

## The Postmodern Self in Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*

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### Abstract:

*Every ethnicity-oriented writing provides a new outlook of the American patchwork, and should be considered as a valuable contribution to the mainstream writings. Becoming ever more absorbed in my research work, I started coming to grips with a series of puzzling but response-inciting questions. This paper is meant to grapple with such questions as: Which are the tenets of the postmodern self, and how does its fragmented condition accommodate instances of the African American sense of self and identity? Which is the relationship between selfhood and socialization, me-ness and community that undergirds two of Morrison's most well known novels **Sula** and **Beloved**? Is the sense of self a multiple construct, or rather a chaotic absorption of such variables as communality, femaleness, linguistic indeterminacy and symbolism? How do the protagonists of each of the novels resemble and differ in their coming to grips with the postmodern chaos and the sense of alienation.*

*The paper is conceived as a merging of theoretical arguments and textual study. The theoretical part, attempts to shed light on such issues as: the development of the self concept from the early times to the postmodern ones, and the reconciliation of blackness, selfhood, and womanhood within the framework of African American fiction. The focus of the textual study have been two novels by Nobel Prize Winner Toni Morrison, *Sula* and *Beloved*, and the different facets of selfhood and identity as skillfully embodied in these texts. The paper has been arranged in four sections the first one focusing on the traits of the*

*postmodern self, the second one on the application of these theoretical considerations in Toni Morrison's Sula, the third one on Beloved, and the last section meant as a comparison and contrast between the two. Dealing with this topic proved interesting and challenging at the same time, the deeper I delved in my study and research work, the less I seemed to know, but I hope it will modestly contribute to the broadening of the scope of the critical essays on Toni Morrison and her novels.*

**Key words:** postmodern self, blackness and selfhood, identity, fiction

## 1. THE POSTMODERN SELF

### 1.1 The Postmodern Self and Identity

The definition of postmodernism has become the basis of ardent debates for many years. To some scholars, postmodernism represents a new historical period that people are entering, while to others it stands as an extension of some of the basic concepts undergirding modernism itself. Postmodernist literature is marked by the presence of uncertainty, discontinuity and inconsistency; there is an empowerment of the audience, an information sickness and a fluctuation between binaries.

Referring to the tenets of postmodernism, Jameson argues that the "advent of post modernity marks a new depthlessness, a consequent weakening of historicity, and a schizophrenic subjectivity". (Jameson 1996,16) So, according to him, we should give up searching for history and a coherent identity, everything is multidimensional, split and chaotic. Technically speaking, postmodern texts are concerned with the breaking of the frame, the use of meta-language, and the presence of self-referentiality.

The conceptions of self and identity have evolved with the passing of the times. In traditional societies one's identity was fixed, solid and stable, and the sense of being was measured in terms of a greater power than itself. In

Enlightenment, there was believed to exist a stable and knowable self, and language had to be rational and transparent so as to enable the reflection of this self. In Impressionism, the self was considered as fluid and unreachable and it could be defined in terms of its impersonality and impalpability.

The modernist concern was with a fragmentation of the self, largely because of the World Wars. Scholars such as Charles Taylor (1989) and Anthony Giddens (1991) treated the modern self as a reflexive entity. Each act of self-exploration was believed to enhance self-awareness, and activate the forces of internal change. In late modernity, psychologists like Sarbin and Kenneth proposed an understanding of self as a narrative identity, "the unity of a person's life being articulated in stories that express this experience" (Kenneth 1991, 36). According to them, being a modernist meant finding ones world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, ambiguity and contradiction.

For postmodernists, the subject is a fragmented being, with no essential core of identity, and in a continual state of dissolution. Expanding this argument, Jean Baudrillard (1999) states that in postmodern society, copies or what he calls simulacra, have taken the place of the originals, and the postmodern individual should be seen in terms of its multiplicity. Terry Eagleton, on the other hand, describes the postmodern self as a network of identification seeking attachments, a "dispersed, decentered network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical inferiority".(Hudgins 2000, 70)

Basic to our understanding of the postmodern self is the setting up of a kind of familiarity with the concepts employed. It is still George Knight with his philosophy of the postmodern self who considers our identities as ersatz or pastiche, our whole entity conceived as made up of a collage or patchwork of ideas or views. According to Kenneth, "the notions of continuity, unity and authenticity that previously had defined the self,

have been replaced by contingency, fragmentation and artfulness" (Kenneth 1991, 181), so the self is a constructed category lacking an essential nature. Attempting to make matters simpler the writer Walter Truett Anderson gives four terms postmodernists use to speak of the self while addressing the issues of change and multiplicity. These terms include: multiphrenia,<sup>1</sup> protean self<sup>2</sup>, decentered self<sup>3</sup> and self in relation<sup>4</sup>.

Worth considering is even the way postmodernists deal with the quest for wholeness, and for an integrated self. They argue that human beings aren't by nature cohesive selves. According to Lóvlie "the postmodernist does not go for identity, but for the manifold and equivocal"(Lóvlie 1992, 120). While attempting to delve into the self, we become more aware of its multiplicity and indefinable character.

The differences between modernism and postmodernism, become quite clear looking at the tenants of each of them. Modernism, is fundamentally about creating order out of chaos. The demise of the postmodern self, on the other hand, is marked by skepticism and fragmentation. Many modernist works try to uphold the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which has been lost in most of modern life, while postmodernists avoid fake assumptions and celebrate the meaninglessness of the world. Mary Klages conveys this argument when she states: "The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense"(Klages 1998, 1)

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<sup>1</sup> The presence of many different voices in our culture, telling us who we are and what we are.

<sup>2</sup> The existence of a self capable of changing constantly to suit the present circumstances.

<sup>3</sup> The absence of a sense of self. The self is constantly redefined, constantly undergoing change.

<sup>4</sup> Found in feminist studies, this concept means that we live our lives not as islands unto ourselves, but in relation to people and to certain cultural contexts.

Concluding we can state that, while most scholars debate over the consideration of postmodernism a historical period in its own right, or a mere extension of the tenets of modernism, they agree on the two basic concepts advocated by this movement: the weakening historicity, and the presence of a schizophrenic subjectivity. The conceptions of self and identity have evolved with the passing of the times, starting with the knowable stability and the solidity of the traditional societies, going on with the fluid and unreachable self of the Impressionism, and supposedly ending with the mourned, fragmented self of the modernists. The demise of the postmodern self is marked by denial of an essential core of identity, and acknowledgement of a continual state of dissolution.

In an attempt to create order out of chaos, the conceptions of self and identity have also gone through an interior evolution in the framework of postmodernism. The philosophy of the postmodern self, starts with George Knight's (1998) consideration of identities as pastiche, goes on with Kenneth's awareness of a state of contingency and fragmentation, and is finalized with Walter Truett Anderson's (1996) coining of the multiphrenic and protean self. At first sight similar in the views that they hold, modernism and postmodernism differ from one another in that the latter avoids fake assumptions, and celebrates the meaninglessness of the world.

### **1.2 The Multidimensionality of the Self**

Toni Morrison's treatment of the self develops along such dimensions as femininity exploration, communal influence, linguistic indeterminacy, black consciousness and multiplicity of personalities. In attempting to reconcile the sense of self with the feminine facets of it, Helene Cixous (1998), suggests that the male/female opposition itself should be resisted, so that the multiplicity inherent in all identities can be explored. In one of

her essays "Sorties, Out and Out", she expands her argument by stating that "in this sort of masculine culture, the identity is bound up with the subordination of the feminine, so that subject positions are mapped out in advance, which prevent the assertion of the female independence" (Geyh 1998, 58). Anis Pratt, on the other hand, sees women as precluded from authenticity of self, and examines the conflict between being an authentic adult and an acceptable female: "Biological femaleness is considered a negation, a constraint and, an encompassing identity" (Pratt 1985, 59). So the woman is all except herself.

In a postmodern society, collectivity is seen as the solution to alienation and fragmentation. A clear example of the communal self and its confrontation with the individual self, is given in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1988). Quinn remains apparently invisible to others due to the entire loss of identity, and the resulting desertion of his self. He hopes to be able to recover this lost self through his attachment to the communal identity: "remarkable as it seems, no one ever noticed Quinn. It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city. From this destruction of the self however a new one may possibly arise. Only by becoming garbage can one hope to be recycled" (Bertl 1990, 71).

Another important dimension of the postmodern self is its awareness of the linguistic indeterminacy. There is one famous episode which reveals the way in which the meaning and truth of our social life seems to depend on the language game of the moment. A parishioner asked his priest if it was all right for him to smoke while he prayed. The priest answered no, that smoking would reduce the significance and the beauty of the prayer. Then the parishioner asked if it would be all right for him to pray while he smoked. The priest said that it would be since one should pray at all times. This episode reflects how we hopelessly expect to be defined by a linguistic world, which is indefinable in itself. Postmodernists argue that language

cannot be adequately related to truth because of the disjunction between our words and the realities that they claim to reflect. Derrida's "sous rapture" also affirms the multiplicity and the perpetual change of forms and meanings: "the truth is under erasure, and although crossed out, it does not disappear" (Derrida 1976, 45).

The history of the African Americans and the black consciousness is marked by constant identity crisis. Negroes first lost contact with their land of birth by being captured, and brought as slaves to the sugar islands of the Antilles, the cane fields of Brazil, and the plantations of British North America. The distance from Africa brought about ethnic fragmentation, and a loss of communal identity. A second Diaspora, and a second loss of the land, took place in the 19th and 20th centuries when thousands of African-Americans abandoned the southern states and went to the north, their aim being to escape the persecutions and lynchings. Bell Hooks (1990) argues that, postmodern theory offers a paradigm within which African Americans can constitute subjectivity: "Part of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct a self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory" (Hooks cited in Fuston 2002, 10) So the African American self, is a self constantly in dialogue with culture, society and its "other".

The postmodern self has been accepted as a fragmented experience where everybody wishes to be nothing else but "himself". The only verifiable place where one exists as a dimension is inside oneself and one's own thoughts. Even Moncef in his consideration of the atopian self supports the same idea: "There is no world, no land, nothing. In the end it is all a figment. The only place you exist is in your head" (Moncef 2002, 156).

Self-fragmentation takes up many forms, the major ones being that of the yearning for wholeness, the indeterminacy of self, and the multiplicity of identities. Yearning for wholeness

has for a long time energized African American artistic endeavors. Bell Hooks (2002), for instance, calls the experience of recognizing the implications of being an African American woman, as a struggle for self-recovery. Finally the multiplicity of selves becomes so bizarre that Edgar Allan Poe's William Wilson interestingly kills his mirror double image in an attempt to establish a stable self. Morrison, in turn, also conceives the theory of the quest as a motivating and organizing device.

We can conclude the section by stating that the postmodern self is definitely multidimensional, it is negating this plurality, which kills its essence. Toni Morrison's self develops along the dimensions of femininity exploration, communal influence, linguistic indeterminacy and black consciousness. The communal influence conditions the lives of the characters to such a degree, that only through its presence can they gain subjectivity or, as Paul Auster (1988) puts it only by becoming garbage can one hope to be recycled. Morrison furthers Derrida's (1976) consideration of truth in a state of erasure, by claiming that our social life is utterly dependent on the language game of the moment. The African American self in turn is considered as one developing constant identity crises and dialogic subjectivity struggles. As far as the only verifiable place where we can claim to exist is within our own thoughts, yearning for wholeness and accepting indeterminacy, turn into the organizing principles of the postmodern novels.

## **2. THE POSTMODERN SELF IN *SULA***

Morrison began writing *Sula* in 1969, and the events span much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time of great equal rights activism among African Americans and others. Morrison's novel explores the impact of the community on the individual's quest for self. *Sula* poses complex and contradictory ideas about identity and self-awareness in the face of violence, death, and change. Its



structure is circular and the narrative evolves along the recollection of fragmented images, storylines, and character descriptions.

## **2.1 Postmodern Self and Identity in *Sula***

In making clear the intertwining of the modern and postmodern features in Morrison's novels Duvall states that if in the first four novels the modern Morrison just explores her own racial identity, "a place where the alienated individual might discover [an African-American] authenticity", the postmodern Morrison of the following novels exhibits an increasingly "postmodernist understanding of the constructedness of all identity." (Duvall 2000, 9). Deborah E. McDowell (1997) on the other hand reads *Sula* as a pioneering piece of post-modern fiction that explores the binary oppositions of black/white, male/female, good/evil, positive/negative ruling traditional African American literature.

The self in *Sula* is a self in torment, a conglomerate of I and the Not I, a merging of self and other, of known and unknown. As we go through the novel, this self appears as alienated, contradictory, absent and questioning. To start with, both Sula and Nel feel alienated from the society and try to shun marginalization either through socializing with one another or through desperately seeking a niche in the society. The contradictory self comes out in Sula's attempt for definition and her awareness that she does not need anybody else to get her know her. The warring co-existence of the physical and spiritual selves is conveyed through Eva losing her left leg in some spiritually unrecoverable journey and killing her children out of that very love.

As the novel proceeds, Sula, comes to recognize that there is something essential missing and lost, it is her self and her innocence. This awareness develops when Sula eavesdrops her mother talking about her like a creature loved but not liked and when she witnesses the drowning of Chicken

Little.Morrison also seeks to describe an "absence that antedates presence"(Duvall 2000:134),a loneliness existing without relation to another. In response to Nel's implicit condemnation of Sula's self-reliant lifestyle ("Lonely, ain't it? "), Sula replies, "Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's... A secondhand lonely." (Morrison, *Sula* 143). Sula has slipped into a "secondhand lonely" for Ajax.

Without claiming that any sort of wholeness or authentic self has ever existed in African American reality critics wish to propose that *Sula's* narrative technique of defragmentation may re-enact a yearning for an authentic self and existential wholeness. Even when Sula seems to be integral, the supposed sense of wholeness is a false alarm. After Nel leaves her old friend, Sula remembers their friendship in: "Pictures drifted through her head as lightly as dandelion spores" (Morrison, *Sula* 147).After that Sula falls into panic to collect the dust of the disintegrated body in handfuls.

Even Sula's statement that together with Nel they used to be "two throats and one eye" (Morrison, *Sula* 55) conveys the idea of fragmentation and defragmentation. They both viewed the things in the same way but they expressed their own ideas differently. The focalizing event in each chapter of *Sula* is a literal or a figurative quest for wholeness. While Sula is literally dying in 1940, the four main natural elements draw closer: fire-fever, water-river-sweat, air-wind, earth-vegetation.

So we can conclude by saying that written in 1969, *Sula* poses complex and contradictory ideas about identity and the impact of the community on the individual's quest for self. Victim and victimizer, neither definer, nor defined, complex and egoless, Sula chooses inwardness and flights as markers of her freedom. The characterization of Nel, on the other hand is marked by incidents of self-fragmentation and self-repression, as well as by a corresponding self-defragmentation. The synchronicity of actions, the need to define and be defined and the relational sameness and difference bring about the

consideration of Sula's and Nel's selves as complementary, two sides of a woman, which everyone of us must try to reconcile. The digging and furrowing of holes in the ground, the definition of the relationship as to throats and one eye, emphasize the perceptual sameness and the discursive difference inherent within the multiplicity of every postmodern self.

## **2.2 Self and Characterization**

**Sula** is heavy brown with large quiet eyes and a birthmark that spreads from the middle of the lid to the eyebrow. She will develop as a "type of woman who chooses inwardness and flights as markers of freedom and who dies out of her undeveloped conscience" (Koolish 2001, 140) and out of refusal to become part of what Morrison calls responsible umbrella women. Sula experiences two things that create her radical self. First, she overhears her mother say that "she loves Sula but does not like her" (Morrison, *Sula* 57). She becomes inadvertently involved in an incident resulting in the drowning of their friend Chicken Little: "Hers was an experimental life and self. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow"(Morrison, *Sula* 118-19).

As the novel unfolds Sula consciously resists definition and she is fighting against being labeled a mother, a wife or even a friend: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself"(Morrison, *Sula* 92). It is difficult to project a closure to Sula's identity. Even the narrative closing of Chicken Little's life, initially described as "the closed place in the water" (Morrison, *Sula* 101), quickly transforms into "something newly missing" (Morrison, *Sula* 61). Deborah Mc. Dowell argues that Sula should be regarded as egoless and the "darkening and spreading of the birthmark is the symbol of the tyranny of Sula's eye/I" (Jones 1993, 615). Faced with loss, the distancing of Ajax, and the betrayal of Jude, Sula becomes like the

headless soldier that Shadrack sees his first day in the war, like her paper dolls. "I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him(Ajax) and so I lost it just like the dolls"(Morrison, *Sula*:136). Along the novel Sula is placed both in the role of a victim and a victimizer. The victimizer Sula comes out more markedly in the episode in which while meeting four boys who have been harassing black schoolchildren, Sula pulls a knife, and assumes the role of an active victim slashing off the tip of her finger.

**NEL.** Nel is the granddaughter of a whore, and the daughter of a strictly religiously reared respectable woman. Her lighter skin is likened to wet sandpaper, dark enough to escape the blows of pitch-black true bloods and the contempts of black women. Nel's characterization is marked by constant incidents of self-fragmentation, self-repression and ultimately self-defragmentation. Nel clearly states her sense of enforced alienation when she whispers: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me."(Morrison, *Sula*: 28) Her sense of "me-ness", the qualities she vowed to hold onto forever, begin to erode when she marries Jude. This personality erosion degrades into an utter dissolution of the self. For Nel her repressed self develops like the oldest cry she is not able to exhale and it becomes "just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat" (Morrison, *Sula*:108). As the novel progresses the pattern of shifting mud, stirring leaves signify Nel's turning outside of her inside, her utter fragmentation:

Mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl. However, it did not come... Finally there was nothing, just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat. (Morrison, *Sula* 108)

Nel's experiences prompt her to look outside of herself, outside her mother's system of self-denial. She decides to undertake her own defragmentation. She achieves this by recollecting her

memories, the temporal fragments of her experience: "She fast rearranges the spatial-temporal bits and pieces at hand and consciously initiates a new story about herself."<sup>5</sup>

### 2.2.1 Complementary selves

An important aspect of the dimension of self and characterization in *Sula*, is the consideration of Sula's and Nel's selves as complementary ones. According to Morrison Sula and Nel make up one whole person: Sula is ship, the "New World Black Woman," and Nel safe harbor, the "Traditional Black Woman". (Jones 1993, 24) The two are often considered by the critics as two different sides of a woman which every one of us must try to reconcile: Sula is Nel's image of freely imagined selfhood, while Nel is Sula's image of fitting to the collective consciousness.

The selves of Nel and Sula are said to merge due to the synchronicity of actions, the adolescent attraction, and the need to define and be defined. Most memorable of the synchronicity of actions between Sula and Nel is the prelude to Chicken Little's death, where the two girls "in concert, without ever meeting each other's eyes dig two holes in the ground, furrowing deeper and deeper" until the two holes were one and the same." (Morrison, *Sula* 58). The digging and burying ritual foreshadows a relationship for a lifetime, a unification of selves, dreams and aspirations. Paul Gray of the Times magazine posits that the attraction between Sula and Nel centers upon the unification of the divided self. "The groping of two girls for one another in dreams echoes the attempt of the unconscious self to embrace its conscious part." (Gray cited in Gyetvai 2006, 2)

They ran in the sunlight, creating their own breeze, which pressed their dresses into their damp skin. Reaching a kind of square of four leaf-locked trees which promised cooling, they flung themselves into the four-cornered shade to taste their lip

sweat and contemplate the wildness that had come upon them suddenly. (Morrison, *Sula* 57)

As the novel progresses, the relationship between Nel and Sula is described as one of two throats and one eye, emphasis falling both on perceptual sameness and discursive difference. The fullest reflection of the merging selves is the episode when Nel first senses the shifting mud in her guts after she has lost both Jude and Sula. The intermingling of the water and earth imagery emphasizes the unification of warring sides of a self into a coherent whole: "Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze." (Morrison, *Sula* 174).

The connected nature of Sula and Nel's shared self-creation is conveyed through their laughter duet: "Her rapid soprano and Sula's dark sleepy chuckle made a duet that frightened the cat and made the children run in from the back yard". (Morrison, *Sula* 97). The different nature of Sula's and Nel's shared self-creation is conveyed through Sula's refusal to be defined and Nel's looking up to Sula to discover her sense of me-ness. The same relationship evolves into one of blurring of the selves: "they worked until the two holes were one and the same." (Morrison, *Sula* 58)

What makes Sula not authentically postmodernist is the accompaniment of every instance of alienation with an act of self defragmentation. If during the burial of Chicken Little Sula and Nel distanced from one another, in the closing lines of the chapter, they join to one another in a juvenile complicity: "they held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth, the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay aboveground forever" (Morrison, *Sula* 66).

The common denominator of Morrison's latest novels according to Duvall is a sense of understanding of the constructedness of all identity. The postmodern self of Toni Morrison's *Sula* appears as alienated, contradictory, absent and

questing at the same time. It is this multiple self, which seeks to shun marginalization through the socializing attempts of Nel, and acknowledges a warring coexistence of physicality and spirituality through the unfolding of Eva's life. Although Sula claims to possess a kind of lonely, which is only hers, she cannot consider herself devoid of a yearning for an authentic self and an existential wholeness, the latter becoming clear through the episode of the dandelion spores.

### **2.3 Multidimensional Identity in *Sula***

The postmodern self in *Sula* develops along such dimensions as femaleness, communal influence, linguistic indeterminacy and symbolism. Toni Morrison's fondness in the female dimension comes into sharp focus since the delivery of her Nobel Prize Lecture:

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin? What it is to have no home in this place? To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company? (Morrison, "Nobel Prize Lecture":1)

It is this being female persecution, which haunts Sula all along the novel and makes her be viewed as evil. This makes Nel state "You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that.... You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't" (Morrison, *Sula*:36). The four dimensions of self and womanhood that Morrison explores in her novel are: sexuality exploration, adolescent curiosity, female friendship and the quest for wholeness. Sexuality is for Sula the way to experience and to mourn the loss of her self". It is not the attempt to meet with an "other," but with herself. "She wept then...[in] the post-coital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" .(Morrison, *Sula* 123). Although man love seems to be the axis around which Sula's family develops, there are episodes in which Sula's sexuality is

not threatened by male aggressiveness, as the one in which she cuts the tip of her finger (the symbolic phallus) warning of her disregard for their sexuality.

The theme of adolescent sexual curiosity is conveyed through Sula and Nel awakening to an amazing range of senses and feelings including the voluptuous pleasure of their own young bodies and the discovery of men. In Chapter 1935, the two girls metaphorically explore their inner kindling of early adolescent sexuality by stripping wigs of their bark, peeling out the exposed pulpy center and then rhythmically digging into the earth with them to create wide deep holes, which they fill with collected debris and then cover with dirt. The burying of the small defiling twigs is an assertion of their feminine control over the masculine imagery of their world. Morrison also explores the importance of female friendship in the formation of individual identity. Nel and Sula's is a shared development of eroticism, the kind of adolescent bond that some theorists of lesbian literary criticism have reclaimed as lesbian.

Considering that Sula's quest is basically one of achieving wholeness and independence, things do not run so smoothly, and this makes the text more attractive to the reader. If Sula's first lovemaking scene exposes her to a "postcoital privateness in which she met herself" (Morrison, *Sula* 123), she also acknowledges the heavy burden that solitude poses on her shoulders, like an eye of sorrow in a hurricane of joy. Sula attempts to achieve the much sought wholeness through her relationship with Ajax, the much-courted guy. With Ajax's he feels the desire of possession, but he abandons Sula the very moment he starts to recognize motherly and wifely attitudes in her.

The communal identity occupies an important place in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. Morrison denounces the consequences of capitalism on the black community of Bottom, Ohio, between WWI and 1965, a time of civil rights movement. Along with the reality of Medallion and the Bottom, Morrison unfolds the



inverted values of the two worlds, the whites wanting peace and quiet away from the city, and the blacks becoming infected with a desire for profits. Typical of this novel is the reflection of the discriminatory attitude of the blacks toward the unconventional members of their own community. So Bottom is a community where chaos is structured through hatred, scapegoating and discrimination.

Sula's independent lifestyle is consumptive and she wavers in between social and individual identity: "What's burning in me is mine "she argues at the same time that she threatens to "split this town in two and everything in it before. I'll let you (her grandmother) put it out" (Morrison, *Sula* 93). Medallion is a community only when it has Sula for a center, when her evil draws its members together in fear. This mythicizing becomes clear through the episode of Sula's return to Medallion and the accompanying plague of robins: "The little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere, exciting very small children away from their usual welcome into a vicious stoning..." (Morrison, *Sula* 89).

In her quest for a comfortable niche in the community, Nel is mainly struck down for her self-diminishing wish for respectability and survival. The distinction between the two women is most clearly drawn when Sula speaks to Nel on her deathbed.

You think I don't know what your life is like....I know what every colored woman in this country is doing... Dying. Just like me .But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world (Morrison, *Sula* 143)

The interrelation between the postmodern self and the linguistic indeterminacy also infuses Morrison's novel. Variability of meaning, whether articulated or silent, derives from a relativity of perspective. Shortly after Nel's departure, Sula contemplates her own lack of permanence and her correlative lack of meaning: "If I live a hundred years my urine

will flow the same way, my armpits and breath will smell the same...I didn't mean anything. I never meant anything. (Morrison, *Sula* 147) Similar to this episode is the one in which Sula eventually stumbles across physical evidence, which ironically negates Ajax's identity as Sula knows it and she starts questioning her knowledge of him in general.

The quest for self and wholeness is conveyed in the novel even through the symbolism of three signs, namely the birthmark, the epigraph and the dedication. Sula's birthmark is considered by many critics at the same time a sign of alienation, latent beauty and wholeness. According to Fitzgerald, the birthmark symbolizes Sula's absolute refusal to see life from more than one window, from any perspective other than her own. According to another critic Rosetta James, the birthmark is perceived differently by different characters who make it a reflection of their own suppressed fears and feelings: "cracked mirror fragments and pieces that we have to see independently and put together for ourselves" (James 2006, 3). It appears "a rose" to the narrative voice, a stemmed rose to Eva and Nel, a "scary black thing" to Nel's children, "a copperhead" to Jude, "Hannah's ashes" to the community, and "a tadpole" to Shadrack. As the birthmark changes Sula develops, and her quest for wholeness progresses.

[It] spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose....The birthmark was to grow darker as the years passed, but now it was the same shade as her gold-flecked eyes, which, to the end, were as steady and clean as rain" (Morrison, *Sula* 63)

The second symbol in Toni Morrison's *Sula* is the Epigraph. Drawn from William's *The Rose Tattoo*. This symbol foreshadows Sula's final isolation, incomprehensibility and self-centeredness. The dedication, the third symbolic element placed at the beginning of the novel serves to emphasize the loss of a self that Sula never managed to find. "It is sheer good fortune to miss somebody long before they leave you. This book is for Ford

and Slade, whom I miss although they have not left me.”(Morrison, *Sula*: Front Matter).

The closed room of Sula’s death episode represents the tyranny of the eye/I, the closing off of Sula’s single perspective, while the womb stands for the place where Sula can be completely herself and free of distraction. The novel ends in an idyllic setting of trotting, a summer day and butterflies. The vast majority of butterflies die in winter, but before they die, they lay eggs so that the species will continue and not be completely wiped out. Although Nel’s and Sula’s quest for sense of self will end one day there will yet be other black women in quest of self and fighting against the conventions of society.

The dimensions of the postmodern self-mentioned in the first chapter acquire a new sense in the light of Morrison’s originality. Sexuality is to Sula a way to mourn the death of a dislocated self and it is only in the postcoital privateness of the first sexual act and in the wig stripping episode that Sula explores her inner kindlings, her awareness of a complementary and limited lonely. Through the dimension of communality, Morrison unfolds the inverted values of two worlds and the structuring of chaos through hatred and scapegoating in a society marked by intra-racial discrimination. Claiming that she never meant anything, Sula draws a parallelism in between the variability of meaning and the relativity of experience. The symbolism of the novel tries to whisper into our ears what the novel itself seems reluctant to shout, suppressed fears and feelings (birthmark),self-centeredness and incomprehensibility(epigraph),and finally loss of the self (the dedication).

### **3. THE POSTMODERN SELF IN *BELOVED***

#### **3.1 The Postmodern Self and Identity in *Beloved***

Although Morrison claims to write an "authentic" African

American history of slavery, her narrative strategies nonetheless share some affinities with postmodern fiction. According to Anthony Hilfer the postmodern traits of her novel unfold along with the dialectical and indeterminate character of the source. As Morrison herself states, in an environment in which "men and women were moved around like checkers"(Morrison. *Beloved*: 23), the identity constantly seeks to anchor on "the other" and to come out of the confusing multiplicity. This same idea is endorsed even by Rachel Lee, according to whom, Morrison mainly attempts to detect the effect of the community on the individual's "retention of an integrated and acceptable self" (Lee 1994, 230).

In this section, I am going to deal with the facets of the postmodern self as presented along Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Beloved's* postmodern self appears firstly as *decentered*. This facet of the postmodern self emphasizes the endless play of signifiers and the fluidity of the boundaries between our physical selves and the world. In the soliloquy chapter when Sethe announces: "My girl comes home. Now I can look at things again because she's here to see them too". (Morrison. *Beloved* 201) she emphasizes the consideration of *Beloved* as an alter ego and reflection of hers.

The self of the black protagonists also develops under the marked presence of an "other". White people believed that whatever the manners, "under every dark skin was a jungle." (Morrison, *Beloved* 77).The more colored people spent their time trying to convince the white people how gentle they were, the deeper and more tangled the jungles grew inside. Manifestations of "self" and the "other" include schoolteacher instructing his nephews to study the black slaves in order to catalog their "animal" and human characteristics.

Another facet of the postmodern self markedly revealed through Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is the quest for an integrated self. The quest for wholeness starts with Baby Suggs, it goes on with Sethe's troubled spirits and ends with the haunting

presence of *Beloved*. No longer able to endure the endless succession of losses, faced with the death or disappearance of all eight of her children, Baby Suggs has a "sadness at her center,...where the self that was no self made its home"(Morrison, *Beloved* 140). Similarly, when Paul D tells Sethe that she is her own best thing, Sethe is amazed at the thought and asks "me", thereby for the first time thinking of herself as an independent being. In another scene *Beloved* pulls a tooth out of her mouth thereby demonstrating her struggle to remain intact. "Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself"(Morrison, *Beloved* 133).

Complex as the concept of the postmodern self appears to be, it quite clearly appears to waver in between the consideration of the *individual as subject and as object*. In the episode of the horrifying attack by schoolteacher and his nephews, Sethe sees herself as object in the gaze of the other: "Two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up"(Morrison, *Beloved*: 70). Similarly, Paul D's memories confirm his object status. When he is recaptured after an escape attempt, he learns the "dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future" (Morrison, *Beloved* 226)

As a summary we can state that *Beloved* as a protagonist of the novel unfolds as an alter ego of Sethe, a reflection of her feelings of loss and culpability. She appears as self-developing in the presence of an "other"-the nephews attempting to catalog her animal and human characteristics and questing for an integrated self. The postmodern self in *Beloved* is one in which the individual appears both as a subject and as an object. In the framework of this concept, Paul D questions the dollar value of his weight, heart and brain, while Sethe prostitutes with the gravedigger for just seven letters.

### 3.2 Self and Characterization

**Sethe** 's sense of self takes different shapes along the novel. At times it is a self shaped through the presence of the "other", at other times it is a split self, a remembered self, a projected self and finally a denied self. Sethe is compelled to convince Beloved that she killed her out of love, and she urgently seeks validation from her, the "other". Even when she conjectures her possible death, Sethe couches in terms of her baby, "I believe this baby's ma'am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of the Ohio River"(Morrison, *Beloved* 31).

Sethe's split self emerges not just in her own soliloquy chapter but also in the first two soliloquy chapters. The first time Schoolteacher, a white man, comes into her yard, Sethe commits self-murder; so she kills a part of herself by killing her child. In the second episode the fugitive Sethe, pregnant with Denver, and carrying Beloved on her already brutally latticed back realizes her split existence "Beloved asleep on my back, Denver sleep in my stomach. Felt like I was split in two"(Morrison, *Beloved* 202). Paul D's arrival at 124 also sets the stage for the reader's discovery of Sethe's split self. While Sethe's controlling consciousness appears to welcome the arrival of Paul D, the fractured aspect of her opposes Paul D's arrival because his presence will enable Sethe to imagine a future devoid of the anguish of the past.

The projected self comes out through Sethe's absorption of the qualities assigned to her. When Paul D shows his concern for Sethe by heating up some water in order to bathe her and she callously asks him if he is going to count her feet, a facet of the projected self comes into play with Sethe considering herself in terms of the attributed animal features. Sethe's remembered self starts to unravel in the episode of Sethe's presumed caressing by Baby Suggs. While longing for Baby Suggs, Sethe begins to feel the unmistakable caressing of her presumed fingers. It is only later that we come to realize that the strangling was part of Beloved's embrace.

**Beloved** is Sethe's third child, murdered at the age of one and a ghost in 124 for the next twenty years. She is reborn in that twentieth year, but though 21 years old in appearance, her mind is that of a child. Through the characterization of Morrison, Beloved comes out as the drowned self, the repressed dimension of everyone's self and identity. While handling Beloved's sense of self we should take into consideration such facets as the complex identity, the split off state and ultimately the identity dissolution.

Beloved's elusive, complex identity is central to our understanding of the novel. She may, as Sethe originally believes, be an ordinary woman who was locked up by a white man and never let out of doors or she may be the embodied spirit of Sethe's dead daughter. Beloved is the age the baby would have been had it lived, and she bears the name printed on the baby's tombstone. She first appears to Sethe soaking wet, as though newly born, and Sethe has the sensation of her water breaking when she sees her. Another interpretation views her as a representation of Sethe's dead mother. In Chapter 22, Beloved recounts memories that correspond to those that Sethe's mother might have had of her passage from Africa to America.

Beloved is repeatedly described as fragmented, split off, shattered but unlike Sethe, she has knowledge of the split self. If on one hand Beloved reacquires her identity whenever Paul D feels in need of her and calls her name, on the other hand she falls a victim of identity dissolution with that very force. In her essay "To be Loved and Cry Shame", Lynda Koolish states that denied the right to keep her own body inviolate, "Beloved shatters into a core self and alters"(Koolish 2001, 143), she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her.

Concluding, in accordance with the postmodern technicalities of characterization, Sethe's personae acquires the forms of a respectively split, remembered and projected self. She appears split while carrying Beloved on her brutally

latticed back, remembered while feeling the supposed strangling of Baby Suggs fingers, and projected while absorbing the assigned animalistic stereotypizations. The consideration of Beloved as a drowned self, a repressed dimension of everyone's self and identity, is based on the assumptions about her past. She fluctuates in between the identifications as an ordinary woman locked up by a white man, that of the embodied spirit of Sethe's dead daughter, and that of a representative entity of Sethe's dead mother.

### 3.2.1 Complementary selves

The consideration of Sethe and Beloved as complementary selves should be picked up at our questioning regarding the identity of Beloved. Beloved serves as Sethe's repressed conscience, as well as a hint of her total identification with her children. When Sethe states that the best thing she was, was her children, she shows her inability to differentiate between herself and her sons and daughters. In the water episode Beloved's face seems to merge with Sethe's and the boundaries to her body and to her sense of self melt down.

where the blue is and the grass....she sees a face down there and wants the face to smile at her. The face comes through the water and leads her down to the grass below, where a woman is waiting. She follows the woman, who is Sethe. Beloved imagines that she chews and swallows me (Morrison, *Beloved* 212).

The same idea of spiritual merging and physical fusion is ironically conveyed even in the last section of the novel where Sethe is depicted as becoming weaker and weaker while Beloved's belly grows bigger and bigger. It is like she is devouring her mother. Sethe and Beloved separately also fuse with other less important or minor characters of the novel. According to Lynda Koolish Beloved is initially considered Paul D's nightmare, a confirmation of his worst sense of self. Unable to control his sexual desire for her, he sees himself as bestial



and deformed. Even more marked seems to be the merging of Paul D's self with Sethe's: "Sethe, me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow"(Morrison, *Beloved* 273). The stream-of-consciousness narrative bringing about the merging of Sethe, Beloved and Denver also conveys the idea of the fusion. Each of the three voices repeats the concerns that they have previously expressed: an escape from their pasts and an extreme need for emotional nourishment.

The complementarity of characterization in *Beloved* develops along three main dimensions: the alter ego, the physical fusion and the stream of consciousness narrative. There are clues in the novel that Beloved is literally an aspect of Sethe, an alter-ego. Sethe, on her side, keeps emphasizing that the best thing she was, was her children, while in the water episode Beloved's face seems to merge with Sethe's thereby enabling a fluidity of characterization which is typical of the postmodern texts. The physical fusion between Sethe and Beloved is so self-consuming that Sethe grows weaker and weaker, while Beloved's belly grows bigger and bigger.

### **3.3 Multidimensional Identity in *Beloved***

After having dealt with the various demonstrations of the postmodern self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it is worth shifting the focus of the attention to the postmodern identity. In the case of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* identity is the skillful interplay of such aspects as community influence, female consciousness, linguistic indeterminacy, past haunting and slavery impact. *Beloved* primarily demonstrates the extent to which individuals need the support of their communities in order to survive. The self of the protagonists of the novel starts to unfold as the characters develop their confrontation with the community and the expected communal conventions. Carla Holloway illustrates this when she states that Beloved's lack of a name signifies that she is everybody, "a communal catalytic helping them face their

pasts."(Holloway 1992, 76)

It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. (Morrison, *Beloved* 274)

Trying to establish a definite link between Toni Morrison's treatment of the postmodern self and that of femininity, Kimberley Chabot Davis considers Morrison's narrative to be an example of Julia Kristeva's concept of "woman's time as circular and cyclical, reflecting the natural cycles of reproduction and the seasons"(Davis 1998:47). In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* the child's relation to the mother is embracing "the other without violence". "[It] is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me"(Geyh 1998, 82).

Morrison also equips her named characters with a command of language, thus lending to their identity formation, but those in the Middle Passage have no language that can give them presence. In "Black Looks: Race and Representation", Bell Hooks states: "We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions"(Hooks 1992, 79). It is in this niche of linguistic indeterminacy that the characters start the construction of their selves.

The unfolding of the self in the novel is enabled even through its interaction with the dimension of *symbolism*. Such is the case of the tree that grows on Sethe's back. Ever-present but never to be seen, it is symbolic of the burden which Sethe carries it is her past, and the prejudice of white men against her. Another marked symbol in the novel is the heart, which in this book represents life. Baby Suggs does not have life until she realizes her heart is beating, Paul D does not have life"until his tobacco tin is forced open, leaving him a red

heart"(Morrison, *Beloved* 73).

In *Beloved*, the character encounters with the past are characterized by instances of trying to beat it back, work it through and finally embrace the most challenging parts of it in view of a possible purging. Sethe initially attempts to repress the past, to "start the day's serious work of beating it back."(Morrison, *Beloved* 73), while Beloved, on the other hand, represents the return of the past that demands to be worked through and not forgotten. One way to free oneself from the horrors of the past is to reenact and reconfigure it in the present, and Sethe does so when at the end of the novel she attacks the whiteman Bodwin, a reincarnation of her slavemaster, Schoolteacher.

*Beloved* also skillfully explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual devastation wrought by *slavery*. In her essay "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Barbara Schapiro argues that the internal resonances of slavery are so profound that even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, the consequences will continue to be markedly felt, "the self will still be trapped in an inner world that prevents a genuine experience of freedom" (Schapiro 1991, 198) As Sethe puts it, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another"(Morrison, *Beloved*: 95). The slavery frustrated self is one marked by alienation, and internalized stereotypizations. Paul D for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else's.

Concluding we can state that similarly to *Sula* the postmodern identity of *Beloved* develops along the dimensions of communality, femininity, linguistic indeterminacy, symbolism and past bondage. *Beloved's* lack of a name turns her into everybody, a communal catalytic helping people face their pasts. Postmodern femininity is also based on the fluidity of identity. The act of giving birth to children is one of bringing the other bodily through the self, that is why the fusion

between parent and child is one of the perfect ones persisting even through the chaos of the modern times. The chokecherry tree that Sethe holds on her back is a symbol of the past burden that weighs upon her, while it is only the opening of the tobacco tin-the heart-that grants life to Paul D.

All along the novel the characters encounter instances of trying to beat back the past, a ghost-like presence which demands to be worked all through and not be forgotten. While exploring the physical, emotional and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery, Morrison emphasizes the effect of the external and internal bondage on an individual's sense of self. Even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, the self will still be trapped within an inner sense of persecution and of reflected stereotypizations. It was typical of blacks to internalize stereotypizations, absorb the attributes that the others assigned to them and interiorize the jungle that the blacks were considered to perpetuate.

#### **4. POSTMODERN SELF IN *SULA* AND *BELOVED*: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST**

There are many similarities and differences between the unfolding of the postmodern self in *Sula* and in *Beloved*, but the similarities outnumber the differences. Firstly, in both *Sula* and *Beloved*, the protagonists carry a physical token, which is expressive of their inner selves, as well as of the process of identity development taking place in them. To Sethe, the chokecherry tree becomes a sign of community, identity, and wholeness, and she has to witness the history of her people and that of her own. Sula's birthmark, on the other hand, becomes a projection of the community's fears and prejudices concerning her. It becomes an integral part of her sense of self and it develops along with her intricate journey from selfhood to collectivism and again to the sense of the loss of the self.

Secondly, as E. Mc. Dowell (2002) states, both Sethe and

Sula forsake the kind of intimacy with the self to be reached through a process of mourning and remembering. Sethe, alone at the grave of the child she murdered, trades ten minutes of sex for seven letters. She feels that she has no self, except in the role of mother. Likewise, Sula can not recognize any sense of self beyond that granted by the presence of her lover, her best friend or even her hostile community.

Thirdly, both protagonists deny themselves and are denied a sense of self and a place in the community. On one hand, Sula finds her uncentered and unbounded existence one of exile, and she seeks boundaries in herself and in the community of Medallion. Sethe, on the other hand, finds her existence to be one of self-exploration, away from the haunting presences of the past.

Fourthly, both Sethe and Sula as victims and victimizers reenact the myth of Cain. Sethe, is the beloved slave who is considered as an animal when Schoolteacher's odious nephews drink her breast milk. Sula, with her rose birthmark, is denied identity by her mother, and she murders a childhood friend throwing him accidentally into the Ohio River, in this way providing her conscience with a smudge never to be wiped. To the community of the Bottom, Sula is the structured and ordered evil which they should shun and to whom they should be paragonized.

In trying to trace the differences we should state that the identity of Morrison's Sula remains incomplete, submitting to the chaos and harshness of the postmodern society, leaving space for the desperate self to be undertaken by other people. While Sethe proceeds toward an investment in herself as her own "best thing" and her act, however brutal, signals individual defiance of the physical and psychological boundaries of oppression.

The two novels differ even in the ending they are provided with by Morrison. So, if *Beloved* is concluded with the putting offstage of the ghost-like girl and Sethe's setting off on

an interior self-quest, Sula's existence is such that even her death creates narrative gaps in the text. Her narrative continues beyond her last breath, and her post-mortem thoughts, "Well, I'll be damned...it didn't even hurt. Wait till I tell Nel!"(Morrison. *Sula*: 149), invite the reader to "wait" until a doubtful future moment deferring infinitely the closure of both book and "self." Ultimately, as far as language is concerned we conclude that whereas *Sula* capitalizes the notion of language as aprioristically corrupt, *Beloved* does not take for granted that there is only one language.

Concluding we can state that the similarities between Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved* outnumber the differences. The similarities include:the possession by both protagonists of a physical token expressive of their inner selves, the forsaking of a sense of intimacy with the self, the denial of a sense of self and place in the community, the binary consideration as victims and victimizers, and ultimately the consideration of both as scapegoats shunning off the evil of the community. The differences unfold mainly along the structural aspects of each novel In *Sula* the identity of all the characters remains incomplete in the face of the chaos and harshness of the postmodern society, while in *Beloved* the minor characters remain discrete entities. *Beloved* is provided with an open end, the author puts offstage the ghost-like creature and sets Sethe on an interior self-quest. While in *Sula* the end is provided with a narrative gap created by death and unlikely to be filled in by anything else. Technically speaking, *Sula* is built on the notion that language is aprioristically corrupt, while *Beloved* is based on the denial of the existence of just one language.

## CONCLUSIONS

Postmodernism, with its focus on the presence of uncertainty and inconsistency, considers the subject as fragmented, with no essential core of identity and in a continual state of dissolution.

Morrison who emphasizes that it is while attempting to delve deeper into the self, we become aware of its multiplicity and indefinable character, has adopted the same demise of the postmodern self. While unfolding the diverse facets of the multidimensional postmodern self, Morrison considers femaleness as an ongoing conflict between being an authentic adult, and an acceptable female, and collectivity, a way of recovering the lost self through being recycled. To her, the I is enshrouded in she and can only be understood by external definition.

According to Morrison (2003), in a world made up of rhetoric and of linguistic indeterminacy, the self must defer to the arbitrariness of all interactions. It is the history of the African Americans themselves, that leads negroes into losing contact with their land and community, and involves them in constant identity crises. In a society where the soil is common property linked to tradition, the humans are marked by a preoccupation for the retention of an integrated, acceptable self, and the nation is considered as a house of mirrors in which each group is reflected.

In a fiction, which is essentially about the character's losses and displacement, Morrison has consistently focused on the quest for self –acceptance and wholeness. Morrison's *Sula*, in the way she is depicted by the author, is at once all self and no self, egoless and consciously resisting definition. Adopting the role of both a victim and a victimizer, she slashes off the tip of her finger in defying the masculine supremacy, and causes the death of her friend by helping him climb the tree, and then swinging him down. To Nel, the repressed self develops like the oldest cry she is not able to exhale, and the enforced alienation leads into the dissolution of her static life by a fine, long and loud cry.

Speaking about her work, Morrison states that *Sula* and *Nel* should be considered as two different sides of a woman, which every one of us must try to reconcile. The former, conveys

the image of a freely imagined selfhood, and the latter, that of fitting to collective consciousness. The similarity of characterization "two throats and one eye"(Morrison, *Sula* 89), and the synchronicity of actions (the soil digging episode and the mud imagery), results into a blurring and fusion of their private selves. While Sula offends people in the town by her otherness, Nel contends to have found a comfortable haven in the society, which in fact can be called anything but "selfhood". While the two girls metaphorically explore their inner kindling of early adolescent sexuality, by stripping wigs of their barks, they differ in that Sula considers sexuality a way to join herself in matchless harmony, while Nel views it as a way of suiting to the communal conventions. It is Sula who consciously sets on a quest for wholeness, the one who gets overwhelmed by the impossibility of reaching such a state, and this is more markedly highlighted in the novel through the episode of the dandelion spores.

In a community, which seems to define itself by the outlaw, as by the paragon, Sula consumptively wavers in between social and individual identity, while Nel is absorbed by the self-diminishing wish for respectability and survival? Thus, in between the two, it is Nel who tries to embrace a sense of collectivity, but who ends up losing the sense of individuality. Stumbling across physical evidence of Ajax's identity, Sula further conveys Morrison's consideration of the relativity of experience and the respective meaning variability. As far as symbolism is concerned, the birthmark represents the various perceptual perspectives, the epigraph Sula's final isolation, and the dedication, the loss of a self that was never found.

*Beloved* unfolds the history of a self both distorted and revived by individual consciousness, striving to anchor on the "other", and at the same time remain integrated in the face of a fragmented and unacceptable existence. Psychically, geographically and temporally floating between the two worlds, *Beloved's* self appears fragmented and decentered to the point



that she can not remember when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. Sethe's split and projected self takes shape in the stream-of-consciousness soliloquy chapters and in the concern that there is nothing left of her to be taken care of and to be bathed. If Beloved's loss of the tooth, marks the beginning of her dissolution, Denver's exile from 124 marks the beginning of her social integration and self-possession. Her alternative consideration as a separate self and as a fused complementary one seems to originate in the incredible thirst and the alleged pregnancy prefigured by Sethe. The episode of trying to get cider in the cold house, embodies the merging of Beloved's and Denver's selves.

The interrelation between self and the "other" starts with the birth of Beloved "an act of bringing the other through the self", and ends with the attempt to achieve psychic wholeness by accepting the reintegrating the past memories and the present situations. From a consideration as subjects, respectively along the articulation of the unspeakable past and the questioning of "me" as her best thing, Paul D and Sethe shift into their consideration as objects. For Paul D this condition happens when after an escape attempt he learns the dollar value of his "weight, his heart, his brain and his future", while for Sethe, when she undergoes the examinations of Schoolteacher's nephews, and when she prostitutes with the stone-carver. The emerging of Beloved as a ghost-like creature represents the return of the past that demands to be worked through and not forgotten.

The spiritual devastation wrought by slavery is such that even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, claiming ownership of a freed self is even more difficult than isolation itself. Accordingly, Baby Suggs, can make nothing of the privilege of being free, and the sense of hearing her heart beat, while Paul D can hardly realize the opening of his tobacco tin. The self of the characters in the novel, starts to unfold as they develop their confrontation with the expected communal

scapegoating. The circular pattern of female identity, the linguistic indeterminacy and the marked symbolism deny the novel of the traditional narrative closure.

In Morrison's treatment of the postmodern self in *Sula* and in *Beloved*, the similarities outnumber the differences. The physical tokens carried by the protagonists of each novel, namely the chokecherry tree and the birthmark, unfold the intricate journey from selfhood to collectivism, and again to a sense of loss of the self. Nevertheless, while faced with the chaos and harshness of the postmodern society, Sethe sets off on an interior quest of the self, thereby leaving space for the desperate quest to be undertaken by other people.

Denied of a sense of self and place in the community, and involved in an uncentered existence which considers them both as victims and victimizers, the protagonists of *Sula* and *Beloved* absorb the attributed characteristics and the assigned stereotypizations to such a degree that they become themselves animal-like and uncivilized. It is through paragonizing to the acclaimed scapegoats, that the communities of the two novels binds their existence and confer sense to their sense of self. Provided with an open-end, the two novels respectively consider language, as aprioristically corrupt and as multi-existential.

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