her best friend for her sins including sleeping with her husband and as a result making him run away from her. Hidden in their argument is Nel's long restrained question which she wants to ask sula: why she took him away?. Sula's reply is mixed with tart wit: "what you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just ..cked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?"(Morrison, 1982, p.145).

The purpose of this article is not to negate this idea by simply arguing for the favor of the obverse case that Sula was the good woman of the story. The argument is wholly different; but it is within the same frame of good and evil in the novel. The point is that the reason why Nel "couldn't get over it", rather than being Sula's fault goes back to a death of self in both Nel and a bunch of other women in the story. This is rooted in structuring their lives according to rigidly conventional standards of morality which bind the women of the bottom.

In order to enlarge on this idea, I will first analyze the Wright line of family which Nel descends from. The word Wright refers to and parodies an inclination or we would better say a gesture toward righteousness which is present in the life of Helen Wright, Nel's mother. Helen's middle class rigid mores in many cases cripples Nel's growth and that of herself. Helen in her attempts to escape her mother's origin, Rochelle, who is a "Creole whore"(Morrison,1982, p.17) resorts to a life of pretentiousness shown in confining herself to cleaning the house and to a stringent social order. She tries to imitate white middle class values by attending church and welcoming world war veterans like shadrack and Plum who do not have any idea why and how they can be welcomed.

Moreover Helen represses her daughter by patronizing her as she " loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband"; she kills her daughter's imagination in a way that Nel became subservient and obedient. Helene killed any spark of enthusiasm that her daughter showed until Nel grew a kind of hatred towards her mother. Helene suffers from a feeling of racial inferiority and does her best to raze her daughter's negroid features.

But a dramatic event happens which changes Nel's course of life and partly releases her from her overbearing mother. Helene following news from her grandmother's illness, Cecile Sabat, decides to go and pay a visit to the dying woman. The amount of black women's segregation and withheld freedom is vivid in Helene's anxiety before the trip. She is afraid of the outside world beyond the insular bottom where one cannot even eliminate easily and as it is mentioned in the novel Helene will have to eliminate behind the trees as a result of strict rules of segregation. Her fears are far beyond elimination; she is certainly aware of violence perpetrated upon blacks in the aftermath of world war I and widespread lynching which took place in the name of national protection. Helene's way of trying to prepare herself for the trip will prove futile as she keeps thinking about the trip with great anxiety when she finally decides that she has the best weapon that is her manner. She further tries to ornament this manner through wearing a beautiful dress.

But her means of protecting herself would not come to her avail. As Helene and Nel mistakenly pass to the *whites only* section of a Jim Crow train, the white conductor immediately stops them and says: "'what you think you doin', gal?'… so soon. She hadn't even begun the trip back…. And already she had been called 'gal'"(p.20) Smitherman (1977) points to the connotations of the word "gal". "The racially inflicted 'gal' a word, according to Smitherman to which black women take particular exception because of its suggestive denial of black womanhood and connotation of white notions of ownership" is the root of Helene's feeling of humiliation. But it is not only Helene who is embarrassed by this scene. Nel and two black soldiers are watching the scene with mixed feelings of shock and contempt. Surprisingly Helene responds to the situation by coquettishly trying to cater to the white conductor's objectified gaze:

Then, for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody coud understand,certainly no reason that Nel understood then or later, she smiled. Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before, Helene smiled.smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor.(p.21) In this scene, Helene performs "the docility caricature" (Etedali Rezapoorian, 2024) attributed to African Americans. Etedali Rezaporian illustrates black author's invocation of docility to subvert it and Morrison too subverts the docility caricature through the figure of Nel. For Nel, the docility of her mother serves to discover her self, as incomplete and fallible as it was during the scene.

As Burrows maintains, Helene in her attempt to cut herself from her maternal inheritance "acts out" her mother's role as a slut. In this way she becomes the jezebel of the racial stereotyping of black women depicted by white ideology(Burrows, 2004, pp.133-135). Helene revives the myths around the looseness and availability of black women by her seductive manners. The image that this event inscribes on Nel's mind for ever haunts her. Nel, is both "pleased" and "ashamed", pleased possibly because she takes pleasure to see her overbearing mother who always disturbed her, and ashamed because she empathizes with Helen as a female and a black. Nel imagines that her mother's dress has come undone and everybody can see the naked body of her mother and her "custard colored skin". As Safi Ullah argues in his reading of Kaiser Haq's *Ode on the Lungi*, the subaltern is often symbolically silenced by dominant cultural discourses, where even everyday attire becomes a battleground for visibility, voice, and dignity (Ullah, 2018, p. 84). Nel's rejection of her mother's racial performance and her whispered assertion of "me-ness" occur in the shadow of this "hegemonic sartorial hierarchy," where black femininity is culturally scripted as either "ridiculous ethnic attire" or eroticized docility. Her refusal to become "custard" echoes Ullah's notion of the "subaltern speaking"—but being unheard**.** Morrison stages this moment as a subaltern rupture—a silent declaration of selfhood in the face of internalized shame and external misrecognition.

The ten year old Nel identifies the sexualized look of the conductor and hatred lurking in black soldier's eyes with the naked body of her mother. She was so afraid and ashamed that "she could not risk letting them (her eyes) travel upward for fear of seeing that the hooks and eyes in the placket of the dress had come undone". This incident with its overtone of shame makes Nel fear that "if this tall, proud woman (Helene) this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance… if she were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too". As Milad Houshmand (2025a) argues, Morrison's fiction demonstrates how ideological systems co-opt Black female subjectivity through mass cultural representations that enforce self-denial and internalized whiteness. In *The Bluest Eye*, this co-optation occurs through symbols of white beauty; in Sula, it is dramatized through Nel's shame-filled identification with her mother's body, her rejection of "custard," and her decision to disown her maternal lineage. Just as Pecola Breedlove becomes a passive subject shaped by dominant aesthetics, Nel's "me-ness" is not self-defined but ideologically interpolated through her mother's mimicry of white propriety and submission to a "respectable" femininity.

Burrows relates custard to "the connotative negatives of moral cowardice, sexual consumption and miscegenation" (135). It is in this crucial moment that Nel wanted to make sure that no conductor, white person or black soldiers would look at her like that. She would never be like her mother; she would never "turn into custard". She further acclaims: "I'm me,she whispered. "Me"…"I'm me. *I'm nottheir daughter*. I'm not Nel. I'm me.Me" (p.28).

It is this new me-ness which is the line of my argument; it is this disavowal of maternal inheritance which I want to discuss in detail. Nel's observation of the futility of her mother's life and crippling neatness and also her observation of her grandmother's life, a woman whose warm sensuality and free ways attracted her, led her to her friendship with Sula. Nel sees that in Eva's household there are a lot of people messing around and the dishes remain there for many days. The freedom of the house and Sula's resemblance to her grandmother led to her friendship with Sula. They each find in the other what each lacks. Sula who cannot keep a thought for more than three minutes finds in Nel a serene and stable quality and Nel finds in Sula a protective attitude. They together seek sexuality; for instance as they walk on their way to Edna Finch's Mellow House, they face exciting looks of young as well as old men. Ajax, twenty four-old man with a strange beauty who made the other men in bottom feel jealous about his "foul mouth" excited them by saying the word "Pigmeat" and the girls "guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight"(Morrison,1982, pp.49-50).

The nurturing and firm quality of their friendship is further established as Sula defends Nel against four Irish boys who try to disturb them. In an act of sacrifice and self-mutation, Sula slashes her finger to keep the boys at bay. In return Nel keeps Sula from wallowing into dark thoughts who, because of her problematic household, indulges herself in dark thoughts. These words made her so frustrated that she rushed upstairs. Sula helped Nel's imagination grow and Nel provided the stability that was lacking in Sula.

Moreover as Morrison tells us the girls' consciousness of the racialized and genderized world in which they inhabited, made one the axis around which the other revolves. Morrison tells us that because they were not males and whites, they did their best to create a different self. This self was totally different from what they had experienced.

But after Nel's marriage, their relationship starts to fade and the two girls experience an exasperating dissociation. When Jude "selects" Nel away from Sula, Nel clings to a rigid life of responsibilities. The reason why Jude marries Nel is noteworthy because it implies Nel's death of self and a return to her mother's stifling way of life. Jude primarily marries Nel because his hopes for "real work" have been devastated by the racism prevalent in the narrative. The project of the new river road kept almost all the men in the novel hopeful that they can prove their jeopardized masculinity. But almost anybody including the whites from Virginia and men from Greece and Italy were hired except for black men. Jude's job as shining shoes in a hotel is not fulfilling for him and he wishes for a kind of job in which he could exercise his power and a kind of job in which he could restore his pride.

Unlike Nel's relationship with Sula which provided the "intimacy they were looking for" and as we see, it helped them grow with each other's help, Nel's marriage would prove destructive for both of them. Jude's purpose for marriage is noteworthy since it manifests his sexist manipulation of Nel. Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez (2024) have argued that marginalized men of color can contribute to the hegemonic suppression of women no matter how marginalized, colored, or oppressed, can equal and even surpass notions of male superiority" (p.114).

As Houshmand (2025b) argues in his reading of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Black women's agency is often only fully realizable "in a non-male vacuum," (p.24) since even sincere romantic bonds can become sites of domination. Like Tea Cake's aspirational control over Janie, Jude's desire to make "one Jude" from his union with Nel is rooted in the same "internalization of

white patriarchal norms" (Houshmand, 2025b, p.23) that Houshmand identifies as endemic in intra-community sexism. In this framework, Nel's devotion to Jude becomes a "gynocentric" misfire, where her care and labor sustain his manhood, but at the cost of her own subjectivity

Mareen T. Reddy (1988) maintains that Nel marries Jude because she feels that he needs her and as a fact she participates in the obliteration of her self that is she participates in the drama of being part of Jude. He further points to the several kinds of oppression in their marriage: first Jude is a victim of a racist society which denies possibilities of work to black men and the only way he sees out of this crippling emasculation is to oppress Nel by denying her independence and by making her a part of himself. T.Reddy aptly says that " both are victims in the racist war against black people, but Nel doubly so because Jude sees the only escape from oppression as residing in the oppression of another"(p.35). Both have internalized the racist and sexist attitudes of the white capitalist society which says that the one's value as a man is determined by one's work and by that work's economic rewards, including ownership of a woman and children, and that one's value as a woman is determined by one's ability to attract a man and then provide that man with children.

Indeed Nel's definition after her marriage with Jude would be to provide him with children. Jude's identification of Nel as the "two of them together would make one Jude" revives the myth of Adam and Eve in which Eve descends from the rib of Adam and she is depicted as part of Adam. The phrase also evokes demeaning clichés and sexist expressions like 'my better half" which reduces women to dependent creatures. Jude's further definition of Nel as the " hem-the tuck and the fold that hid his raveling edges" as well as evoking the images explained above, evokes a sewing metaphor traditionally identified as a feminine task. The metaphor illustrates the traditional woman bound to home and routine responsibilities.

The marriage between Jude and Nel is not a relationship between a man and wife; rather it resembles the relationship between a mother and a son. Throughout the novel men are depicted as boys rather than the adult males symbolized in the figure of deweys whose growth were permanently stunted by Eva's naming them the same and also symbolized in Plum's wish to return to her mother's womb.

Wife or a Mother?

Rather than viewing marriage as a mutual bonding and support, Jude seeks in Nel a soothing mother who is always there to sooth him, mother him and grow old with him. It is ironically reversed in the story. It would be solely Nel's duty to provide Jude with Love and shelter. Motherhood is one of the central, and at the same time, problematic issues in the Morrison's fiction. We can hardly refer to motherhood as a nurturing element in the novel. I want to point to one of the myths surrounding black motherhood fabricated by white ideology. Black mens' figural emasculation has been often ascribed by the power of these myths to black women's spoiling their men by excess mothering and excess cherishment. Morrison paradoxically reinforces this myth rather than attempting to eradicate it. Nel ironically does this task by sheltering Jude and playing the role of a good mother.

As is the case in the figure of her mother, Helene too sacrifices her independence for a man who is home only three days out of sixteen and Wiley Wright, Helene's husband, spends the rest of his days cooking on a ship. Unlike Nel's early disavowal of her maternal inheritance Nel follows her mother into a rigid life of responsibilities.

After Nel's marriage, Sula disappears for ten years going to colleges in different cities but her interdependence with Nel impels her to go back to the Bottom. Her return for a short time, before she sleeps with Jude, brings back real life to Nel's dried existence. The passage which describes Nel's joy after her return from her trip is quite telling in that it shows the inseperable and interdependent relation of both. Nel thinks that she is revived; she does not remember when she last had a real laugh. But now that her friend is with her, she almost died laughing. This laughter was quite different from the temporary and silent ones that she had these few past years.

However this period of peaceful bliss in the safe company of each other does not last long when Nel discovers Sula and Jude sleeping together which she thinks they did it like dogs. Following this dramatic event Jude leaves Nel; Many times Nel mentions that Jude "left his tie" and that "I was worried about you not knowing that your fly was open and scared too because your eyes looked like the soldiers' that time on the train when my mother turned to custard (p.106). Nel does not think that Sula is naked when she sees them "on all fours" but thinks it is Jude who is naked because, although she is shocked by her best friends' act of betrayal and later on puts all the blame on Sula, she at that traumatic moment thinks that Jude betrayed her. The ironic reference to Jude's tie refers to Nel's entanglement and captivity in the drama of self-abnegation because Nel cannot see that the marriage from the start was an ailing one. The tie does not belong to Jude but in fact it belongs to Nel. Nel ever since is going to be traumatized because of her ailing dependence on an other. It is interesting that Nel thinks that Jude's eyes remind her of the soldiers when she watched her mother change into "custard", for on the one hand Nel despite her early disavowal of Helene cannot

escape her origins and on the other hand, Nel, like Helene, is objectified and ashamed by relying on social mores which regards possession as an inseparable part of a relationship between a man and a woman.

If we go back to Nel's first me-ness, after her trip with her mother to visit Cecile Sabat, Nel desired to take trips alone where she can explore her desires and more than anything else explore her self. We are told in the novel that the trip was the last time she left the city.

Ironically it is Sula who fulfils Nel's desire to take trips alone. What is lucid in the passage is that Nel's determination to build her self will be shattered as a result of her mother's influence on her and in a larger context, as a result of cherishing the community's values. Gael Bryant (1990) suggests that Nel is "domain" and Sula "dominion"(738). The word domain suggests boundness to home and confinement but the word dominion refers to Sula's power which is represented through her challenge to her prescriptive definitions of herself as rooted to home; she assumes the role of a masculine who is free to do whatever she wants to and to *go* wherever she wishes to (Bryant, 1990, pp.738-740). She is unlike Nel who will never travel in her life except this time which was forced rather than desired. In a sense Sula is the desired Nel that Nel wanted to be.

The text in many ways strengthens this idea. Many times Eva identifies Nel with sula at the end of the novel when Nel tells her that it was Sula who accidentally drowned Chicken Little.

When Nel returns after paying a visit to the dead Sula, Shadrack sees her and identifies her with Sula, the girl whose belt hang down shadrack's cottage. The narrator describing the physical connection of Sula and Nel says: "their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's"(p.83) Morrison has stated that "if they were one woman they would be complete.(qtd in Bakerman, 1978, p.60). Nel forgets that Jude's escape rather than being Sula's fault is a reflection of his own insecurities. She also forgets that with Sula her relationship was one of interdependent and with Jude one of dependent.

After Jude abandons Nel, she tries hard to mourn for herself but she cannot. The passage which describes Nel's effort to cry is significant. She waits in the bathroom for tears to flow out of her eyes. She desires to cry, not for others, not for a dead child, a dead father, but for herself. The passage tells us that everything changed during the time she was in the bathroom, leaves shook on the trees, the mud shifted its place, but Nel fails to cry. Safi Ullah (2016) suggests that magical realist fiction often uses the fantastic to dismantle hegemonic truths, confront oppressive power, and give voice to the subaltern through symbolic indirection and emotional dissonance. In *Sula*, Morrison employs similar narrative strategies—not explicitly magical, but charged with symbolic intensity—to explore the interiority of black women like Nel, who remain trapped in a "fragmented" and "anti-categorized" identity space.

Nel's failure to cry, to mourn for herself signifies her failure to retrieve her lost self. She remains a passive victim since even she cannot mourn for her grave pain. It is highly interesting that Morrison before describing Nel's pain prefaces a long passage about the women of the bottom mourning seemingly for Chicken Little but in fact they were mourning for themselves. As Taghizadeh and Ghaderi argue, in post-apocalyptic literature like *The Road*, subjectivity is often marked by "madness, inconsistency, and incoherence," wherein the subject fails to sustain reason or theological meaning (Taghizadeh & Ghaderi, 2016, p. 175). Nel's inability to mourn, her passivity in the face of her own pain, and her fixation on a socially prescribed identity mirror what Ghaderi describes as the "shattered self" caught in a world where neither reason nor faith can restore coherence.

Burrows (2004) makes a distinction between mourning and melancholia and states that Nel's state is melancholia. Implicit in the passage is that the women can mourn because in the physical act of their grave pains they can move from the state of melancholia into mourning: "mourning is a forward and dynamic process, while melancholia is a passive and self-destructive process. Melancholia and depression are passive acts of aggression against the self. Mourning is a release of this repressed Malignancy" (Burrows, 2004, p.151). Helen's trying to keep her daughters from vulnerabilities and from the outside world and making her a passive victim of pain and trauma makes her unable to mourn for herself.

Nel's only safe harbor in which she flees is the bathroom where she feels that a ball of fur hangs above her head. Nel does not dare to look which signifies her inability to confront her weak points. She feels that there is something on her right. She does not know exactly what she is but she knows well what it looks like. She saw in a second that it was a grey ball. What is interesting is that she does her best not to look. She does not "See" because she does not "look". Although she spends a whole summer with the ball, she is too frightened to look at it.

This gray ball, I believe, signifies Nel's unraveled entanglement with the problem of self. Throughout the story Nel has refused to listen to Sula's message that a blind sacrifice of self to the confining social mores, such as the one which defines a woman's meaning in being owned by a man. Nel refuses to unravel the knots of sexism and racism

prevalent in her life. Instead she takes the aura of a good woman who looks after old people and goes to see a dying old friend with the gesture that she has forgiven her. Karen F. Stein (1984) has suggested that Jude's name in fact evokes the biblical Judas, he is betrayor of Nel's hopes.(F. Stein, 1984, p.147). Whatever the implications of his name are, Jude like almost all the men in the story flees from his responsibilities and leaves his woman with a bunch of children to raise.

In fact although sexism in *Sula*, is not enlarged on by critics, sexism in *Sula* is a key factor in black women's misery and it is doubly so because black women in a larger context have been oppressed by the racist ideology which denies them their womanhood. Sexist discrimination in Sula can be seen in Ajax's advice to Jude which is only one of abundant scenes in which women are pictured as Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez (2024) illustrate black women's suppressed voice and unleashing of voice as a result of double oppression.

Lalbakhsh and Ghaderi argue in their Derridean reading of *The Hobbit*, literature functions as a "liberal institution" that destabilizes self-proclaimed centers and finalized identities through undecidability and the "play of structure" (Lalbakhsh & Ghaderi, 2017, p. 153). Similarly, *Sula* subverts moral absolutism and exposes how characters like Nel are entrapped within inherited "phantoms of ideality" (p. 158)—phantoms that reduce identity to stable, singular categories like "good woman" or "dutiful wife." Nel's gray ball thus reflects the "undecidable subjectivity" that Morrison, like Derrida, urges us to confront: the self as fractured, shifting, and caught in tension between inherited structure and unclaimed freedom.

Nel's gray ball, hovering ominously yet eluding direct engagement, allegorizes what Hooti and Mahmoudi describe as modern identity's "invidious morass"—a state of confusion in which the individual is "encaged by... multi-faced essence" and unable to claim coherent subjecthood (Hooti & Mahmoudi, 2013, p. 1210). Nel's failure to look at the ball and her paralysis in mourning reflect this discordant modern condition, where identity becomes a "blind and elusive term" and melancholia takes the place of active self-reclamation.

Like the passive fairy-tale heroine Nel waits for someone to come and save her from her 'profound loneliness'. Nel is in fact " tangled in her own hair" unable to see her self fully as she must. Because as the text informs us Nel knows that because she is neither male nor white and therefore she has absolutely no freedom, she does her best to fully forbid this freedom. She does not experience life and her own being to the fullest. Sula's dream pictures her as an active participant in her life "galloping through her own mind the freedom which is inherited from her maternal line. That is why Morrison calls Sula's life an "experimental one" (Stepto, 1977, p.26). Nel's image as "tangled in her own hair" is parallel to the her gray ball hovering above her head. She is a metonymy for self which Nel fails to nourish and explore.

Sula is an artist without a medium, is free but has no direction, she never directs her freedom towards attachment to a person or a thing. In other words Sula needs a touchstone through which she can nourish her experimental life to the fullest. Sula's trips in order to explore herself will prove futile because what she lacks is the presence of an other who provides her with meaningful self exploration. As the narrator makes the point vivid to readers and points to the interdependence of Sula and Nel'relationship:

She had no center, no speck around which to grow…She had clung to Nel as the closest thing toboth an other and a self…Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her…Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that make it possible to stetch it to its limits.(Morrison, 1982, pp.119-120)

Although Nel is right in that Sula has somewhat a self-interested trait, she misunderstands Sula in many ways. First of all Sula says that she did not want to hurt Nel at all. Secondly as I have already said Nel does not understand that Jude's departure was a result of his own insecurities as a black man in a racial world and because of his troubled and threatened masculinity. The More important reason is that Nel cannot see that as Sula unconsciously helped the bottom people in uniting them and making them feel sympathy for each other: "Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another"(p.117).

In a way Sula led her to the revelatory realization, though belatedly, of the fact that what she yearned for all these years was reunion with Sula rather than Jude. When Nel pays a visit to Eva, the old woman opens her eyes with as Sula delivers the hammer home, Nel's loneliness is absurd because she has given up her dark impulses. When Eva tells Nel that she killed Chicken Little and Nel responds that it was Sula who accidentally drowned the little boy, Eva says that you and sula are one person; there is no difference between you. Eva's wisdom prompts Nel to think about the past and she realizes that during the incident she was calm.

The story of Sula and Nel's friendship is Morrison's way of picturing the troubled status of black females as traumatized and shattered. Both Sula and Nel endeavor to find a way for surviving in a world which,

because of their gender and color, deprives them of their freedom and self-satisfaction. Morrison wants to show black females and by extension all women in the world that their means of survival is through cleavage to one another and through a firm union which prepares them for battling against the patriarchal ideology of the western tradition. Morrison's structuring of Sula and Nel's friendship is, as she says " my way of saying to the reader, *don't let it happen*!" (Bakerman, 1978, p.60).Nel at the end of the story, paying a visit to Sula Peace's grave, realizes her profound need and close connection to her dead friend.

All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude" and the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something." O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl,girl,girlgirlgirl." (Morrison, 1982, p.174).

Nel manages finally to mourn for herself and she begins to realize the lost part of her life that is a devotion to self. But she is only starting to do so as "circles and circles of sorrow" signify and as Morrison comments: "Nel does not make that 'leap'-she does not know about herself. Even at the end she does not know. She's just beginning."(qtd in Stepto, 1977 p.476).

II. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's Sula resists the moral simplifications that often frame black female characters as either virtuous or transgressive. Instead, through the complex, often painful bond between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, Morrison explores how ideological structures—rooted in racism, patriarchy, and internalized respectability—fracture black female subjectivity. Nel's gradual recognition of her emotional paralysis and her belated grief over the loss of Sula rather than Jude mark the beginning of a painful but necessary self-reckoning. Her inability to mourn for herself, her entanglement in the "gray ball," and her disavowal of her mother's body are not individual failings but symptoms of an identity forged through shame, denial, and cultural silencing. Morrison's narrative offers no easy resolution, but it does gesture toward the possibility of becoming—an incomplete and often solitary process of self-discovery that defies inherited roles and binary oppositions. By presenting Sula and Nel as two halves of a fragmented whole, Morrison challenges readers to reconsider the terms of morality, friendship, and womanhood in black communities. Sula ultimately argues that black women's survival—emotional, psychological, and existential—depends not on conformity to social scripts, but on the reclamation of voice, desire, and relational autonomy. As Morrison herself warned, Sula is not simply a story about betrayal, but a cautionary tale.

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