

Care and Estrangement in Mother-Child Relationship in *Sula*

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Motherhood is one of the unavoidable themes of Toni Morrison's *Sula*. However, motherhood manifests itself more as split and disconnection than affection and comfort in this novel. From the perspective of the ethic of care, we will find that motherhood is rather complicated and fraught with conflicts. The onus of parenthood care has traditionally fallen on the mother. The reality is that mother care is not as guaranteed and unconditional as readers used to believe. The performance of mother care is actually subject to many hindrances even though the mother may entertain a profound love towards her child. In this story, we may find that racial oppression, financial hardship, emotional burden, children's depressing response, etc., all exemplify these hindrances. Lack of care, thus, can lead to the disconnection and estrangement between mother and child. This novel dispels the myth of unconditional maternal love and presents to us the complicatedness of motherhood.

Keywords: *Sula*, motherhood, ethic of care

Introduction

After reading Toni Morrison's *Sula*, readers may be confused about whether there is unconditional love between a mother and her child. The myth that motherlove is unconditional, as Paula Caplan points out in *Don't Blame Mother*, underpins contemporary ideological constructions of motherhood. In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, Andrea O'Reilly argues that it is Sula's adherence to normative definitions of motherlove, in particular the ideology of unconditional love that leads to the disconnection between Sula and Hannah. Actually, the mother-daughter split of Sula and Hannah has emerged long before Hanna's remark of not liking Sula and this split arises out of the lack of care. Thus, compared with unconditional love, this paper tends to use care as a new measurement to analyze the estranged state of mother and child in this story.

Sula and Nel, two main characters in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, are referred to be "daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers" (1974, p. 36). The father's role is almost absent in all the families mentioned in this story without exception. Philip Page argues that in this work "men are so consistently absent that no father/child relationships exist" (1995, p. 67). Sula's father had been dead since she was three years old. Hannah's father had abandoned his family and left Eva tend to three small kids. Nel's father is a seaman (or rather a lakeman, for he was a ship's cook on one of the Great Lakes lines), in port only three days out of every 16. It is always mothers that bear the responsibility of raising a family. However, despite mothers' devotion to holding the family, children in this story still estrange from their mothers at last. In fact, children in this novel do share the experience of losing care from their mother. Care giving does play a great role in maintaining human relationship. It is because of the lack of care that leads to the estranged motherhood in this story. In *Moral Boundaries—A Political*

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Argument for an Ethic of Care, Joan C. Tronto puts forwards four phases of caring. They are: caring about, taking care of, care-giving, and care-receiving. Specifically, they are the following steps. The subject of care knows what the object of care needs. The subject of care assumes responsibility for the unmet needs. The subject of care offers physical work to meet the needs of the object of needs. The object of care will respond to the care it receives. It is important to include care-receiving as an element of the caring process because it provides the only way to know that caring needs have actually been met. These four phases are an ideal process of caring. In this paper, however, the author will explore the lack of caring between mother and daughter and what leads to the discontinuity of the four phases.

Helene's Unawareness of the Need

Helene Wright is the first female character presented to the reader in this novel. We know little about her childhood and adolescence before her marriage. The narrator seems to consciously emphasize her life after marriage and pay no heed to the years when she is a maiden. According to the narrator, Helene Wright is an impressive woman, at least in Medallion she is. Not only does she manipulate her daughter and her husband, but she occupies dominance in the community of Medallion. However, with the letter describing the illness of her grandmother and thus urging her to make a visit to her hometown, it seems possible that we can get to know more about her past. The journey to the south begins when Helene enters a coach peopled by white men. Although Helene and Nel at last reach the colored car, the white conductor still comes towards them to make inquiries. This episode offers us a window into what has happened to Helene in the past. She is thrown into panic simply because of being called "gal" by the conductor. This casual term reminds her of the days when she was casually treated. Before entering the train cars, Helene is so alert that she is armed to teeth. Her manner, her bearing, and her beautiful dress all serve as her arms. With all these arms, she walks head high to the train depot. Unfortunately, we find that the well-armed soldier Helene had run into a total failure even though she had not reached what she regarded as a battlefield. More importantly, she even displays an obsequious smile after such a fiasco. What confuses Nel is not the sharp and absurd contrast between her mother and the white conductor. Helene is decently dresses yet she has lost all her disgrace before the white conductor who is leisurely removing wax with finger. What comes to Nel's mind is the contrast between what her mother used to be and what she is like now. All the time, what Helene presents to others including Nel is an image of "tall, proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look" (Morrison, 1974, p. 15). Helene is the embodiment of power from Nel's eyes. Seeing this powerful woman being reduced to such a disgrace, how can Nel avoid feeling confused even frightened? The episode at the beginning of the journey to the south does offer us a window into how Helene is treated by the white people when she is a young girl. Although it does not directly touch upon Helene's reminiscence, Helene's response towards the white conductor speaks louder than that. Helene must have been looked down upon by the white since she is the daughter of a Creole whore. Helene's fear comes from the white people. While Helene feels nervous at the face of the white, she adopts a composed even pride attitude when dealing with black people. In Medallion, in every occasion concerning black people, Helene is in charge. She never feels frightened before her black fellows. Instead, she always demonstrates a sense of superiority. In no way will she notice that she has been looked down upon by the two black soldiers watching her flattering smile at the train car. But Nel has witnessed the whole process. Helene does not notice the gaze of the soldiers whereas Nel has completely suffered their disdain. Nel knows clearly that what the soldiers despise is her mother because of her foolish and obsequious

smile. However, it is Nel that couldn't help feeling ashamed. Nel is so shocked by the "midnight eyes" that "she wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly" (Morrison, 1974, p. 15). At this occasion, Nel does need her mother to protect her from these midnight eyes. However, Helene is so proud that she cannot imagine that there could be any black man that dares to look down upon her. Thus, Helene neglects not only the eyes lurking behind her back but also her daughter's need to be comforted. Attention is an essential element involved in caring, especially in the first phase of caring which is called "caring about". Tronto argues that "Caring about involves the recognition in the first place that care is necessary. It involves noting the existence and making an assessment that this need should be met" (1993, p. 106). Nel Noddings also emphasizes that "attention plays a central role in arousing empathy" (2013, p. 203). It is Helene's neglect of Nel's need that leads to the failed care between them. Helene never pays attention to what Nel really needs. Instead, "Helene's version of motherhood is to mold Nel (literally by trying to reshape her nose and figuratively by eliminating her individuality) into her own concept of white respectability" (Morrison, 1974, p. 67).

Eva's Denial of the Need

The myth of unconditional motherlove has been haunting the Peaces in this story. Hannah's question of "Mamma, did you ever love us" is one of the strange things in this story. Eva's response to this question is "No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'" (Morrison, 1974, p. 48). At first glance, this response seems to suggest that Eva does not love her children. Actually, what Hannah really wants is Eva's care, not just her love. In the mother-daughter relationship between Eva and Hannah, motherlove is understood in two different ways. When Eva gets pissed off by Hannah's strange question, Hannah changes the way she asks the question about motherlove. Hannah says that "I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (Morrison, 1974, p. 49). In this sense, we come to know that in Hannah's view, if Eva ever played with them, that is love. However, from the perspective of the ethic of care, what Hannah regards as love is actually care. Love maybe the basis of care yet cannot equal care. According to the definite of love in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, love refers to "a strong feeling of deep affection for somebody or something". Thus, love is a kind of feeling whereas care is a kind of action. Love is closely related to the first two phases of care, i.e., "caring about" and "taking care of". Only with love can the subject of care pay attention to the needs of the object of care and assumes responsibility for the unmet needs.

After figuring out what Hannah really wants, we will find that she puts forwards a need beyond Eva's ability. Not all the expressed needs should be met. Not all the expressed needs can be addressed. Nel Noddings (2013) maintained that

Striving to maintain natural caring does not imply that we respond positively to every expressed need. Indeed, there are many situations in which it would be clearly wrong to do so. There are times when we must deny an expressed need, sometimes for the sake of the cared-for, sometimes out of concern for others in the web of care. (p. 17)

We can see from Eva's reminiscence that she has gone through really hard times with her three children. Rearing three children totally by herself is anything but easy; playing with her children is such a luxury to Eva as a single mother abandoned by her husband, and inflicted by financial hardship and emotional burden. Eva thus denies Hannah's unreasonable need.

It is worth noting that not only has Eva denied Hannah's need of playing with her, but she denies Plum's need of crawling back in her womb. In *Black Mothers to Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature With Social Practice*, Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell argue that the question black mothers ask in the raising of their sons is how can they "help sons develop the character, personality and integrity a black manchild needs to transcend these forces" (1995, p. 19). When asked about what she kills Plum for by Hannah, Eva explains that "He was a man, girl, a big old grewed-up man" (Morrison, 1974, p. 51). Eva said that

I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. (Morrison, 1974, p. 52)

According to Eva's reminiscence, she suffers a lot because of rearing her three children, especially Plum. She wants Plum to become a brave man, a tough man, an independent man. However, Plum's growth does not live up to Eva's expectation. Plum gets addicted to drugs and is reduced to a boy begging his mother's permanent shelter for the rest of his life. Disappointed by Plum's impotence, Eva denies such a need and burns Plum to death.

Hannah's Neglect of the Need

Hannah marries a laughing man named Rekus who dies when their daughter Sula is about three years old, at which time Hannah moves back into her mother's big house. Hannah simply refuses to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus' death has a steady sequence of lovers.

While Eva tested and argued with her men, leaving them feeling as though they had been in combat with a worthy, if amiable, foe, Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was—he didn't need fixing—and so he relaxed and swooned in the Hannah-light that shone on him simply because he was. (Morrison, 1974, p. 30)

Hannah knows clearly what a man desires and she is glad to offer her flirt. "Without ever a pat of the hair, a rush to change clothes or a quick application of paint, with no gesture whatsoever, she rippled with sex" (Morrison, 1974, p. 29). Hannah's behaviors gain favor among men in her community. By the same token, men's response also wins her heart.

The men, surprisingly, never gossiped about her. She was unquestionably a kind and generous woman and that, coupled with her extraordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner, made them defend her and protect her from any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill. (Morrison, 1974, p. 31)

According to Tronto (1993), "The final phase of caring recognizes that the object of care will respond to the care it receives" (p. 107). It is important to include care-receiving as an element of the caring process because it provides the only way to know that caring needs have actually been met. Hannah's lovers' addiction to her voluptuousness and their protection of Hannah serves as an inspiration to her steady stream of coquettering. Hannah has thus been addicted to playing with her lovers. As a result, Hannah's care for her lovers is never absent whereas Sula's need of maternal care has seldom been met. Before meeting Nel, most of time, Sula "spent hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of a someone who shared both the taste and the speed" (Morrison, 1974, p. 36).

Hannah's case is different from that of Helene. Helene is so self-centered that she pays little attention to others including her daughter Nel. Hannah is a caring person only to her lovers. Sula as her daughter, however,

receives little care. Andrea O'Reilly analyses the context of Hannah's announcement of her dislike of Sula. Hannah is sitting at the kitchen with two friends, Patsy and Valentine and talking casually about many things, including the problems of child rearing the kitchen. According to Andrea (2012),

What Hannah says is that a child is a separate person with her own unique personality. While mothers always love their children—"can't help loving your own"—they may not like the person their child becomes. A mother may not like a child at a particular moment, or at a particular stage, or at all, whether because of differences in personality, lifestyle, beliefs, or values. (p. 59)

During her childhood, Sula is an introvert girl with solitary and withdrawn personality. Compared with Hannah's responsive lovers, Sula gives less response to Hannah's care. As we can see, in the case of Hannah's lovers, not only can she receive active response of her care, but also Hannah can receive reciprocal care.

Conclusion

Women's assignment to the role of caregiver is not new. For a long time, care-giving has exclusively been a women's sphere. Maternal caregiving is a case in point, and it has long been taken for granted. However, we can see from the motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula* that there is no such a thing as unconditional mother care. Instead, care, including mother care, is subject many conditions. We could not expect a mother who suffers from racial oppression as Helene, or is inflicted by financial and emotional burden as Eva to offer considerate care to her child. Besides the external hardship, mother care is also influenced by the child, the care-receiver. Those undue need put forward by the child should not be satisfied. The complicatedness of mother care is well demonstrated in this story. The lack of mother care in this story has led to many conflicts. Obviously, the scarcity of care has led to the split mother-child relationship. More importantly, care giving also involves power structure. That a mother does not offer care is likely to be regarded as powerless by her child. In this sense, both Nel's fear under her mothers' disgrace and Sula's defiance against Eva are understandable. Helene and Eva are considered as powerless since they do not sustain the care relationship with their children. Toni Morrison's *Sula* does dispel the myth of unconditional mother care and explores the estrangement arising from lack of care.

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