

The Solo Fight of Eva Peace in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate in literature and Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction, was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on 18th February 1931 in Lorain Ohio; she is the second of four children of George Wofford and Rahma Willis Wofford. The unfavourable social condition which threatened their life at the gun point of racism urged Morrison's family to move from south to North in pursuit of better opportunities. Her father was a hardworking and dedicated man. He found employment as a shipyard welder and did three jobs in order to support his family needs. Her mother was a church-going woman and she sang in the choir. Her name was picked blindly from the Bible. Chloe attended an integrated school, in her first grade; she was the only black student in her class who could read. Morrison had great passion for dancing and she wanted to become a dancer like her favourite dancer, Maria Tallchief. She paid great attention also in reading. She was very much inspired by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gustavo Flaubert and Jane Austen. She was very good at studies. After her graduation with honors from Lorain High School, Morrison joined Howard University in Washington. She changed her middle name 'Anthony' into 'Toni' since many people found difficult to pronounce her name. Her acquaintance with university players, a repertory company, gave her many touring opportunity to south where she saw the life of blacks. Morrison graduated with a B.A in English from Howard University in 1953 and graduated masters from Cornell University in 1955.

After her graduation she was offered a job at Texas Southern University in Houston. Thereby she had an opportunity to teach Negro history and it helped her to know more about her people. In 1957, she got an opportunity to work as a faculty member in Howard University. She met Harold Morison, a Jamaican Architect in the same university and married him in 1958. He fathered her two sons. Her married life was not so fruitful. It deteriorated her and so she put an end to it in 1964 by divorcing her husband. Her married life lasted only for six years. To escape from her unhappy married life, she joined a small writers group. She was comfortable with her new company which appreciated and fostered literary interest. The writer's group had the customary practice of bringing a story or a poem for discussion. The foundation for her first novel *The Bluest Eye* was laid there. As there was nothing to discuss during discussion when her turn came up, she quickly wrote a story loosely based on a girl whom she knew in her childhood in Loraine for her blue eyes. The story interested the group. Later, when Morrison worked for a textbook subsidiary of Random House in Syracuse, she rejuvenated the story which she had written for the writers group and decided to change the story into a novel. Amidst her busy schedule in work and family responsibilities, she found time to write when her sons were asleep. As a debut writer, it was both exciting and challenging.

Sula is Toni Morrison's second novel written next to *The Bluest Eye*. The story begins towards the end of First World War, 1919, and winds up towards the end of the Second World War, 1945. The background of the story revolves around a hill top called Bottom in Medallion City. Bottom is inhabited by black slaves who were given freedom after performing some very difficult chores. The white farmers in order to give them a piece of land gave away a valley land called Bottom. The slaves were convinced by the definition for calling a hill top as Bottom; when God looks down from the sky, it is Bottom. It also refers to the fact that God is directly "High up from us". The blacks occupied the hill top which is cut off from all basic facilities. Though the life of blacks would be so miserable, they are happy with a "small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks". Apart from this, the story begins with an action of introducing National Suicide Day by Shadrack who returns to Medallion after serving as a soldier in the First World War. He comes to Medallion after getting tired of fighting and bored of living. After settling down in Bottom, he institutes National Suicide Day on 3rd June 1920. He believes that the people who lead a miserable life can make use of this opportunity to ease their pain and save the remaining years of life.

Eva is one of Morrison's magnificent women who commit herself to face any obstacles so as to protect their dependants. She dares even to cut herself into pieces to serve her children if they are in dire need of it. Morrison presents such magnificent woman characters in every novel so that the readers get impressed. To quote a few, Sethe in *Beloved*, Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Violet in *Jazz* are the best examples. Each of them expresses their love and affection in a unique way. They possess some important qualities like love and compassion, tolerance, acceptance, sacrifice, commitment and understanding the need of their people that are essential for uniting people with the cord of relationship. So, it is apt to call Eva as one of Morrison's magnificent women. The critics may comment that Morrison's mighty women attempt to bring out maleness out of their femaleness happens through their practice of violence to solve their problems. However, it has to be deeply analysed. The violence was not one of the options given to them rather it was the only option left over by the society. In order to protect their generation single handedly, they happened to be violent.

Eva was leading a miserable life. Her husband, Boy Boy was very much engaged himself in womanizing, drinking and abusing Eva. He deserts Eva and her three children after five years of his marriage. When he leaves, "Eva had only \$1.65 and 5 eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger..." (*Sula* 32). She remained bereft and directionless to go anywhere. At that inevitable situation, Eva controls her emotions, postpones her anger and molds her confidence. Initially, she seeks for help from her neighbours. She senses that her neighbours could not afford to feed her children for too long, so she decides to find a way to earn some huge amount of money to give her children some basic needs.

Eva was left in a situation in which she fumbles back and forth whether to go to work or to be with her children, because all of her children were below five years old. Hannah was the eldest. She was too little to take care of her brother and sister. Eva did some menial job to feed her children, besides being very difficult to get a job; the earnings are insufficient to feed her children. At this juncture, she leaves her children with Mrs. Shuggs saying that she would come back next day. But she returns after 18 months with a new black book and one leg. It was surprise for others to see Eva with one leg. People start spreading rumours about Eva's one leg. After her return, she reclaims her children and starts to build a new house to settle them. Now Eva's house is blessed with all basic facilities, it also has become a refuge for four destitute called Deweys and one portion is rented for Tar Baby. Eva peace's adoption of these four boys shows that she has a great concern for other human beings. She is very grateful to the people from whom she gets timely help.

Her children grows steadily. Both Hannah and Pearl gets married. Pearl after marriage moves to Flint Michigan. She continues to contact her mother through letters. Her letters show the records of the happenings of her new life with her husband and children with minor problems. Hannah's married life comes to an end very shortly due to the death of her husband Rekus. She comes back to her mother with a three year old daughter, Sula. Plum who was the hope of Eva's family returns home after serving as a warrior in World War I. He is completely shackled, tattered, mentally disordered and he is literally turned into a destitute with a sack on his shoulder. As Lucille P. Fultz points out; "When Plum returns from the war (which makes him a warrior, like Adonis) mired in heroine addiction, Eva is not able to accept his self-destructive behaviour, slovenliness, and diminishment to a mere shadow of himself." (41). Out of three children, it seems only Pearl is settled in her life. The other two, Hannah and Plum returns home to spend rest of their life with their mother. Eva warmly welcomes both. She gives them a shelter and tries to mould their confidence and further shows a new path to travel on. In her attempt, she succeeds in Hannah's case but fails in Plum's, because he returns home beyond repair.

Morrison's mothers consider their children as an extension of their limbs and wounds to express the bondage of their relationship. Marianne Hirsch adds up to the above mentioned statement, "Their children were like distant but exposed wounds whose aches were no less intimate because separate from their flesh" (42). By which one could easily understand how Eva could have suffered and what she could have felt while seeing Hannah burning. One could understand the fervor of pain that Eva undergoes through her agony of experiencing the burning of limbs.

Plum is another inept male character of Toni Morrison. He is Eva's last son. Eva has great hope on Plum and dreams that he would live with her and take care of her during her last stage of her life. Eva plans to bequeath everything to him. With lots of expectation and joyfulness, Eva looks forward his homecoming from the war field. When his return is delayed a little, Eva is disappointed. Her eagerness is kindled and at the same time

her confidence is slightly shattered. At last three days after Christmas, he arrives at Medallion. His appearance makes Eva and Hannah to ponder about Plum and they recognize that something wrong has happened to Plum. Initially, they reserve their question and wait until he opens up his mouth, but it was all in vain. He did not say anything about his strange looking and behaviour. But Eva was smart enough to understand her son. She gives up her curiosity to ask what happened to him, instead she tries to understand him. She observes the change in Plum's character caused by the war field. It has plucked his soul and sent the body to Medallion. On seeing her son's condition, Eva makes up her mind. She drops her hope that he would accompany her and take care of her till her last breath instead she prepares her mind to take care of her disturbed son till her last breath. This time she finds it more difficult to take care of a grown up son who is completely diseased by bad habits that he has practiced in the war field. She could not tolerate her son's dilapidated condition. On seeing Plum's struggle to give up his last breath, she decides to ease his pain by killing. Lucille P. Fultz expresses his view with regard to Eva's act of euthanasia,

She takes away his life by engulfing him in fire,...In what we at first perceive as merciless, inhuman act, we find, although in exaggerated form, a lesson in the ultimate importance of the self-reliance that Sula must come to realize and accept. Scarred, too, like Shadrack, Plum seeks to escape independence through drugs rather than to act responsibly to establish an order and chart a direction for his fragmented life. His infantile behaviour is a metaphor for lack of independence. He wanted to return to the womb...As Eva suggests, what Plum sought was not incestuous cohabitation, but escape through rebirth and childhood. He wanted to become a child again, to return to the parental shelter she once offered, to avoid responsibility for self, as well as to be resorted and made new. Unable to accept either her son's dependence or his inevitable decay, Eva destroys him (41-42).

As Sethe did to Beloved in Morrison's another novel *Beloved*, Eva practices a mercy killing to her own son. This act of Eva once again engages Morrison's critics to justify her act. At this juncture, it is important to recollect an incident which happened when Plum was a small kid. He was crying for quite long time out of stomach pain, by then, Eva was struggling hard to find out the reason for his incessant crying. She did this and that to soothe his pain. At last, she finds it by chance that he was suffering from constipation. She pokes her finger into his anal and removes the stools that had blocked free motion. Then he stops crying and Eva feels relaxed. A mother's feel towards the incessant crying of a child can never be understood by an outsider and an onlooker. It is a unique feel which the mother alone would experience. When the critics try to condemn Eva's mercy killing the above mentioned incident that takes place in the childhood age of Plum, gives a clear hint that it has to be viewed very seriously and interpreted rightly. It is not that Eva could not tolerate the pain, and could not afford to take care of him but simply she decides to ease his pain. Nellie Y. McKay points out to Eva's perception on death as, "To Eva, death was the ultimate reality. Having given Plum life through tremendous struggles, she

could not endure his meandering in the artificial pastiche of death; she took him out of his dope-ridden misery and gave him the real thing.” (26). McKay’s statement very well supports Eva. This time she remains choiceless. Morrison’s mothers do not find choices to relieve their pain rather they are left on a one way track. Similarly Eva was left with only option to kill. Eva’s solo fight is intended to benefit her children but unfortunately it ends in tragedy due to the poor social order.

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