

BLACK FEMINIST SPIRIT AGAINST RACISM AND SEXISM AS REFLECTED IN *SULA*

Stella Rose Que*

Abstrak: Kajian ini diarahkan pada analisis dari suatu karya sastra bertemakan kritik sosial yang ditulis oleh Toni Morrison dengan judul *Sula*. Novel ini menggambarkan kondisi sosial masyarakat kulit hitam di Amerika pada awal abad XX. Saat itu masyarakat kulit hitam harus menghadapi diskriminasi rasial dalam berbagai bentuk, serta kondisi sosial kaum wanita kulit hitam yang harus menghadapi dua bentuk diskriminasi yaitu diskriminasi rasial dan diskriminasi seksual. Kajian ini membahas tentang diskriminasi rasial yang menimpa kaum kulit hitam di Bottom, diskriminasi seksual oleh kaum pria kulit hitam terhadap kaum wanita, nilai-nilai patriarkal yang menindas wanita kulit hitam, dan bagaimana karakter Sula Peace serta semangatnya yang merepresentasikan seorang *black feminist* dalam menghadapi rasisme dan seksisme.

Dari analisis data yang dilakukan dapat disimpulkan bahwa diskriminasi rasial telah membuat masyarakat kulit hitam menderita selama berabad-abad, mereka tidak dapat berbuat apa-apa terhadap dominasi kaum kulit putih. Sedangkan diskriminasi seksual dalam bentuk nilai-nilai patriarkal telah membuat wanita berada dalam kepasrahan, selalu bergantung pada pria. Sula membuat terobosan dalam kehidupannya dengan menolak semua jenis diskriminasi, baik seksual maupun rasial.

Kata kunci: karakter, black feminist, rasism, seksism, diskriminasi

Introduction

Women are often thought as inferior. They are considered unequal to men. The inferiority of women has also been experienced in America. In the earlier periods of the American history, women in America had been discriminated. They were regarded unimportant and tended to be a minority. Unsatisfied with the conditions, women in America struggled to remedy the conditions. It was started at the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848. It then continued up to the women suffrage in the 1920s and the women liberation in the 1960s.

Throughout an extended period of their history, black American people faced great sufferings because of slavery. During the cruelty of American slavery system, the blacks had no freedom at all. As time went by, the slaves were finally freed. Yet, being freed from slavery did not mean that blacks had the same kind of equality as whites did. In fact, they were still oppressed, discriminated and possessed unequal opportunities in relation to whites. In general, black Americans suffered a great deal, but black American women even dealt with greater hardships than black American men did. Black women had to fight against both racial and gender discrimination.

* Stella Rose Que adalah seorang dosen Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Patimura

Harley and Terborg-Penn stated that black American men tended to perceive the problem of black women primarily in terms of the struggle against racism rather than as the struggle against sexism (1978: 28). This statement implies that the struggle of black American women was not seen as a struggle against men. Instead, their struggle was considered as the struggle of the whole race for freedom and equality with whites. In other words we can conclude that black American women faced even worse discrimination than black American men did. The situation for black women was described as one of double jeopardy – they were oppressed both as blacks and as women (Chafe, 1976:338). This statement shows that black American women were not only treated unequally because of their race but also gender. Although women faced double discrimination, their struggle for gender equality was considered less important than the struggle for racial equality because the fact that black women were victimized by both sexist and racist oppression was seen as insignificant, for in men's eyes, women's suffering however great was not greater than men's sufferings (Hooks, 1981:6).

The irony that black American women were not treated equally by the whites and black American men becomes a very interesting topic to be investigated and provided the stimulus to concentrate the discussion on the spirit of black feminist against racism and sexism, as expressed in the literary work. The study is intended to analyze these issues as reflected in Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

Sula presents the social condition of black Americans, in the early 20th century, when the issues of racism, sexism and the struggle for Civil Rights Movement and Women's Right Movement are dominant. Over centuries, racism has made black American people suffer, therefore, through the Civil Rights Movement; they fought against racism, while the sexism blocked black women from achieving their rights to have their own lives. The study focuses on *Sula*, as a main character in the novel, by tracing her thoughts, and actions that represent black American women's struggles for equality and fight against racism and sexism that oppress them.

Black women face two kinds of oppressions, a racist world and a sexist black community. Black women struggle both as black women for their rights to be equal to black men, and as black American people for anti racism and rights to be equal to white people. Through *Sula*, Morrison tries to create a strong black woman's character that represents the spirit of black feminist who fights for her rights.

Thus, this research aims to study how the spirit of black feminist is expressed through *Sula's* character; to examine the impact of racism and sexism towards black American people; to find out the reasons why black women have to face double oppression and to reveal the spirit of black feminist that is shown by *Sula Peace*. The finding of this research is hoped to offer better understanding of black American people experience of their fight against racism and sexism, especially for black women and to be beneficial for the development of the study of American culture and modern literature which will evoke further interest of the study of black literature.

The method used in this research is a library research in order to collect the appropriate data which are needed in analyzing the topic. The data is taken from Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973) as the primary source. Meanwhile, as the secondary sources, the writer also gathers all data related with the topic in the form of criticism, comment, essays about the author or novel, theory and concept used in the study. All resources obtained from private, public, and university libraries and the internet are listed in the bibliography. The selected data were processed by applying a qualitative method. It is used since this method of research is aimed at comprehending the process of someone's or a group of individuals' thought toward his or her environment where they live. In the qualitative method, meaning is essential to interpret someone's or society's behavior (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982).

However, by applying the library research, this study can hand down the issues in terms of proposing and analyzing the various data through a descriptive analysis. It means that the study deals with the description of any data found out in the work in order to relate all data comprehensively in achieving the objectives.

Analysis

Analyzing the spirit of black feminist against racism and sexism cannot be separated from the role of black people in American society especially the role of black American women. The study is intended to present an analysis on these issues and show their relation to racial and gender discrimination experienced by black people and black women. It is also connected to Morrison's intention in using Bottom's black people and *Sula's* character in order to criticize the society.

Furthermore, when specified to what is reflected in Morrison's *Sula*, there are two things that have been found. One is related to the outlook of black Americans in American society; the other is related to the spirit of black feminist against racism and sexism in *Sula*.

A. Racism and Sexism against Black American People in American Society

The abolition of slavery, of course, was the dream of every slave. They always dreamed of freedom although they never knew what freedom would be like and what they would do with freedom. The dream of the slaves came true when they were set free on January 1, 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation. However, lives after freedom were far from what they had expected. In most cases, their conditions were as bad as before they were freed and some were even worse.

Racism was one of the obstacles that former slaves had to face. White Southerners denied that blacks were citizens. Southern whites had always thought of blacks as inferior beings (Thernstrom, 1997:27). As black American people were not considered as citizens equal to whites, they were given lower standard of public facilities. Beginning from the late 19th century, the racial segregation system – known as Jim Crow's Laws, was administered.

Jim Crow's Laws were made by white American people in the South in the late 19th and early 20th century was called Jim Crow. The term Jim Crow used to describe the laws, rules, and customs of the South, which were designed to buttress white supremacy and to force black Americans into a subservient position. Jim Crow was not only about keeping races separated; segregation was but it was also one part of whole system of power relationships designed to enforce white control.

The historian, Leon Litwack, describes Jim Crow as "the machinery of domination", in order to emphasize that it was a system, with economic, social, and political components working together to oppress black Americans. Violence, and the threat of violence, was an integral component of the system. But Jim Crow was about more than violence, it was a whole system meant to limit black opportunities and advancement. The important part of Jim Crow was the denial of resources for black Americans. For example, blacks had only poorly funded school or even no school at all, and black women who sought employment in industries, shops, department stores, and the array of newly sex-stereotyped jobs, such as secretaries or sales clerks, they quickly crashed into the wall of Jim Crow. Most of these jobs were reserved for white woman (Boles, 2002).

During the practice of slavery, both white and black women were not allowed to enter high school because the formal education for women was secondary to the men. They were not permitted go to college since their major role was to become housewives. The races – black and white, were strictly separated by law on public facilities (Thernstrom, 1997:31). Signs reading "Whites Only" or "Colored" hung, for example, over drinking fountains and the doors to restrooms, restaurants, movie theaters, and other public places (Tuttle, 1987:1).

Black women especially have been discriminated against because of their sex. Therefore, feminism is an important movement since "feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression". Feminism is not a declaration of war between the sexes. It is a struggle to change a system which is based on "elitism" and "dominance". Feminism is the solution to the war between the sexes: It can transform relationships so that the alienation, competition, and dehumanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with feelings of intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie (Hooks, 1981: 20-35). Women who stand together can more easily communicate their needs and also make demands for equality. Sadly, sexism has been a useful tool of oppression. Sexism has broken bonds between women and has kept them in check.

Black women have been called "the mule of the world" because they have been loaded with the burdens others have refused to carry (Walker, 1983: 237). Black women have also been exploited within the area of sexuality. Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard state that black women have "been constructed as objects of male fantasy" (1995: 110). They were seen as "sexual temptresses" who turned white men into sinners (Hooks 1981: 33). Another form of sexual exploitation was "breeding" (1981: 39). Black women were compared to "horses" and

“mules” and had to breed in order to increase the slave-owners workforce (1981: 39).

According to Hooks, the reason for this double standard is due to an interest in restricting black women’s “sexual behavior”. He argues that black men have used the same strategy as white men did to restrict white women’s sexual behavior; they invented the myth of the black rapist in order to control white women’s sexuality (1981: 67). By using the same tactic – inventing the myth of the white exploiter – black men have been able to restrict and control black women’s “sexual freedom”.

Hooks also claims that because of “the emphasis on the white male as sexual exploiter”, black men have been able to “deflect attention away from black male sexual exploitation of women”. For a great number of black people, racism has been regarded as such an important issue that they have failed to deal with and understand the impact of sexism (1981: 68). For Hooks, it is important to contest sexism regardless of the color of the skin of the sexual exploiter (1981: 69).

B. Racism and Sexism against Black American Women in *Sula*

In Morrison’s *Sula*, there are four very prominent scenes of racism. At the beginning of the novel, the freed slave is getting the worst land and the scene with Nel’s mother on the train; at the end of the novel, the white men’s treatment of Chicken’s body, and the problem of blacks getting jobs building the new tunnel. It seems to form a frame. There are two incidents at the beginning, and one at the end, but with the exception of the Chicken Little scene that happens outside of the Bottom, racism isn’t included in the narrative. This seems a narrative strategy by Morrison to show that racism spreads among the society and that it has greatly affected the society almost in every aspects of life, such as the poverty among them. For the most part, these people keep on living their lives ‘normally’ despite it, keeping its intrusion to a minimum (Morrison, 1973).

A part of racial discrimination was the denial of resources for black people. Whites thought that colored people did not have the ability to use power or resources responsibly. It can be show through the novel *Sula* when the whites built the New River Road. They only hired the old black men to do the easy work. They tended to prioritize white people to do the better work and refused to hire young black men to build the road. In fact, they preferred to hire other white people or white immigrants to do the jobs (Morrison, 1973: 81-82). Black American women were not permitted go to college since their major role was to become housewives. Therefore, through *Sula*, Morrison tries to break the chain that locked black women from gaining education. *Sula* went to college for ten years. She was the only Bottom’s woman who gained education (Morrison, 1973:99).

Through *Sula*, Morrison disputes society’s norms of what a woman should be. *Sula* was groundbreaking because it challenged patriarchy by portraying the relationship between two women, told from a female perspective, and contesting traditional gender norms. Through *Sula*, Morrison shows African American women’s need to “create their own

notion of selfhood" and challenge men's control and dominance (1973: 54). It is evident that double standards prevail in a sexist society; Sula is "labeled a bitch" because of her promiscuity and also because she is said to have sex with white men. Black men resent that Sula has sex with white men, even though it is accepted for a black man to have sex with a white woman (1973: 112-113).

Sula's refusal to conform to the norms of society creates a fear amongst the men. This fear is shown as prejudice and double standards: Every one of them imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections - Sula underneath some white man - and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier. The fact that their own skin color was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lay in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them towards tolerance (Morrison, 1973: 113).

Morrison has acknowledged that Sula is a "masculine character". She is independent, bold, and treats men the way men treat women (1973: 53). Thus, Sula does not conform to society's predominant image of what a black American woman should be. By transcending traditional gender norms Sula is urging black women to break away from the patriarchal system with its sexist oppression. By creating characters that forthrightly tell their experiences of sexism, and by creating characters that challenge the given norms of society, Morrison draws attention to the root of black women's oppression and, at the same time, offers help to a solution for it.

In *Sula*, Morrison describes the relationships between black men and black women. Her focus is not on the oppression by whites but blacks. The black woman is described as experiencing oppression and unequal treatment by her husband. Through different male characters, Morrison illustrates that some men had similar understanding about how to treat women. This simply implies that in general, men often treat women unequally. In fiction for example, the female character, however, was described as a strong woman who would not be submissive to her husband and she struggled to gain equality.

Morrison's female characters are fiercely independent and subvert the traditionally assigned roles of dutiful wife, mother, and daughter. Of this category, Sula and Eva are the most prominent. Nel, who is raised by her mother to accept without question the passive roles of wife, mother, and daughter, comes to recognize the power of womanhood by the novel's end, although it remains unclear just what she will do with this newfound knowledge.

Through *Sula*, Morrison also tries to describe that survival is also very important for black American women. Eva and Hannah know that they do not have much opportunity being black and female, so they prepare for the winter by canning food in the summer. Sula, on the other hand, does not contain a suitable outlet for her creativity. She becomes dangerous without a suitable outlet. She never realizes she is dangerous because her sins are unintentional. In order to fill up the emptiness in her life she uses men. The community of Bottom despises Sula for this,

but they tolerate her. To the community of Bottom Sula is a pariah. She is different from everyone else and she does not care about what others think. The price of Sula's independence is her isolation from the community. But Sula is not concerned; she just wants to live her life the way she wants to.

Sula was groundbreaking because it challenged patriarchy by portraying the relationship between two women, told from a female perspective, and contesting traditional gender norms. Through *Sula*, Morrison shows black American women's need to "create their own notion of selfhood" and challenge men's control and dominance (Morrison, 1973: 54). It is evident that double standards prevail in a sexist society; Sula is "labeled a bitch" because of her promiscuity and also because she is said to have sex with white men. Black men resent that Sula has sex with white men, even though it is accepted for a black man to have sex with a white woman (Morrison, 1973: 53). Sula's refusal to conform to the norms of society creates a fear amongst the men. This fear is shown as prejudice and double standards: Every one of them imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections - Sula underneath some white man - and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier.

Morrison through her novel, *Sula*, urges women to challenge patriarchy by contesting traditional gender norms and men's dominance. *Sula* is challenging because her character transcends traditional gender norms. It shows how women have embraced patriarchal values and how they have been oppressed by them.

Sula is considered as a black feminist novel because it was written by a woman through a womanist perspective. *Sula* also focuses on the position of black women in black society. The main emphasis of *Sula* is on the fact that black women are treated unequally by black men. The unfair treatment of black women only came from black men. This implies that the connection between black men and women was much more important than the relationship between blacks and whites.

Since the novel describes the experiences of black women in their relationship with black men, the struggle of the black women to free themselves from men's domination became much more significant. For this reason, the novel can be categorized as black feminist novel because its main purpose is to show the struggle of black women.

C. Black Feminist Spirit in defeating Racism and Sexism in *Sula*

To be able to describe black feminism specifically, it is necessary to define feminism in general. The term 'feminism' began to be used in reference to the theory of sexual equality and the movement for women's right (Tuttle, 1987:107). This term is originated from the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. In other words, this term refers to attempts to analyze the reasons for and dimensions of women's oppression and to achieve women's liberation (Tuttle, 1987:107).

Feminism seeks for equality for women in general. It is extremely unfortunate, however, that the term is often associated with

white women's struggle merely. This term is believed to exclude black women and other women of different colors. During the development of the women's movement, it was obvious that black and white women developed different objectives. White women needed to fight for gender equality only, whereas black women had to fight for both racial and gender equality. In the first wave of feminism, most black women decided that racial oppression took priority over the sexual oppression (Tuttle, 1987:42). Because of the notion above, black women struggle was often considered as the struggle for racial equality rather than the struggle for both racial and sexual equality. To conclude, black women's struggle for equality, therefore, is different from white women's struggle. In line with the aims of black feminism to fight sexual oppression to show the struggle of black women, African female writers often pictured the unequal treatment by black men instead of whites.

As the main character in Morrison's *Sula* and becomes the focus of the discussion of the research, Sula Peace was an ordinary black woman who lived her extraordinary life. She lived in the middle of racist and sexist communities that consist of white and black Americans. Sula's character represented a black feminist spirit who fights for freedom and equality. This character also appears as a figure who opposes the racial discrimination. The spirit of black feminist is shown by Sula through her attitudes, thoughts, and speeches.

Sula's attitude that represented black feminist spirit who fought against racism was seen when one day she had enough of white Irish boys' harassment. She tends to end up their racial oppression that they did to the black school children, their racists, and proved to them although she was a black girl and regarded lower than them, but she felt as equal as them. This thought encourages her to oppose racism and to face those white Irish boys; even though the way of Sula stopped their racist was odd (Morrison, 1973: 54-55).

When Sula and Nel were young, they held the spirit of black feminist. They believed in the bound of sisterhood. They found comfort in each other where any kind of jealousy could not disturb them. They believed that there was no way black woman could be other black woman's enemy because black women must be united and support one another. They shared everything together and never competed or even quarreled (Morrison, 1973: 84, 119).

Sula is depicted as a symbol of independence. She breaks the tradition that ties black women for such a long time. At that time, both white and black women were suggested not to gain education higher than high school because formal education for women was secondary to the men. They did not have to go to college since their major role was to become housewives. But Sula, break the chain that locked her from gaining education, she went to college for ten years. She was the only Bottom's woman who gained education (Morrison, 1973: 99).

Sula's feminist spirit was told by Jude Greene and Ajax. They thought Sula was free-spirited woman, who explored the world to find men to be subdued. Not like the other conventional women who were always dependent on men, obedient, and being under control by men,

Sula was definitely different. She lived her life for her own and took charge of her own body. She was smart. It can be seen from the way she talks to men. Her words can attract many men. She controlled men's mind to take charge over men because then she would make them fall on her knee. She did not want to be totally surrendered in the arms of man and lost her self-respect by giving him her body, and tie them in a marriage that would make her lose her self-identity and freedom (Morrison, 1973: 103-104; 127-128).

Black feminist regarded that man and woman were equal. It was shown by Sula when she had an argument with Nel, how she argued Nel's opinion that colored women could not be as equal as colored men. Sula disagreed with her; she said that colored man and woman were human beings. They were just separated by their sexes, but it did not mean that the difference in sex would bring the different status for their lives (Morrison, 1973: 142).

Sula was proud of herself. Her pride makes her refuse any help from others. This means that she thinks she can do it all by herself. She never pitied herself and never wanted others to feel sorry for her. In her dying, she still spoke how proud she was, to die as a respectable person who really lived her life and never lost her self-respect and self-identity. While every colored woman was dying like a stump- like part of a tree left in the ground after the rest had been cut down, because they have lost their self-identities since they lived their lives for somebody else after they married (Morrison, 1973: 143).

One of her acts that represented a black feminist who opposed racism was through her inter-relationship with some white men. Bottom's people said that Sula slept with white men. Although black people cursed her for this, she never cares what they do. Sula's act showed that she could freely have relationship with any man she liked, either black or white men. She saw them as the same human beings who had equal rights. She wasn't a racist because she did not reject inter-relationship (Morrison, 1973: 112). Sula believed that one day, what she did like having inter-relationship with white men, be independent woman with leaving domesticity, will be appreciated by black people although it would take time. One day, there would be no racial discrimination anymore, white and black people would live side by side with equal. They could freely have inter-relationship without feeling afraid of racial harassment (Morrison, 1973: 145).

Sula refused to take conventional role of black woman, to be a housewife and to settle down with man because she thinks that man was not as worthy as herself. She believed that she does not need man to comfort her. She was such a man-hating woman because she has a concept that all men in the end will leave her children, like what has happened to her. Besides, she had experienced that all men wanted was to control over women. She also believes that men cannot be women's good friend. That is why she considered that man could not be a good couple for her and would never be for any women (Morrison, 1973: 143-144).

Sula Peace, a black woman, who is trapped in the situation when the issues of racism and sexism are dominant. She tries to struggle in these discriminations by fighting against the conventional values which tends to oppress women particularly, the black American women. She lives her life with values which are opposite to the ordinary American social values. She refuses to take the role of conventional woman such: getting married, becoming a housewife, raising children, etc., because she believes that a marriage based on the patriarchal values makes cause a lot of suffer to women. That way, they will lose their dignity and freedom.

Conclusion

Black women had been described as living in double discrimination. They were discriminated not only because they were blacks and belonged to the minority group but also because they were women. Apart from showing the general treatment of whites toward blacks, the oppressive situations that specifically experienced by black women were also described in Morrison's *Sula*.

Black people in Bottom experienced racial discrimination mostly from white people. Black people are regarded uncivilized, uneducated, and have lower status than white people that leads them to their inferior status among the society. That is why white people create laws that separated the whites and blacks, in order to keep their superiority, their power and domination over the blacks. The separation covers all aspects of blacks' life, including all public facilities. This kind of separation is known as segregation time. Racist is also shown from the unjust punishment given to the blacks who have broken the rule of segregation.

Sexism that spread among the black community of Bottom is mostly affected by the model of patriarchal family. Black people believed that man is the head of the family, takes care and controls his woman. They also believed that black woman has to take conventional role of black woman, to be a housewife and to settle down with man. Patriarchal values continuously grow among black people in the Bottom because both, black men and women accept their status. In fact black women mostly get used to it. Their families also encourage the patriarchal values despite all the failure. This condition is fully depicted in Morrison's *Sula*.

As a response to this condition, Morrison, through *Sula*, actually wants to criticize such kind of condition that according to her has restricted black women in pursuing their dreams. She forms her critics through the character of Sula. The uniqueness of Sula's character becomes the representation of Morrison's concern in fighting against racism and sexism among black people.

Bibliography

- Afshar, Haleh, and Mary Maynard. *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender. Some Feminist Interventions*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1995.
- Bogdan, Robert C., and Sari Knopp Biklen. *Qualitative Research For Education: An Introduction to Theory and Method*. Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1982.

- Boles, Mike. "Martin Luther King, Jr." *The Civil Rights Movement, an American Memory*. 17 November 2002. April 15, 2008. <<http://users.ksni.net/~uu-quincy/talks/mlk.htm>>.
- Chafe, William H. *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Harley, Sharon and Rosalyn Terborg – Penn, editors. *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and images*. Port Washington: National University Publications, 1978.
- Hooks, Bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.
- Morrison, Toni. *SULA*. New York: Bantam Book, 1973.
- Thernstrom, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom. *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible*. New York: A Touchstone Book, 1997.
- Tuttle, Lisa. *Encyclopedia of Feminism*. London: Arrow Books, Ltd., 1987.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1983.

