

## THE INTENSIFICATION OF ALTERITY AND IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at showing through Toni Morrison's *Sula* how black people in the United States have succeeded in creating their own identity. Once in America, their original identity has been called into question through alterity. With the encounter of various cultures and civilizations, they have been so alienated that they have adopted the habits and customs of their new environment giving them arbitrary and fake identities. Going against the distorted images and labels attributed to them, they define their own norms and values from which they assert themselves and construct their specific identities.

**Key words:** Identity, alterity, encounter, culture, self-assertion, images

**Résumé:** Cet article vise à montrer à travers *Sula* de Toni Morrison comment les Noirs aux États-Unis ont réussi à créer leur propre identité. Une fois en Amérique, leur identité d'origine a été remise en question par l'altérité. Avec la rencontre de diverses cultures et civilisations, ils ont été tellement aliénés qu'ils ont adopté les us et les coutumes de leur nouvel environnement leur conférant des identités arbitraires et fausses. S'insurgeant contre les images et les étiquettes dénaturées qui leur sont attribuées, ils définissent leurs propres normes et valeurs à partir desquelles ils s'affirment et construisent leurs propres identités.

**MOTS CLÉS:** Identité, altérité, rencontre, culture, affirmation de soi, images

### Introduction

The issue of identity has always been a main concern all over the world in general, and particularly in the United States of America. Since the arrival of Black people in the New Land, their identity has always been called into question. The struggle they undertook to restore their lost identity has often given rise to conflicts that ended in massive slaughter. Thus, identity crisis is frequent between people who hardly accept their differences, showing that the notion of identity is in various ways interpreted or defined. According to Tarde, "identity is but a minimal difference, and hence a type of difference, and a very rare type of movement at that, in the same way as rest is a type of movement and circle a peculiar type of ellipse" (Tarde, 1993).

In such a cosmopolitan society as the United States, people from different origins and cultures need to know what they have in common as well as what makes their differences. The distinction between people living side by side in the same society has sometimes been in the depths of misunderstanding and conflicts. The relations between Blacks and Whites as

regards identity is dotted with social upheaval and dispute. Identity is then seen as being the cause of most of the present world troubles. It is this perspective that Buruma states: “Identity is a bloody business. Relation, nationality or race may not be the primary causes of war and mass murder... But identity is what gets the blood boiling, what makes people do unspeakable things to their neighbors” (Buruma, 2002, 49).

White people in the United States inflict suffering, humiliation and dehumanization on Blacks because they don't have and share the same notion about identity. African-American writers like Toni Morrison go against this clumsy attitude of Whites towards Blacks to restore their identity and give them more dignity. In *Sula* (1973) Morrison lays a particular stress on identity.

This paper purports to highlight in *Sula* the construction of the characters' respective images through the interplay between alterity and identity. The study is based on the assumption that identity has no universal characteristics, to the extent that it is constructed and determined depending on the type of society and the cultural values that interact. This why dealing with alterity and identity in Morrison's *Sula*, we will use postmodernism as literary theory. According to Lyotard:

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by pre-established rules and cannot be judged . . . by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. (F. Lyotard, 1992, 15)

The intensification of alterity and identity in Toni Morrison's *Sula* will lead to an analysis of the way an identity can be forged from cultural mixing. Secondly, we will throw light on the way an individual identity is often constructed to the detriment of the community or the society a person lives in.

### **1. Identity Forged in Alterity**

As an expression of alterity Toni Morrison's *Sula* chronicles the life of many characters committed to forging their own identity different from the one they have acquired from their respective families or the community. Very often living outside their family circle and meeting different persons, Morrison's characters compare the culture they have acquired with that of the others. This cultural comparison permits them to form their identity.

## 1.1. Cultural Encountering

Toni Morrison's *Sula* insists on the fact that the identity is forged through the encounter of culture. When the two young girls Sula and Nel meet, their friendship results in mutual cultural enrichment in such a way that the two types of education characterizing these protagonists enable to have a diversified view of the Black community in the novel. Their friendship is built on and strengthened by their differences. Sula's family is the source of her spirit of independence. Contrastively, Nel Wright is brought up on the basis of the principles of obedience and politeness in a well-ordered and repressive household. She is well prepared to face the harsh realities of life. Each one of the two girls has a different perception of life and a different experience that is beneficial to the other. Whereas Nel shows Sula life governed by restrictions, Sula teaches Nel the qualities of courage. The experiences they learn from each other forge an identity they do not have in their respective families. They understand each other and each one thinks to have found with the other assistance and protection. This is why the narrator puts that "they found relief in each other's personality" (*Sula*, 53).

Viewed as an encounter of culture their friendship fortifies their personalities that enable them to overcome successfully the difficult situations they face in a racist environment. First, to foil white boys who usually frighten them, Sula hurts her forefinger with a knife and shows them her bleeding finger saying: "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (*Sula*, 56). Through her gesture of mutilation, Sula asserts her identity, namely courage. Beyond her courage, she sends a message to the White boys indicating that she also belongs to the same country and accordingly she is free. Her gesture expresses her courage. Secondly, Nel shows moral strength to protect and save their friendship when Sula has sex with her husband. She forgives Sula who has had a love affair with her husband. Both girls, through their encounter have acquired an identity enabling them to analyze events according to their own visions. This is why the narrator says: "in a safe harbor of each other's company, they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (*Sula*, 56).

Apart from Sula and Nel's friendship that resulted in a formation of a strong identity, the meeting between Sula and Shadrack is also rich both in teaching and experience as it permits to discover the true identity of Shadrack. Sula and Shadrack are presented as two different ways of being. The difference between the two individuals stands in their socialization. Sula is of a wealthy family with high standards of living; she is educated, while

Shadrack is described as a desperate person living in a state of nature. He is presented as follows: “he didn’t even know who or what he was... with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address look” (P.17).

The conversation Sula between Sula and Shadrack shows that he is sociable. His attitude to the black woman and his answers her questions enable her to have a clear idea of his personality. His behavior towards Sula is indicated in the following way: “He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come. He nodded his head as though answering a question, and said, in a pleasant conversational tone, a tone of cooled butter: “always”” (*Sula*, 63). The fact of talking with Shadrack has enabled Sula to get rid of prejudice about him. He is not in fact the kind of person he is thought to be. From their conversation, Sula comes to the conclusion that it is always important to exchange sentiments with a person to discover his real identity. Shadrack’s smile and pleasant tone are the evidence he is friendly and enjoyable. Contrary to what he is said to be, he is not from a state of nature, but he is a man with socialist tendencies. Whenever he encounters Sula, he feels human heat and notices that he is not left out of the society. His smile and pleasant tone are indisputable signs that he appreciates life in society and discovers now who and what he is. He realizes that he is not a useless and worthless person, but a man with qualities worthy of respect and consideration.

The instances of conversations in Toni Morrison’s novel read as a style by which an individual can have a clear idea about his own identity and that of the others. It is in this context that Davies and Harré state: “It has always been accepted that identities are performed in conversation. What we achieve in conversations is positioning vis-à-vis other people” (1990, 44). Sula and Shadrack achieve their identities through the conversation they have, since each one of them has a clear idea about the personality of the other. In addition to the encounter of culture and education which constitute an opportunity for the characters to forge their respective identity, othering is also a means that causes an individual to construct his own identity.

## **1.2- Othering**

*Sula* tackles the theme of othering that is presented as the process of casting a group or an individual into the role of the “other” in order to construct one’s own identity. The process of othering begins with the denigration which consists in denying a person of aspects like same, reason or dignity. The black community of “Medallion” in the novel describes Shadrack as a crazy man. He frequently fishes on Fridays, and the other days of the week, he walks naked in

the streets of “Medallion”. Shadrack’s humanity is denied because the other members of his community see him differently. They measure their identity to Shadrack’s to better assess their differences. It is in this context that Richard Rorty states: “everything turns on who counts as a fellow human being, as a rational agent in the only relevant sense. The sense in which rational agency is synonymous with membership of our moral community” (Rorty, 1999:124).

Shadrack’s insanity is a means for them to forge their identity considered as more rational than his. The process of othering usually occurs between groups or individuals who live side by side and who know each other very well. When Sula peace enters Shadrack’s room, she was surprised by the tidiness that prevails. Her astonishment is indicated as follows: “the neatness, the order startled her, but more surprising was the restfulness. Everything was so tiny, so common, so unthreatening” (*Sula*, 62). She concluded that perhaps this was not the house of Shadrack who walks about with his penis out. Sula is able to draw such a conclusion because she lives in close proximity with Shadrack. In this situation, othering is prompted by what Freud refers to as “narcissism of minor differences”, meaning the group or person that “others” is the one in closest physical and symbolic proximity, as it is seen to present a major threat to one’s identity and pride ( S. Freud, 1921).

Through Shadrack who is accused of craziness, othering forges an identity by reducing a person to the rank of an animal. The other is seldom attributed qualities and is usually referred to with various pessimistic views that connote barbarity and savagery. It is for this reason that Said states that “Western identity and culture are fundamentally forged by an othering logic, one that dehumanizes or devalues other people, such as primitives and uncivilized” (E. Said, 1994). Another essential aspect of othering consists in denying the other his own voice. The other is not given the opportunity to speak for himself. Instead, he is ascribed qualities, opinions and views that refer to one’s own identity and culture.

In *Sula*, Eva peace puts up three children to whom she gives a common name: Dewey. They are presented as deeply black boys with beautiful heads and golden eyes of chronic Jaundice. In their neighborhood, everybody speaks on behalf of these children in such a way that their voices are silenced. For this reason, they are judged and seen differently. During Nel Wright’s wedding ceremony, people have a low opinion of these children considered as immature. This negative opinion is found in the narrator’s assertion: “At the wedding, everybody realized for the first time that except for their magnificent teeth, the Deweys would

never grow. The realization was based on the fact that they remained boys in mind” (*Sula*, 81).

The description of the “Deweys” as immature, indicates that black people face major problems that can threaten their future. This threat that hangs over the black community is one of the reasons why it marginalizes some of its members. Infantilized through their marginal position in a community that sees them differently, most of Morrison’s characters remain children with indicative names like Tar Baby, Boy Boy who are never responsible for their actions. Thus, othering is a means by which the black community of “Medallion” silences and infantilizes others by ascribing them stereotyped images from which the other members of the community establish their own identity. Noticing the usefulness and the importance of othering in the formation of one’s own identity, Baudrillard indicates that “alterity is a precious and transcendent element and its loss would seriously impoverish a world culture of increasing sameness” (J. Baudrillard, 2008).

In the same way as Othering constitutes a factor by which an identity is forged, collective thought, judgement and opinion are also essential for a gregarious identity.

### **1.3. Gregarious Identity**

Through *Sula*, Toni Morrison insists on the fact that a gregarious identity can be forged from a collective thought and an opinion expressed by a community or a social group. In the novel, the black community of “Medallion” is opposed to Sula who is viewed as totally distinct from them. Their perception results in Sula’s exclusion from their group. They unanimously think that Sula is negative, simply because she is different from them and sees things differently. This is why Zahavi asserts that “the process of calling attention to distinctions has sometimes been called negativity” (Zahavi, 1999: 196).

Being very image-conscious, the black community of “Medallion” qualifies Sula as a negative woman for several reasons. First, because she has been away from “Medallion” for ten years, she returns home accompanied by a plague of robins. The advent of these birds announcing the return of Sula is perceived as an early warning sign of misfortune that will descend upon the community. When Eva Peace, Sula’s grand-mother states notices the massive presence of these birds, she speculates: “I might have knowed them birds meant something” (*Sula*, 84). For Eva Peace, these birds mean evil that must be avoided. As they appear as the day of Sula’s arrival, she is also seen as an evil. For this reason, she is given negative labels like roach, bitch and devil. These labels attributed to Sula are undeniable signs

that the community she lives in is gorging an identity different from hers. Because she is not like them, she is depicted as a very bad woman. Her behavior within her community justifies the negative image people have about her. She is accused of having killed a black boy, chicken Litte and Mr Fineley, an old black man. She is also held responsible for hurting Tea Pot, another black boy. People are once more puzzled when she refuses to assist her mother, Annah who dies in fire, and mainly when she sends her grandmother, Eva Peace in asylum. Her community dislikes her actions, hence her depiction as a pariah. They refuse to associate her with them, but do nothing to harm her. The fact of keeping Sula at a distance, permits them to redefine certain norms within their community to make it more harmonious and peaceful as related by the narrator:

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had left to protect and love one another. 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. (*Sula*, 104)

This collective tendency to protect themselves against the threat embodied by Sula is justified by their being convinced that their union can expel the devil from their community. This conviction entails a moral strength that characterizes their personalities and gives them a collective and gregarious identity. The black community of "Medallion" as a group has its own norms and rules to regulate the social conduct of its members. Those who break these norms and rules are categorized as the "others" whose identity is different from that of the group. This differentiation is a means for the group to highlight its habits and customs which are important features for its identity. In the case of Sula Peace, her anti-social behavior enables the group to reaffirm the norms in power for its stability. Through Sula, Toni Morrison shows that the identity of a group is also forged in adversity and differentiation. Yet, within a group or a community, an individual cannot always conform to the established identity. Instead, he can perceive things differently and creates his own rules to construct his own society.

## **2. The Construction of One's Identity**

Morrison's novel *Sula* tackles the theme of identity as a major issue to the extent that the characters can free themselves from the authority and identity of their community and assert their own identity. They flout the conventions and collective thought prevailing in the

society they live in, and develop their own ideas according to their own visions. This self-affirmation that characterizes their personalities entails the formation of their identity.

## 2.1 The Formation of Self-Identity

In Morrison's *Sula*, several black characters long for their own identity different from the one they are ascribed to by the society. The new identity they look for equates with their freedom. In that novel, Shadrack is a black boy who is accused of craziness. As he intends to know who he is really, he throws a look in a mirror: "He looked for a mirror to see his reflection. He saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him" (18). When he notices that he has a Black face, Shadrack discovers his ego. His use of the mirror to have conscience of himself finds echo in Jacques Lacan's formulation according to which "the ego is formed during the early stage of infancy as the child contemplates its own face in a mirror" (J. Lacan, 1988). For the French psychoanalyst, the child first discovers himself as another and misrecognizes himself as a subject before sustaining this recognition in the gaze of the other.

When Shadrack sees his face in the mirror, he gets surprised. In other words, he first misrecognizes himself before figuring out his personality. This discovery leads to a new life described by the narrator in the following terms: "Shadrack rose and returned to the cot, where he fell into the first sleep of his new life. A sleep deeper than the hospital drugs" (*Sula*, 18). Shadrack enjoys a deep sleep to celebrate his new identity. His deep sleep enables him to make a clear sweep of the past, get rid of prejudice against him, and definitely construct a new identity.

Like Shadrack, other characters like Nel and Sula strongly reject the identity that is attributed to them by people of their neighborhood, in order to assert their self-identity. Nel is a young girl who is brought up in a prosperous family. Her mother Helene Wright teaches her moral and social values useful for her integration in the society they live in. Nel's education enables her to have, not only a good social conduct, but also to give advice to her friend Sula when she breaks social norms. Such pieces of advice cause Sula to "become obedient and polite!" (*Sula*, 18). But, when Nel gets old, she not only rejects the education received from her family, but also destroys her identity shaped by her parents. Instead, she asserts her own identity by affirming: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (*Sula*, 31). Nel's affirmation of her new identity (her me-ness), meets Freud's analyses that lead to the discovery of oneself. For Freud, the mind is divided into three regions which are the id, ego and superego. He indicates that the id is the space where various instincts reside and operate



entirely unconsciously feeding different fantasies and desires. The ego according to him, is the seat of consciousness which deploys logic, memory and judgment. While the superego is concerned with maintaining and enforcing moral and social norms and prohibition (Freud, 1961, P 155-170).

Through Nel, Toni Morrison uses the superego and the ego. In the novel, the superego resides in moral and social values, social norms and prohibition which have been transmitted to Nel by her family, while the ego is found in her own judgment of the received conception that ends in their rejection. Her reasoning (I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel) is a scathing disavowal of parental and social prescriptions and assertion of her being, of her self. With her new identity, she frees herself from her family and the society's authority, with a view to making her own decisions.

In quite similar ways, Sula Peace manages to construct her own identity when she opposes her own community. She has always had turbulent relations with her neighborhood that accuses her of devil, nastiness and pariah. Facing with all these allegations, she decides to create an image specific to herself, and different from what she is thought to be. She shows her strong determination when she states: "I want to make myself." (*Sula*, 85). She forms her own identity from which she must now be recognized by her community. The character's declaration of self-identity can be formulated by Mead's argument that "the self must be seen as an image of "I" produced and reproduced in interactions." For him, such a self would be stable because there persists a memory of past interactions" (G. Mead, 1913). Sula's self is stable and permanent since she still lives in her community and challenges its prescribed norms. She feels free in asserting her new identity because she depends on nobody. The narrator reveals that, "Sula acknowledged none of their gossip and seemed to need the services of nobody" (*Sula*, 100).

The characters in *Sula* show that the formation of their respective identity is expressive of their freedom. The construction of their identity continues with newness.

## 2.2-Newness

Toni Morrison's *Sula* lays a particular stress on newness as a way of constructing identity. In the novel, Sula's newness is expressed through the reference to the black community. She is opposed to her community and from this opposition, she clearly displays her new identity. In this respect, she means to assert that the one that characterizes her community is old-fashioned and outmoded. Newness is essential since it establishes a difference between the self and the others. This is why Jandranka argues that "newness has signification because it

reveals otherness in so far as it reveals the experience of otherness” (S. Jandraka, 2015). In claiming her newness, Sula refuses the old image of Blacks as dominated and exploited people and establishes an identity free of the past of racial oppression. While Sula perceives the present moment as a change for a prosperous future, the black community of Medallion clings to a static vision of the past. By turning the page of the black community, that is to say rejecting its norms and practices, Sula gives herself a new vision that draws people’s attention in the community. She makes an exhibition of herself when she gets dressed like American movie stars in fashion. The narrator describes her new style as follows:

She was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye. In her right hand was a black purse with a beaded clasp and in her left a red leather case so charming no one had seen anything like it before (84).

In Medallion, Sula appears as an exceptional person towards whom all eyes turn. She is at the center of all conversations. The members of her community disapprove her new lifestyle because it goes against their established norms. She is denigrated in these terms: “she was guilty of the unforgivable thing, the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion” ( 99). Sula’s behavior goes beyond their understanding because it contrasts with their vision. This contrast makes Sula’s newness more visible since they recognize her, but they do it differently. This difference reinforces Sula’s position as she discovers that her new way of life tallies with her desires and aspirations. She has no account to give to anybody preferring to devote herself to her dream that is to be an artist. The form art she wants to perform is song. As a singer, she needs always to be on fashion in order to draw the attention of people. To this end, she gets rid of the habits and customs which are in force within the black community that she considers as retrograde and non-evolving. She is only interested in songs when she says: “they aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are. I have sung them all” (121).

This propensity to sing and always adopt the posture of a star has taken her away from the members of her community who hate her. Their hatred for her reached its highest level that they avoid her. The narrator gives an insight of this hatred when he reveals:

they said Sula slept with white men. In any case, all minds were closed to her when that word was passed around. It made the old men draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame (99).

Sula does not take care of their attitude towards her and decides to be what or who she wants to be. The character of Sula represents the construction of identity in adversity. The pressure exerted on her causes her to construct an image and a label by which she asserts herself as a star. Even if her neighborhood does not appreciate her lifestyle, they recognize that she has an identity that defines her personality.

A part from newness, narcissism is another means to construct an identity.

### 2.3-Narcissim

In *Sula*, narcissism appears as a major theme in so far as it constitutes a means to construct one's identity. In that novel, Toni Morrison shows that narcissism is in connection with leadership. In fact, Shadrack, a black character who participated in World War II in France is presented as a narcissistic leader as soon as he got back to Medallion. According to Maccoby, "narcissistic leaders tend to be creative people who like to hog the limelight and be at the center of attention"(Maccoby, 2000.) Shadrack corresponds with the description made by Maccoby when he instituted the National Suicide Day in Medallion. This day is celebrated every January 3<sup>rd</sup> to defy the notion of fear. In Medallion, Shadrack monopolizes the attention of all the members of his community. Initially, he celebrated alone this day by parading in the streets of Medallion because he was considered as a crazy man. The narrator reveals the attitude of the black community towards Shadrack saying: "at first, the people in the town were frightened; they knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn't have any sense, or more important that he had no power (18).

Like narcissistic people, Shadrack overflows with qualities, creativity and imagination. He is a good communicator and he uses his imagination to develop visions that convince people to join him. He walks through medallion's streets with a cowbell calling people together. Shadrack's qualities make him ideal for leading people to challenge the white administration of medallion to improve the living conditions of black people. Finding his action noble, they decide to follow him. They even appropriate Shadrack's National Suicide Day, as described in the novel: "they had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives" (99).

Through his narcissistic leadership, Shadrack succeeds in constructing an identity that reflects on the black community. They understand the meaning and usefulness of his action characterizing his personality. He is portrayed by his followers as a sensible man whose

undertaking will permit the black community to make progress. They recognize him as their leader, trust him and decide to support his actions. From then on, Shadrack hogs the headlines within his community. During one of his parade several people join him as described in the novel: “the scene was so comic the people walked into the road to make sure they saw it all. In that way the parade started. Everybody...laughing, dancing, calling to one another, formed a piper’s band behind Shadrack” (140). It would be impossible to think of Shadrack leading a community like the one of medallion without strong narcissistic qualities endowing him with an identity.

### **Conclusion**

In *Sula*, the identity emerges from crises among individuals, groups of people and even between nations. The novel highlights the different conditions in which black people in the environment presented in the novel have lost their identity and shows the different ways by which they succeeded in restoring their distorted identity. Through alterity and the encounter of various cultures, black people are able to get rid of stereotyped images ascribed to them. Instead, they define their own values that determine their personalities in order to construct their own identities.

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