

Analysis of Racial Internalization in Toni Morrison's "*Sula*"

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Abstract

In "*Sula*," Toni Morrison vividly depicts how racism profoundly affects African Americans, using *Sula*'s life as a lens. She explores both institutionalized racism, embedded in societal structures, and internalized racism, inherent within the African American community. By showcasing these dual forms of racism, Morrison highlights the complex challenges African Americans endure, not just from external discrimination but also from within their own communities. Through her nuanced portrayal, Morrison emphasizes the ongoing struggle against racism and the resilience of African American individuals and communities in the face of adversity.

Keywords

Toni Morrison; Racialism; Internalization.

1. Introduction

"Racism" is not only one of the core concepts in American literary criticism theory, but also a hot topic in the study of African literature theory. With the continuous deepening of literary theory research, most readers do not have a thorough understanding of "racism" in literary works. African American female writers represented by Toni Morrison, with their delicate portrayal of the various situations encountered by African Americans under racism, have seen the increasing value and importance of their literary works. However, when observing literary works involving "racism" from various perspectives, different authors and readers also have their own ways of expression and interpretation of "racism". Anissa, Janine Wardi¹, as an anti-racism advocate, believes that we should analyze the plight of Black women who suffer from both gender and racial oppression from a standpoint that transcends race (Anissa, Janine Wardi,2005). Butler Judith², in her novels, uses the metaphor of "caged birds" to depict the situation of Black women, evoking both the feeling of being imprisoned in the cage of racial discrimination and oppression, and the determination to break free from it(Butler, Judith,2002). Although many African American female writers and literary works have "racism" as their theme, the essence of them is unified. Racism is a self-centered attitude that believes racial differences determine the history and cultural development of human society and that one's own group is superior to others.

Since its publication, Toni Morrison's literary works have been centered around "racism", sparking widespread discussion and controversy in both the natural sciences and social sciences. She has also been the most prominent African American female writer throughout the 20th century. However, this has also led to most academic understanding of "racism" being limited to interpretations of racism by others, with little mention of the internalization of racism. In fact, there have been early understandings of "racism" in the works of Toni Morrison and other literary writers. A more complete and clear understanding of "racism" can be achieved through a comparative and systematic examination of Toni Morrison's "racism"

literature, using "Sula" as an example. Based on the order of composition, and also the degree of understanding of this ideology, Toni Morrison's racism research can generally be divided into two parts: the duality of racism, namely institutionalized and internalized racism.

2. The Duality of Racism

In Toni Morrison's works, the exploration of institutionalized racism is a central theme, particularly exemplified through the character of Sula in the novel "*Sula*." This form of racism manifests in societal structures and policies that perpetuate racial discrimination, impacting individuals like Sula as they navigate through life.

Sula's journey illustrates the external manifestations of institutionalized racism when she leaves her home and attempts to create a life for herself. As she ventures into the outside world, she encounters systemic barriers and prejudices that limit her opportunities and hinder her progress. These barriers are ingrained in societal norms and institutions, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and oppression for African Americans.

Furthermore, upon her return to her original Black community, Sula is confronted with the internalized racism within the group. Despite being part of the same racial community, individuals within the group hold prejudices against themselves and their own race. This internalized racism reflects the deep-seated impact of institutionalized racism, as societal structures and policies shape individuals' perceptions and beliefs about themselves and others. Sula's life is characterized by the dual constraints of conflicting cultural consciousness between Africa and Europe, torn between the lower strata of society where she resides and the outside world. This constant struggle highlights the pervasive nature of institutionalized racism, which permeates both external and internal aspects of individuals' lives.

The duality of racism is vividly portrayed in Sula's character, serving as a poignant reminder of the complex interplay between societal structures and individual experiences. Despite the similarities between African and European cultures, Morrison emphasizes the differences in their emphasis on personal freedom and collective interests. In African culture, collective integrity takes precedence over individual integrity, leading to conflicts when individuals like Sula pursue their own paths against societal expectations.

Overall, Morrison's exploration of institutionalized racism in "*Sula*" sheds light on the systemic barriers and prejudices that African Americans face in society. Through Sula's journey, Morrison challenges readers to confront the deep-rooted inequalities embedded within societal structures and policies, urging for greater awareness and action to dismantle institutionalized racism.

3. The Internalization of Racism

In Toni Morrison's works, the concept of the internalization of racism is deeply explored, particularly through the lens of African American communities. This internalization refers to the ingrained racism within these communities, where discrimination against fellow members occurs across personal, political, and economic spheres. Morrison's examination of this phenomenon sheds light on the complexities of racial dynamics within African American culture.

One aspect that Morrison delves into is the lack of awareness among white individuals regarding the prevalence of internalized racism within African American communities. This lack of awareness perpetuates a system where African Americans are deprived of power and opportunities, as the societal structures are constructed to serve the interests of those in power. The continuous labeling of African Americans as "Black" by whites further restricts their

opportunities for empowerment, making it challenging for them to break out of lower socioeconomic strata.

Moreover, Morrison highlights the diversity and complexity of African American identity and values, where individuals navigate multiple intersecting identities such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and political orientation. This diversity and complexity result in unique intersections of identity characteristics, exposing individuals to various forms of discrimination. Women, homosexuals, and non-whites often find themselves at the intersection of discrimination, becoming focal points for internalized racism.

In Morrison's novel "Sula," the character Sula embodies these intersections and experiences the consequences of internalized racism firsthand. As she navigates different layers of identity, each additional layer adds to her experiences of discrimination. Sula's rejection of predetermined societal norms for people of color reflects her refusal to conform to the confines of internalized racism. Morrison intricately weaves the community's identification with others and self-identification, illustrating the conflicts that arise from negotiating these conflicting demands within the Black community.

In conclusion, Toni Morrison's exploration of the internalization of racism in her works sheds light on the complex dynamics within African American communities. Through her nuanced portrayal of characters like Sula, Morrison exposes the inherent racism that permeates societal structures and individuals' perceptions, challenging readers to confront the complexities of race and identity in American society.

4. Conclusion

In her works, Toni Morrison delves deep into racism within races, internalized racism, racialism, classism, and sexism, demonstrating the relentless struggle of African Americans against racism. The characters in "Sula" have a variety of issues, sometimes even embodying all of these problems simultaneously. Light-skinned African Americans often mock and discriminate against darker-skinned ones, successfully depicting racism within races. The underlying logic behind this is that due to the sustained and systematic racism perpetrated by whites, African Americans are almost impossible to avoid internalizing these hateful values. After years of brainwashing, if one is constantly told that they are not worthy of consideration, opportunities, and quality of life, they themselves become their own worst enemies. In the novel, the townspeople "could use her [Sula] to contain their helpless, furious hatred" (Morrison, "Sula")³(Feng, Pin-chia. 2007). In Sula, one can see to some extent the internalized racism and self-hatred, as her conflicts with identity and community create polarization within the group. When Sula returns to the bottom, she tells Nel, "Half (the people in town) need (killing)" (Morrison, "Sula"), admitting her dislike for the surrounding town and community. This conflict may be the primary reason Sula gives up the "bottom" and seeks identity elsewhere. Nonetheless, even in this internalized racism towards herself and other African Americans, something compels Sula to return to the bottom; it makes her fully embrace the life she once tried to abandon.

Racism has altered the lives and determined the destinies of African Americans. Every aspect of an African American's life is a constant struggle against various forms of racism. Meanwhile, racism, as a series of key and complex themes within African American theory, bestows new significance upon African American novels, aiding readers in understanding African American history; without African Americans, there would be no America. Through their significant contributions to historical events and their literary works, we not only take important steps in understanding the African American experience but also amplify the spirit of African American life and struggle, making it a part of black history.

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