

THE THEME OF DISPLACEMENT IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

A.R. Jyothi Priya

Research Scholar

The English and Foreign Languages University
Hyderabad

Abstract

Displacement is a form of change. It takes place at various levels of society. Any society is ephemeral and is bound to change due to varied expansions in knowledge and structure. Displacement affects the people involved in that change and forces them to adapt to a newer state of feeling or location. It goes beyond the physical, concrete world and occurs at different levels-psychological, emotional, social, verbal, linguistic and structural etc. Psychological or emotional displacement refers to misplaced feelings or thoughts. Whether it is placing blame on others or simply transferring emotions of anger to the people we love, or having feelings like love being replaced by hatred or vice versa are examples of psychological displacement. Social displacement could be a grave threat to the society in terms of violence, crime and unexpected changes leading to eviction from a certain place. It can both be seen and emotionally felt. Linguistic displacement is the capability of language to talk about things that are not immediately present spatially or temporally, things that are not here in the present. Structural displacement refers to the displacement in a society or an object owing to changes in patterns of that society that leads to change in its structure. However, all these forms of displacement occurring in an individual or society could have both positive and negative effects. Some of these kinds of displacement are, to categorize, visual and some abstract, that is, which cannot be seen but felt. This concept of displacement at various levels is quite familiar in African American women's writing where a lot of changes are prompted by the demands of the society on women and prevalent racism. And Toni Morrison's *Sula* is no exception. This research paper shall discuss these forms of displacement in the novel by providing instances from the text.

Keywords: Displacement, Psychological, emotional, Structural, Linguistic, African-American Women's Writing, Toni Morrison etc

INTRODUCTION:

How does displacement affect an individual with reference to African American Women's writing and in particular to *Sula*? How does it affect the characters? The answer is that if a society achieves a happy or positive outcome of displacement, it brings positive changes or hopes for the future. But if the displacement is one that affects or disappoints the sentiments or expectations of people living in that society that individual or society is forced to pass through a bitter situation and the result will be a painful one as they are wrenched away from their locations or sentiments attached to objects and might as well affect their sense of self and identity in a fragmented world and especially in an already vulnerable social conditioning of the African-American women. *Sula* addresses these issues and shows the changes that occur due to displacement, both at the individual level as well as at the level of the society. It basically focuses on the characters' feelings attached to it.

PHYSICAL/SOCIAL DISPLACEMENT:

The very first chapter presents Morrison portraying the 'beginning of an end'. There is a detailed description of a place undergoing changes. It can be seen by the human eye and can be visualized. This chapter describes the changes taking place in the once all-black neighborhood known as the Bottom in the hills above the once all-white town of Medallion, Ohio. It is told that the old buildings that functioned as the site of a vibrant African-American community are leveled to make way for a golf course as rich white people begin to encroach on the Bottom. Thus, the chapter opens to change, a kind of displacement affecting the community, particularly the Bottom, as it bitterly hurts the sentiments of the people living there. This particular section dealing with physically displaced people from the Bottom to find a place for a living elsewhere is like the climax of a larger displacement in the novel, besides other kinds of changes, as the whole community of the Bottom which is the heart of the novel is in itself displaced entirely. This section is closely connected to the last section of the novel, which shall soon be discussed. Working on the same level is the novel's major subject which is the change of community values. This is portrayed in the Bottom in the section dealing with the year 1937 of the novel when Sula returns after 10 years. There is both physical and social displacement in this section as can be judged when Sula breaks conventions and is totally replaced from the innocent child Sula once was and was once known for. Sula startles her neighbors with her stylish, expensive clothing which is a change in Sula from the one everyone knew of her. This phenomenon in the change of her values reveals her perception of herself and of others. The community considers her as an epitome of evil in the later part of the novel and as she answers back Eva after her return shows her disrespect condoning all reasons of excuse. Her threatening to kill Eva is really scary as it is unexpected of her from the one we knew of her in childhood. But on the other hand, Sula shows a soft corner which becomes ironical, when she puts Eva in a home which shocks the whole community. This fluctuation of both goodness as well as evil is a kind of a displaced self within a larger displacement in the novel.

The community of the Bottom naming Sula as evil brings about a lot of changes. The community in which Sula was once a child, the same community goes against her and brings about a change within itself. They as a whole against Sula guard themselves from any influence which is to affect their families. As their hatred towards Sula grows, they impose meaning on random occurrences which they attribute to the presence of Sula. The whole community's labeling of Sula as evil displaces their earlier feelings and this change in fact improves their lives. Her presence in the community gives them the impetus to live harmoniously with one

another. For instance, it is told that Teapot's mother was once a negligent parent, but she begins to care for her son as a result of her hatred for Sula. Sula's presence thus gives the residents of the Bottom a stronger sense of collective identity and strength. Her affairs with white men give them a stronger sense of outrage against the interracial relationships. Therefore, Sula's presence also gives them a stronger sense of racial identity. Although the community regards her as an evil person, it becomes actually a blessing in disguise. What seems like a chaotic disruption in the social fabric is actually an ordering and focusing influence. This whole change in the community is a form of a social change. Further, Nel is emotionally displaced even as Sula starts an affair with Nel's husband Jude. The lines, *"Nibbling at each other, not even touching, not even looking at each other, just their lips, and when I opened the door they didn't even look for a minute and I thought the reason they are not looking up is because they are not doing that. So it's all right. I am just standing here. They are not doing that. I am just standing here and seeing it, but they are not really doing it"* justifies the claim. She becomes distraught and she totally blames Sula for her situation which gives a sharp contrast of their friendship during their childhood. Thus, everything changes. One's perception of right and wrong, of social conventions and behaviors and actions undergo transformation.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT:

The character in the novel that seems to be affected most is Shadrack. The actions of Shadrack justifies a man who is and feels out of place with his surroundings and people after his traumatic experience in World War 1. When he returns to the Bottom, his displaced self can be evident in the fact that he launches the National Suicide Day in order to conquer his fear of death and understand his experiences better. This displacement at the psychological level shows how certain experiences in a man's life can affect him so much to the extent that his entire life is spent in trying to understand and overcome it. Shadrack is totally unbalanced character in the novel (although he shows some signs of improvement at the end of the novel) along with many others who are similarly displaced from their own surroundings. Shadrack's case is more felt than seen, and many characters fail to understand his displaced self, other than thinking of him as a madman. The lines, *"He fought a rising hysteria that was not merely anxiety to free his aching feet his very life depended on the release of the knots. Suddenly without raising his eyelids, he began to cry"*, shows to what extent he has been mentally affected. Shadrack's lonely home is a justification of a displaced self, where his feelings and thoughts consume him throughout the day. His character is similar to that of people who suffer traumatic experiences in life which totally degenerate their sense of perception and such people often remain isolated. The description of Shadrack's loneliness for the first time since he came back from World War I is indeed a change worth noting. In the beginning he is portrayed to be a mentally unbalanced man, who imagines his fingers going longer. But in the last section of the novel, he demonstrates his inclination for social interaction. In the novel, only one visitor had ever come to his house and that was Sula. He fondles the belt, she left behind which provides the only evidence of her brief presence. Sula, a crying child had come to his door years ago and he had said the word "Always" to allay the fear of change, which he thought he saw in her face. But after seeing Sula's dead body he realizes that he had been wrong. There is no "always." The truth about life and death comes to light in his mind as he realizes that change is an inevitable phenomenon as it is not under one's control. By demonstrating this realization, he shows a change in his maturity and yet he snatches that one compliment by resolving to observe the National Suicide Day. At the same level of psychologically displaced is Eva Peace. Eva Peace's killing of her son Plum is one of the

most painful and saddening instances which can arouse political debate on the issue of mother's love. Once upon a time, Eva sacrifices her leg for supporting her family and yet the same Eva kills her own son as a result of his heroin addiction. This act of hers shows Eva's displaced thoughts from her earlier thoughts. In the beginning she is portrayed to be a person who is sacrificing to meet the needs of the family, but her killing of Plum raises the ambiguity of her love. The most appreciating fact is that her love does not change even with his return from the war as a heroin addict, and Eva's decision to kill him becomes an expression of her love for him. Because she loves him she is unable to watch as he plummets further into addiction, and so she kills him. On one level, this is a sacrifice: a mother putting her son, whom she loves, out of his misery and thereby losing him. On another level, it can be seen as an act of selfishness: because she loves him. Her love is ambiguous. In other words, at least in her case, love is not subject to morality. On one level, Eva suffers from some sense of perception and can be judged selfish due to the fact that she likes and accepts those which she thinks right and totally disregards nevertheless of what it is, acting according to her whims, although she has her own reasons for defending herself. Thus, over a course of time, Eva's displaced mind and actions can be seen and judged, which is very disturbing. Though she is not wholly displaced, yet there is a transformation in her thoughts of love to thoughts of selfishness and killing her own son. Also changes occurring in the childhood innocence in that of Nel's and Sula's case, whose friendship is thick as children during childhood is a form of psychological displacement. The death of Chicken Little removes this childhood innocence. They are no longer protected by a childish sense of their own immortality. Shadrack assumes that Sula's tear stained face is connected to her fear of change and he says 'Always' to her to allay her fears. The effect of his words can be seen at the funeral, as Sula does not feel the guilt that afflicts Nel as there could be a possibility that Shadrack's assurance of her permanence or his "always" relieves her fears that Chicken Little's death was accidental and there was no necessity to fear any change. Although Sula and Nel's actions following Chicken Little's death may seem reprehensible, it becomes necessary to remember that they are still children. They did not intend to harm the boy. They were too afraid to tell anyone about the accident for fear they would be blamed for intending to kill him. The incident seems on the surface not to have affected them much, but later chapters reveal that his death had a profound influence on them. These whole chain of events displace their childhood thoughts and forces them to accept adulthood and its realities and discover the more serious issues demanding attention. The famous line from this incident in the novel, "*..and the water closed over them*" recurs once again even as Nel and Sula grow up, which shows that the incident is very much alive in their hearts and their trying to come in terms with their lost innocence. Sula is also psychologically displaced in her thoughts regarding her relationship with Ajax can be visualized in the sense that she is somehow displaced from her feelings of liberality and independence and yearns for something secure and close connection greatly similar to the love of a man and woman in a family. Her relationship with Ajax opens her to new feelings as she discovers the possessive nature of love, which is totally different from her earlier feelings when she condemned Nel for conforming to conventional social expectations, yet she herself gets seduced by the promise of security that her love with Ajax seems to offer. The friendship between Nel and Sula which is the whole theme of the novel and their misunderstanding as they grow into adults, comes to bring about a change in Nel as she retrospects her past and her part in the events around her. In her thoughts she accepts that she always intended to be the 'good woman' and the bitter feelings she had towards Sula is displaced by more gentle and subtle thoughts. It is a mental displacement one sees in her. Eva's comments during Nel's visit are the

main force which makes Nel to confront her unfair judgment against Sula. Nel admits that she accepted Chicken Little's death by enveloping herself with it and was actually thrilled when she saw Chicken Little drown in the river. She confesses that she blamed Chicken Little's death entirely on Sula and set herself up as the "good" half of the relationship. As she questions why it felt good to watch Chicken Little falling, she realizes that her pleasure came from seeing the water peacefully close around his "turbulent" body as the water imposed an illusion of calm and order over the traumatic event. It erased the disorder and chaos of his flight through the air and his accidental death. In her trip to Sula's grave, Nel acknowledges her regret for the course of her life. When she cries out Sula's name, she is finally able to admit her feelings of love toward Sula and, therefore, is able to mourn her loss. And in grieving for Sula, in letting herself once more see the positives in Sula, Nel is able to mourn for herself, for the sacrifices she made to gain social acceptance, which Sula defined herself by refusing.

STRUCTURAL DISPLACEMENT:

In the section spanning 1941-1965, structural changes in the community's balancing of its moral and social etiquettes mentioned earlier in this paper becomes weak with Sula's death. There is a drastic change in the community and even Nel retrospects her past and even admits to have been equally wrong. The justification of the community's displacement is shown in the fact that the community begins to suffer from Sula's passing in other ways as well. Without her "evil" influence to rally them together, the moral righteousness Sula inspired in the townspeople begins to crumble. Teapot's mother, who showed her love towards her son by blaming Sula that she pushed her son intentionally, beats him furiously after he refuses to eat some food she makes for him. Wives cease to cherish their husbands as they did when Sula was alive. Thanksgiving and Christmas are portrayed to be bitter, ill-tempered affairs. The changes that take place are both structural and social. As a result of Sula's influence, the whole community undergoes a change. This brings to question the community's capacity to balance its moral conventions and etiquettes with or without Sula. A community is believed to be stronger than an individual. But here in this case, it becomes the contrary as Sula's passing away gives the community no guard to protect themselves from evil. They are as usual as before. They direly depend on Sula's presence to guard themselves. But with no Sula, the whole community is displaced with its earlier modes of behavior and conduct. The community's moral resolve and harmony dissolve in the absence of the woman who, in breaking social conventions, motivated others to uphold them. In the later part of the novel, structural changes occur when Nel reflects that the black community of the Bottom has slowly moved into the once all-white city of Medallion to build homes with their wartime wealth. The job prospects have improved, but Nel laments the loss of community living, which characterized the Bottom. People have started to live in isolated households rather than as a collective whole. Rumors of black workers being hired for the construction of the tunnel under the river and plans to build a new nursing home, which would house both black and white patients, including Eva are signs of change. The former residents of the Bottom are described to have more civil rights, and they have been wealthier in the years following the war. On the surface, this seems like a positive thing. However, they also lose something. The disintegration of the collective social identity that began with Sula's death only grows worse; the community, which once defined the Bottom, has been replaced by a town in which the people live in relative isolation from one another.

LINGUISTIC DISPLACEMENT:

As Morrison earlier describes Sula and Nel's friendship as thick and flowering, yet in the 1937 section this is displaced by his description of Sula's arrival running on parallel with a "plague of robins", which is a sign of bad omen in the beginning of the novel. In her interesting paper, "The Phenomenon of Displacement in Contemporary Society and its Manifestations in Visual Arts", Emma Wilhelmina Willemse investigates the nature of displacement in society by establishing the interrelationships between the three concepts: Land and Home, Memory and Identity. In her paper she gives statistical evidence as well as her investigations to test the premise that displacement has become a state of mind in contemporary society and consciousness. She mentions that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees distinguishes between two types of displaced people: those who are internally displaced (IDPs) and refugees. In contrast with refugees who have left their country of residence involuntarily, IDPs are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters etc. According to her statistical investigations, she says that of the 26 million internally displaced people worldwide, 11.6 million are from Africa. South Africa is the largest single recipient of asylum seekers in the world, with 207 200 individual asylum claims registered officially in 2008. The majority of applications are from Zimbabwe followed by other African countries. The above statistics gives some idea about the plight of African residents and thus, as a matter of fact, such portrayal of displaced communities becomes an integral part of Morrison's novels.

CONCLUSION:

Characters in the novel undergo displacement of various kinds. It is the result of the cause and effect of circumstances that causes the displacement. Displacement affects the community on a larger scale, as almost everyone is displaced in their own way either mentally and physically. Even the characters who do nothing at all and laze are even displaced. Displacement which is emotional or mental can be more harmful or painful than the others. In the novel, one's own identity comes to be displaced as in the case of Deweys, the three adopted children of Eva, who are stripped out of their individual identities and are identified with a collective name. Tar Baby is totally displaced whose job is only to drink himself to death. One meaningful solution to this could be introspection and interpretation of multiple levels of meaning. When a person is psychologically displaced, he tries to repress his past which actually leads to suffering and self-torture. Hence, a meaningful way of interpreting a bad past is essential. Just as, at the close of the book, Nel demonstrates this introspection about the past, learns about the errors and finally is able to reconcile with Sula, whom she decides was not entirely wrong all through. In the text the community is displaced when Sula is portrayed as evil and it tries to protect itself. Hence, here displacement comes to good use. But in other circumstances it produces bad result. Thus, displacement at different levels can bring about both transformative and destructive changes over the society where change becomes the only constant.

WORKS CITED

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