

Deconstruction of Binary Opposition in Sula

Yang Yancun

Department of Foreign Languages, Lijiang Culture and Tourism College, Lijiang, Yunnan, China

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Abstract: Toni Morrison, as an Afro-American female writer, has been widely appreciated for her representation of African American community groups and nuanced description of complex human relationships. Among numerous works of hers, *Sula* is a great manifestation which reveals the oppressive nature of binary thinking and reinforces the fluidity of human experience. By deconstructing several pairs of binary oppositions in spatial hierarchy, emotional dualities, social roles and moral dualities, the thesis strives to reveal how the seemingly divergent conceptions intertwine with each other and how the identical boundaries can be further blurred. By doing so, it seeks to challenge traditional perceptions towards simplistic dichotomies in the society, suggesting the possibilities of embracing complexity and ambiguity in human relationships.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison, as a leading light in contemporary Afro-American literature, whose novels outshine others not only for the panoramic exhibition of Afro-American culture, but also the representation of complex human relationships. Born in an Afro-American family in Ohio, Morrison was brought up in a family ambience where the intense love of black culture and literature would be reinforced, which cultivates her interest and devotion on Afro-American writing. Because of that, she is able to write with “visionary force and poetic import”, and “give life to an essential aspect of American reality” according to Nobel Prize Award.

Apart from her race, Morrison has always been related to gender issues for her identity as a female writer. She herself has confessed that instead of “subscribing to patriarchy” or “(being) substituted with matriarchy”, she aims to find “equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things ^[1]” in a similar way as what she does to the race issues. Most of her ideologies can find the traces in the novel *Sula*. As a work published in 1973, it centers on Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who used to be good friends but finally became a pillar and a pariah respectively of the black community. Their opposite life choices, to some extent, reflect the division between binary oppositions, but their used-to-be and still refreshing sisterhood relationship paves the way for the interconnectedness of the contrasts.

Based on the discussion of binary oppositions in *Sula*, the paper is structured into six main sections: Introduction sets the stage by introducing Toni Morrison and her novel *Sula*, while the research background of the study will be elaborated in this part as well. The Literature Review provides the research on Morrison and *Sula*. After carefully analyzing previous studies, it seeks to testify the necessity of adopting deconstruction in discussing binary oppositions in *Sula*. The third section, Binary Opposition, introduces the theoretical framework. It defines binary opposition, emphasizing its relationship with structuralism and deconstruction. The fourth section explores the four pairs of

binary oppositions in spatial hierarchy, emotional dualities, social roles and moral dualities, so that to examine how Morrison deconstructs traditional binary opposition and reconstructs a more complex and ambiguous relationship. The Conclusion summarizes the key findings, reiterating the importance of recognizing the fluidity of identity, morality, and human relationships, rather than relying on rigid dichotomies.

By examining the deconstruction of binary opposition in *Sula*, this study not only enriches the application of binary opposition to literary analysis, but also highlights Morrison's innovative deconstruction of binary opposition, which defy traditional conceptions of the world and further embrace the multiplicity of human relationships.

2. Literature Review

Toni Morrison, as a Nobel Prize-winning author and a central figure in African American literature, whose work *Sula*, has been widely studied for its exploration of race, gender, and identity. Based on that, the critical reception of Toni Morrison and *Sula* will be examined to help provide the diverse perspectives on it.

2.1 The Study of Toni Morrison

In the early 1980s, Toni Morrison was first introduced to China. But at that time, the articles were mainly restricted on the introduction of Toni Morrison's biography and some translation works. In 1986, Dong Dingshan published "Recent Publications of Afro-American Writers" in the Chinese leading journal *Dushu (Reading)* in which Morrison's novels, *Sula*, *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon* were introduced. Dong explained one important principle to understand Morrison's novel well. That is, "one has to consider not only a black woman's life experience and living environment but also her gender and sex" ^{[2]137}. His words forecast the following trend of studying Afro-American literature. Another insightful scholar in this period was Hu Yunhuan, who took interest in both themes and artistic features of Morrison's writings. His article "A Black Star—Approaching the African American Writer Toni Morrison" showed his keen observation and thorough analysis.

1993 was a turning point for Morrison's study. After that, her literary talent, unique style of writing and the implications have been widely appreciated. Of special note was Wang Shouren and Wu Xinyun's joint scholarly work known as *Gender, Race and Culture—Toni Morrison and 20th Century African American Literature*. By admitting that "Morrison's writings confirm that social values can coexist with aesthetic appeal in literature" ^{[3]25}, the study on Morrison has been further expanded for the following generations. From the late 1990s, on comparative studies of Morrison and her contemporaries as well as predecessors began to surface. Among them, American writers like William Faulkner, Alice Walker and Chinese writers Mo Yan were always referred. In the new century, feminism which explained Morrison from the perspectives of Afro-American women's trauma, their identity crisis and self-construction became the leading theory. In addition, cultural criticism also drove scholars to investigate the Afro-American history and culture. For example, Yang Zhongju and Wang Hongkun introduced the folklore, myth and oral tradition of black people on the analysis of Morrison's novels in *The Book of the Black*. The latest 20 years saw the discussion of narrative features like Ma Fenying's "The Study of Body Narrative in Toni Morrison's Novels", Hu Ni's "A Study of Spatial Narrative in Toni Morrison's Fiction" or ethical criticism like Xiu Shuxin's "A Study of Toni Morrison's Novels from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism", even historical writing like Jing Xingmei's "Toni Morrison's Historical Writing in the Postmodern Context" and religious views like Zhang Hongwei's "A Study of Toni Morrison's Religious Views" and other new perspectives on Toni Morrison's novels.

2.2 The Study of *Sula*

With the popularity of Toni Morrison, the study on her novel *Sula* thrived in China and new theories arose. For example, Hao Yunhui and Guo Qiqing's "A Nietzschean Interpretation of Toni Morrison's *Sula*", Xie Yuefang's "Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* from the Perspective of Reader Response". What's more, Lacanian reading, archetypal interpretation, the carnival theory, queer theory and death aesthetics perspective were all used in interpreting *Sula*. As for the theme, the growth theme, the rebellion spirit, black female madness and deformed motherhood were easy to be found in criticism. Even black male characters, the image of overman and the mirror image have been talked by the scholars.

Sula was also widely acknowledged by black feminist literary critics. In 1977, black feminist literary critic Barbara Smith, performed a lesbian reading of *Sula* in her essay *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*. Another one is Deborah McDowell. In "Boundaries: or Distant Relations and Close Kin", she read *Sula* from a poststructuralist perspective and pointed out that the ambiguity of *Sula* is a character that subverts traditional binary opposition^[4].

But the data from CNKI shows that there are very few articles explaining *Sula* from the perspective of binary opposition. Among the five articles found, two mention binary opposition as a part of deconstruction theory and one connects it with Ecofeminism. Only Yin Xiujuan's "Binary Oppositions in *Sula*" and Liu Yun's "Contradiction Is Everywhere- Binary Opposition in *Sula*" discuss it as a whole. But Liu simply emphasizes the existence of the contradiction while Yin worries about the dilemma of the black.

Therefore, this thesis will talk about binary oppositions in *Sula* by citing the sentences in the novel and find the inter-connection between each term of binary oppositions. By doing so, it's achievable to appreciate Morrison's aesthetics of literature and further present her complex yet nuanced description in human relationships.

3. Binary Opposition

Binary opposition is defined as "a relation between the members of a pair of linguistic items, as a pair of distinctive features, such that one is the absence of the other" in dictionary. Though it can be dated back to Plato's era, binary opposition continues to be a heated topic for both structuralism and deconstruction in modern era.

3.1 Binary Opposition and Structuralism

As the basic concept of structuralism, binary opposition has been developed since Saussure coined "signifier and signified", "langue and parole", "diachronic and synchronic", "syntagmatic and paradigmatic"^[5] in *Course in General Linguistics*. Roman Jakobson followed Saussure's ideology of binary opposition and extended it into poetic analysis. In *Fundamentals of Language*, he further clarified two kinds of relationships. One is relationships of contiguity, or metonymy, the other is relationships of equivalence, or metaphor^[6]. According to him, metonymy and metaphor, which are totally contrast can be found together in poetry.

Another successor Lévi-Strauss sought to apply the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure to anthropology. He believed that the human mind thinks fundamentally in these binary oppositions and their unification (the thesis, antithesis, synthesis triad) in *The Structural Study of Myth*. Also, Jonathan Culler explained binary opposition in *Structuralist Poetics*. From his perspective, binary opposition is the most important and the simplest relationship in structural analysis. It helps structuralists to reconstruct the text from the view of binary oppositions so that to get the meaning of the text^[7]¹³⁵. In other words, binary opposition is the origin of meaning for structuralists.

Regardless of it, Structuralists regard the world as a system with a center, and the structure is determined by the center ^{[7]138}. By attaching great importance to the function of the center as well as the integrity of the structure, structuralists believe that in binary opposition one term is prone to dominate, or privilege over the other.

3.2 Deconstruction of Binary Opposition

Binary opposition offers structuralists the way to construct the world. But as time goes by, the shortage of it was revealed. With the boom of third wave feminism, post-colonialism, and critical race theory, binary oppositions between Man and Woman, Civilized and Uncivilized, and White and Black have been argued. Derrida, an important figure in deconstruction, has questioned assumptions of the binary thinking of western philosophy to be “a violent hierarchy” where “one of the two terms governs the other”. In his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy”, Derrida deconstructed Phaedrus by Plato, and revealed the inter-connection between the word chain *pharmakeia–pharmakon–pharmakeus* and the notably absent word *pharmakos*. *Pharmakos*’ *différance* allows it to develop into either *remède* or *poison*. That is to say, the two binary oppositions “although are totally different, exist in the same integrity” ^{[8]169-70}.

Terry Eagleton expressed the similar idea in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. The sort of binary opposition signifies that “for male-dominated society, man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite of this; and as long as such a distinction is tightly held in place the whole system can function effectively” ^{[9]114}. But in the process of defining himself, man will undoubtedly find that “woman is not just another in the sense of something beyond his ken, but another intimately related to him as the image of what he is not, and therefore as an essential reminder of what he is.” He also showed his attitude that “we may begin to unravel these oppositions a little, demonstrate how one term of an antithesis secretly inheres within the other” ^{[9]115}. All these thoughts have paved the way for the discussion of binary opposition in *Sula*.

4. Deconstruction of Binary Opposition

In *Sula*, Morrison sets a lot of binary oppositions such as bottom/up, love/hate, obedience/rebellion, evil/good to question the validity of rigid categorizations and highlight the interconnectedness of opposites. In the following section, each of them will be explored and further analyzed.

4.1 Deconstruction of Spatial Hierarchy: Bottom& Up

The binary opposition of bottom/up is intricately deconstructed through the symbolic naming and geographical positioning of “Bottom”, a predominant Black community. The origin of this place is rooted in a historical act of deceit: A white landowner tricks a Black slave into accepting what he describes as the “bottom” land, claiming it is “rich” and “fertile” but then provides a hilly and less arable land. This “nigger joke”, as what Morrison puts, has become “the way it got started” ^{[10]5}. But this ironic beginning is not only the start of the novel, but the beginning of the suppressed Black history. Just as the trick played by the White on the name of “Bottom”, African people have also been cheated in the Slave Trade. In that way, the naming of the Bottom has become a symbol of the systemic oppression and racial inequality that Black communities have historically endured.

The Bottom, though physically situated on a hill, is ironically named to reflect the marginalized status of the Black community within the broader socio-economic hierarchy in American history. However, it can be seen that the White person from the “up” has failed in his morality while the “bottom” Black person has won the credit for his trustworthiness and diligence. Through Morrison’s

writing, the simplistic dichotomy of “bottom” as inferior and “up” as superior has subverted. Instead, it has become something more complex as what McDowell describes:

Sula insistently blurs and confuses... binary oppositions. We enter a new world here, a world where we never get to the “bottom” of things, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions ^{[11]80}.

Despite its name and the marginalized status, the Bottom is far from being a place of despair. Geographically, it is located on a hill, overlooking the wealthier, white-dominated valley town of Medallion. This physical elevation symbolizes the diversity and richness of the Black culture. For example, in *Sula*, Shadrack’s National Suicide Day was regarded as a chaotic and tragic event, but then it has been shifted to a communal ritual which reflects the community’s struggle to assert agency. That kind of spirit shows how the residents in Bottom strive to make their community a space of communal bonds and shared histories even under the circumstances of poverty and racial discrimination. Because of that, the Bottom might be economically disadvantaged, but it is full of profound human dignity and strength, which turns to be “up”.

In conclusion, the Bottom in *Sula* is more than just a physical location, but a powerful symbol of the complexities of race and identity. While “up” always signifies superiority and “bottom” inferiority, Morrison deconstructs the binary opposition, suggesting that what is perceived as “bottom” can also be a place of elevation and empowerment. That’s why the chapter ends with “maybe the white farmer was right after all. Maybe it was the bottom of heaven ^{[10]6}”. In doing so, Morrison critiques the systemic inequalities that perpetuate racial and economic disparities, while affirming the dignity and strength of the Black community.

4.2 Deconstruction of Emotional Dualities: Love & Hate

In *Sula*, the binary opposition of love and hate is closely developed around Eva Peace’s interactions with her husband, BoyBoy, and her son, Plum. After BoyBoy abandons Eva and their children, leaving her to struggle in poverty, Eva’s initial love for him turns into resentment. However, that hatred isn’t depicted as a pure negative emotion, but the one bears power and enables her to survive:

Knowing that she would hate him long and well filled her with pleasant anticipation, like when you know you are going to fall in love with someone and you wait for the happy signs. Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred ^{[10]36-37}.

In Morrison’s writing, the simple categorization of love and hate has been dissolved. For Eva, the hatred to Boyboy has, instead allowed her to get strength and support her family- just like the benefits one can get from love. Though love and hate are always regarded as two opposite emotions, Morrison defies the traditional boundaries between them, showing how hate can coexist with love or even transform to it.

Similarly, Eva’s relationship with her son Plum further deconstructs the binary of love and hate. Plum, Eva’s last child, is “to whom she hoped to bequeath everything, floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection” ^{[10]45} though he gave her a hard time in the process of his growth. But when Plum returned from the war and suffered the drug addiction, Eva’s love takes a tragic turn. In an act that can be interpreted as both love and hate, Eva sets Plum on fire for “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 man” ^{[10]72}. Comparing with living painfully, Eva determined to let Plum die in relief through the horrifying action of “killing her son”. In *Beloved*, the mother Sethe also kills her daughter with a purpose of protecting her from the torturing slavery fate. These mothers’ actions blur the supposed- to-be

identical line between love and hate, showing how the two emotions can intertwine in the most extreme circumstances.

Eva's love for Plum is not purely nurturing, nor is her hatred for BoyBoy purely destructive. By showing how love and hate can coexist and even merge, Morrison allows the readers to move beyond rigid dichotomies and embrace the nuanced reality of human relationships.

4.3 Deconstruction of Social Roles: Obedience vs. Rebellion

In *Sula*, the binary opposition of obedience and rebellion is deconstructed through the contrasting lives of the two protagonists, Sula and Nel. As Morrison said, Nel has widely been regarded as an "obedient and polite" girl whose "enthusiasms are calmed" and "imagination is driven underground" ^{[10]18} while Sula merges "Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence" with "all her own imagination" since they are young ^{[10]118}. However, the rigid boundaries between these roles have been dismantled in the process of their growth.

As a child, Nel is taught by her mother, Helene, to conform to the expectations of her community, particularly those placed on women. This environment shapes Nel into a dutiful and compliant individual, as seen in her role as a devoted wife and mother- an ideal "angel in the house". However, beneath her obedient exterior, Nel possesses a quiet strength and independent thought. For instance, she seeks to claim her self-identity by murmuring at a young age: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" ^{[10]28-29}. What's more, when her husband Jude leaves her, Nel realizes that her life has been shaped by the expectations of others rather than her own desires. Morrison writes, "all that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. I was missing something else" ^{[10]174}. This revelation of Nel underscores the tension between her obedient facade and her inner desire for self-fulfillment, admitting that the obedient girl is the one with rebellious spirit against social norms.

In contrast, Sula's life is defined by rebellion and a refusal to conform to societal expectations. From a young age, Sula rejects traditional roles, choosing instead to live freely and unapologetically. She is that kind of women who would profess that "I sure did live in this world" ^{[10]143} and is labeled as a person "whose life was her own" ^{[10]127}. However, when she falls in love with Ajax, Sula's independence falters. This free bird breaks her wings and traps herself in the net of love and marriage. As Ajax says, "very soon she would, like all of her sisters before her, put to him the death-knell question 'Where you been?'" ^{[10]133}. When the bird without wings thinks of returning to the sky but end up falling, what left for her is this remorseful soliloquy "I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls" ^{[10]136}. The once rebellious woman can easily lose the very freedom she cherishes in love, which suggests that Sula's rebellion, while liberating, has its own limitations.

Therefore, it's arbitrary to jump to a conclusion that Nel is enslaved for squandering her life in trifles while Sula is free for more ups and downs in her life. In fact, Nel's obedience is not entirely passive, for she also calls for independent identity, just as Sula's rebellion is not entirely free, for she can ever be trapped in intimate relationship. Yet, this dichotomy can be further complicated by their different outcomes. Nel, though chooses to live in town and leads a mediocre life, supports her family and does her utmost to fulfill her life task as an independent woman. Sula, who gets tertiary education and travels a lot with broadening horizons, is stuck in the mind of being a free woman and dies in her early years. Thus, true freedom lies not in choosing one role over the other, but in navigating the tensions between them and defining one's own identity.

In conclusion, *Sula* deconstructs the binary opposition of obedience and rebellion by revealing the complexities and consequences of both roles. Through Nel and Sula, Morrison challenges the notion that conformity and defiance are absolute, showing instead that they are fluid and interconnected.

4.4 Deconstruction of Moral Dualities: Good vs. Evil

Apart from this obedience and rebellion contrast, another difference lies in the two girls is good and evil. Sula, who is born with a birthmark, watches her mother being burned, kills the Chicken Little, comes back with a plague of robins, sends her grandma to the guardian and goes to bed with all kinds of men, is undoubtedly a Satan in most people's eyes. While good Nel is distinct from her for taking care of her children, supporting her family and helping others in the community. But Eva reveals the truth "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" ^{[10]169}. A sentence of Nel's psychology description exposes the truth:

All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula's frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation ^{[10]170}.

In Sula and Nel's conversation about goodness, Sula says "how you know it was you? Maybe it was me" ^{[10]146}. Sula is labeled as evil by the Bottom community due to her defiance of societal norms and her seemingly selfish actions. However, her actions are not without reason. For example, Chicken Little's death is an accident happened in their playtime rather than a murder committed intentionally. Her decision to place Eva in a nursing home, though harsh, is motivated by a desire to assert her independence and escape the oppressive expectations placed on her as a woman. As Morrison writes, "she had no center, no speck around which to grow" ^{[10]119}, suggesting that Sula's actions are driven by her search for autonomy rather than a desire to cause harm.

However, Nel, perceived as good, secretly acknowledges the pleasure she derives from wrongdoing. While Sula is haunted by the guilt of Chicken Little's death, Nel secretly feels a sense of exhilaration. As what has been revealed, "it was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top" ^{[10]174}. This admission discloses that Nel, despite her outward goodness, is capable of deriving pleasure from actions that society would deem evil. Just like Morrison has expressed in an interview: "I started out by thinking that one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good--you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to" ^{[12]216}. Here, Nel's internal conflict highlights the complexity of morality, which shows that even the "good" are not immune to darker impulses.

Through the characters of Nel and Sula, Morrison challenges the simplistic labeling of individuals as purely "good" or "evil", showing that morality is not determined by surface behavior but by internal motivations and societal context. Nel's internal acknowledgment of her capacity for wrongdoing complicates her image as a purely good character, while Sula's actions, though perceived as evil, are rooted in understandable, if not justifiable, reasons. As Bergenholtz said in *Toni Morrison's Sula: A Satire on Binary Thinking* that "Morrison reminds us that there is no proper meaning inherent in words or names, only meanings we assign to people and events in our attempts to establish the limits-the top and the bottom, so to speak-of reality" ^{[13]96}. Morrison blurs the lines between good and evil, proving that morality is not a fixed trait but a dynamic interplay of actions and motivations.

In a word, Sula and Nel meet in their childhood, accompany and grow up with each other, just like two different individuals who share the same soul. Having one for the company is like "getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed" ^{[10]95} for the other one. So, no matter who is free or enslaved, good or evil, they are always the most intimate. As Wang Xiangfeng said "The two binary oppositions, although are totally different, exist in the same integrity" ^{[8]169-70}. To some extent, their friendship grows and flourishes on their differences. Just like the two plants mentioned at the beginning of the novel: Nightshade is an "unusual" plant that produces "toxic" berries, while

blackberry is a “common” plant that produces “nourishing” fruit. But the nourishing and poisonous ones can situate together, and both thrive. That’s the same case for different pairs of binary opposition argued in the thesis.

5. Conclusion

Binary opposition is a good way for us to construct the world, but it can easily lead to prejudice. This thesis illustrates binary opposition theory and then deconstructs it from spatial hierarchies, emotional dualities, social roles, and moral binaries in the novel *Sula*. By deconstructing these oppositions, it aims to prove that *Sula* not only critiques societal norms but also celebrates the resilience and individuality of those who defy them.

By moving beyond binary thinking and embracing the complexities of human experience, Morrison reveals that true understanding lies in recognizing the interconnectedness of these seemingly opposing concepts, rather than depending on simplistic dichotomies. After knowing that, the relationships between the two terms of binary oppositions can be further exposed in future study and Morrison’s work continues to resonate as a profound exploration of the human condition.

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