

Feminine Writing in Toni Morrison's Sula

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's *Sula* vividly depicts the struggles of black women against patriarchy in a black community in Ohio from 1919 to 1965. The three female characters Sula, Hannah and Eva are studied through the lens of feminism in this paper. In fact, writing about their sexual experiences proves to show the essence of feminine writing. It can be explained by Hélène Cixous' theory in which she argues that women must write about women on the basis of their bodily experiences and speak for themselves. As a result, the explicit expressions of female desires, vivid narrations of female sexuality as well as the careful descriptions of female body based on the three characters' experiences ultimately contribute to reveal female voice from woman's perspective, liberate women's body and therefore break the phallogentric discourse. The paper then serves to combine the theory and practice and at the same time helps enrich the understanding of feminine writing.

Keywords: feminine writing, female body, female sexuality.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Sula* has shaped a few female characters that are brave enough to fight against patriarchal culture. Three female characters—Sula, Hannah and Eva—are all quite explicit about their sexual desires and manage to take pleasures from having sex with men in the town. And carefully describing their sexual experiences from the author's perspective as a woman exactly demonstrates what Hélène Cixous introduced as feminine writing. In her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous strongly calls for women to write through their bodies and voice out the pleasures of their sexuality so as to liberate women from the male discourse, which is the theoretical basis of the investigation of this paper.

Generally, many researchers tend to examine the novel in a way feminism and racialism intersected. For example, while exploring the intimate relationship between Sula and Nel, Barbara Smith regards *Sula* as a lesbian novel, claiming it shows the Black women's impacts upon each other's lives [1]. Also, in terms of Sula's jezebel image, Sydney Fonteyn Lewis argues that Sula uses sex to liberate from both restricting respectability and its connection to white racist misogyny [2]. In fact, few have focused on above mentioned three characters' sexual experience through the lens of feminism specifically. The paper will thus apply the theory of Hélène Cixous to explore the feminine writing in *Sula*.

Firstly, the paper will talk about Sula, Hannah and Eva's pursuit of sexual liberation through their sexual behaviors. On one hand, they release their sexual desires without hesitation and restraints regardless of conventional social norms. And this narration frees all suppressed desires

and impulses in women, which is the first step to liberate women's body and help them escape from patriarchy. On the other hand, careful descriptions about Sula's feelings during her process of lovemaking will contribute to show female sexuality to the public from woman's perspective, change the muted position of women in the male discourse and lead women to exist in their own voices. Secondly, writing about female body of these three characters will be analyzed. By focusing on their body and its unique experiences, women get to realize their own strength and shape their self-identity.

2. Sula, Hannah and Eva's Pursuit of Sexual Liberation Through Sex

Hélène Cixous criticizes that "men have committed the greatest crime against women" by letting women be "the executants of their virile needs" [3]. Women then internalize the phallic rules and suppress their sexual urges and even feel ashamed or guilty of having the "funny desire" [3]. Yet the systematic deprivation of women has been a fact as much in language as in life. Thus while the strong waves of feminism were advocating gender equality in all domains of life, the post-structuralist feminists that evolved during the 1960s and 1970s, were more concerned about elaborating and deconstructing gender difference in language [4]. It was during this time that Hélène Cixous, while exploring the relation between gender and writing, introduced a new form of writing known as feminine writing in the essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*. According to Cixous, women should explore their erogenous pleasures bravely and express their sexual desires openly. She calls this practice an "aesthetic activity", and encourages women to escape from the shackles that men have created upon them by bringing out women's sexual experiences into the text.

2.1. Sula, Hannah and Eva's Display of Their Sexual Desires

Candid expressions of female sexual needs can be seen through Sula, Hannah and Eva's behaviors and attitudes. First, take Sula for an example. Returning to the Bottom after ten years, she becomes preoccupied with having sex with different men. This is not only because she is influenced by her mother's behaviors at her early age but also because during her ten years' adventures she finds that a man can never be a friend but a lover to a woman, for "whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, they hooded their eyes" [5]. At this point, it implies that men are always neglectful of women's needs and women's voices are muted and their desires are forced to be concealed, a metaphor for how women have been excluded from language, "from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" as Cixous argues [3].

Sula finally takes the action, to explore, to fight, and to conquer, in the domain of sex, which is another metaphor for the arising of female consciousness. As it is written in *Sula*, "When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center" [5]. It means a transition from the passive position to an active one and thus an attempt to break from the phallocentric tradition. Sula seeks the pure pleasure in sex and is not dedicated in the romantic relationships with men; she ditches the sex mate for others after she takes him from his wife, and it happens sometimes that she doesn't even remember her partner's name after the lovemaking. However, when she was trying to recall his name, her partner would "look down at her, smiling with tender understanding of the state of tearful gratitude to which he believed he had brought her" [5]. It is exactly projecting the nature of phallocentrism which, according to Cixous' description, is "self-admiring, self-stimulating, and self-congratulatory" [3]. In addition to satirizing phallocratic ideology, Morrison successfully delivers a powerful message here that a woman is also supposed to desire sex for its pure pleasure and it is not just men's privilege to indulge in sex or define its nature.

Sula's mother Hannah is also a good example of sexual liberation from male-dominated culture.

After her husband's death, Hannah frequently sleeps with the husbands of her friends and neighbors. Morrison depicts her inner desires in chapter 1921 as "What she wanted, after Rekus died, and what she succeeded having more often than not, was some touching every day" [5]. Hannah refuses to live without men's affection at the same time she does not mix sexual desires with commitment of love all together, for she would rather have sex elsewhere in the house than do it in the bedroom given that "her love mate's tendency was always to fall asleep afterward" [5]. And she is really picky about whom she sleeps with even though she does not mind whom she has sex with. It shows that Hannah wants nothing from a man but the pleasure he can bring her through sex. After all, she doesn't rely on a man financially. Her dependence is actually on another woman—her mother Eva. Though some might reasonably object that the evidence is not convincing enough in that Hannah desires men probably because she lacks it, she needs a man, given that she is a widow, thus the passage is probably expressing about her psychological need rather than sexual urge. But note that, even though she is a widow, she doesn't try to have a man in her life as a partner. Because, she is not capable of jealousy and she can even help with the bride's chores right after she has sex with her husband. It means that she just longs for sex for its own sake. So there is no doubt that Morrison is releasing women's sexual desires without restraints and hesitation.

Eva, the mother of Hannah, is another woman who refuses to hide her own lust. Eva had a hard time struggling to live when her husband left her after five years of marriage, but she managed to survive with her three children in the end. So when she hears that her ex-husband BoyBoy is going to come and pay her a visit, she is not sure how to face him and what to talk about. It even occurs to her that she might beg him to make love to her. Even though there is no sexual activity between them till the end during the visit, the initial thoughts of Eva clearly show her inner desires as a single woman. Despite the fact that she is greatly hurt by BoyBoy and she is supposed to hate him anyway, there is still part of her that wants for intimate sexual activity with the man. It manifests that a woman's sexual appetite can be so strong that it can beat resentment. Later when her life gets better and better, she also has regular male visitors to please her with the teasing and kissing during their stay at her house. Old as she is, and with only one leg, she gets herself satisfied while making her desires explicit to her male friends. She does not choose to live a miserable life as a single woman who is abandoned by her man. Instead, she gets rid of patriarchal social conventions and liberates her body.

According to Cixous, releasing female sexual desires can help women acknowledge their desire "to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new" [3]. It means sexual desires serve as a fountain for feminine language. Therefore, Eva, Hannah and Sula's brave pursuit of sexual liberation—the freedom to express sexual desires and get sexual satisfaction—would eventually help women reclaim their buried voice and provide them with courage to break the masculine language, which is exactly the spirit of feminine writing.

2.2. Sula's Exploration of Her Sexuality

Careful depictions of Sula's sexual pleasure while having sex with Ajax also well indicate a sign of feminine writing, because it voices out the sexuality of female body. According to Ann Rosalind Jones, French feminists especially Cixous celebrates female sexuality, the bodily pre-linguistic desire unappropriated by phallic systems in order to locate the linguistically and culturally repressed femininity [6]. Besides, while analyzing Cixous' assertion, Clare Juncker claims that a woman must "explore her jouissance, her sexual pleasure, so as to bring down phallogocentric discourse and, ultimately, change the world" [7].

As Cixous suggests, feminine writing could be materialized at two levels, first being the individual level wherein the individual woman should explore and exhibit her sexuality in writing and describe the pleasures. And looking back to the narration of *Sula*, abundant evidence can be

found to fit the idea. The most evident one lies in the encounter between Sula and Ajax who she sleeps with quite a few times and it is a very rare case. In 1939 at their second meeting (the first time they met is when Sula was twelve years old) when Ajax comes to Sula's house with two quarts of milk, she takes the first step in their sexual relationship. As Morrison writes in the novel, she "took the bottle with one hand and his wrist with the other and pulled him into the pantry" [5]. There in the pantry, she "stood wide-legged against the wall and pulled from his track-lean hips all the pleasure her thighs could hold" [5]. She gets rid of the "stupid sexual modesty" that men have fooled women to contain, and bravely explores the sexual pleasure in her lovemaking with men even though there are "sex cops to bar their threatening return" [3]. She has sex with Ajax only because it pleases her. And she does not wait for Ajax to invite her into the sexual action. Instead, she takes the leading role and leads him to have sex with her, which is normally men's role to do so.

Sula's exploration of the sexuality of her body is full of excitement and pleasure. "As she rocked there, swayed there, like a Georgia pine on its knees, high above the slipping, falling smile, high above the golden eyes and the velvet helmet of hair, rocking, swaying, she focused her thoughts to bar the creeping disorder that was flooding her hips" [5]. She lets her thoughts "dwell on his face in order to confine, for just a while longer, the drift of her flesh towered the high silence of orgasm" [5]. From these vivid depictions, women's sexuality is well presented to the public. The fact that women enjoy as much as men and do not necessarily occupy the passive position in terms of sex has been shown clearly in the text, and it illustrates the second level which Cixous asserts about feminine writing—writing about female body and sexuality creates a new signifying order in which a woman will no longer remain passive but emerge as a source of power and an identity by itself.

Sula's feelings during the process of the intercourse also show the complexity of female sexuality, which in turn proves the richness of feminine writing. Aiyun Li acknowledges that female sexuality has an organic connection with feminine language and that the characteristic of female sexuality makes women adopt a different mode of speaking from masculine discourse [8]. It is because women's sexual pleasures come from different parts of their body. For example, Sula can feel the pleasure that comes from her breast, thighs, hips, and even the skin. The rich and complex feelings are different from male monosexuality, enabling women to write in non-phallogentric way—non-linear, non-singular, and full of fluidity and arbitrariness.

3. Sula and Hannah's Recognition of Female Strength through their Body

Writing about female body and revealing its beauty also illustrate the characteristic of feminine writing. The careful descriptions of Sula's and Hannah's body in the text well indicate Morrison's feminism. Sula uses her body to present female strength and challenge masculine rules. First of all, Sula's attempt to free her body from the uncomfortable clothes implies women's courage to escape from the unpleasant androcentric culture. For example, she does not wear any underwear when she goes to the church suppers. In this case, she frees her body by not adding any restraints to her body. Her body thus serves as a vehicle by which she fights against social norms that are regulated by men. As a matter of fact, she is not "laughing at their God," she is laughing at the masculine rules [5]. What's more, Sula's body shows an incredible power that represents femininity. As the narrator describes, Sula looks younger than her age—she does not have any of her teeth lost, nor does she have any ring of fat at her waist or pocket at her neck; she does not even catch any diseases when she is young. She shows no sign of vulnerability except for a "funny-shaped finger and that evil birthmark" [5]. Even the birthmark on one of her eyes shapes like a stemmed rose, the thorns of which to some extent implicate danger and something that cannot be easily handled. Therefore, the passage suggests a powerful female strength while portraying Sula's body. Finally, Sula's body also serves as a function to protect her from the harm of men. Sula protects her friend Nel and herself from the harassment and harm of the boys on their way home after school when they are young by

hurting her finger with a knife. The four boys who are trying to bully them are shocked and frightened when they see “the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate” [5]. So the female body can be seen as a means of protecting females against males’ harm.

Hannah is another example that represents female strength through the body. She loves her body and can always make men aware of its beauty. She would make men “aware of her behind, her slim ankles, the dew-smooth skin and the incredible length of neck” [5]. But she does not make herself look “hot” to please men or to seduce them to make love to her. Instead, she just wears the plain and ordinary clothes while she is spending time with men. In addition, when Hannah’s lover sees her carrying coal scuttle up from the basement, “he made no move to help her with it simply because he wanted to see how her thighs looked when she bent down to put it down, knowing that she wanted him to see them too” [5]. It is easy to conclude that Hannah always keeps real to herself whenever she is with men and she is well aware of her own strength and beauty that come through her body. In other words, she manages to shape her own identity in heterosexual relationships and never compromises to exist as the Other in the patriarchal society.

Morrison’s writing on Hannah’s and Sula’s body exactly coincides with what Cixous argues for feminine writing. She links the language and female body together, making body the front line and deadly weapon that can overturn the phallogentric binary opposition of female and male. It is through body that a woman forges herself a weapon to break androcentric culture and language and put herself in the subject position. As Lin Wu claims, western feminists hold that women’s recognition of their body is an important approach and component that helps women define their identity, control their destiny and offer themselves rights” [9]. Hannah and Sula clearly manage to appreciate their body and find the inner strength it contains.

4. Conclusion

Toni Morrison’s *Sula* describes the hard lives of black women under the oppression of patriarchal society. Some female characters, however, find a way out utilizing their body as a tool. Sula, Hannah and Eva, three women from different generations in Peace family, are brave enough to pursue sexual liberation and manage to find the female strength in their body. And writing about their sexual experiences is studied as a case in this paper to present the essence of feminine writing and its implication on the basis of Hélène Cixous’ theory.

Sula is undoubtedly a practice of feminine writing as women’s sexuality and body are encouraged as two main elements to be brought into female texts. Bogang Huang argues that if females aim to change the situation in which they exist as the Second Sex and the Other in male-dominated cultural tradition and hierarchical system, and to establish and construct female identity, they must begin with language revolution because it is language that is the root and basis of the oppression and discrimination that women suffer [10]. In Masculine language, desires of men are put in a centric position while female experiences and voices are always neglected. Therefore, female sexual desires that has been oppressed by patriarchal culture for a long time becomes the source of feminine language, and the female body that has never been talked about or acknowledged becomes a vehicle of feminine writing [10]. On one hand, the explicit sexual desires revealed by Sula, Hannah and Eva and the elaboration of Sula’s sexuality mean sexual liberation of women. They release their sexual needs without feeling guilty or ashamed. And it helps to bring out various desires in women—including the desire to write and to speak—and eventually provides them with courage to break the masculine language. The careful descriptions about Sula’s sexuality during her intercourse with Ajax then contribute to show female sexuality to the public from woman’s perspective specifically. It changes the muted position of women in the male discourse and leads women to exist in their own voices. On the other hand, Sula and Hannah present unique

female strength through their body. It shows that by focusing on their body and its unique experiences, women get to realize their own beauty and shape their self-identity. Hence it's another way to liberate women's body from patriarchy.

In the end, the paper contributes to explain Cixous' theory of feminine writing with a study case of Sula, Hannah and Eva's behaviors and attitudes. By showing female sexuality in public, the narration of Sula serves as a female-sexed text. It reveals female desires without restraints, carefully portrays female body and bravely describes the female sexuality during the process of lovemaking. Female sexuality is no longer a secret or something forbidden, something cannot be spoken. Making female voice heard through their body and sexuality, it can be concluded that *Sula* indeed contributes to liberate the female body and break the confining structures of phallogentric discourse. The paper, therefore, connects the theory with the practice and enriches the understanding of Cixous' theory of feminine writing to some extent.

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