

An Analysis of African-American Women's Trauma: A Case Study on Sula

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Abstract: The term 'trauma' was originally used only to describe physical trauma, later to describe human sufferings at the mental and psychological levels for medical, psychological, literary and other studies. Toni Morrison as an African-American writer focused on the blood and tears history of African Americans. Her beloved book *Sula* described a story of Sula who grew up in the "bottom" of the African-American community, being attacked by racial and gender discrimination, but still bravely pursued herself. Based on the trauma theory, this paper takes a series of African-American female characters in *Sula* as the research objects, and explores the three kinds of trauma that African-American women suffer in the gap between white mainstream culture and patriarchal society, namely, the loss of subjectivity, sexual discrimination and mental assimilation caused by patriarchal culture, and the alternation of generational trauma. This study hopes to enrich the research on African-American women's trauma, and helps African-American women to heal trauma and pursue freedom and equality.

1. Introduction

Sula, set in the 1920s and 1960s, was a novel written by Toni Morrison in 1974. It was based on the protagonist Sula's growing experience, describing the image of an African-American woman who dared to challenge evil practices and corrupt customs of the African-American community. The content of the book was closely related to civil rights movements and feminist movements of African Americans at that time.

Although the African-American community has ushered in free liberation at the institutional level since the US Congress confirmed on December 18, 1865 that Constitutional Amendment to Article 13 came into effect. The legal provisions could not completely eradicate the far-reaching influence and the serious discrimination of the whole American society. African Americans were still extremely marginalized in society [1]. What's more, the white society used cultural hegemony to infiltrate the so-called mainstream culture, which lowered people's cultural and national values to weaken the self-consciousness and native culture of African Americans.

World War II was a new climax of African-American civil rights movement because this international anti-fascist upsurge inspired ethnic awareness of the African-American people. Then in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States ushered in the second climax of feminism. Some African-American women gradually became sober, rational and fearless from numbness, and

actively participated in the political field for equal status and rights. But feminist movement was difficult for African-American women because African-American men opposed and even used cruel means of racism to rein in the African-American women's freedom of actions. Therefore, the African-American feminism of this period, in the extreme marginalization and the common suppression by white and African American males was still quite weak. During this period, many contemporary African-American female writers emerged, especially taking women as protagonists and getting rid of the solidified model images of women in traditional Southern literature. Tony Morrison was one of the representatives of this group of writers [2].

"Trauma" was a Greek word for "wound" originally used by the Greeks describing physical injuries [3]. As to when the word came to be used to describe human sufferings on the spiritual and psychological levels, many scholars believed that it is originated with Freud. For example, Cathy Caruth [4] thought that Freud's important work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920 laid the theoretical foundation for the emergence and development of trauma criticism.

Freud first used the term "psychological trauma" with Broil in 1893 and pointed out the great influence of psychological trauma on traumatic neuroses. In 1895, he published *Studies in Hysteria* [5] to explore the relationship between traumatic memory and painful childhood experience of hysterics, which opened a precedent for trauma research. After witnessing the cruelty of the first World War and the suffering of countless people, he began to analyze depression, war trauma, cultural trauma, and deeply analyzed the social roots, psychological symptoms and psychological mechanisms behind them. His series of important discussions laid research foundation of trauma criticism. Then in 1952, Fanon put forward a theory of post-colonial racial trauma in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*. He pointed out that from the colonial period to the present age, the African-American groups were under the oppression of the white society, countries and regions. He thoroughly explored the collective existence, needs and psychology with race as the unit, from the white dominated psychoanalytic paradigm to the ethnic comparative psychological paradigm; from the individual trauma to the ethnic cultural trauma. In 1980, American Psychiatric Association's the *Handbook Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* for the first time officially included "post-traumatic stress disorder", illustrating the recognition and emphasis from psychiatrics on trauma. In the early 1990s, Cathy Caruth, an American scholar, first proposed "trauma theory" in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* [4], she defined "trauma" as someone's "extremely unusual experience of a sudden or catastrophic event". Her research has attracted wide attention, and since then researches on "trauma" have appeared frequently in people's vision.

After searching relevant literature, it is found that the number of research on the African-American women's trauma and the trauma analysis of *Sula* is very limited. Although many scholars have mentioned that the trauma of African American women in their books, there is little systematic analysis and research on trauma theories. Consequently, under the boom of civil rights movement and feminist movement, the research on the theme of "African American women's trauma" has a lot of room for development. The author also hopes that this study can help women in the world to pursue freedom and equality.

2. Loss of subjectivity

Subjectivity refers to self-confidence and recognition of values of national traditions, language, belief, etc. For a long time, African Americans have been colonized, belittled, discriminated, segregated and impacted by strong mainstream culture, which made them lose their subjectivity. Some of them were not proud of the existence of the nation and its rich heritages, or were even ashamed of their skin color, appearance, language and ancestors.

Helene was a typical example who lost her subjectivity. Firstly, Helene's surname "Wright" was similar to "white" in pronunciation, suggesting that the family accepted the white values as well as codes of conduct; and removing the "Wright" of "W" means "right", indicating she strongly supported the "right" orders accepted by the white society. Secondly, what's more surprising was that she was dissatisfied with her African-American name, and even changed her original name into Helene, a typical white name. Thirdly, Helene controlled power in the African-American church, seemingly showing her strong support of national culture, but as a matter of fact it is a way of establishing a ruling class similar to the white society in the African-American community, and of gaining the so-called superiority. Fourthly, Helene was extremely ashamed of her mother's status, not allowing her mother to be close to her baby daughter, nor giving Nel any chances to learn Creole. Fifthly, when Helene strayed into the white carriage by mistake, in the face of the white conductor's rude attitude and earwax removal, the normally supercilious and elegant lady showed a face of begging and flattering with sweat and tremble. This series of behaviors showed her disdain and disgust for her African-American identity, and she was deeply assimilated and enslaved by the white people.

The white society disintegrated, weathered, eroded and burned the traditional values and subjectivity of African Americans. Some African-American women represented by Helene suffered from inferiority and pain brought by the white superiority and national inferiority for a long time. Under the huge national trauma, they gradually lost their self-confidence in culture and abandoned their African-American identities. With the attitude of distortion and alienation, they hoped to affiliate "lofty" white society, and struggled in the cracks of African-American and white communities

3. Trauma caused by patriarchal culture

3.1 Sexual discrimination

In patriarchal culture, men and women played very different and unequal roles in sexual relations. Men's sexual needs, advantages and oppression were absolutely rationalized, but women were always the targets of criticism. As the objects of men's erotism, women were not allowed to have sexual desires and gender dominance. Otherwise, they would be stigmatized with insulting labels. This phenomenon was not only harmful to women's bodies and reputation, but also a deep reflection of their sexist culture.

Sula and Nel began to suffer from this experience when they were 12 years old. They were closely watched by a group of men of different ages with cougar-like eyes, commented with interest, and ridiculed as "chicks" in an obscene tone. Therefore, in such social environment, Sula, who was sexually open, was reviled by all parties. Her bold sexual behaviors and the concept of "out of line" had a great impact on the original patriarchal society. The majority of African-American women at "Bottom" were jealous and resentful of these sexually open women and did their best to discredit and mock them, but interestingly, these African-American men treated sexually open women with different attitudes. Men in the "Bottom" loved and respected Eva, who loved "flirting, kissing and laughing" casually. And for Hannah who often had affairs with her friends' or neighbor's husbands, local men often defended her to protect her from abuse. However, it was men who strictly accused Sula of committing immoral crimes, because unlike Eva and Hannah, Sula didn't satisfy the self-esteem of African-American men and did not rely on them physically and mentally. She always willfully abandoned men after one night stands, resulting in strong anger of men in the community. Sula was despised by Eva and other men, women, and children, and became a culprit of all the pain, misfortune and accidents in the "Bottom". African-American women were placed on the edge of society as "the other", oppressed by gender discrimination and sexual violence under the label of

‘good wife’ and "chastity".

3.2 Mental assimilation

In the patriarchal cultural hegemony society, many African-American women were poisoned by this kind of imposed ideology. They, like frogs in warm water, slowly were assimilated to accept their roles, and even actively became the defenders of sexism to attack radical awakening women.

The first kind of assimilation was that some African-American women accepted the regulations of the patriarchal society towards women, such as Helene. According to her, marriage was the most important thing in a woman's life, related to the happiness of one's life. Consequently, Nel's wedding was the culmination of all her existence, thoughts and behaviors over the years. As her daughter, Nel obeyed the shackles of society on women, narrowly regarding family as the whole of life and forgetting her self-development. So Nel was devastated when she found her husband was having an affair. Compared with the departure of her lover, what made her more painful was her disillusionment with her happy life. The concept was also reflected in Nel's visit to the dying Sula. Nel felt Sula was a poor guy living alone, commenting on Sula, "You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't". Women like Helene and Nel submitted to the traditional housewife status of a good wife and a good mother, accepted meaning of existence given by the patriarchal society, and bowed to the patriarchal power.

The second manifestation of being assimilated was worship and maintenance of patriarchy by some African-American women, such as Eva. As a divorced mother of three kids, Eva not only provide for her children, built her own house, but also gave kind assistance to poor people and vagrants, seemingly an independent woman. But her words and deeds still had a strong patriarchal concept. For example, Eva often favored men in big and small matters, criticizing many women for not serving their husbands well and not taking good care of the housework. Her behavior and attitude indicated that in her heart, she also agreed with the fixed division of labor between men and women. In essence, her self-consciousness didn't awaken, because the source of her constant struggle was not for self-development but a strong maternal love and hatred for her husband. She was forced to stand in the position of men in the family and still insisted on taking men as metric and value to safeguard men's interests, playing a male-centered subordinate role. Another example is Sula's mother Hannah, who relied on men to the extent that she could not live without the favor of them, filled inner emptiness by seeking different lovers. Such African-American women as the accomplices of men were not a minority in Sula, and they reviled and spurned Sula's sexual liberation

3.3 Trans-generational trauma

The horror of African-American women's trauma lied in that it would be transmitted to their next generation. The new generation of young African-American women would be controlled by the mainstream culture, taught by their parents, would be brainwashed to endure the persecution and imprisonment in silence, or would refuse the cultural colonization to fight bravely for freedom and self. However, regardless of their thoughts and behaviors, African-American girls would receive different degrees and types of injuries and devastation.

Nel was a typical submissive representative of the first group. Nel lived in a home full of white decorations symbolizing the aesthetics of white people since she was a child, accepting Helene's practice of raising her nose and straightening her hair to get close to a white girl. There was a period that Nel's self-consciousness has been awakened, when she saw her mother flattering the white people in the white carriage. She looked at herself in the mirror and said with a shudder, "I am me.

I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" .However, Helene had a deep influence on her mind, so Nel finally got married and her life was trapped in a pattern repeated from generation to generation.

Although there were too many similarities between Sula and Nel, Sula was more independent and open-minded under the influence of her grandmother and mother, and was the next generation of the second kind of struggle. Sula took the initiative to choose her own sexual partners and never dressed up deliberately to please men, using her body to restore the true state of sex. So in a society full of racism and sexism, she was attacked and stigmatized. A lot and even her best friend Nel sneered at her before she died. Sula was a mighty woman, but a bitter and mourned warrior.

Many characters in the book have experienced the above-mentioned harms, such as Eva, Hannah, Sula, Helene's mother, Helene, Nel and Nel's daughter. The trauma was hitting the soul of every generation of African-American women and shattering their personalities.

4. Conclusion

Based on the perspective of trauma theory, this article takes a series of female characters in Sula as research objects to research the racial trauma suffered by African-American women under the double oppression of race and patriarchy.

First of all, in the 1920s and 1960s, some African-American women lost their subjectivity under the racial inequality of "white superiority". Secondly, African-American women suffered a lot as a result of patriarchal culture. Women were forced to submit to subordinated to sexual roles to meet men's psychological and physical satisfaction, otherwise they would be labeled and defamed. And many of them were assimilated by patriarchal culture. They gradually accepted their lower role than men, and even took the initiative to maintain such "norms" to show their chastity and integrity. The last one was trans-generational trauma. African-American women, growing up in the vicious cultural hegemony society, gradually became a kind of public opinion in the society, and their thoughts had the power and influence on young female generations.

African-American women, in the gap between the white mainstream culture and the male-centered culture, were a vulnerable group who needed more attention. Through the book, Morrison tells the story of the trauma experienced by African American women and reveals their enduring scars.

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