

# AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO TONI MORRISON'S INTERCULTURAL WORD

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**Abstract:** *In a growing multicultural world, the connections and interactions between individuals become more and more complex. This idea is present throughout Toni Morrison's novels, but especially Sula. This paper will use intersectionality as a basic approach in an attempt to analyze the multicultural, multifaceted world of individuals with distinctive past and backgrounds. The aim is to highlight the need for a specific approach to eliminating intercultural barriers in communication.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication, barriers, Toni Morrison, intersectionality.*

Toni Morrison's fiction challenges the way race and racism are constructed in the United States by highlighting how both whites and blacks try to control the experience of the African-American individual. In this respect, *Sula* presents the readers with what is perhaps one of the biggest issues debated by contemporary African-American literature: the double oppression African-American women face and the ways in which they can break free of this oppression, because not only are they women but they are also black. Unfortunately, in the end, the heroine, *Sula*, suffers because of the treatment and discrimination that result from the intersection of these two dimensions: race and gender.

According to Bernard Bell, African-American individuals experience a so-called "double vision"<sup>1</sup>, which arises when they have to reconcile the definitions placed on them by others with how they formulate their own identity. In time, this leads to an increasing effort to maintain one's own individuality while at the same time conforming to the norms and values that the community expects one to conform to. This paper aims to analyze the way in which Toni Morrison approaches the idea of double vision by focusing on two patterns present in the novel: doubles and couples. Moreover, it will attempt to show that these pairings were chosen specifically by the author because they are intersectional in themselves.

The questions that I will be looking at in the analysis of the use of doubles and couples as a means of highlighting the double oppression felt by African-American women are: To what extent does the African-American family and community influence decisions and attitudes about important events in life (marriage, for

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Bell, *A Guide to Contemporary African-American Fiction*, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 114.

example)? How does Toni Morrison use doubles and couples to emphasize the double oppression based on race and gender? and To what extent are the pairs present in the novel intersectional in themselves?

The project aims to provide a different approach to studying both literature and sociology by looking at a contemporary African-American text through an intersectional lens and focusing on the intra-community discrimination. Whereas the majority of scholarly articles which discuss *Sula* in this way focus on the white treatment of African-Americans in the novel, I will analyze the role which one's own community plays in discriminating African-American women.

Morrison's fiction constitutes a critique of race and racism in the United States, by looking at the black experience within the white dominance and resistance to change. As Morrison herself has stated in *Playing in the Dark*, most of her work is a "running commentary on race theory and cultural practice and how each shapes the other"<sup>2</sup>.

In this respect, *Playing in the Dark*, her work of nonfiction is concerned with the way race and gender have defined American literature and race. Morrison is particularly concerned with the way literature reflects a racialized society, "and not in the recognizable way blacks are marginalized in texts – to provide local color – but in a more systematic way"<sup>3</sup>.

The black presence is inextricably and unavoidably bound to the American life<sup>4</sup>, says Morrison, and this is reflected in literature. As it has been in society historically, in literature, "blacks are not given full stature as agents of their own fictional destinies"<sup>5</sup>. Instead, the black character is one-dimensional, and the black experience created by white imagination is reduced to stereotypes and symbols of otherness: immorality, ignorance, cowardice, enslavement and servility.

In order to better grasp the structure and nature of Morrison's arguments in *Playing in the Dark*, as well as to define some of the notions used throughout this paper, a closer look at some of the concepts used by Morrison is necessary. First of all, it is important to note that the double structure appears not only throughout *Sula*, but also throughout Toni Morrison's fiction. For the writer, the motif of the double describes not so much a shared (as in, divided and split) form of existence, but as "an adventure out of the confines of the self into extended possibilities of existence"<sup>6</sup>, since "double" characters in her novels choose to share aspects of their existence with each other and explore mutual interests. Therefore, when Morrison talked about writing *Sula*, she stated that she did not visualize two distinct characters, but a complex and dual relationship as a starting point: "I wanted to throw *Sula's* relationship with another woman into relief. Those two

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<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Vintage, New York, 1993, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Lucille Fultz, *Playing with Difference*, University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> *ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Harding, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels*. Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 1994, p. 75.

women – that too is us, those two desires, to have your adventure and safety. So I just cut it up.”<sup>7</sup>

In *A World of Difference*, Wendy Harding formulates a very interesting interpretation of the conceptual basis used by Morrison, by pointing out that the double relationship is an occasion for the characters to see unity in multiplicity and the possibility of identity in otherness<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, she takes Morrison’s definition of the double vision of blacks (who have to reconcile the definitions placed on them with how they formulate their own identity) and develops it, by highlighting its social aspect: the double vision, Harding states, leads to the “[African-American] double experience”<sup>9</sup>, which arises out of trying to distance oneself from and at the same time try to live up to a variety of roles imposed by one’s community. This very interesting comment paves the way for the questions tackled in this paper, related to the impact of the African-American community on one’s personal growth and how the same community can discriminate against its own members if they choose not to follow prescribed ways of behavior.

Although the notion of “couple” is not specifically used by Morrison, Tommy Lott is the first to introduce it in regards to Toni Morrison’s work and defines it as a relationship that has the same working proposition as the doubles, the difference residing in the fact that the two elements forming do not substantially influence one another, although they are remarkably similar in what concerns their mindset.

The novel’s plot unfolds in Bottom, a black community in Ohio. Readers are first introduced to Shadrack, who had fought in World War I and now lives in Bottom. Because the war has scarred him so much, he tries to reorder his life by dealing with his fear of death in a most unusual way: he invents a National Suicide Day, where people who are afraid of dying can commit suicide and “get it out of their way”<sup>10</sup>.

At the same time, the novel compares and contrasts two families, Nel’s and Sula’s. Nel’s family rigidly follows social conventions in an attempt to create a stable home, although it lacks the true warmth of a family. In this context, Nel starts questioning the very traditional and conventional life her mother expects her to live throughout her entire grown-up existence. At the opposite end is Sula’s family is very different, which is described by the townspeople as being “eccentric” and “loose” because it did not follow the norms and conventions respected by the rest of the community.

Despite all of these differences, Sula and Nel become very attached to each other in their teenage years. After high school, Nel chooses to marry and settles into the conventional role of wife and mother, while Sula leaves Bottom in order to live an independent life, marked by a total disregard for social conventions. She has many affairs, some with white men. However, she finds people following the same boring routines elsewhere, so she returns to the Bottom and to Nel.

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<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Harding, *A World of Difference*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> *ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula*, Vintage, New York, 2004, p. 22.

Upon her return, the town regards Sula as the very personification of evil for her blatant disregard of social conventions and their hatred in part rests upon Sula's interracial relationships. Because of her constant and intentional disregard for rules and norms, Nel breaks off her friendship with Sula. After Sula's death, Nel begins to reanalyze her past attitudes toward her friend, and realizes that she had treated Sula in an unfair manner. Moreover, she admits to herself that she had too quickly clung to social conventions in an effort to define herself as the good half in their relationship.

In order to fully grasp the analysis of the relationships present, an overview of the basic concepts that will be used throughout the paper is needed. Intersectionality is a sociological paradigm which looks at the way in which various socially constructed categories interact and shape one another. Its basic assumption is that the classical approach to analyzing oppression, based on race, gender, ethnicity, class and so on does not reflect the true complexity of the social environment, because these dimensions do not have separate and independent effects, but rather intersect and influence one another. The end result is what Bart Landry calls "interlocking systems of oppression."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, understanding oppression through an intersectional lens means accepting the fact that race, as well as class or gender or ethnicity interact and shape the way discriminated groups are treated. For example, in order to better understand the oppression of black women in the United States, one must look at the way the social structures and social environment are influenced by race, class or gender. Of course, there are many other intersecting dimensions that can be taken into consideration, depending on the social group that is investigated: for example, sexuality, religion, nationality, disability, in any combination.

According to Leslie McCall, there are three perspectives on using intersectionality to analyze the complex nature of oppression in society: the intercategorical analysis, the intracategorical analysis and the anticategorical analysis. Since this paper will deal with the second type of analysis (intracategorical), I will be focusing on a definition of this approach.

McCall believes that the intracategorical analysis "recognizes the apparent shortcomings of existing social categories and it questions the way in which they draw boundaries of distinction"<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, this approach does not completely reject the importance of categories, "but rather it recognizes the relevance of social categories to the understanding of the modern social experience"<sup>13</sup>. Moreover it attempts to reconcile these contrasting views by focusing on individuals who cross the boundaries of constructed categories, in an effort to understand the ways in which various dimensions that exist in the social environment intersect and shape each other.

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<sup>11</sup> Bart Landry, *Race, Class and Gender: Theory and Methods of Analysis*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 2007, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Tommy Lott, *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing, London, 2003, p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 225.

The manner in which Toni Morrison chooses to explore the double oppression black women face is very interesting: she develops two female characters who do not feel complete by themselves. They also represent two extremes, as is obvious in the description of their homes and families. In Nel Wright's home, there are too many directions and rules, and as a result her house is "incredibly orderly"<sup>14</sup>. In Sula Peace's house there are no directions or rules, and the result is "a household of throbbing disorder"<sup>15</sup>. Interestingly enough, these conclusions are not drawn by the inhabitants of the homes, but by the narrator, who adopts such a tone as to suggest that "order" and "disorder" are the terms used by the black community to describe their households. In this respect, even their last names are significant: to be (w)right means to follow the path that society expects you to follow and abide by its rules; to be (at) peace is to be allowed the freedom to be who you want to be and follow your own path. Therefore, "the two of them together could have made a wonderful single human being" (13) that would reconcile both sides of the issue: being your own person while at the same time living by the rules prescribed by the community.

In the same vein, the concept of the "doubles" (Nel and Sula) is also used in order to question the traditional good/bad opposition in terms of how African-Americans view one another. Jason Bouson describes how "blacks are encouraged to develop disgust and contempt for bad, black behavior and to see such behavior as sinful"<sup>16</sup>.

In building up the image of Nel and Sula as doubles, Morrison gives indications throughout the novel of how the two women are actually two halves of one person. For example, when Sula returns to Bottom, Nel thinks that her friend's return was "like getting an eye back" and that talking to Sula "had always been a conversation with herself"<sup>17</sup>. Another indication of this is found in the following passage: "Their friendship was so close, they themselves has difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's"<sup>18</sup>. Their status as only half a person makes both of them go out on a quest to become whole.

The causes of Nel and Sula's sudden estrangement offers Morrison an opportunity to examine the way both characters react to the values and expectations of the African-American community. "Each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male" (which again emphasizes the double oppression of black women, based on race and gender) "[and] that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be"<sup>19</sup>. However, in the end, only Sula appears to take charge of her own existence without the permission or approval of her family or community.

Nel's approach to becoming whole is to take refuge in an unequal marriage. For Nel's mother, marriage is one of the conditions of living that defines a

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<sup>14</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula*, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, SUNY Press, New York, 2000, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.

woman's place and Nel accepts a similar arrangement for herself. "Nel does not choose Jude; she accepts his choosing her as a way of completing himself"<sup>20</sup>. In marrying Jude, Nel gives up her youthful dreams of "trips she would take"<sup>21</sup> and being independent. In essence, she gives up herself<sup>22</sup> "by wrapping herself up in the conventional mantle of sacrifice and martyrdom, just like every other woman in the community" (Mbalia 87. In the end, Nel proves that her effort to escape what had been already prescribed for her (role as a mother and wife) is not enough, because – although she questioned the validity of abiding by social norms – the importance of following conventions had been instilled into her throughout her entire life. In this respect, the presence and role of Nel's mother should not be overlooked. Helene Wright, Nel's mother, is a middle-class, respectable woman in the Bottom community. She is described as being "an impressive woman who wins all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority" and she "rises grandly to the occasion of motherhood"<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, the novel presents Helene as a mother who enjoys "manipulating her daughter" and acting as a repressive force which will calm down any attempts on Nel's side to disregard conventions. As a result, Nel becomes "obedient and polite", as her mother gradually "drives her daughter's imagination underground"<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, it is obvious why, years later, Nel has difficulties in reconciling her individualism with the roles the black community expects her to play.

Sula is different. She resists any authority or control, an aspect obvious even from Sula's childhood days when she would go up to her attic to run away from and mark her resistance to tradition. She rejects the advice to settle down and have babies, replying "I don't want to make somebody else, I want to make myself"<sup>25</sup>, again pointing out her unwillingness to give in to the pressures of norms and expectations. Later on, she is surprised and saddened by Nel's choosing Jude over her, since she had not expected Nel to behave "the way the others would have"<sup>26</sup>. But not even the prospect of losing someone who is so close to her is enough of an incentive to draw Sula to conventionality.

An interesting aspect of the relationship between the "doubles" is the fact that Nel's discovery of me-ness leads to her friendship with Sula. This points to the connection between Nel's potential to be free and Sula's freedom, as Morrison purposefully places middle-class Nel (who is light skinned) side by side with lower-class Sula (who is darker skinned), in an effort to address the racist stereotypes that lower-class blacks are immoral and disorderly. In this respect, the novel and its characters prove that middle-class and respectable is not always the status one would desire, since it could also include restraint and repression.

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<sup>20</sup> Lucille Fultz, *Playing with Difference*, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula*, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> As a child she had rejected her mother's rules by whispering to herself "I'm me.... I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me...."

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

Sula and Shadrack form what J. Brooks Houston calls a “shameless couple”, which is meant to emphasize the shaming racist stereotypes of the black Jezebel<sup>27</sup> and “the degenerate black madman” within the African-American community. What is more, according to Wendy Harding, the couple also presents us with a male and female version of the “bad nigger folk hero who is a social outcast”<sup>28</sup>. Both Nel and Shadrack avoid being around people and thus, to the rest of the African-American community, they appear to be dangerous and in need of restrictions and control. Therefore, the novel not only presents us with the possibility that not all black characters/individuals are alike (contrary to what the whites might believe), but that racism and racist discourse exist within the community that is actually supposed to protect Sula and Shadrack from the outsiders, the whites. Interestingly enough, Toni Morrison places black-white relations on a secondary level to allow for a greater focus on the struggles within the African-American community: Sula and Shadrack are pushed aside by the blacks just because they do not adhere to their norms and expectations.

Looking closely at the narrative, one notices that the two descriptions of the madman, Shadrack, are found in the opening and closing parts of the novel, thus pointing out that his experiences related to oppression come to a full circle and that black men are never truly able to escape the systematic trauma inflicted upon them by the white society. The beginning of the novel presents the horrifying experience of Shadrack during World War I, when he witnesses a soldier’s head being shot off, and sees “the drip and slide of brain tissue down his back”<sup>29</sup>. The impact this has on Shadrack and his subsequent trauma subtly point to the hypocrisy of white society at that time: although African-American men were seen as not being good enough (to be integrated into society), they were good enough to be sent to France to fight in the war, only to return and find that they are still discriminated against. “Trauma can be both overwhelming and disorganizing and can lead to the feeling that one is unsafe in one’s body and that one’s emotions and thoughts are out of control”<sup>30</sup>; this is obvious in Shadrack’s reaction to these horrendous events.

Toni Morrison does not present us with a continuous narrative, but rather chooses to jump directly to a year later (when Shadrack is sitting in a hospital bed) in order to emphasize the post-traumatic amnesia that he is suffering from. After witnessing body parts being blown off he now has recurrent nightmares about possessing gigantic, monster-like hands. When he is finally released from the hospital, Shadrack is so traumatized that he believes he has “no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch”<sup>31</sup>, an obvious allusion to slavery and the status of the slaves, who were required to purge their identities. After he is arrested for vagrancy and thrown in jail, he confronts his

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<sup>27</sup> Which refers to the ongoing portrayal in history of African-American women as lascivious, alluring, lewd, promiscuous individuals who use their seductive skills to tempt men.

<sup>28</sup> Wendy Harding, *A World of Difference*, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It’s Kept*, p. 160.

<sup>31</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula*, p. 92.

blackness in the water of the toilet bowl and, for the first time in his life, is relieved to see that his hands are both monstrous claws, but rather just “courteously still, black hands”<sup>32</sup>. He then goes to sleep, “the first sleep of his new life”<sup>33</sup>. Upon going back home, Shadrack creates National Suicide Day, meant to help people confront the idea of death for one day a year and “get it out of the way” so that the rest of the year will be “safe and free”. By inserting this aspect in the narrative, Toni Morrison is trying to point out not only the constant oppression of blacks, but also the omnipresence of racism (Shadrack walks around holding a rope, an obvious allusion to the days of slavery and lynching). According to Frantz Fanon, all these features that readers see in Shadrack contribute to building one single, clear picture, that of “a brute beast” with “no use in the world”. This is also a reference to a specific historical period (end of 19<sup>th</sup>, beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century) of oppression of blacks, when whites used the image of African-Americans as beasts as a pretext to lynch them and maintain the status quo. Their argument was that no beast can be fully aware of its actions and therefore it should be stopped before it does any harm.

Jason Bouson discusses the ongoing tendency to view black men as subhuman by referring to the jail episode, when Shadrack has an epiphany while looking at his hands: historically, black men have been robbed of their individuality by being told that they are brutes and beasts and have no use in the world. Shadrack, who in the beginning is presented as a very traumatized man sees his black hands and “experiences a moment of racial recognition”<sup>34</sup>, according to Bouson, that is, he realizes that he does not have to depend on others to know who he is, he does not have to rely on others to tell him what he is. Moreover, the incident can be seen as a modified version of the myth of Narcissus that draws on the white racist equation between blackness and dirtiness, which is meant to emphasize Shadrack’s discovery of his stigmatized racial identity.

Although at this point, after looking at the couple Sula/Shadrack most critics seem to conclude that “both [Shadrack and Sula] are misanthropes and social outcasts” (Furman 45), I believe this is not the case. In fact, it is my opinion that Morrison purposefully created this “couple” in order to show the difference in treatment that Shadrack and Sula receive from their community and, at the same time, the oppression that Sula (but not Shadrack) faces, which is directly tied to the double oppression that has been discussed so far. At the beginning of the novel, the Bottom community wonders “what Shadrack was all about”, but also “what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman was all about”<sup>35</sup>, all the while suggesting that maybe their behaviors do not perfectly fit into the expectations of the community. However, even if Shadrack goes on to create a National Suicide Day which is, in all respects, a shocking event, and Sula goes off into the world and sleeps with various (white) men, in the end just one of them is gradually welcomed by the community, which is “at first wary of him, but [then] unthinkingly accepts

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept*, p. 81.

<sup>35</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula*, p. 8.



him”<sup>36</sup>. In other words, both Shadrack and Sula are pariahs, but up to a point, where the former ceases to be pushed away by the community and is accepted just like any other individual among them, while the latter is still being cast aside for refusing to take on the prescribed roles of wife and mother and questioning the traditional values of the black community. In this respect, it is obvious that Sula is facing the double oppression, based on both race and gender: first, because she is black she is expected to follow the norms imposed by the respectable members of the community and second, because she is a woman, her transgressions are not as easily overlooked as those of a man, who is in the end accepted for who he is, although his actions are peculiar and disturbing.

Dorothea Mbalia advances a theory for this discrepancy in the treatment of the two individuals. Both characters experience the various forms of oppression<sup>37</sup>, but their reactions and solutions to it are different: Shadrack, who has “no past, no language, no tribe, no source”<sup>38</sup> longs for a place in the community, while Sula struggles against the community while trying to enjoy her fullest potential as a human being. In other words, it is the longing for a community and recognition of the need for a community that makes Shadrack be accepted in the end, as he chooses to stay within and not outside of the black community. On the other hand, “Sula fights alone and she does not manage to connect her oppression with the oppression of the entire community”<sup>39</sup>. And, as it appears in the end, without such a connection, her struggle is in vain.

Through her paired characters, Nel and Sula, as well as Sula and Shadrack, Toni Morrison explores issues concerning oppression based on race and gender in what concerns African-American women. At the same time, she examines the construction of black femininity (what it means to be a black woman in an African-American community such as Bottom), by using the dangerously free Sula to investigate the stereotype of the promiscuous lower-class black female and therefore highlight the existing intra-community oppression.

All in all, the novel develops as a systematic investigation of the dominant causes of the African-American women’s oppression (race and gender), by drawing attention to the fact that a group identity may discriminate against and, ultimately, oppress black women’s identities as individuals, in a search to erase differences and foster a need to belong to the black community.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> Shadrack is forced into military service by whites, while Sula is seen as evil by her own community.

<sup>38</sup> Dorothea Mbalia, *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness*, Associated University Press, London, 1991, p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> John Furman, *Toni Morrison’s Fiction*, p. 85.

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