

Reclaiming Space: Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Toni Morrison's 'Sula'

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Abstract

This article delves into the exploration of space in Toni Morrison's novel Sula through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. Titled "Reclaiming Space: Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Toni Morrison's Sula", the article aims to analyze how the concept of space is portrayed in the novel, particularly in relation to themes of colonization, identity, and environmental degradation. By employing a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, the article seeks to uncover the ways in which the characters in Sula navigate and reclaim physical, social, and psychological spaces in the aftermath of colonialism. Key questions addressed in the article include: a). How does Morrison depict the relationship between space, power, and identity in Sula? b). In what ways do the characters in the novel challenge or conform to colonial structures through their interactions with space? c). How does the novel's portrayal of the natural environment reflect broader themes of postcolonialism and ecological consciousness?

1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison sheds light on African Americans' lives, slavery experience and the aftermath. Morrison unveils the different ways in which black people were uprooted from their land of origins, from their culture, and their identities. K. Zauditu-Selassie confirms:

Toni Morrison declares that the "forced transfer" of African people is the "defining event of the modern world" ("Home" 10). The arrival of captive Africans to North America, their enslavement, and their continued survival, represent a journey of remarkable resiliency. Besides enslaving African people, the deliberate mission of Europeans included efforts to destroy them by attempting to wipe out their traditions, substituting their languages, and desecrating their cultures. To reiterate, this experience of Africans in America has been a quintessential example of adaptation in the face of adversity That they managed to continue on

with any measure of psychic integrity is a tribute to the dynamic role that culture plays in the lives of people. (Kokahvah, 2007)

Sula, Toni Morrison's second novel which was published in 1973, is no exception to her literary contributions. The narrative revolves around the lives of two African American women, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, raised in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio. Unfolding across multiple decades, the story commences in the early 1900s and concludes in the 1960s. *Sula* serves as a poignant exploration of the African American experience, delving into the challenge individuals face in shaping their identities and finding their societal footing. Morrison's eloquent writing style and intricate character portrayals elevate the novel, making it a poignant and memorable piece of literature.

Sula can be seen as a powerful critique of the ways in which colonialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation intersect to create systems of oppression that marginalize and exploit marginalized communities. The novel challenges readers to rethink their assumptions about the relationships between humans and the environment and how these relationships are shaped by systems of power and inequality. The novel's examination of the impact of colonialism and environmental degradation on marginalized communities brings attention to issues of social and environmental justice. Morrison's storytelling prompts readers to reflect on the complexities of human-nature relationships and the importance of understanding historical and environmental contexts in shaping individual and communal experiences.

In *Sula*, the environment has been exploited and destroyed by colonialism and capitalism. The novel portrays the town of "the Bottom" as a site of environmental degradation, where the land has been stripped of its resources and the water is polluted. This degradation is linked to the history of colonialism in America, which has been characterized by the exploitation and destruction of natural resources for profit. Furthermore, the novel highlights the ways in which the exploitation of the environment is linked to the exploitation of marginalized communities. The town of "the Bottom" is predominantly inhabited by African Americans who have been forced to live in a polluted and degraded environment. This environmental degradation is not accidental but is rather the result of deliberate policies of exclusion and marginalization. Yet, the experiences of the African American community in Medallion are deeply tied to the land they inhabit, and their connection with nature becomes a source of resilience and strength. At the same time, the encroachment of industrialization and the influence of dominant, colonizing cultures disrupt this harmony with nature, leading to a loss of traditional practices and a degradation of the environment.

A central theme explored in the novel revolves around “the bottom,” a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood located on the outskirts of Medallion, predominantly inhabited by African Americans. This setting is portrayed as a complex space characterized by both beauty and peril, oppression and liberation, as well as the coexistence of death and rejuvenation, where the residents struggle to survive amidst polluted streams, crumbling houses, and constant flooding. Through the portrayal of the bottom, Morrison highlights the ways in which marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and neglect.

In addition to its exploration of race, gender, identity, and community, the novel explores human relationship with the environment and how it reflects on marginalized communities, and it uses nature imagery to reflect the characters' emotions and experiences. This postcolonial ecocritical reading highlights the themes of environmental degradation, marginalization and the relationship between the White master, black slaves' predecessors and nature. An ecocritical perspective grounded in the postcolonial context necessitates more than a mere scientific understanding of the postcolonial environment; it also demands an examination of its psychological, sociological, religious, and historical dimensions, particularly in relation to imperial nature and how it is depicted in the specific work at hand. Morrison skillfully integrates these diverse elements to form a narrative that traces the historical journey of African Americans, a past that is frequently overlooked by white society (Tolman, 2003). Although overlooked by ecocritics, Toni Morrison gives special focus to nature in her writings. In Morrison's novels, nature plays a central role in the lives of her characters. Barbara Christian adds:

Toni Morrison has created a world of her own in three critically acclaimed novels. Though different in emphasis, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), and *Song of Solomon* (1977) present communities whose particular view of Nature transforms the air they breathe, the earth they walk. In a few contemporary American novelists is the meaning of Nature so important as it is in the novels of this black woman writer. The interpretation of Nature is not only central to her characters' attempts to understand themselves, but to the fables Morrison weaves, the way she tells her tales. (Christian, 1980)

The protagonist of Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* is a young African American girl. She develops resilience and tenacity in the face of oppression. Strong female relationships throughout the book are explored by Morrison, as well as how these ties both support and jeopardize individual

black identity. In her novel, Toni Morrison wonders if mothers' natural instincts to shield their children from the harsh environments of the White oppressors are ultimately beneficial or harmful. The novel demonstrates how both good and evil coexist in the Bottom. The people are used to going through pain and putting up with evil. They reluctantly accept one after another, Hannah's seduction of their spouses and the death of Eva's drug-addicted son Plum. Despite this, the community cannot accept Sula since she thinks for herself and does not share their sensibilities. So that they may organize against her "evil" and treasure their virtue, they must make her become a witch. They lose some of their goodness without the witch. Sula is used as a scapegoat.

So, what potential aspects can be explored in a postcolonial ecocritical interpretation of Toni Morrison's *Sula*? How are various representations of the impact of the White Empire's legacy depicted? How it has affected the lives of Black Americans? What is its impact on the natural environment? And, how do the main characters in the novel relate to nature within the context of postcolonial themes?

2. ECO-IDENTITY AND THIRD SPACE: SULA AND NEL'S FRIENDSHIP

Third Space becomes evident through the characters of Sula and Nel. They share a deep bond and their friendship represents a third space, an in-between realm, that transcends the societal norms and boundaries of their community. Through this friendship, Morrison explores the idea of eco-identity, where the individual's sense of self is influenced not only by cultural factors but also by their connection to the natural world. Sula and Nel's interactions with nature shape their identities and how they perceive their place in the world. Moreover, Sula's orality as well as the language of Black women permit them to create a safe space where they become autonomous beings who are able to dwell, rest, and prosper. So, how can we comprehend the concepts of eco-identity and third space through the characters' interactions with nature and the natural landscape of the Bottom in *Sula*, as well as through the orality embodied in the language of Sula, the central Black female protagonist of the novel?

2.1. Eco-Identity Webs In *Sula*

Eco-identity, a concept rooted in ecocriticism, refers to the understanding that individual and collective identities are influenced and shaped by our relationship with the natural world. It emphasizes the idea that humans are not separate from nature but are deeply interconnected with it. This concept recognizes that our sense of self is not solely constructed through social, cultural, or political factors, but also through our interactions with the environment and the non-human world. Eco-identity challenges the notion of a rigid human-nature divide and encourages a more holistic perspective that acknowledges the interdependence between

humans and their surroundings. It suggests that our identities are not isolated entities but rather intricate webs of relationships, both with other humans and with the broader ecological systems in which we live.

In the context of *Sula*, the characters' eco-identities are deeply influenced by their experiences with nature and their environment. For example, Sula, the main character, develops a unique eco-identity as she grows up in the Bottom, a rural community close to nature. Her interactions with the land, water, and animals contribute to her unconventional worldview. Sula's connection with the natural world allows her to challenge societal norms and envision a different way of living that is more aligned with the cycles of nature, "Sula fled down the steps, and shot through the greenness and the baking sun back to Nel and the dark closed place in the water. There she collapsed in tears" (Morrison, 1973). In this passage from Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, eco-identity is depicted through the protagonist Sula's emotional and physical connection with nature. The fact that Sula is described as "fleeing" suggests a sense of urgency or distress. Her emotional state prompts her to seek solace and escape from her current surroundings. This indicates that Sula's eco-identity is closely tied to her emotional well-being and how she interacts with her environment as a form of coping. Also, the use of the term "greenness" signifies the presence of lush vegetation and a natural environment. This implies that Sula finds comfort and refuge in nature. Additionally, the phrase "baking sun" suggests intense heat, which might represent the challenges or pressures she faces in her life. Despite this, Sula seeks comfort in the natural world, indicating her eco-identity as someone who finds solace and connection in nature. The mention of "Nel and the dark closed place in the water" implies that the two friends have a shared connection with a specific natural site. This suggests that their bond extends beyond their individual identities, creating a shared third space eco-identity rooted in their connection with the natural world. The "dark closed place in the water" could symbolize a hidden, intimate space that holds significant emotional value for them. Sula's emotional release in tears while being in the presence of nature highlights the therapeutic power of the natural world in her life. Her vulnerability and emotional outpouring signify that she finds healing and comfort in her eco-identity, as the environment acts as a safe and accepting space for her to express her emotions freely.

Through the previous passage, Toni Morrison portrays Sula's eco-identity as deeply intertwined with her emotional state and her relationship with the natural world. Nature becomes a refuge, a space of emotional release, and a source of healing for Sula from the tragic incident of Chicken Little's sinking. Additionally, the shared connection between Sula and Nel through their interactions with the "dark closed place in the water" further emphasizes how

eco-identities can be shaped and strengthened through shared experiences with nature and intimate connections with others. This depiction highlights the importance of recognizing and nurturing our eco-identities as a means of finding solace, understanding, and interconnectedness with both the environment and our fellow beings.

If Sula develops a unique eco-identity, Nel, Sula's best friend, experiences a more complex relationship with nature. While she shares moments of intimacy with nature through her friendship with Sula, she also seeks validation from societal norms and expectations. This tension between her eco-identity and her desire for conformity leads to the creation of an in-between space and to internal conflicts throughout the novel.

In 1922, upon receiving a perplexing remark about love from her mother, Sula seeks refuge by the river, finding comfort in the company of her friend Nel. The narrator comments:

They ran in the sunlight, creating their own breeze, which pressed their dresses into their damp skin. Reaching a kind of square of four leaf-locked trees which promised cooling, they flung themselves into the four-cornered shade to taste their lip sweat and contemplate the wildness that had come upon them so suddenly. They lay in the grass, their foreheads almost touching, their bodies stretched away from each other at a 180-degree angle. Sula's head rested on her arm, an undone braid coiled around her wrist. Nel leaned on her elbows and worried long blades of grass with her fingers. (Morrison, 1973)

This passage portrays Sula and Nel's physical engagement with nature. As they run in the sunlight, the wind they create molds their dresses against their moistened skin. This physical immersion in the natural world signifies their embodiment of the environment. It exemplifies how eco-identity is not just a cognitive or emotional connection to nature but a lived experience where the characters actively interact with and become part of the natural world. Moreover, the depiction of Sula and Nel reclining in the grass, their foreheads nearly touching, and their bodies extending in opposite directions at a 180-degree angle, implies a merging of boundaries between the two characters and a blending of the human and non-human (natural) aspects. This sense of interconnectedness and fluidity resonates with the Third Space theory, which emphasizes hybridity and the dismantling of binary oppositions. The characters' physical closeness and their shared experience in nature create a third space, a liminal realm where their identities merge and blend.

The above passage mentions the characters contemplating the “wildness that had come upon them so suddenly.” This wildness can be interpreted as an awakening of their eco-identities, a sudden realization of their deep connection to the natural world. This notion of wildness challenges conventional societal norms and expectations, encouraging a reconnection with the untamed aspects of nature and the self. Additionally, the square of four leaf-locked trees represents a sanctuary for the characters, a cooling and comforting space where they seek solace from the complexities of human life, and from the racist behaviors of white men. Nature becomes a space of refuge, healing, and contemplation, allowing them to escape the constraints of their social roles and engage with their eco-identities more authentically. Also, the passage’s description of Sula and Nel in this shared natural space portrays the third space as a liberating realm. In this space, they are free from societal expectations, allowing them to explore their eco-identities and connect with nature without judgment or restriction. This liberation further emphasizes the idea that eco-identity transcends traditional cultural and social boundaries.

Through the previous passage, Morrison emphasizes the transformative power of nature and the significance of eco-identity in shaping the characters’ experiences and relationships. The blending of boundaries and the creation of a third space underscore the fluidity and complexity of human-nature interactions. It also illustrates how the natural world can catalyze self-discovery, empowerment, and a deeper understanding of one’s place in the broader ecological context. By embracing eco-identity and recognizing the interconnectedness between humans and nature, the characters in *Sula* find a sense of liberation and authenticity that enriches their lives and relationships.

In addition to Sula and Nel, The Bottom, as a community deeply connected to the land, possesses a collective eco-identity. The lives of its residents, who suffered from the white men oppression, are intertwined with the rhythms of nature, as their livelihoods depend on agriculture and natural resources, the narrator elaborates:

The air all over the Bottom got heavy with peeled fruit and boiling vegetables. Fresh corn, tomatoes, string beans, melon rinds. The women, the children and the old men who had no jobs were putting up for a winter they understood so well. Peaches were stuffed into jars and black cherries (later, when it got cooler, they would put up jellies and preserves). The greedy canned as many as forty-two a day even though some of them, like Mrs. Jackson, who ate ice, had jars from 1920. (Morrison, 1973)

The act of canning and preserving food reflects the community's engagement with nature's bounty. The people of the Bottom come together to harvest and store fresh fruits and vegetables for the winter. This communal effort emphasizes a shared eco-identity, where the community recognizes its dependence on the natural world for sustenance and survival. Also, the activity of canning and preserving highlights the Bottom's interdependence with the environment. They rely on the seasonal harvests of fruits and vegetables to sustain them through the winter months. The practice of putting up food is a testament to their understanding of the cyclical nature of the natural world and their ability to adapt and make use of its offerings.

The act of canning and preserving is a blending of tradition and modernity. While the practice itself is rooted in traditional methods of preserving food, the presence of Mrs. Jackson's jars from 1920 suggests continuity and the passing down of knowledge across generations. This blending of traditional and contemporary practices represents a third space where the community navigates their eco-identity within changing socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, the act of canning and preserving embodies a sense of sustainability and self-sufficiency. By preserving excess produce, the community reduces food waste and ensures a supply of food during the winter when fresh produce is scarce. This eco-identity point highlights their resourcefulness and resilience in adapting to their natural surroundings and local climate. Food preservation practices are often deeply intertwined with cultural identity and heritage. In the Bottom, the act of canning and preserving food carries cultural significance, passed down through generations. This cultural identity connects the community to their ancestral roots and reinforces their eco-identity as a distinct cultural group with a strong tie to the land and its resources.

In *Sula*, Morrison wants to prove that the black community are deeply connected to nature, they are green agents. She shows the black community's shared engagement with nature, their interdependence with the environment, and their ability to navigate their cultural identity and traditions within the context of a postcolonial space. The act of preserving food also highlights the community's sustainability practices and their connection to the natural cycles of the land, reinforcing their eco-identity as a community deeply connected to their environment and its resources. This sense of eco-identity is threatened as industrialization and modernization led by the white oppressor encroach upon the community, leading to environmental degradation and a disconnect from their traditional relationship with the land.

2.2.Orality and the Creation of a Third Space

The novel's second part focuses exclusively on the main character, Sula. This part can be viewed as an illustration of Third Space theory and the role of orality within it. A notable

instance is when Sula comes back to the Bottom after a decade of college and travel. Instead of conforming to Bottom's norms, she takes the unconventional step of facing Eva and, in defiance of societal expectations, arranges for Eva's relocation to an adults care facility. Eva retaliates by launching numerous attacks in response, Sula responds:

"When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man."

"You did."

"Not by choice."

"Mamma did."

"Not by choice, I said. It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need...I'm a tell you what you need."

Sula sat up. "I need you to shut your mouth."

"Don't nobody talk to me like that. Don't nobody..." (Morrison, 1973)

To move into the third space, Sula embraces her own empowering narrative, becoming a vessel for her self-liberation. She strongly asserts her desire to shape her identity, rejecting any external labels or definitions imposed on her. In the past, her voice and control over her body might have been suppressed by societal norms. Nevertheless, Sula's presence within Eva's home and among the Bottom community emerges as a conspicuous and indisputable element of their shared identity.

Later in the novel, Sula visits Nel and her husband, Jude. When Jude complains about the challenges, he faces at work due to racism, he seeks consolation and sympathy. However, Sula chooses not to comfort him and instead skillfully employs her way of speaking to turn the impact of racism around, using her orality to challenge and subvert its effects:

I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every

corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children—white and black, boys and girls—spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a whole day. So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world. (Morrison, 1973)

By transforming Jude's complaints into a humorous joke, Sula grabs his attention. Her comments possess an "interrogatory" quality, according to Bhabha's notion. This corresponds with the idea of Third Space identity, where conventional structures are not only challenged but also overturned. Despite the humorous and improvisational tone in Sula's reaction to Jude, there's an implicit seriousness that reinforces her identity as a Third Space character.

Sula's last conversation with Nel serves as a final illustration of how Sula's way of speaking propels her into the Third Space. Death becomes the catalyst that reunites the two women upon Nel's visits to Sula when she is dying. Their dialogue mirrors the discussion Sula had with Eva, delving into the depth of Sula's connection to human nature and her desire to truly "live."

"You can't have it all, Sula."

"Why? I can do it all, why can't I have it all?"

"You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't." (Morrison, 1973)

In this instance, Sula is rejecting the perceived inferiority associated with her gender. Bhabha also touches upon similar ideas when he talks about "familiar traditions and ideological Eurocentricity." Sula is resolute in her decision not to be subjected to objectification any more. The interaction between the two women becomes intimate when Sula says:

“You think I don’t know what your life is like just because I ain’t living it? I know what every colored woman in this country is doing.”

“What’s that?”

“Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world.”

“Really? What have you got to show for it?”

“Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me.”

“Lonely, ain’t it?”

“Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely.” (Morrison, 1973)

Sula’s orality represents her resistance, as she declines to let Nel’s attempts at shaming her about her relationship with Jude affect her. Sula possesses an individualistic self-perception that is entirely self-driven. In perfect alignment with Bhabha’s analysis of interrogation, Sula raises questions regarding the notions of morality. On a grander scope, however, Sula is challenging all established, unchanging ideas put forth by the prevailing societal norms. Through Sula’s voice, after the departure of Nel, Morrison questions the reader:

“How you know?” Sula asked.

“Know what?” Nel still wouldn’t look at her.

“About who was good. How you know it was you?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me.” (Morrison, 1973)

In the final chapter of the book, as Sula’s life comes to an end, her path towards self-discovery and personal autonomy becomes evident. Initially, she lies in bed, suffering from pain and fever, bracing herself for the upcoming bouts of physical distress. However, later on, as she gazes at the sealed-up window, she attains the sense of fulfilment she has long sought. While on the surface, the symbolic meaning of the boarded window could be seen as Sula’s yearning

for solitude, it goes beyond that—it signifies Sula’s profound understanding of her own sanctuary. Sula realized her own complete safe space, “where she had always wanted to be—free of the possibility of distraction” (Morrison, 1973).

Sula portrays Morrison’s creation of an independent space for Black women, free from the constraints imposed by white men or their racist institutions. The use of orality and local dialects becomes the primary means through which all women in the Bottom find liberation. Morrison’s second novel signifies a refusal to conform to prevailing notions that marginalize Black women and their sense of self. What often is unnoticeable for many readers is that Toni Morrison’s intention goes beyond narrating the story of a woman who embraces the “pariah” label within her community. Instead, *Sula* serves as a blueprint for significant themes like family bonds, motherhood, friendship, etc., which have been the focus of Morrison’s writing career. Furthermore, when we analyze *Sula* through the lens of the Third Space theory, Morrison presents contemporary readers with a wealth of potential discussions, urging them to envision Black women as self-reliant individuals who can resist oppression and establish their own eco-spaces for dwelling, rejuvenation, and success.

3. IDENTITY AND THE RACIALIZED SPACE OF THE BOTTOM

The study of the idea of identity and the racialized space of the Bottom in *Sula* through a postcolonial ecocritical perspective offers insights into the intersections of colonial history, environmental exploitation, and individual and collective identities. This approach considers how colonialism, racism, and the environment are interwoven in the narrative, shaping characters’ identities and the community’s relationship with their surroundings. So, what is/are the way(s) in which Morrison creates different kinds of time and space in her 1973 novel *Sula*? What are the effects of colonial legacy and its impact of the racialized space? How the land and the people of the Bottom have been exploited? and how this exploitation reshapes the racial space? What are the images of the double racial and socio-economic marginalization of the people of color in the Bottom, and how this marginalization is manifested through the racial spaces they inhabit? And how Black community in *Sula* try to reclaim an imagined space to deconstruct colonial hierarchies and resist their oppression?

3.1. Nel and Sula, and Identity Building

In her novel *Sula*, Morrison introduces a unique concept of time and place. Morrison delves into the grown-up realm of women’s friendships. The novel starts with a compelling depiction of a place referred to as the Bottom, illustrating how this setting becomes linked with racial themes, influencing African Americans’ perception of their identity and the opportunities they have. Before introducing the main characters, Nel and Sula, the narrative familiarizes the reader with the societal context that transforms a black community into an exclusive country

club. Through a passage portraying a familiar trend of urban renewal, where financially disadvantaged residents are displaced by wealthier individuals acquiring the land, displacing those who considered it their own, Morrison demonstrates an almost prophetic understanding of the evolving nature of urban spaces—both public and private. The text indeed anticipates the repercussions of population relocations and the subsequent redistribution of resources in various communities over the years. The novel introduces the concept of derogatory “nigger jokes” and the black individuals who were targeted by them, serving as a historical and geographical backdrop for the unfolding story. Despite establishing this racially charged setting, the author notes that the people had limited opportunity to dwell on the racism that played a role in determining their destiny or their current location. Alternatively:

they were mightily preoccupied with earthly things – and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom.
(Morrison, 1973)

Morrison's words simultaneously establish two spaces for her readers. Firstly, they offer insight into how black individuals in Medallion interpreted the narrative of their own experiences. Secondly, they reveal that the intricacies of their life stories exceed the limitations of any racially-focused interpretation. Therefore, even in her second novel, Morrison skillfully constructs a space where readers can contemplate the significance and insignificance of race in the narratives she wishes to convey.

After acquainting her readers with the town of Medallion and its most peculiar resident, Shadrack, Morrison proceeds to introduce Nel Wright. Nel is the friend of the novel's eponymous character. In this way, Morrison shapes the narrative by progressively leading the reader from the broader context of the neighborhood and its history to the specific story of two households and their respective daughters. Through Nel's mother's perspective, the reader gains insights into the oppressive atmosphere within Nel's home. The layers of significance become evident in how Helene treats her daughter, guiding her to conform and stifling her emerging sense of self. Morrison contrasts the Peace household starkly with the structured and controlled environment of the Wright home. Sula's unconventional and tumultuous household, marked by a continual influx of lodgers and multiple male partners, provides minimal lessons on emotional connection and affection. However, it provides ample education on matters of sexuality and utilizing men for amusement. Sula is described as following:

In a way, her strangeness, her naïveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (Morrison, 1973)

Both Sula and Nel are the only child, when they meet, they feel:

the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (Morrison, 1973)

The center of the novel revolves around the unravelling of a once-strong friendship, exploring themes of gender dynamics within and outside of marriage, and the repercussions of life-altering choices. Morrison's writing, with its occasional poetic and captivating qualities, allows readers to observe how these two women interpret the limited options presented by their culture and community. Within the narrative, she unveils how seemingly familiar and intimate spaces like home, marriage, and even friendship can create a sense of alienation from oneself and others. By transforming well-known and recognizable environments into something unfamiliar through the portrayal of an outcast character like Sula, Morrison disrupts the readers' conventional understanding of moral distinctions, such as right and wrong, good and evil, and even love and hate. She challenges these notions by presenting a scenario where, on her deathbed, Sula, despite her betrayal of her friend Nel, and breaking the bond that connected them, leads Nel to ponder the possibility that Sula, not Nel, is the virtuous one. Similar to Nel's introspection following Sula's death, Morrison's readers are compelled to reevaluate their own values, choices, and how their perceptions of others may reveal more about themselves than they might realize.

3.2.The Racialized Space of the Bottom

The racialized space of the Bottom, inhabited predominantly by African Americans, reflects the historical legacy of slavery and racial oppression. From a postcolonial ecocritical

standpoint, this racialized space can be seen as a result of colonial power dynamics that marginalized certain groups and assigned them specific spaces based on their racial identity. This spatial segregation continues to impact the residents' sense of self and belonging. The Bottom, the predominantly Black community in the novel, is a reflection of the racialized space created by the historical legacy of slavery and racial oppression. The environmental conditions of the Bottom are linked to this legacy, with limited access to resources, economic disparities, and subpar living conditions. The best example of this situation is embodied through Teapot, a neglected, malnourished child living in the Bottom, and his mother who can't take him to see a doctor, "The two dollars she hated to release turned out to be well spent, for Teapot did have a fracture, although the doctor said poor diet had contributed substantially to the daintiness of his bones" (Morrison, 1973). The misery of the land, and its people emphasizes how the exploitation and mistreatment of marginalized groups during the slavery and post-slavery era have lasting impacts on their relationship with the land and their ability to sustain themselves.

The exploitation of Land and Black people by the white masters reshapes the sites of a racialized space in *Sula*. Postcolonial ecocriticism emphasizes the exploitation of both land and people by colonial powers. The Bottom's economic struggles and environmental degradation can be viewed as a continuation of this exploitation. The land is depicted as degraded and less fertile due to the modernization, and the disregard for the environment by those in power. This mirrors the historical exploitation of land and resources during colonial periods, often resulting in ecological degradation and its impact on marginalized communities. The wealthy whites are depicted as enemies of the natural environment, and oppressors of Black community, thus "the Bottom had collapsed," and:

Everybody who had made money during the war moved as close as they could to the valley, and the white people were buying down river, cross river, stretching Medallion like two strings on the banks. Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom any more. White people were building towers for television stations up there and there was a rumor about a golf course or something. Anyway, hill land was more valuable now, and those black people who had moved down right after the war and in the fifties couldn't afford to come back even if they wanted to. Except for the few blacks still huddled by the river bend, and some undemolished houses on Carpenter's Road, only rich white folks were building homes in the hills. Just like that, they had changed their minds and instead of keeping the valley floor to themselves, now they wanted

a hilltop house with a river view and a ring of elms. The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn—and the rich white folks. Maybe it hadn't been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by. (Morrison, 1973)

Through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, the passage vividly illustrates the radicalized space within the context of the Bottom's collapse and the subsequent exploitation of the landscape. The concept of radicalized space refers to the spaces where the dynamics of power, oppression, and identity are intertwined due to historical colonial processes. In *Sula*, this radicalized space is a result of the lingering effects of colonialism and its impact on both the environment and the community. The passage describes how economic gains during the war prompted those who had profited to move closer to the valley, leaving behind the Bottom. This geographical shift is symbolic of the desire to escape the marginalized space associated with the African-American community. The white people's acquisition of land downriver and across the river reinforces the colonial legacy of dispossession and exploitation, as they stretch Medallion, the town, in a way that mirrors colonial expansion. The language used in the passage emphasizes the dispossession and displacement of the African-American community. The phrase "Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom any more" underscores the forced migration from the Bottom due to economic pressures and a shifting power dynamic. The racialized nature of the space becomes apparent as the once-thriving community is abandoned and replaced by white-built towers for television stations and rumored golf courses. The socio-economic disparity is further highlighted by the valuation of hill land, now considered more valuable. The passage mentions that African Americans who had previously moved away during and after the war couldn't afford to return, indicating how economic inequality is linked to spatial mobility. This economic constraint further restricts the marginalized community's agency within the landscape. The landscape's transformation reflects the appropriation of resources and spaces by those in power.

The wealthy white individuals now desire hilltop houses with views and a sense of exclusivity. This desire for elevated space points mirrors colonial aspirations for dominance and control over land and resources. As the African-American community seemingly rushes to

either reach the valley or leave town, the hills are left behind for those “interested.” This highlights the differential access to space and resources based on race and economic status. The passage evokes a sense of sadness for the loss of the Bottom as a “real place” that held historical and cultural significance. The narrative underscores that, while the younger generation speaks of community, They, in reality, sustain the socio-spatial division by relinquishing the hills to the impoverished, elderly, obstinate, and rich white population. This passage illustrates the complex interplay of power, identity, and the environment within a postcolonial context. The landscape transformation and spatial dynamics echo the colonial exploitation and dispossession, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and displacement. Through this lens, *Sula* invites readers to critically examine the intersection of racialized spaces and the exploitation of the landscape, shedding light on the ongoing impacts of imperialism and its implications for both human communities and their environment.

The community of color living in the racialized space of the Bottom experience dual marginalization - both through their racial identity and their socio-economic status within the community, for instance Eva, Sula's grandmother, struggled to keep her family away from starvation after the departure of her husband Boyboy, she:

had \$1.65, five 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 for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it. She was confused and desperately hungry. There were very few black families in those low hills then. The Suggs, who lived two hundred yards down the road, brought her a warm bowl of peas, as soon as they found out, and a plate of cold bread. She thanked them and asked if they had a little milk for the older ones. (Morrison, 1973)

The intersectionality between racial identity and socio-economic status parallels postcolonial narratives where colonial subjects were marginalized both due to their racial and cultural backgrounds, as well as their economic positions. These characters' identities are shaped by the overlapping effects of colonialism, racism, and environmental challenges. The racialized space of the Bottom is deeply rooted in the historical legacy of slavery and colonialism. The legacy of subjugation, dehumanization, and forced labor during the slavery and post-slavery era directly impacts the African American community's identity and place within the community. Their history of being treated as property, along with the cultural erasure and

systemic racism that followed, underscores the multi-dimensional nature of their marginalization. The socio-economic status of the African American community within the Bottom is marred by economic exploitation and environmental racism. Postcolonial ecocriticism highlights the structural inequalities perpetuated by colonial powers that continue to affect marginalized communities. The Bottom's residents face limited access to resources, substandard living conditions, and environmental degradation, mirroring historical patterns of exploitation that were used to enrich imperial powers.

The African American community's relationship with the land is fraught with complexities. Land dispossession during and after the slavery left many African Americans disconnected from their ancestral territories. This disconnection from the land contributes to a sense of displacement and identity fragmentation. Their racial identity intersects with their dispossessed relationship to the land, resulting in a unique form of alienation within the Bottom. Postcolonial ecocriticism underscores how spatial hierarchies and power dynamics perpetuate marginalization:

Everybody who had made money during the war moved as close as they could to the valley, and the white people were buying down river, cross river, stretching Medallion like two strings on the banks. Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom anymore. (Morrison, 1973)

This passage highlights the shift in spatial dynamics as white individuals move to hillland, leaving the Bottom behind. This movement reinforces power imbalances and reproduces racial segregation, as the African-American community is further marginalized within a limited racial space.

The double marginalization of the Black community in the Bottom also reflects the resistance and agency present within marginalized communities. By analyzing their experiences through a postcolonial ecocritical lens, we can recognize instances of eco-social resistance efforts to resist environmental degradation, reclaim cultural identities, and challenge systemic injustices. Characters like Sula challenge societal norms and question prescribed identities. This resistance can be seen as a response to the historical colonial narratives that dictated the identity and roles of marginalized groups. Sula's defiance and self-discovery reflect a desire to reclaim agency over one's identity, echoing the broader postcolonial efforts to redefine identity beyond imposed boundaries. Also, Nel and Sula's friendship, for instance, challenges the boundaries that society places on their identities, suggesting the possibility of transcending constructed racialized spaces. This mirrors postcolonial movements that seek to

deconstruct colonial hierarchies and redefine spaces based on more inclusive and equitable principles.

To escape white men oppression, and in addition to the main protagonist Sula and her friendship with Nel, the Black community of the Bottom creates an imagined space that serves as a refuge, a source of identity, and a means of resistance against the oppressive forces of racism and socio-economic disparities. This imagined space is a space of belonging, memory, and empowerment, helping the community to navigate the challenges of their reality. The imagined space provides a form of escapism from the oppression and discrimination that permeate their lives. Within the Bottom, they can momentarily escape the racial prejudices and economic hardships they face in the wider society. This imagined space offers a sanctuary where they can find solace and reprieve from the challenges of their everyday lives. By creating and nurturing their imagined space, the Black community of the Bottom reclaims agency over their lives. In a world where their agency is often constrained by systemic racism and economic inequalities, this space allows them to assert their autonomy and make decisions that affect their community. This act of reclamation challenges the narrative of victimhood and passivity imposed on them by external forces.

The African American community's double marginalization in the racialized space of the Bottom in *Sula* is a complex interplay of historical legacies, economic exploitation, environmental racism, and power dynamics. Postcolonial ecocriticism helps us unpack the layers of their marginalization, revealing how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary landscapes and impact the identities and agency of marginalized communities. This perspective urges readers to not only recognize the interconnectedness of socio-environmental issues but also to critically engage with narratives that challenge dominant power structures and advocate for social and environmental justice.

4. SPATIAL METAPHOR AND THE CREATION OF PRIVATE SPACES

Spaces, in Toni Morrison's novels, frequently serve as symbolic representations of how her characters relate to both others and the broader societal context. Through the use of spatial metaphors, Morrison examines the potential for individuals to attain varying levels of independence by means of seeking solace, safety, or personal development. Several key figures in Morrison's narratives demonstrate a desire for personal private space, either as a reaction to strained interpersonal connections or in response to formidable external forces such as racial and social oppressions. The nature of these individual spaces reveals the intricate process of how individuals navigate their connections with others and the world around them. So, what are the ways in which metaphors can connect individual and collective experience as well as

past and present events? Furthermore, what are the means through which spatial metaphors play a significant role in exploring themes related to postcolonialism and ecocriticism in *Sula*?

4.1. Spatial Metaphors, Nature and the Community of Color

Spatial metaphors refer to the use of physical spaces to symbolize and convey deeper social, psychological, and cultural meanings. In *Sula*, these metaphors are used to represent the creation of private spaces, which in turn reflect the characters' struggles with identity, agency, and the impact of colonialism on their lives. Analyzing these elements from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective provides insights into the complex interplay between human relationships, nature, and power dynamics.

Metaphors, acting as transitional elements, have the capacity to forge links between historical events and present-day situations, as well as between individual and communal experiences. This linkage is formed by the transformative essence inherent in metaphors – it simultaneously draws close to everyday contexts while introducing additional elements that extend its meanings and associations beyond those contexts (Lacan 2012, Kristeva 2024, Chase 2019). This aspect of transitioning from the past to the present is particularly relevant to Morrison's utilization of metaphors. She achieves this by repositioning past connotations into the present, enabling her to depict the struggle of coexisting with or finding reconciliation amid the persistence of historical influences within new circumstances. Morrison accentuates the dynamic interplay between past and present, manifested in the evolving interactions among characters and the environments in which these relationships unfold. In doing so, she acknowledges the enduring potency of history while also opening avenues for change and subversion.

The spatial contexts within *Sula* echo Jessica Benjamin's concept of spatial metaphors introducing an "in-betweenness". In this "in-betweenness", "representation of self and other evolves in part through a play of distance and closeness, a shifting of spatial boundaries between two bodies" (Benjamin, 1988). The notion of achieving this "in-betweenness" is influenced by D.W. Winnicott's notion of transitional space, which doesn't rigidly define exterior or interior boundaries. Benjamin proposes that this concept forms the foundation for understanding and acknowledging others, facilitating dynamic and mutual relationships that evade dominance (Benjamin, 1988). In Morrison's literature, these transitional spaces correspond with forging connections with others while also preserving a sense of incomplete, unrealized, or even relinquished awareness of these others, often due to a fear of compromising one's own identity. The desire for the other is tinged with suspicion, potential appropriation, or oppression. Thus, these spaces serve to reestablish the boundaries that have dissolved

between the Black community and white oppressors. Functioning as tools for self-assertion and as defenses against external demands, individual spaces allow for privacy and introspection. In Morrison's narratives, characters often search for such private spaces when facing oppression or when external forces compel them to adopt values, judgments, or desires that contradict their identity. These spaces symbolize transition, emerging during moments of upheaval, sorrow, introspection, or reevaluation. They are closely linked with processes of self-discovery and personal development.

Through her characters, Morrison expresses the need to create a space(s) for self-discovery and personal autonomy in a hostile world, marked by racial oppression and socio-economic inequalities. Sula's adoption of space, for instance, signifies an affirmation of her self-reliance. By having her grandmother Eva institutionalized and retaining possession of her ancestral residence, Sula is in defiance of her grandmother's attempts to exert control, all the while acknowledging the matriarch's concerns. I perceive this relationship as maternal and daughter affinity, with Eva playing a significant role in shaping Sula's growth. Despite surpassing Sula's biological mother, Hannah, in longevity, Eva imparts a multitude of characteristics to Sula. The association between Eva and Sula is potent, yet their closeness is limited, and neither will endure subjugation. Both possess a sense of pride, and each has resorted to self-inflicted harm in moments of desperation, a concept Susan Willis has categorized as "confrontation(s) with oppressive social forces" (Willis, 1987). These actions demonstrate that Sula and Eva are resilient individuals who will oppose racial injustices and mistreatment, ultimately achieving self-determination and mastery over their own lives. Their intense disagreement highlights their mutual apprehension: Sula is aware of Eva's involvement in Plum's demise, while Eva is cognizant that Sula witnessed her mother's death through fire out of oddity. Eva once again breaches a boundary, this time between her and Sula, attempting to impose her individual agenda and the community's expectations onto the protagonist of the novel: "you need to have some babies. It'll settle you... I'm a tell you what you need" (Morrison, 1973), Sula escapes Eva's influence by expelling her from the house and declares this place as her own distinct space.

Eva's inflexible position serves as a significant illustration of the constraints that Sula must strive to avoid in her pursuit of a liberated existence. Nonetheless, preserving her individual identity necessitates Sula's deliberate avoidance of forming bonds with others, despite the considerable void that emerges from this detachment. She embodies a figure who, while asserting autonomy and liberty, might deny "the terror of having one been subjected to the control of others" (Benjamin, 1988), that is, in Hannah's refusal of her "I love Sula. I just

don't like her.” (Morrison, 1973) and Eva's orders. Sula, having experienced that placing trust in someone results in mistreatment from Hannah or the imposition of control by Eva, is considerably limited in her ability to see herself in connection to others. In truth, the pronounced self-centeredness she has developed is a product of influences from both Hannah and Eva, exemplified by the belief that “all men available” (Morrison, 1973) ruins the balanced relationship she shares with Nel. Sula endeavors to embrace a life of liberty and acknowledges the autonomy of others, yet she must relinquish meaningful connections in exchange for her pursuit of freedom. Once more, there is an absence of balance, although in contrast to the mother figures, the emphasis with Sula lies in the concept of disconnection.

4.2.Colonial Legacy, Slavery and Private Spaces

In *Sula*, the creation of private spaces is explored in the relationships between characters, particularly in Sula and Nel's friendship. Their intimate bond creates a private emotional space where they can express their desires and fears without the constraints of societal norms. This private space becomes a form of resistance against external pressures that seek to define and limit their roles as Black women. The act of carving out such spaces for themselves can be viewed as a response to racial attempts to dictate their identities and limit their agency.

For Nel, space acts as a refuge. The “small bright space”, where she is alone, becomes essential for her. The sorrow stemming from severed connections compels Nel towards a personal space “but a deeply personal cry of one's own pain” (Morrison, 1973). Following her separation with her husband Jude, Nel's self-identity, initially built upon it, leads her to inhabit a self-constructed space of torment.

However, the space that Sula embraces during her dying moments provides an escape from her profound isolation. While the definitive and sealed quality of the boarded-up bedroom provides her seclusion and initially appears as another refuge from appropriation, within her thoughts, it also metamorphoses into an organic realm of development and connection. Her surrender to death may be seen as a form of surrender, yet it also represents a longing for the renewal of life—an aspiration for a fresh existence free from slavery and white oppression. Her fetal position and the imagery of water imply a profound desire to go back to nature. The space where she was laying down at her last moments undergoes a metamorphosis in her imagination, becoming a natural environment, a protecting and creative space:

The sealed window soothed her with its sturdy termination, its unassailable finality. It was as though for the first time she was

completely alone—where she had always wanted to be—free of the possibility of distraction. It would be here, only here, held by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always. Always. Who said that? She tried hard to think. Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always? The effort to recall was too great; it loosened a knot in her chest that turned her thoughts again to the pain. (Morrison, 1973)

The spatial metaphors play a significant role in conveying the protagonist Sula's sense of liberation, her yearning for autonomy, and her eventual merging with nature. The rain scent and water symbolize a connection with the natural world, perhaps pointing toward the desire for a return to a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment, which might have been disrupted by colonial exploitation. The phrase “and wash her tired flesh always” evokes cleansing and renewal, potentially symbolizing a desire for cultural and environmental healing after the wounds inflicted by racial injustices. From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, these metaphors can be interpreted as a reflection of Sula's longing for autonomy, reconnection with nature, and liberation from the constraints of colonial history. The passage explores the complex interplay between personal, cultural, and ecological dimensions, drawing attention to the impacts of historical power dynamics on both human and environmental landscapes. Sula is always associated with nature and with water:

Sula was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose...The birthmark was to grow darker as the years passed, but now it was the same shade as her gold-flecked eyes, which, to the end, were as steady and clean as rain. (Morrison, 1973)

Sula's character is portrayed as dynamic rather than stagnant, displaying a sense of fluidity, Deborah E. McDowell confirms that she is “multiple, fluid, relational and in a perpetual state of becoming” (McDowell, 1988). for Sula, water is linked with both devastations especially when she lets go of Chicken Little while he was sinking in the river:

The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water. (Morrison, 1973)

and growth when she is described as water and Ajax is loam.

In *Sula*, spaces such as the Bottom and the hills surrounding it are used to symbolize socio-economic disparities resulting from historical injustices, including colonialism and slavery. The Bottom, a predominantly Black neighborhood situated at a lower, less fertile area, represents the marginalized and exploited spaces that African Americans were often confined to due to systemic oppression. The hills, on the other hand, represent a more privileged and expansive realm, inhabited mainly by white residents. These spatial metaphors reflect the intersection of race, class, and historical legacies, showcasing how colonialism's legacy continues to shape identities and opportunities.

In conclusion, *Sula* employs spatial metaphors to delve into themes of identity, agency, and the lasting impact of slavery. These metaphors offer insights into the private spaces characters create for themselves as a response to societal constraints. Morrison's depiction of *Sula* illustrates Abena Busia's assertion that Black women authors needed to reclaim their individual narratives, utilizing writing techniques to establish and validate their identities and life experiences with more emphasis on "self-definition and therefore, cultural redefinition" (Busia, 1988). One of these tactics involves linking self-awareness with place and "autonomy with space" (Busia, 1988).

5. CONCLUSION

Environment functions as a foreshadowing mechanism in *Sula* because the characters' tragic activities are predicted by the characters' devastation of Bottom's natural habitat and existing monuments. The surroundings and nature play a crucial part in *Sula* from the beginning. Toni Morrison's opening refers to the environment. Exploitation of the environment occurred at the very beginning of the novel. A Medallion City Golf Course has been constructed on the place where once Bottom existed.

In *Sula*, the community seems to have been significantly impacted by the golf course's development. The "stripped and faded buildings" (Morrison, 1973) where the Bottom residents formerly spent a lot of time will also be destroyed in order to improve the road leading to the golf course. Morrison starts the story with Bottom's devastation in order to warn the audience

of the white institution's destructive and violent tendencies. It is a technique for foreshadowing. It seems as if the way the characters grow is similar to the way the land grows. Eliminating a community with its own history and importance to build a meaningless golf course isn't being compassionate. However, many of the characters do not seem to be very concerned with their own personal well-being.

The Bottom is changing very quickly, the narrator cautions us. The forests and structures of the ancient neighborhood are being replaced by the Medallion City Golf Course and the suburbs. However, the residents of the Bottom still lack perspective and are entirely unaware of the value of their possessions. The inhabitants of the hill are not even conscious of the possibility of losing what they have. The ignorant hill people are unaware of the effects of the change. It is clear that the environment is essential to the story; it also helps to define the conflict and provide light on the characters. Heaven and Hell are suggested by the environment.

Ecocriticism, as a literary theory, examines the relationship between literature and the environment, while Third Space theory emphasizes hybridity and the blending of identities and cultures. By combining these perspectives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the novel's ecological themes and the ways in which characters negotiate their sense of self in relation to their environment.

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