

# *Breaking the Bound of Cocoon*

## *-- A Comparative Study on Black Female Identity in Sula and Yearning*

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**Abstract:** In the influential work, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Bell Hooks scrutinizes prevailing Black feminist discourses, emphasizing the hegemony of white feminists, intersecting forms of oppression, and the consequential loss of subjectivity. Nevertheless, hooks' innovative analysis encounters limitations when addressing the complexities within a literary context. This study conducts a comparative analysis of Black female identity construction, exploring the applicability of hooks' theoretical framework to *Sula*, a novel by African American author Toni Morrison. This paper seeks to clarify alleged contradictions and evaluate hooks' theory in three key aspects: the common predicament of Black female identity, the process of identity formation, and the relationship between identity and social class divisions. The analysis uncovers the necessity of acknowledging the shortcomings of hooks' arguments when applied to Black feminist literature, such as its inattention to the profound inner struggle originating from cultural constraints in authentic experiences of Black females. Due to distinct writing contexts and backgrounds, Bell Hooks and Toni Morrison diverge in their perspectives on Black female identity, necessitating a closer examination to steer Black feminism towards a more radical path in the future.

**Keywords:** black female identity, Sula, yearning

### 1. Introduction

Black feminism is an example of a postmodernist movement that began in the 1970s and quickly spread into the spheres of politics, sociology, literature, and the workplace. It quickly formed its guiding premise on the intersectional identities of Black women who have experienced racial, gendered, and class oppression. Naturally, identity politics became their tool to defend their rights.

The establishment of Black female identity has been one of the most contentious concepts in Black feminist criticism for several decades. Recent theoretical breakthroughs have shown how racial and gender disparities affect Black women in the Euro-American environment. Samrakshika Thapa writes that the establishment of identity has been extremely tough due to the dual burden of sexism and racism [1]. These views have had an impact on the field of Black feminist literature because their arguments provide new insight into the collective plight and void in Black feminism critique. However, the inner Black identity group is gradually being divided by a class division symbolized by an uneasy Black middle class and a poignant underclass, making contextualization

vital in the subject of feminism. While some argue that if identity politics are overly involved, there will be a loss of the historical and cultural bonds that exist in nature, the majority of Black feminist research associated with identity politics is aimed at finding success in racism, sexism, and class structure rather than white-supreme feminism and paternity. The internal disputes in Black feminism, which address contemporary identity issues in varying ways, have received little attention in research.

*Sula*, authored by Toni Morrison, the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature, is regarded as a masterpiece of Black feminist literature. It showed a succession of ups and downs in the development of two Black girls as a result of their disparate personalities, educational backgrounds, and fate. The story repeatedly emphasizes the blurry line between morality and stigma, as well as the battle that every Black woman endures if she wants to break free from the societal framework.

*Sula* has been interpreted well enough in terms of storyline and character development, and *Yearning* is frequently enriched to allow for new critiques. There are many theses disputing *Sula* and *Yearning*'s positions and proof, but few works have contrasted them on what they think about identity and attempted to apply the result to movement in practical lives.

This paper will test Bell Hook's claim of identity politics in *Yearning* by comparing it with *Sula*'s view on identity. Firstly, with the aid of other theories of Bell Hooks and other Black feminist critiques, *Yearning* will be interpreted from the angle of identity politics. Secondly, this paper will analyze the complexity and conflict of identity that has been emphasized in *Sula*, presenting concrete examples from the novel. The paper will next highlight how their viewpoints differ and overlap in order to shed light on the problem of Black female identity in various circumstances. Finally, by using a comparative approach to examine the issue of identity in literary works and critiques of African American women, the paper questions how Bell Hook's theory is restricted and comprehends the complex discussion of Black female identity from several angles. Such a strategy could have innovative ramifications for a more aggressive Black feminism movement in the sphere of literature.

## 2. Definition and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Definition of Identity

An "identity" can be regarded as either a social group characterized by membership criteria and distinguishing characteristics or socially defining features assigned to a single individual. From either perspective, identity is a concept that has increasingly been emphasized in the postmodern context. In this paper, identity will refer to the former definition, which means that the concept of identity will be discussed as a social group categorized by common traits or inborn qualities.

Identity politics is a political movement that subsequently follows the re-establishment of identity. It refers to political practices of mobilizing for change on the basis of political identity, including women, Black and Indians. The term was first coined by Black feminist Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective in 1974. The movement is united against common mistreatment or discrimination for a group constructed by a joint political feature.

With the advent of the postmodern era, multiculturalism began to play an essential role in the development of identity politics since it upholds that every marginalized culture deserves to be respected and preserved. Many marginalized groups, including Black females, stood up to voice themselves. As Combahee River Collective points out, it is upheld that the most in-depth and the most potentially subversive political movements stem from the formation of identity [2]. Black feminism identity politics soon staged itself as an indispensable component in the identity politics movement.

## 2.2. The Definition of Essentialism

According to the philosophical theory of essentialism, things have a set of characteristics which are essential to their identity. In other words, essentialism holds that everything has fundamental properties that determine what it is and that it is the responsibility of philosophers and scientists to identify and characterize these properties.

Bell Hooks contends that items and individuals are made up of various identities and experiences rather than adhering to the idea that objects have a stable core. She furthermore insists that a more heterogeneous representation of Black women, especially intellectuals, should be presented in the political arena and in the field of academia.

## 2.3. Theoretical Framework: *Yearning*

First and foremost, this paper's study is mostly focused on Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Bell Hook's *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, with support from additional ideas and arguments on pertinent subjects. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* is an essay collection by Bell Hooks, a well-known African American feminist and cultural critic. Her paper delves into numerous facets of Black identity, representation, and resistance in the context of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

It begins by denouncing the deconstruction of subjectivity's worsening effect on the marginalization of Black intellectuals in postmodern discourse and, as a result, advocates for an authoritative voice to represent the interests of the Black female group. Then it objects to essentialism, affirming that multiple Black identities and varied Black experiences should all be displayed with respect, which requires the validity of identity politics despite the identity deconstruction of postmodernism. The dominant discourses of postmodernism, feminism, and cultural studies are challenged by Hooks, who advocates for a radical liberation politics that values difference without dismissing the past or struggles. Additionally, she studies how various cultural objects, including rap and novels, reflect or contradict the dominant ideas of race, gender, and class. Hooks advocates for constructing a new platform where overturning ideas and collaborative meetings can happen [3], where diverse perspectives can coexist and create new possibilities for social change.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1. The Common Plight of Black Female Identity

Where there is oppression, there are protests; that is common knowledge. In outlining how Black women have suffered from discrimination and patriarchy, both authors build their arguments on the oppressive status quo of Black women. However, to set up their own further illustrations, different authors may differ from each other in concentration.

The key aspects of Bell Hook's claims on the joint predicament can be listed as follows: exclusivity, intersectionality and subjectivity deconstruction. Bell Hooks begins by criticizing the exclusivity and hierarchy that persist in academia and politics. The dominance of white feminists in academic research and the marginalization of Black intellectuals serve as examples of this, which has the effect of creating an overlooked injustice in a movement that advocates for equality. Then, Bell Hooks defines the oppression of Black females' intersectionality, which is a conceptual framework that studies how multiple social identities interact with racist and repressive societal institutions. The combined burden of race and gender has haunted the lives of many Black girls. Bell Hooks eventually justifies the critique of subjectivity deconstruction in the postmodern framework. She saw it as purposefully unfair to deprive the Black female group of subjectivity when they had only recently gained the right to express themselves.

Toni Morrison and Bell Hooks both emphasize the importance of giving Black female groups the space and respect they deserve. McDowell highlights the awkward situation for Black women writers in that the mainstream neither overlooks them totally nor respects them with honour but instead distorts their essence and misunderstands them generally [4]. Seeing this, Morrison proceeds to construct a fictional novel with each chapter titled in year numbers as if to protest the neglect of Black history. This type of artwork also adds historical weight to highlight the ingrained tragedy of coloured races.

Morrison further illustrates the difficulties and hardships in a broader period, demonstrating how the challenge of identity possession is passed down from generation to generation. Eva, Sula's grandmother, had no choice but to sell her own leg to feed her children after her husband abandoned them without even considering getting a job on her own. What Morrison seeks to emphasize is that it has been extremely difficult for Black women to both gain acceptance in a suitable working environment and initially connect themselves with income receivers. Helene, the daughter of a prostitute, developed every feasible means to elaborate the shadow of her mother's affinity on her daughter, Nel, but Helene, such a woman with strict discipline for herself and her daughter, unwittingly staged a flattering grin to a nasty conductor simply because he was white. Nel formed her identity as a result of her initial experiences with moral restriction, segregation, and prejudice. It is like a tragic cocoon conundrum in which people and norms from the outside stifle the inner battles, as was the case with Nel, who later moved far away from the little girl who gazed in the mirror and exclaimed, "I'm me. Me [5]." Various vital aspects of a complete identity are still lacking, limiting Black females' employment, morals, and development. Morrison is exactly wrestling with this larger identity crisis that has pervaded Black female adolescence and maturity for decades.

Both Bell Hooks and Toni Morrison concur on the fundamental notion that the right to self-expression and representation is essential for the empowerment of African American women. Nonetheless, Bell Hook's emphasis on the critical importance of gaining political identity overlooks the process and details of how Black women have been discriminated against, underestimated and restricted in traditional customs and structures. While hooks passionately underscores the importance of political and intellectual identity in achieving this objective, Morrison enriches the discourse through her literary prowess, as evident in her novel *Sula*. In *Sula*, Morrison effectively employs the power of narrative to evoke an emotional response from readers by portraying the intergenerational tragedy that has permeated the lives of countless African American women. This approach serves to augment the impact of her message and resonate deeply with her audience. Toni Morrison utilizes language as a tool to measure and extend lives, depicting the scenes and possibilities of numerous Black females. In other words, While *Yearning* offers valuable insights into Black feminism, it fails to adequately address the real-life experience and sufferings of the Black female community.

### **3.2. Identity Acquisition**

Bell Hooks views political grounding as a core component of the identity acquisition process for Black women, equating political and academic voice paths to identity construction. She contends that through participating in the political process and understanding the power dynamics at work, Black women can gain a sense of self-empowerment and autonomy. This freedom and right empower people to regain their power, write their own stories, and form relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. As Biana commented, in contrast to liberal feminists who only pay attention to self-freedom, radical feminists pursue a far more revolutionary self-awakening and the realization that they can eventually reshape the global political structure [6]. By actively

engaging in the political process, Black women are able to shape things around them and create a more equitable society.

In the literary context of *Sula*, however, the attainment of Black female identity becomes far more complicated. Not only do Black females require a channel to develop identities, but they must also locate their identities in the opposing influences of personality, fate, culture, and others' judgement from the outset.

The birthmark on Sula's face serves as evidence. It acts as a symbol and a thread that runs throughout the plot and Sula's development. Based on their attitudes towards Sula, the characters in the "bottom" form their own perceptions of the birthmark. It is a rose and a stem for Nel, who likes her. It is a copperhead or rattlesnake, according to Jude, who taunts her. It is a frightening Black thing for the children who are terrified of her because of hearsay. It is as bad as Hannah's ashes for the townspeople who despise her. Finally, it is a tadpole for Shadrack, who treats her objectively. The various interpretations of a single birthmark demonstrate how other people's emotions and prejudice can influence identity building. However, there is one crucial component lacking. What is Sula's take on the situation?

Surprisingly, despite her declaration to "make herself [5]," Sula fails to construct the meaning of the birthmark or her identity. No matter how liberated Black females strive to appear, their sense of identity is still measured by a third-party evaluation system. In comparison, it is completely reasonable for Bell Hooks to declare the role politics has played in identification and the imperative of seizing voices, but Sula has gone further, claiming that identity is not an objective property derived solely from race, gender, or class. It is also not a tool that may be used for political activism. It is difficult to gain in the midst of inner and outer turmoil when numerous Black females finally awakened from a long time of sleep but found themselves bound up by social standards and confused about what they should become. The application of *Yearning* to practical guidance on the awakening of female consciousness is hindered by its inability to account for where the girls can find their identity and, even if they have acquired the channel, what to fight for themselves. Those Black women's inventiveness and freedom of choice were stifled by the living environment, which was comprised of thousands of years of history and culture, leaving them trapped inside the confines and helplessness.

### 3.3. Identity and Class Division

Bell Hooks emphasized the growing importance of class separation in Black feminist groups. She agreed with Cornel West, who stressed the growing differentiation, which creates, on the one hand, an anxious Black middle-class and, on the other, a vast and growing Black underclass devastated by deindustrialization [7]. As a result, Bell Hooks objected to the essentialist logic of approaching Black females by emphasizing their struggle and characteristics based on collective race and gender. She advocated for class mobility, abandoning such an outdated manner of discriminating against Black people, particularly female intellectuals, validating distinct female identities and variegated Black existence [2]. She also challenges colonial imperialist ideas of Black identity, which never depict Blackness as its whole but instead reinforce and extend white supremacy.

Despite the strengths, *Yearning* is not without its limitations, including its focus on the hierarchy at the expense of overlooking the inner links inside the Black community, which plays an indispensable role in supplying the political voice of Black females. Sula's attempt to depict class division differs greatly from Bell Hook's. Morrison emphasized the commonality and connecting bond that exists among Black girls regardless of the hierarchy they are in, as illustrated by Nel and Sula's relationship and tragedy.

During their girlhood period, the two girls' likeness of identity allows them to build a close bond despite the disparity of their upbringing and class. Kadida referred to their bond as liberal, which

allows them to find condolence for each other against the malicious treatment of the world. In the book, Sula and Nel's intimacy allows them to build an inseparable bond between themselves and one another and empowers them in the failure of their own mother/daughter relationships [8]. In fact, "their relationship was so intimate that they themselves had trouble differentiating one's mind from the other's [5]." The girl's emotional bonds blur the boundary of hierarchy, and they complement each other to create one full personality.

After the girls reach maturity, it is their gradual loss of awareness of their similarities that causes bonding to fail. Morality and class hierarchy grow more ingrained in the girls' minds, and those who disagree on these life choices loathe each other for no apparent reason. For Nel, who married a man and kept her life on track before Sula intervened, Sula was a betrayer, whereas, in Sula's opinion, Nel was reduced to a dull lady confined by secularity. The animosity generated by class divide and public judgement is so oppressive that they completely forget their misery, soul, and identities are indistinguishable. Despite the fact that Nel pretends to be unconscious of her involvement in Chicken Little's death, Eva subconsciously reminds her of the occurrence. "Just alike. Both of you. Nel was no difference between you [5]." The remark from Eva inspires Nel to reconsider her deep desire to reconcile with Sula, which deviates from and goes beyond the traditional moral idea formed by patriarchy and white supremacy. Morrison awakens readers to how the overlapping oppression of race, gender, and class dusts the eyes of Black females and hinders them from making meaningful long-term bonds. If solidarity is to be developed, it should be constructed on the foundations of culture, kinship, and inner similarities rather than political class boundaries. Only after that process can Black girls develop identities sufficiently powerful to accept one another without hostility.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Possible Counterargument

One may astutely argue that Toni Morrison's organization of the plot, which illustrates the impact of racial segregation in fostering a pervasive animosity towards the racially mixed Sula, and by depicting a social environment where men enjoy unchecked freedom while women bear the brunt of societal expectations, emphasizes the political influences that have infiltrated every aspect of Black women's lives and thus goes along with Bell Hooks. This approach seemingly focuses on the broader implications rather than the ostensibly trivial psychological conflict between two girls. However, such an interpretation inadvertently confounds the chronology of a radical identity movement.

Bell Hook's arguments on politics can only be regarded as one single aspect of identity foundation. To be more accurate, the political right opens up a channel for Black women to start establishing their status, while a complete identity realization calls for much more, including self-exploration and cultural recognition. As Sula depicts, the internal fragmentation within the "Bottom" community is, in fact, portrayed as a foundational obstacle to achieving collective solidarity.

Morrison's approach diverges from that of Bell Hooks, who advocates for the attainment of subjectivity in political and academic spheres. Instead, Morrison contemplates the challenge of bridging the gap between acquiring a voice and determining what should be articulated. Sula proves the limitation of Bell Hooks by stating how tough it can be for Black females to win absolute autonomy over their identities, to construct female bonds beyond great conceptual differences and to cast off the burden of moral abduction. Toni Morrison portrayed Sula as a Black girl who unrelentingly wrests her true 'self' from the socially instructed 'other' [9]. Even given their political identity, Black females still have a long way to go to foster unity and, consequently, to bring about

meaningful change in their lived reality before their community can establish a shared identity and strike a balance between societal pressures and innate desires.

## 4.2. Reasons

The observed dissimilarity between Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula*, and Bell Hook's theoretical perspectives can be explained through two distinct lenses: the contextual differences in writing and the authors' divergent backgrounds. To explore these disparities, it is essential to scrutinize the manner in which each text approaches the issues surrounding Black female identity, as well as the unique experiences that have informed each author's perspective.

Bell Hook's theoretical work explicitly addresses the challenges faced by Black women in society and offers insightful recommendations for change. Although her analyses occasionally overlook certain aspects of self-perception and cultural connectedness, they remain enlightening and thought-provoking. In contrast, *Sula*, as a work of fiction, seeks to provoke questions and speculation rather than provide definitive answers. Throughout the novel's narrative, Morrison introduces various obstacles faced by Black women, illustrating the complex and multifaceted nature of their experiences. The literary context allows the author to explore a wide range of possibilities and interactions, painting a comprehensive picture of the patriarchal, white-dominated society.

The inherent differences between these two types of writing result in distinct aims and outcomes. While both literary works and theoretical essays involve creativity and imagination, they are fundamentally rooted in the authors' personal experiences. These individual observations, emotions, and interactions shape the narratives and contribute to their resonance with readers.

Bell Hook's background, steeped in the wealthy magical environment of southern Black culture [10], exposed her to the stark contrasts between races and classes. Her mother worked as a maid for a wealthy white family, and she attended a racially segregated school. These early experiences fostered a politically oriented sensitivity to Black female identities, which is evident in her work.

Conversely, Toni Morrison's upbringing was characterized by a blend of adversity and optimism unique to African-American culture. Her parents instilled in her a deep appreciation for her cultural heritage and linguistic prowess, sharing traditional African-American stories, supernatural tales, and melodious songs. Morrison's family faced numerous challenges, including racial persecution and socioeconomic struggles. However, their resilience and laughter in the face of adversity, such as when their landlord burned their house down over unpaid rent, imbued her with an indomitable spirit. This dual understanding of the trials and cultural richness experienced by Black women informed Morrison's nuanced portrayal of identity crises in *Sula*, as well as her keen insight into internal conflicts and emotional bonds.

In conclusion, the dissimilarities between *Sula*'s and Bell Hook's theories can be attributed to the unique writing contexts and the authors' diverse backgrounds. Each text, while addressing issues related to Black female identity, approaches the subject matter from a different angle and with different objectives. By examining both works in tandem, readers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex experiences and challenges faced by Black women in a white-dominated society. Furthermore, the distinct perspectives offered by these two authors can stimulate thought, foster dialogue, and inspire future scholarship on this important topic.

## 5. Conclusion

This study set out to test Bell Hook's theory in the literary context of *Sula* and infer the significance and limitations of *Yearning*. In conclusion, both Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Bell Hook's *Yearning* address the complexities surrounding Black female identity, focusing on the struggle to establish a

sense of self amidst oppressive societal forces. While hooks only emphasize the role of politics and class division in shaping identity, Morrison delves deeper into the intricate relationships and personal experiences that mold Black women's self-perception. The scope of Bell Hook's theory is restricted by its inability to fully account for the multi-dimensional realization of Black female identity construction, of which the struggle takes place in morality, female relationships and ingrained prejudice. Above all, Bell Hooks overlook that the top priority of Black women is to find solidarity through shared experiences, culture, and kinship, transcending political and class boundaries in order to embrace and empower their identities fully.

The comparison undertaken here has extended our knowledge of the departure existing in Black feminism, which may well have an instructive bearing on the further interpretation of identity politics movements and feminist literature. Being limited to a single theory and literature context, this study lacks universality. Considerably more work will need to be done to determine the fundamental predicament of Black female identity in the postmodern era.

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