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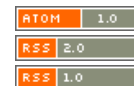
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Emasculation of Male Characters as Seen Through *Sula* by Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT

Emasculation is a drawback of slavery as it was practiced in the Americas. Men are limited in their power in order to be exploited without strong reactions. This aspect appears in *Sula* where female characters play the main roles. Male characters are shaped to be absent, irresponsible or insane. Female characters take care of the household and fight for their own survival. Children are educated by the female characters, male characters are regularly absent, some of them have deserted the household. The objective of this paper is to explain, through the emasculation system, the behaviors of some male characters such as Shadrack, Plum Peace, BoyBoy, Jude and Ajax (Albert Jacks) in *Sula* in order to provide deeper understanding to Toni Morrison's skills to deal with the conditions of Blacks in the South of the USA. This can help to understand more *Sula* which is deeply rooted in the black community with its traditions and realities.

Key words: Emasculation, Male Characters, Female Characters, *Sula*, Toni Morrison

RÉSUMÉ

L'émasculatation est un inconvénient de l'esclavage tel qu'il était pratiqué dans les Amériques. Les hommes sont limités dans leurs réactions, ce qui permet de les exploiter sans réactions énergiques. Cet aspect apparaît dans *Sula* où les personnages féminins jouent les rôles principaux. Les personnages masculins sont réputés pour être absents, irresponsables ou fous. Les personnages féminins prennent soin de la maison et se battent pour leur propre survie. Les enfants sont éduqués par les personnages féminins, les personnages masculins sont régulièrement absents, certains d'entre eux ont déserté le foyer. L'objectif de ce document est d'expliquer, à travers le système de l'émasculatation, les comportements de certains personnages masculins tels que Shadrack, Plum Peace, BoyBoy, Jude et Ajax (Albert Jacks) dans *Sula* afin d'apporter une meilleure compréhension des techniques utilisées par Toni Morrison pour peindre les conditions des Noirs dans le Sud des États-Unis. Cela peut aider à mieux comprendre *Sula* qui est profondément enracinée dans la communauté noire avec ses traditions et réalités.

Mots-clés: Émasculatation, Personnages Masculins, Les Personnages Féminins, *Sula*, Toni Morrison

INTRODUCTION

The fiction of Toni Morrison is set in the black community in order to shed light on some aspects of the Blacks living in the Americas and their nightmare. *Sula* is about the black community of the Bottom, a suburb of Medallion where live white people. This vicinity is created to depict the reality of the blacks in the USA: the male characters in the Bottom are poor, jobless, irresponsible and alienated. In fact, these male characters are emasculated. To emasculate is from Latin *emasculatus*, past participle of *emasculare* (= castrate) and is used to mean to make a man feel less male by taking away his power and confidence. In *Sula*, the female characters are better, they are brave, more successful, responsible

and let alone to take care of their children. Eva Peace can build her house where she lives with boarders:

Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept on adding things: more stairways—there were three sets to the second floor—more rooms, doors and stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other part of the house; others that you could get to only by going through somebody's bedroom. The creator and sovereign of this enormous house with the four sickle-pear trees in the front yard and the single elm in the back yard was Eva Peace, who

sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders. (p.30).

This parallel has helped to question the behaviors of the male characters who happen to be emasculated and are not able to react as normal men in the society. This psychological handicaps designed by the whites to belittle blacks has maintained them in the stage of characters who suffer instability or insanity. Shadrack and Plum, two war veterans, suffer addiction and despair; Boyboy, Jude and Ajax abandon their families running after job opportunities. Some other male characters are nameless, idle, dreamy, single, but the job is for the whites first. The racial trauma black males were submitted to in the Americas created a machine that limited their manliness in order to preserve a placid manpower for the Whites.

This work has focused on the definition of emasculation and its drawbacks on some characters, then has referred to some male characters to illustrate some aspects of the plague

DEFINITION AND CONTEXT

Definition

To emasculate an individual means to make a man feel less masculine; to deprive a man of his strength; to make something weaker or less effective; to castrate. According to Henry Epps, to emasculate means: "to castrate, to deprive of strength or vigor; weaken. Synonym: debilitate, undermine, devitalize, and soften; effeminate"¹. The black man's emasculation dates back to the African American slavery roots. Black nigger men, pregnant nigger women and their baby nigger boys were submitted to the same basic principle used in breaking a horse, combined with some more sustaining factors. In fact, horses are broken from one form of life to another: they are reduced from their natural state in nature. Whereas nature provides them with the natural capacity to take care of their offspring, people break that natural string of independence from them and thereby create a dependency status, so that they may be able to get from them useful production for their business and pleasure. During slavery, the white slave owner would castrate the black man's testicles. In addition to literally depriving the black man of his manhood, the barbaric white man would beat and rape the black woman day to day while the black man could do nothing but idly stand by as their women were scarred and taken advantage of. But the white man didn't stop there. To put fear in the Negro slaves, the white man would take the strongest male slave and beat him to death or probably go further to hang him so that all other slaves would be warned what could happen to them if they decided to disobey. The physical damage of the slave caused so many wounds that generations to come would be affected by the pain and suffering. In these conditions, male slaves became emasculated and female slaves raped at will by the masters. That's why Eldridge Cleaver, from his prison cell wrote the following apology toward female Blacks in America:

I have Returned from the dead. I speak to you now from the Here And Now. I was dead for four hundred years.

For four hundred years you have been a woman alone, bereft of her man, a manless woman. For four hundred years I was neither your man nor my own man. The white stood between us, over us, around us. The white man was your man and my man. Do not pass lightly over this truth, my Queen, for even though the fact of it has burned into the marrow of our bones and diluted our blood, we must bring it to the surface of the mind, into the realm of knowing, glue our gaze upon it and stare at it as at a coiled serpent in a baby's playpen or the fresh flowers on a mother's grave. It is to be pondered and realized in the heart, for the heel of the white man's boot is our point of departure, our point of Resolve and Return—the bloodstained pivot of our future. (But I would ask you to recall, that before we could come up from slavery, we had to be pulled down from our throne.)

Across the naked abyss of negated masculinity, of four hundred years minus my Balls, we face each other today, my Queen. I feel a deep, terrifying hurt, the pain of humiliation of the vanquished warrior. The shame of the fleet-foot d sprinter who stumbles at the start of the race. I feel unjustified. I can't bear to look into your eyes. Don't you know (surely you must have noticed by now: four hundred years!) that for four hundred years I have been unable to look squarely into your eyes? I tremble inside each time you look at me. I can feel. in the ray of your eye, from a deep hiding place, a long-kept secret you harbor. That is the unadorned truth. Not that I would have felt justified, under the circumstances, in taking such liberties with you, but I want you to know that I feared to look into your eyes because I knew I would find reflected there a merciless Indictment of my impotence and a compelling challenge to redeem my conquered manhood².

Context

The very system of slavery and the conditions of slaves work together to gnaw off the masculinity or the manhood of slaves in America. Frederick Douglass has mentioned some of these dehumanizing experiences in his narrative:

To all these complaints, no matter how unjust, the slave must answer never a word. Colonel Lloyd could not brook any contradiction from a slave. When he spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble; and such was literally the case. I have seen Colonel Lloyd make old Barney, a man between fifty and sixty years of age, uncover his bald head, kneel down upon the cold, damp ground, and receive upon his naked and toil-worn shoulders more than thirty lashes at the time. Colonel Lloyd had three sons—Edward, Murray, and Daniel,—and three sons-in-law, Mr. Winder, Mr. Nicholson, and Mr. Lowndes. All of these lived at the Great House Farm, and enjoyed the luxury of whipping the servants when they pleased, from old Barney down to William Wilkes, the coach-driver. I have seen Winder make one of the house-servants stand off from him a suitable distance to be touched with the end of his whip, and at every stroke raise great ridges upon his back³.

Whipping is just an aspect of the punishment slaves were submitted to. In *The Emasculation of the American Negro. The Systematic Exploitation, Domination, and Suppression of the American Negro* (Epps, 2016), some other aspects are developed in the following words:

Slaves were punished by whipping, shackling, hanging, beating, burning, mutilation, branding and/or imprisonment. Punishment was most often meted out in response to disobedience or perceived infractions, but slaves were also sometimes abused to assert the dominance of their master or overseer.

The mistreatment of slaves frequently included rape and the sexual abuse of women. Many slaves were killed because of resisting sexual attacks. Others sustained psychological and physical trauma. (p. 24)

Some other slaves were punished with knives, guns, field tools and nearby objects. As confirmed by Epps on page 32: "Mutilation (such as castration, or amputating ears) was a relatively common punishment during the colonial era and still used in 1830". Masters and overseers involved were protected by laws. An article of the Virginia regulations of 1705 insisted on the fact: "If any slave resists his master, correcting such a slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction, the master shall be free of all punishment, as if such accident never happened." (Epps, 38).

Behind this physical sadism exists a psychological target. Black men have been stripped of their identity and history, and have been completely brainwashed. Every opportunity is welcome to show them that they are inferior to white people:

One device evolved by the whites was to tab whatever the blacks did with the prefix "Negro." We had Negro literature, Negro athletes, Negro music, Negro doctors, Negro politicians, Negro workers. The malignant ingenuity of this device is that although it accurately describes an objective biological fact-or, at least, a sociological fact in America- it concealed the paramount psychological fact: that to the white mind, prefixing anything with "Negro" automatically consigned it to an inferior category⁴.

This psychological device is likely to take black people to consider themselves as inferior and doubt about their own capacities to be as able as the white man or even better than him. Then the black cannot believe in his ability to innovate, he becomes inactive, submitted. The war was a success for a time but became inaccurate when the blacks happened to come aware of the treachery and engaged individual and collective actions to stop it. In Toni Morrison's novel, some male characters show the stigma of emasculation and prove passive, leaving ladies to take important actions.

EMASCULATED CHARACTERS IN *SULA*

Sula is about the black community of Ohio in the South of the USA where civil rights and equality were denied to Blacks. The real story of *Sula* takes place within a frame narrative. The novel focuses almost exclusively on African-American characters, and draws upon black folk traditions and folktales. The first and last chapters take place around the year 1965. Let's remember that the Civil Rights Act was enacted

in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 to reinforce the guarantees of full citizenship provided for in the Reconstruction amendments nearly a century earlier, and marked the end of the Jim Crow system in the South. The Civil Rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's challenged institutional racism. Yet the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws which legalized segregation in the South continues to affect Black and White Americans. Being Black in America, writes Helen Mayer Hacker, "bears the mark of slavery" (Davidson, 736). She means that marks of slavery are indelible both on the physique and psyche of African-Americans. Then the desegregation of public facilities was swiftly implemented, and the rapid increase in black voting had far-reaching consequences for politics in the South and the nation as well. This period of the American history is important to underline simply to explain the behaviors of the characters interacting in the novel. Except the first and last chapters, the ten chapters in the middle take place in the years between 1919 and 1940. The setting is in an area known as "The Bottom," which is a hilly area above the valley town of Medallion, Ohio. For the most part, black inhabitants live in The Bottom and white landowners live in the valley. There is a story behind the settlement of The Bottom, a story that has become a significant piece of local lore. In the previous century, a slave owner promised his slave freedom and a piece of rich bottomland in exchange for some difficult work. The slave did the work and got his freedom; but the slave-owner played a trick on him in regard to the land. He gave the freed slave land at the top of a hill, rather than in the rich bottomland that is good for farming. He told the slave the hill was indeed bottomland--the Bottom of heaven, closer to God. The slave felt lucky to have it, but soon learned the truth of this cruel trick. The planting was difficult, the soil washed away, and the wind blew hard. In spite of the hardship, The Bottom soon developed into a lovely town with close-knit inhabitants. By 1965, the rich white neighbors in the valley have decided they like The Bottom better than their valley and proceed to level the small black town in order to build a golf course and fancy houses. The Blacks are forced to move into the valley.

Characters are placed in a context where they are under the permanent influence of the white community characterized by the idea of supremacy over the rest of the communities living in America. So the Bottom inhabitants especially male characters have developed some behaviors that deserve investigation. Some of them are selected to illustrate the stigma of slavery and the influence of Jim Crow during the very period after the Civil War and the World Wars.

Shadrack and Plum Peace

They are WW I veterans. They went to Europe to fight for equality and justice though they could not enjoy them in their own country. They came back alienated. In fact, World War I was a European conflict (1914-1918) that involved the overseas service of 200,000 African American soldiers but that, despite the initial optimism of black leaders, produced nothing likely to improve racial conditions, but a racial backlash. For most African Americans, the United States' entry into World War I in the spring of 1917 held the promise that

patriotic service could improve their opportunities and treatment in postwar America. W. E. B. Du Bois, the nation's principal African American leader, called on fellow blacks to get enrolled, for it would result in the right to vote and the right to work and the right to live without insult.

In short, America the black soldiers served during the European war of 1914 has provided, as a reward for African Americans, nothing but lynching. America in return, has disfranchised its own citizens, encouraged ignorance, and organized industry to cheat them. It has cheated them out of their land; it has cheated them out of their labor. It has confiscated their savings. It has reduced their wages. It has raised their rent. It has stolen their profit. It has taxed them without representation. It has kept them consistently and universally poor. They were disappointed and determined, more than ever, to fight unjust and the parody of democracy in America:

But today we return! We return from the slavery of uniform which the world's madness demanded us to don to the freedom of civil garb. We stand again to look America squarely in the face and call a spade a spade. We sing: This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land.

....

This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is our fatherland. It was right for us to fight. The faults of our country are our faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. We return.

We return from fighting

We return fighting

Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why⁵.

Blacks in general were disappointed and the veterans alienated. Shadrack invented his own philosophy to be able to live in his community.

Shadrack

Shadrack is a strange resident of The Bottom. He returns shell-shocked from the war and turns to alcohol for company. He often talks sensible nonsense and wanders aimlessly. He has founded his own holiday, National Suicide Day. On January 3 of every year he marches the streets of the town and invites people to commit suicide, in acknowledgment of the crazy world they all live in. In fact, he has witnessed horrible scenes on the battle field in Europe

He ran, bayonet fixed, deep in the great sweep of men flying across this field. Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring al-

together the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back. When Shadrack opened his eyes he was propped up in a small bed. Before him on a tray was a large tin plate divided into three triangles. In one triangle was rice, in another meat, and in the third stewed tomatoes⁶.

Shadrack fell unconscious and was taken to the hospital. The divided tray is the symbol of his philosophy consisting in trying to separate evils from good things, giving the impression that horrors are not coming suddenly the way they appear on the battle fields. This is simply a psychological view because dramatic events are daily realities in the Bottom. Little Chicken drowns and the bridge collapses killing people. Shadrack is simply insane and is not a balance person. As a consequence he interacts only once with Sula and stays unmarried and less than a man in the community. Plum Peace who is his comrade in arms could not find a device likely to help him live in The Bottom.

Plum peace

He is Eva's son and Hannah's brother. Plum is his mother's favorite. When he returns from the war, he is a wreck. He lives in a room downstairs in his mother's house, and spends his time sleeping, stealing, and taking drugs. Eva cannot bear to see him suffer from his drug addiction, so she douses him with kerosene and lights him on fire. As explanation, Eva said:

When he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well. I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin' back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again... I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man⁷.

Plum is not a man anymore; her mother is obliged to give him the opportunity to die like a man. He has gone back to the stage of childhood; he needs to depend on some other people for his mere needs. His manliness or his masculinity are all lost. He no longer deserves life, he is totally alienated and has become a shame for the family.

Shadrack and Plum should have been taken care of if they were not black. In fact, they need psychotherapy and detoxification after the war, but nobody cares about them because they are black and placed under the yoke of segregation. Some other characters who happen not to be veterans develop other behaviors through which it is easier to notice the presence of their lack of masculinity due to their conditions of blacks living in a hostile environment.

BoyBoy, Jude and Ajax

They have abandoned their partners because they don't know anymore how to protect wives or girlfriends. They

don't know the good behaviors ladies deserve simply because they have been in a system proper to Blacks for centuries. Eldridge Cleaver confesses the inability of the Blacks to deserve black ladies in the following words: "the white stood between us, over us, around us. The white man was your man and my man". (*Soul on Ice*, p.205). Blacks under dominion for four hundred years need time to regain the very reflex of the roles and duties of a normal man

BoyBoy

He is the husband of Eva Peace. They have three children: Hannah, Eva (Pearl) and Ralph (Plum). BoyBoy is not a good example of husband. His psychological instability takes him to appear strange vis-à-vis his household. His instability is actually due to the ideology of white hegemony prevailing in America, chiefly in the South. Toni Morrison explains his behaviors in the following terms: "After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage BoyBoy took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third". (p.32).

In fact, BoyBoy is working for a white carpenter and toolsmith who takes him to Medallion where he builds him a one-room cabin, he is given the name of the man he has worked for. This aspects corroborates the ideas defended by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*. BoyBoy is given the name of the white carpenter to become his possession. By doing so, BoyBoy has no conscience of his own existence, but believes in his own inferiority status. From that moment, it is no surprise when he leaves home and forget about his family. He has gone to Medallion with another wife and come back later to The Bottom with her. His case is a little different from that of Jude Greene.

Jude Greene

He is but twenty when he has decided to choose Nel as friend among other girls. His objective at the beginning is not to marry her not because he does not love but his job as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion does not provide him with enough income to cover his needs and the needs of his parents and their seven other children. However, Jude has engaged simply because he has become hopeful he is informed that there exists a road building project to connect it to the other towns. His dream is to be hired and work for the project, not only for money, but contribute to the building to prove his usefulness to the community: "I built that road." People would walk over his sweat for years'. (*Sula*, p. 82). He wants to do a man's job different from his hotel job. He is disappointed because the white men in charge have hired three old colored men to help them carry food and do some other small jobs. Jude is frustrated not only because he has been refused the job, but also he does not support to belong to a social group that is always given the second roles. Women can do such a job for example, he wants to experience his capacity as a man to show his manliness. His frustrations will affect his behaviors and actions in the community. Later, when Sula

has come back after ten years absence, Jude has an affair with her. Nel surprises them in the closet:

But they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor where the tie is pointing to, on all fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs. Nibbling at each other, not even touching, not even looking at each other, just their lips, and when I opened the door they didn't even look for a minute and I thought the reason they are not looking up is because they are not doing that. (p.105)

As a consequence, Jude has left The Bottom leaving Nel alone with three children. He has never come back. Nel is obliged to find a job working as a chambermaid in the same hotel Jude has worked in.

In short, Jude and BoyBoy have left their wives with three children each. Nel cannot find a new husband, Eva has stayed unmarried, they have worked to take care of their children alone. "For four hundred years you have been a woman alone, bereft of her man, a manless woman" repeated Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul On Ice* on page 236. Toni Morrison has silenced Jude and BoyBoy giving the opportunity to ladies to be on stage up to the end of the novel to highlight this period when African American men were emasculated. Jude, as well as BoyBoy are just two examples, Ajax is another particular case in the novel.

Ajax (Albert Jacks)

He is the handsome black Bottom resident who first notices Sula and Nel when they are about twelve years old. Years later, he has an affair with Sula, but ends it when she becomes too attached to him. In fact, Albert Jacks loves but his mother and enjoys listening to her. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison has written about this on page 126: "Other than his mother, who sat in her shack with six younger sons working roots, he had never met an interesting woman in his life". As a matter of fact, Ajax is a good dreamer. He is always thinking of airplanes, pilots, and the sky, things he cannot afford. His relationships with Sula are fundamentally based on a simple curiosity to discover all that is said about her. Anyway, he can draw a type of similarity between her behaviors and his mother's habits. He is jobless and has no specific objectives in life: "The rest of the time, the time he was not watching his mother's magic or thinking of airplanes, he spent in the idle pursuits of bachelors without work in small towns". (*Sula*, p. 127). The Bottom offers no job opportunity than what whites in The Medallion can provide. Idle hands are said to be the devil's playground, he goes to Sula for curiosity and sexual lust. Sula discovers his name after he has abandoned her. The social system never allows them to emerge and be known. Their names may change according to the good will of a white man likely to hire him for a job. They may disappear sooner or later or stay idle, living like a tramp their lifelong in the black community simply because they are all processed with the same machine set up to emasculate them.

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison, in her art, has empowered the female characters in *Sula* to prove their womanliness and, in the same way,

she has portrayed male characters to be emasculated and be assigned the roles of mere onlookers in the black community of The Bottom. Most of the male characters are psychologically affected somehow and their behaviors reflect it as mentioned in *Soul On Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver on page 75: "From the beginning, America has been a schizophrenic nation". Blacks and Indians are submitted a heavy yoke that works to limit their potentials." Toni Morrison has shaped this particular universe in *Sula* where World War I black veterans are alienated; BoyBoy, Jude and Ajax are unable to accept their responsibilities vis-à-vis their households or their partners. To explore the field deeply, Morrison includes three characters named Dewey: one is a deeply black boy, the second is light-skinned with freckles everywhere and the third is a half Mexican with chocolate skin and black bangs. They are all called Deweys without any other precision. She adds that, "the deweys remained a mystery not only during all of their lives in Medallion but after as well. (*Sula*, p.39). All these male characters are limited psychologically and cannot be fully responsible in the community. Toni Morrison has set a parallel between the group of the females on one side and the group of males on the other side simply to make it visible the sharp contrast existing between them. As a female writer, Toni Morrison has decided to value the effort of women in the black community of the Bottom, a way to highlight and praise their contribution and their power in society.

END NOTES

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