International Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume 7, Issue 2, 2025
Homepage : http://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls

# The Black Mammy and Black Matriarch: Morrison's Subversion of Deteriorating Stereotypes in Sula

**Ali Mohammadi**
*Kharazmi University of Karaj, Iran*
Ali.mohammmadii.1986@gmail.com

**DOI:** http://doi.org/ 10.36892/ijlls.v7i1.2013
**APA Citation**: Mohammadi, A. (2025). The Black Mammy and Black Matriarch: Morrison's Subversion of Deteriorating Stereotypes in Sula. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies. 7*(2).71-81. http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i2.2013

***Received:*** *16/01/2025*

***Accepted:*** *25/02/2025*

***Keywords:*** *stereotypes, mammy, black matriarch, paradox, survival strategies.*

***Abstract***

*This paper examines Toni Morrison's Sula as a critique and deconstruction of the pervasive stereotypes imposed on Black women and men, including labels such as jezebel, mammy, and matriarch archetypes. By invoking and inverting these reductive labels, Morrison exposes their paradoxical nature and roots in white patriarchal systems. This paper employs a close textual analysis of Toni Morrison's Sula, drawing on critical race theory, intersectional feminist criticism, and theories of literary paradox to deconstruct pervasive stereotypes imposed on Black women and men. The paper not only interrogates the literary mechanisms through which Morrison deconstructs stereotypes but also traces how these mechanisms position her work within the broader African American and feminist literary traditions. Through characters like Sula, who lives unapologetically on her own terms, and Eva, who defies traditional maternal roles, the novel dismantles the myths surrounding black womanhood. Morrison's use of irony, parody, and paradox discloses the cognitive dissonance underpinning racist stereotypes and highlights the humanity and complexity of Black identities. Central to the novel's themes is the exploration of survival strategies in the face of systemic oppression, as seen in Shadrack's National Suicide Day and Eva's sacrifices. By challenging these stereotypes, Sula reclaims agency for Black women and underscores the destructiveness of antithetical labels, calling for a deeper understanding of identity and autonomy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

If Morrison depicts Pecola Breedlove as a passive victim, she depicts Sula as a shameless opposite of Pecola. In *Sula* Morrison moves beyond the childhood stage shown in *The Bluest Eye*. She states that in *Sula* she wanted to depict what the "Claudias and Friedas, those feisty little girls, grow up to be" (Stepto, 1977, p.481). And in fact one of her aims in her second novel is to draw on black women's sexual oppression. Morrison regards Sula as the "New World black woman," explaining that Sula is "experimental" and "sort of an outlaw" and that "she's not going to take it anymore" (Moyers, 1994, p.269). But if Sula has been endorsed by feminists as a hero, she also echoes the racist stereotypes of black women as a jezebel. These stereotypes depict black women as hypersexed, loose and debased. As Diane Roberts (1994) maintains, "In the circular logic of segregation, blackness equaled sexuality and sexuality was, in all senses, black. In the hierarchy of purity to pollution, blackness was dirt" (p.156).

This paper argues that Toni Morrison's *Sula* deconstructs and subverts stereotypes ascribed to black women and men, to illustrate their resilience, autonomy, and multifaceted identities. Morrison does not erase these stereotypes in her fiction but instead tries to draw on them frequently. By invoking and then inverting stereotypes, Morrison critiques the paradoxical narratives imposed by white patriarchal systems. The novel employs irony, parody, and

paradox to dismantle stereotypes rooted in "cognitive dissonance" and "white scopophilia" (Etedali Rezapoorian, 2024, p.121) and to reveal their absurdity. Morrison's project in Sula thus centers on "rehumanizing" (Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez, 2024, p.100) black America by exposing the destructiveness of reductive stereotypes and the need to reclaim agency and dignity in the face of systemic oppression. By confronting these degrading labels head-on, Sula exposes the systemic racism behind such constructs. At the same time, it reclaims the dignity and humanity of African Americans by situating them as active agents in their own lives and histories. Sula's unapologetic independence—symbolized by her biting and kicking against restrictions—redefines the stereotype of the "mule" into that of an obstinate horse, while Eva's authority as a matriarch disrupts the trope of the submissive "mammy."

This paper also argues that survival emerges as a central theme in *Sula*, where Morrison portrays it as a powerful act of resistance against systemic oppression and dehumanizing stereotypes. Characters like Helene Wright, though spiritually shattered by racist constructs, adopt rigid societal measures as a strategy to navigate a world that denies them respect and equality. Shadrack's National Suicide Day becomes a ritualized defiance of war trauma, a way to impose order on chaos, while Eva's self-mutilation is a deliberate and extraordinary sacrifice to save her children from hunger. Even Jude and BoyBoy, despite embodying fractured notions of Black manhood, reveal the desperate, albeit misguided, attempts of Black men to reclaim their agency. Through these acts, Morrison underscores survival not as mere endurance but as an active confrontation of the societal forces that seek to diminish her characters. This emphasis on survival as resistance powerfully complements Morrison's critique of stereotypes and her rehumanization of black identity. Moreover, the emphasis on survival positions her characters as resilient agents in their own stories.

In order to explain this, first the stereotypes that are ascribed to the black people are drawn upon and Morrison's rendition of them in her narrative is dealt with subsequently.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The stereotypes ascribed to Black individuals, particularly women, have been extensively critiqued in scholarship. Toni Morrison's *Sula* subverts these stereotypes by invoking and inverting them to expose their roots in white patriarchal systems. Diane Roberts (1994) highlights how segregation equated Blackness with hypersexuality, aligning with the jezebel stereotype of Black women. Morrison's artistic portrayal of characters like Sula challenges these reductive archetypes, showing them as complex individuals.

Frantz Fanon (1980) explores the psychological impact of systemic racism, emphasizing how Black individuals are overdetermined by white perception. Morrison's work aligns with Fanon's argument, as seen in her depiction of Shadrack. Shadrack is a character whose mental state critiques the stereotype of the "degenerate Black madman" (Bouson, 2000, p.48). Similarly, bell hooks (1981, 1992) critiques the intersection of race and gender, underscoring how myths like the Black matriarch and jezebel dehumanize Black women.

Etedali Rezapoorian (2024) examines the paradoxical and visceral nature of these stereotypes, which Morrison mirrors in *Sula* through her use of irony and paradox. Bergenholtz (1996) further supports Morrison's project, emphasizing her intent to dismantle binary and reductive labels. By critiquing these stereotypes, Morrison rehumanizes Black identities, a theme also discussed by Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez (2024) and hooks, who view Black women's survival strategies as acts of resistance.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The Degenerate and Dumb Black Madman

One of the stereotypes that is frequently ascribed to black men is that of the "degenerate black madman"(Bouson, 2000, p.48). This stereotype maintains that a black man is not in control of his action and he is gullible. In Sula, Shadrack has the characteristics of the "degenerate black madman". After the world war I, he returns to the Bottom and inaugurates a ritual named the National Suicide Day. He invites people to kill themselves each January third and save themselves from the fear of it. His idea is that "if one day a year was devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free"(Morrison, 1982, p.14). The inhabitants of the bottom, along with the white racist stereotype propagators, believe that he is crazy. Moreover it is Shadrack who "walked about with his pen.. out, who peed in front of ladies and girl-children, the only black who could curse white people and get away with it, who drank in the road from the mouth of the bottle, who shouted and shook in the streets" (Morrison, 1982, p.62). In other words, Shadrack does what the propagators of the stereotypes desire he would do. In every sense Shadrack is the desired degenerate black madman. But Morrison by picturing the mad Shadrack tacitly asks us where his insanity stems from? Was he mad before he left to fight in the World War I? The narrator tells us that "Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917, he had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged, and even the most fastidious people in the town sometimes caught themselves dreaming of what he must have been like a few years back before he went off to war"(Morrison, 1982, p.7). . Before he went to the war, "his head was full of nothing" (Morrison, 1982, p.8) the narrator tells us, which, while ironically evoking the stereotype, implies that he did not know anything about the horror which would permanently traumatize him. During his first encounter with the enemy he sees the head of a nearby soldier "fly off" (Morrison, 1982, p.8). By watching this horrible scene, Shadrack's head figuratively flies off as well. The epithet of the black man as mad is again, ironically, confirmed. However, the scene tacitly affirms that this is a white man's war which instigates the head of the black man to "fly off". Ironically, Morrison proves to be more skillful and more merciless in the 'art' of stereotyping for she places Shadrack, in a mental hospital following the trauma of the flight of his head. Thus, Shadrack is not only a black mad man, but also a psychotic black man. He is chained to a bed in the hospital, because he beat some guards there in a degenerate way.

Commenting on the pain and shame of being "hated, despised, detested . . . by an entire race," Frantz Fanon (1980) describes how the black man is "overdetermined from without" (p.118) as he is "dissected under white eyes" (p.116). He also explains that he engages in "a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence" (p.60). The black man's attitude toward his own race, remarks Fanon, can border on the "pathological" (ibid). Robbed of his worth and individuality, the black man is told that he is "a brute beast," (ibid) that he and his people are "like a walking dung-heap" (ibid). Etedali Rezapoorian (2024) posits that the image of the black man as a savage beast superseded the docility myth, itself another imposition on the black skin prior to their Emancipation, to help "contain blacks, albeit with the same goal of justifying the yoke of white authority over them. The latter myth served to further dehumanize blackness to deprive this population of their economic rights, often making them victims of lynching and race riots" (p.121). Morrison points to the fact that the derangement of black men stems from "systematic traumatization of black men" (as cited in Bouson, 2000, p.50). Moreover, Shadrack is proud of his black skin when he looks at the toilet water in a prison. When he sees that he is black, he also simultaneously thinks that he is "real". That is to say, the only way Shadrack finds in order to make sure that he is real, is to rediscover his black face: "There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real-that he didn't exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more" (Morrison, 1982, p.13).

The first chapter, in which the demolition and the creation of the bottom are juxtaposed together, reflects some stereotypes:

> A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores". When the slave does those duties, he asks the farmer to "keep his end of the bargain". The good white farmer who did not want to grant any piece of land to his slave, gave him a piece of the hilly lands and called it the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, "Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile". "But it's high up in the 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". (Morrison, 1982, p.13).

The slave echoes the stereotype of the black people as unintelligent and dumb. But Morrison inverts the stereotype when some white farmers suspect that maybe the farmer was right about the hilly land as the bottom of heaven. Moreover Blacks ironically counter the stereotype when the narrator tells us that they took "small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks" (Morrison, 1982, p.13).

### 3.2.The Jezebel

Another stereotype, which is ascribed to black women, pictures them as sexually loose and available. This stereotype is rooted in the slavery system. According to bell hooks (1981), whites "Justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men" ( p.52). Many black women in Sula, echo, The stereotype of the black woman as a jezebel. Helene's mother, Rochele, for instance, is a "Creole whore" whom Helene shuns in order to maintain her image of a good black woman. bel hooks remarks that the stereotypes picture black women as immersed in sexual pleasure. These stereotypes would like to see black women as exotic by suggesting that: "black people have secret access to intense pleasure, particularly pleasures of the body" (hooks, 1992, p.34), they also picture blackness as a "'primitive' sign" (ibid) and the black body as a sign of sexual pleasure (ibid). She also states black women were seen as "sexual temptresses" who made white men commit terrible sins (hooks, 1992, p.33). Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard (1994) also add that black women were "constructed as objects of male fantasy" (p.110). Hannah's sexuality in the novel repeats the stereotypes with her generosity in sleeping with men, "funky elegance of manner" (Morrison, 1982, p.44) and her sensual desires for men.

In fact, it can be argued that part of Morrison's purpose is to use the uninhibited Hannah and, more importantly, Sula to reflect the late 1960s and early 1970s ideology of sexual liberation and freedom from oppressive social and inner restraints, but these feminist stories of women's sexual emancipation were largely expressed by white, middle-class women and although Morrison reflects part of their ideas, she merges their gender-restricted ideas with black women's race-inflicted voices. Morrison, speaking of the possibilities open to black women for livelihood says that: "To go back, a black woman at that time who did not want to do the conventional thing, had only one other thing to do. If she had the talent, she went into the theater… That was the only outlet if you chose not to get married and have children. That was it. Or you could walk the streets" (as cited in Fisher, 1980, p.169). Morrison, by drawing on the stereotype suggests that the prostitution of some black women is a result of lack of access to jobs which would enable them to explore their talents and moreover would enable them to get rid of poverty. Sula, herself is described as a potential artist who does not have the means to realize her talent:

> In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. 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" (Fisher, 1980, p.121).

Sula's art is frustrated because as a black woman she does not have access, like Rochelle, to opportunities which would enable her to practice her art. Away from these opportunities, she is immersed in sexual intercourses which would bring her boredom. Kimberle Crenshaw, in her analysis of the anti-discrimination doctrine, highlights a rule which supposedly aimed to deal with the colored people's complaints on discrimination against hiring policies. She observes that the judges and magistrates do not take into account the "intersectionality" of race and gender. That is to say, the courts fail to observe that black women are oppressed both as blacks and as women. Crenshaw provides some court cases in which black women complained that the employers of some companies did not hire them because they were black women, not only black, not only women, but black women. But the courts refused to accept black women's petitions because they concluded that both women and blacks were hired by the heads of the companies. Crenshaw observes:

> Thus, the court apparently concluded that Congress either did not contemplate that Black women could be discriminated against as "Black women" or did not intend to protect them when such discrimination occurred. The court's refusal in DeGraffenreid to acknowledge that Black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences. Under this view, Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups" (Crenshaw, 1989, 142-143).

Under such circumstances, there will remain no opportunity for black women to get a decent job. Crenshaw asserts that black women are refused to be recognized as a special group to be protected.

Helene Wright in Sula, does her best to avoid her mother's bad reputation by fleeing north to Ohio, with her husband, George Wiley, in order to assert herself as a good mother. The fact that Helene rejoices in the maternal role recalls hooks' analysis of how many black women tried "to shift the focus of attention away from sexuality by emphasizing their commitment to motherhood" (hooks, 1981, p.70). hooks explains that by resorting to the "cult of true womanhood" that reached its peak in early 20th century America", such women "endeavored to prove their value and worth by demonstrating that they were women whose lives were firmly rooted in the family" (ibid). But Helene fails to cut off herself from her maternal reputation for ever. In a trip to the south to attend to the funeral of her grandmother, Cecile Sabat, Helene accidentally enters the whites-only section of a Jim Crow train. Helene's shame from being a black is signified in the text when she thinks that, in order to pass on to the colored-only section, she has to pass the shaming glances of the white passengers in the whites-only section. Helene decides to "spare herself some embarrassment and walk on through to the colored car" (Morrison, 1982, p.20).

Helene regards walking through the whites section as an "embarrassment". Hellene's behavior echoes a deep internalization, that is, the "profound psychological and social introjection of negative images and meanings" which is the "common and profoundly problematic outcome of stereotyping discourses" (Stepan and Gilman, 1992, p.89). The white conductor, angry at Nel's transgression of her limits, casts an angry look on Helene and calls her "gal". The word terribly shames Helene and in order to appease the angry conductor, she is forced to play a role which for years, she endeavored to play the role of coquette. Helene smiles "dazzlingly and

coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor" (Morrison, 1982, p.21). Her seductive glance casts her in the role of a slut, that of her mother, Rochelle. Even her elegant dress prepared specifically for the trip, cannot save her from the harsh glance of the white conductor. Morrison's rendering of the stereotypes in Sula, functions as a two-edged sword. Helene is a victim, and she is certainly a victim, of the detracting conduct of the conductor. In the aforementioned scene, which is permanently and vividly inscribed on Nel's mind, she is also depicted as a middle-class black woman who tries to mimic white values. She is the only woman who welcomes the shattered black veteran returning from the world war one. Her oppressive behavior towards Nel kills Nel's imagination and makes her an apt victim, and a passive receptacle of Jude's sexism.

Obviously Morrison does not want us to endorse all her female characters. Helene Wright is, however, an example of a black woman shattered spiritually by the deteriorating effects of the stereotypes. Helene's measures are anyway, her strategy for survival in a world which denies her respect and equality. For one of the main themes in Sula is survival. Shadrack's idiosyncratic ritual is his effort to survive the trauma of the war. Eva's self-mutilation is her way of saving her children from hunger. Jude's and BoyBoy's escape from home are their futile efforts to trace their troubled manhood.

### 3.3.Go Raise Your Children, Woman!

Helene Wright, moreover, evokes another epithet ascribed to black women. She is the black mammy figure of the racist myths. This stereotype depicts the black woman "as a submissive and nurturing domestic who not only serves but also loves white people" (Bouson 55). Morrison immediately after describing the story of Helene, inverts the myth by narrating the story of Eva Peace, "The creator and sovereign" of an impressive and big house. She is, contrary to Helene, an assertive and authoritative woman who is in charge of a big house, takes in stray waifs and has the power to re-name them. Following the escape of BoyBoy, her husband, Eva in an act of sacrifice, self-mutilates herself in order to save her three little children from hunger. Moreover she despises white people and their manners. When BoyBoy pays a visit, after some years, he brings with himself a "citified" woman. The Woman's loud laughter, when BoyBoy whispers something in her ears, makes Eva extremely angry which possibly reminds her of the miseries she had in big cities where she mutilates herself. Moreover when people guess that Tar Baby is half-white, Eva retorts that: "he was all white. That she knew blood when she saw it, and he didn't have none" and she names him Tar Baby "out of a mixture of fun and meanness" (39-40).

### 3.4. Matriarchal Women

But if Eva is a challenge to black mammy stereotype, she is a victim of a more deteriorating stereotype. Black women have been accused of damaging their children's, especially their son's, personalities and manhood. They are accused of emasculating or castrating their men by dominating them and hindering their growth. The notion of the black matriarchy, which had a kind of wide cultural currency around the time the novel was written, was infamously formulated in the 1965 Moynihan Report. In the shaming discourse of the report, a root cause of the "deterioration of the Negro family" (Rainwater, 1967, p.51) and the "tangle of pathology" (ibid) of black urban life was the black matriarchy. The black matriarchy was said to impose "a crushing burden on the Negro male" (Rainwater, 1967, p.75). As Marianne Hirsch (1995) has aptly remarked, "To write the story of the African American family in the wake of the report and the public images it fostered is always to write against the risk either of perpetuating or of appearing to repress this noxious stereotyping" (p.71). But the life story of both Eva and her son, Plum, prove that neither Eva is a matriarch in the sense that the white myths claim nor is plum emasculated by Eva. When Plum was a little baby, he started crying ceaselessly because he felt a terrible pain as a result of constipation. The narrator tells us how

Eva, with extreme difficulty, pulls out the stools that had disturbed him to a great extent: "Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food she had in the world(besides three beets) up his a... Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels" (Morrison, 1982, p.34). Besides, Plum's emasculation was a result of the world war and the horrible lynching which he observed in different cities. When he returns to Medallion he was already emasculated, deeply addicted to heroin in a way that he started stealing things from his household and began sleeping for many days in his room, eating little and seeing nobody. In actuality, black women did not take any role in emasculating black men; black women mothered their sons extremely well and they had nothing to do with retarding their sons and men's development.

bell hooks (1981), in her analysis of the matriarchy myth, states that the myth of the black matriarch parallels the racist image of black women as "masculinized, domineering, amazonic creatures" (p.81). Even if it was "readily accepted by black people" (p.78), the matriarchy myth was a white creation used to discredit black people by describing black women as the aggressive castrators of passive, and emasculated, black men. But despite the fact that hooks finds the matriarchy myth humiliating, she also implicitly recognizes its oppositional, anti-shaming force, stating that many black women are "proud to be labeled matriarchs" (hooks, 1981, p.80) because the word has "more positive implications" than other stereotypes of black womanhood, such as "mammy, bitch, or slut" (hooks, 1981, p.81). Those "who are economically oppressed and victimized by sexism and racism" are encouraged by such a myth to believe that "they exercise some social and political control over their lives" (hooks, 1981, p.81). The matriarchy myth, as shame theorists might describe it, expresses the need to counteract passive shame with active and angry, defiant challenge. At any rate, Eva's act of burning Plum is firstly due to the fact that she did not have any hope in the recovery of his son, and her act is, secondly a parody of the lynchings which took place both during slavery and during the post-world war era. Not only are black men not castrated by black women, but also they, as represented in Morrison's Sula, oppress black women. Their means of oppression is manifested in their flight from their responsibilities. Moreover, Alice Walker along with hooks believes that black women avoid talking about black men's sexism because they want to protect their men (Christian, 1985, pp.90-91). Barbara Christian believes that Walker like Morrison, "Aligns herself, neither with prevailing white feminist groups, nor with blacks who refuse to acknowledge male dominance in the world" (ibid).

To cap it all, racist propagators of stereotypes, observing the black woman's brave obstinacy have labeled her as, in Morrison's terms, "de mule uh de world" (Morrison, 1971, p.63). The phrase was earlier used by her contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston. Morrison subverts the stereotype by saying that the black woman is an obstinate horse who bites and kicks if provoked. They have not become the "true slave" (ibid) that white women acknowledge in their history. Compelled out of "her profound desolation" (ibid) to define herself, the black woman, has merged responsibility and femininity. She is morally superior to white women and black men and she is free to face her world, including her man, on her own terms (ibid).

The stereotype is echoed in the chapter describing the accidental drowning of Chicken Little, when a bargeman finds his decomposing body: "He shook his head in disgust at the kind of parents who would drown their own children. When, he wondered, will those people ever be anything but animals, fit for nothing but substitutes for mules, only mules didn't kill each other the way niggers did" (Morrison, 1982, p.63). Morrison implicitly questions the validity of stereotypes in this scene by implying that the bargeman did not have any idea whether Chicken Little was murdered or drowned. Even if he was murdered, he did not have any idea whether it was his parents who drowned him or anybody else. Secondly, his seeming sympathy for the

dead child is questioned when the bargeman, not knowing what to do to the corpse, decided to throw him back to the river where he originally found him. Only when he happened to find a man with a ferry who agreed to take him over to his people, he decided not to throw him into water.

The stereotype of the black woman as "de mule uh de world" finds its parallels in the character of Sula. When she returns to the Bottom, Eva calls her a "heifer" (Morrison, 1982, p.93) for breaching social values such as marriage and motherhood. As suggested by Morrison, Sula is a black woman who is free to confront her world, including her men, on her own terms. She is also a horse who bites and kicks if her freedom is restricted or endangered: "She lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure" (Morrison, 1982, p.118).

Morrison's rendition of stereotypes subverts them by repeating and then inverting them. Her way of fighting against these stereotypes is not by erasing them in her fictions. Parody, irony and especially paradox are Morrison's instruments in critiquing these stereotypes which have the power to interest the reader and engage his or her curiosity. Deborah Mcdowell (1988) states that "*Sula* glories in paradox and ambiguity" (p.60). Morrison subverts the stereotypes by invoking the same strategy that the stereotypes use that is paradox. As the examples of the black people's lives and history show, the labels that white racists attach to black people are paradoxical. Etedali Rezapoorian (2024) considers the paradoxical stereotypes ascribed to the people of color as rooted in white people's "cognitive dissonance" which "Conditions white people to cherish contradictory beliefs about the people of color without recognizing these contradiction" (p.121). Morrison by drawing on the stereotypes maintains that many of the labels are visceral and many are rooted in the white patriarchal racism of the western tradition. If the "rehumanization" of African American was Zora Neale Hurston's life-long ambition (Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez, 2024, p.100), rehumanizing black America through deracinating absurd stereotypes against them was one of her main objectives, if not the main one. Such detracting stereotypes continue to haunt and deface black people and one of Morrison's projects in Sula is to show the invalidity of such deteriorating labels. As Rita A. Bergenholtz (1996) states: "Morrison wants us to understand how reductive and destructive it is to affix antithetic labels such as good and evil to entire races of people" (p.91).

### 3.5. Morrison's Literary Techniques: A Strategy to Subvert the Stereotypes against Black Women

Apart from paradox and irony, Morrison employs magical realism in Sula to question, reevaluate, and subvert the damaging stereotypes against black women and men. Magical realism, often defined as a literary mode where magical elements coexist with realistic ones, allows Morrison to blur the line between what is real and symbolic. One of the most striking examples of this is the plague of robins that engulfs Medallion, Ohio, after Sula's return. This seemingly supernatural event carries symbolic weight, as it reflects the collective fear and suspicion harbored by the town's inhabitants. The plague questions the binary thinking ingrained not only in Medallion's community but also in the broader context of white America. The robins ironically cast Sula as the bringer of evil, positioning her as a scapegoat for societal anxieties about sexually liberated black women. However, Morrison's use of magical realism encourages readers to interrogate this perception.

The robins serve a dual function. On the surface, they work as a convenient symbol for the townspeople, allowing them to associate every misfortune that befalls them with Sula's return and her rejection of social norms. But beneath the surface, the plague critiques society's limited, myopic attitudes toward women, especially black women. Sula's sexual liberation—deemed threatening and morally suspect by the community—demonstrates how patriarchal and

racial ideologies rely on scapegoating women to maintain order. Morrison's deliberate ambiguity surrounding the robins forces readers to question whether Sula is truly the source of destruction or if the town's collective hysteria is to blame, thus underscoring the constructed nature of stereotypes like the jezebel and the outcast.

Morrison also heavily draws on fragmentation and ellipsis to compound meaning and encourage readers to avoid jumping to hasty conclusions about characters or events. Fragmentation, characterized by disjointed narratives and shifts in time and perspective, prevents the reader from forming a fixed or singular interpretation of the story. This technique is crucial in challenging stereotypes, particularly the jezebel archetype, which oversimplifies black women's identities by reducing them to hypersexual and morally deviant figures. Morrison's fragmentary style in Sula invites readers to resist looking for semantic unity or a singular moral lesson within the novel. Instead, they are encouraged to confront the complexity and contradictions within the characters' lives, reflecting the multifaceted experiences of black women.

By deliberately omitting certain details and leaving gaps in the narrative, Morrison uses ellipsis to provoke active engagement from her audience. For example, the lack of a complete, linear backstory for Sula and her relationships forces readers to fill in the gaps themselves, prompting them to think critically about how societal narratives about black women are often incomplete or biased. Fragmentation, therefore, serves as a way to reflect the disjointed nature of African American history and identity under systemic oppression, where stories and histories have often been fractured or erased.

This strategy becomes even more significant in the epilogue, where Morrison's use of fragmentation suggests that history itself is not a monolithic narrative but rather a tapestry of experiences open to multiple interpretations. By presenting a fragmented account, Morrison invites her readers to question dominant historical narratives that often exclude or marginalize black voices. The fragmented structure encourages alternative readings of African American history, challenging readers to consider how incomplete or biased versions of history contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Morrison's literary technique thus functions as a form of resistance, urging readers to continuously seek new understandings of the experiences of black women and reject simplistic, reductive labels.

By blending magical realism with fragmentation and ellipsis, Morrison not only critiques societal constructs but also redefines how black women's stories are told. Her techniques challenge readers to go beyond surface-level interpretations and engage deeply with the complexities of black identity, history, and survival.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's *Sula* exemplifies the transformative power of literature in challenging and deconstructing reductive stereotypes of Black women and men. By invoking and inverting labels like "jezebel," "mammy," and "degenerate madman," Morrison not only critiques the systemic racism underpinning these constructs but also reclaims agency and humanity for her characters. Her use of irony, paradox, and characterization compels readers to confront the inherent contradictions in such stereotypes and their destructive impact on black identity.

In the 21st century, Morrison's influence can be seen in the works of writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jesmyn Ward, and Brit Bennett, who continue to deconstruct stereotypes and explore the multifaceted identities of black women. These contemporary authors, inspired by Morrison's legacy, delve into themes of intersectionality, cultural memory, and systemic oppression. Future research could study how these authors' deconstruction of

stereotypes intersects with and departs from Morrison's strategies. It could explore areas where they overlap or chart new directions in response to contemporary societal challenges. This line of inquiry could shed light on how global and intersectional perspectives cherish or challenge Morrison's narrative techniques in their own contexts.

Additionally, there is room to investigate how Morrison's deconstruction of stereotypes interacts with contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter or how her narrative strategies are employed in other media, such as film and digital storytelling. These directions could provide deeper access into the evolving legacy of her work and its relevance in dismantling systemic biases in the 21st century.

## REFERENCES

Afshar, H., & Maynard, M. (Eds.). (1994). *The dynamics of "race" and gender: Some feminist interventions*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Bergenholtz, R. A. (1996). Toni morrison's Sula: A satire on binary thinking. *African American Review*, *30*(1), 89. https://doi.org/10.2307/3042096

Bouson, J. B. (2000). *Quiet as it's kept: shame, trauma, and race in the novels of Toni Morrison*. United States: State University of New York Press.

Christian, B. (1985). *Black feminist criticism: Perspectives on black women writers*. Pergamon Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *1989*, 139–168.

Etedali Rezapoorian, S. N. (2024). White emotion and white scopophilia: The myth of docile and brute blacks. *American and British Studies Annual*, *17*, 120–131. https://doi.org/10.46585/absa.2024.17.2586

Etedali Rezapoorian, S. N., & Sanchez, J. A. (2024). Reclaiming humanity in literature: A dialectical analysis of Zora Neale Hurston and her critics. *American, British and Canadian Studies Journal*, *43*(1), 100–121. https://doi.org/10.2478/abcsj-2024-0028

Fanon, F. (1980). *Black skin, white masks*. Pluto Press.

Fisher, D. (1980). *The third woman: Minority women writers of the United States*. Houghton Mifflin (Academic).

Hirsch, M. (1995). Knowing their names: Toni morrison's *song of Solomon*. In V. Smith(Ed.), *New Essays on Song of Solomon* (pp. 69–92). Cambridge University Press.

hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.

hooks, b. (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press.

McDowell, D. E. (1988). "The self and the other": Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text. In N. Y. (ed. . McKay (Ed.), *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (pp. 77–90). G. K. Hall.

Morrison, T. (1982). *Sula*. Plume.

Morrison, T. (1971). What the black woman thinks about women's lib. *New York Times Magazine*.

Moyers, B. (1994). A Conversation with Toni Morrison. In D. & introd. . Taylor-Guthrie (Ed.), *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (pp. 262–274). University Press of Mississippi.

Rainwater, L., & Yancy, W. L. (1967). *Moynihan report and the politics of controversy*. MIT Press.

Roberts, D. (1994). *The myth of Aunt Jemima: representations of race and region*. Routledge.

Stepan, N. & Gilman, S. (1992). 3. Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism. In D. LaCapra (Ed.), *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (pp. 72-103). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501727481-005

Stepto, R.B. (1977). "Intimate Things in Place": A Conversation with Toni Morrison. *The Massachusetts Review, 18*(3), 473–489.

## ***AUTHOR'S BIO***

***Ali Mohammadi*** ***holds a master's and PhD in English Language and Literature from Kharazmi University of Karaj. His research focuses on 20th-century American literature and African American literature, exploring themes of identity, race, and representation. Passionate about examining literary contributions from diverse perspectives, Ali's work highlights the transformative narratives that have shaped modern American literary discourse.***