The Battle between Community and Its Nonconformists —A Comparison between Sula and Emily in Their Relationships with the Communities

Wei YU (Corresponding author)

Lecturer

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Guangdong University of Finance

527 Yingfu Road, Tianhe District, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China 510521

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Beijing Normal University

19 Xinjiekouwaidajie Street, Haidian District, Beijing, China 100875

E-mail: ivyywlovely@163.com

Tel: (86)18028663400

Abstract

A community always expects conformity from its members. Any individual who challenges community norms will be coerced to conform via segregation or rumor. This paper compares community characteristics, community conflicts and effects of segregation and rumors of the protagonists Sula in Toni Morison's *Sula* to Emily in William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. Although the protagonists Sula and Emily act differently, they both suffer from community segregation and gossip. The tragedies of the two heroines illustrate the discipline and punishment a community inflicts upon its nonconforming members.

Keywords: segregation, rumors, phallocracy, loneliness

1. Introduction

A community tends to mold the behaviors of its members to conform to certain pattern of values and norms into uniformity. Any individual who fails to abide by the communal rules

will be punished and brought to conformity. Both the novels *Sula* and *A Rose for Emily* elaborate the relationship between an individual and his or her community. The protagonists of *Sula* and *A Rose for Emily* both invite segregation and rumors from their communities due to their rebellion against the community norms. This paper examines the community's subsumption of individuality by comparing the heroines Sula and Emily in terms of their communities' features, their conflicts with their communities and the effects of segregation and rumors.

2. Communities' Features

The community where Sula grew up was known for its patriarchal ideology as evident by her absence in the Bottom from 1927 to 1937, when Sula's intensified consciousness made her realize that she lived in a world dominated by men. She travelled to many cities only to find that all men had "the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love." Men "taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money" (Morrison, 1987, pp.120-121). Words like *entertainments, cooling*, *tricks,* and *money* signaled men's unserious attitude toward women when it came to love affairs. Men courted women for entertainment and deserted them after the passion ebbed. Women were supposed to share no happiness with the men but to comfort men when they fell into depression. In return, men gave women money. The use of money equated women to property and established the notions of superiority and inferiority. Men were constructed as the centre of the community, with women conspicuously marginalized. Such is the norm that Sula was assumed to comply with.

While Sula was confronted with gender prejudice, Emily was cocooned in a hierarchical community. The Griersons, as a noble family, was regarded superior to the other townsmen. The remittal of Emily's taxes by Colonel Sartoris illustrated the privilege with which the upper class was endowed. Besides, the Griersons even insisted that "[none] of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily" and "have driven away" all the young men who attempted to court Emily (Faulkner, 2007, p.364). The attitude of the Griersons highlighted the existence of a striking gulf between the aristocrats and the lower-class people. While the Griersons thought highly of themselves, the townspeople too seemed aware of the class gulf and subconsciously maintained the social class stratification. When the neighbours suffered from the smell emerging from Emily's house, none of them dared to complain to Emily. Even the Judge said, "Will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?" (Faulkner, 2007, p.363). Revealed in the words is a palpable feeling of awe which can also be detected as the spokesman "[comes] to a stumbling halt" at informing Emily of paying taxes (Faulkner, 2007, p.361). Clearly, even the authority is overwhelmed with awe when facing Emily. This feeling, entangled with animosity, is embedded in "a context of deep hostilities that have existed between herself and the community" due to the class discrepancies (Honeini, 2021, p.82). In other words, it is people's identification with their subordination to Emily that evokes such feelings. Examples listed above suffice to prove that the whole community, be they nobles or lower-class people, were entrenched in a hierarchical structure.

3. Conflicts between the Communities and the Deviants

Both Sula and Emily distinguish themselves from their communities, thus challenging their communities' norm. Sula's counteraction of the patriarchal ideology of the Bottom community was mirrored in her refusal of marriage and her gaze on Ajax. While other women got married and engaged themselves in house chores, Sula insisted on being alone. She felt that marriage tied women to a life purely aimed at fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers. To win others' approval, women construct themselves as men demand but in the meantime, disregard their own needs. Gradually, they go detached from their personal identities (Chrisler, Golden & Rozee, 2004, p.186). Sula had found proof in the townswomen, as she pointed out, "Those with men had had the sweetness sucked from their breath by ovens and steam kettles" (Morrison, 1987, p.122). Sula opted to persist in pursuing her selfness by fulfilling her own needs instead of fulfilling the roles of wives and mothers in the community. "[She] lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (Morrison, 1987, p.118). Morrison portrays Sula as one who did not live to please others. Rather, Sula concerned herself with her own feelings which freed her from the stereotyped obligations that women were demanded to assume. Sula identified herself as the subject of her 'self' rather than the object of others. By "rejecting to the traditional role ascribed to women" (Mbalia, 2004, p.28), Sula rendered herself atypical in her community.

Sula's *gaze* on her lover Ajax was another weighty proof of Sula's rebellion against the gender stereotype. According to Emily Martin (1989, p.21), phallocracy determines that "[female] is to be subjected to the cold appraisal of the male connoisseur." The male is the gazer while females can only be gazed upon. Men, through their gaze, evaluated women and shaped how women developed themselves. Sula challenged to the norm. "She watched him--- or rather the rhythm in his throat--- with growing interest. When he had had enough, he poured the rest into the sink, rinsed the bottle out and presented it to her" (Morrison, 1987, pp. 124-125). Sula reversed the gendered gaze by putting Ajax under her gaze. The vivid description of Ajax's actions implied that Sula was carefully observing the man, making herself the gazer and Ajax the object of her gaze, which promises her an appraisal of the man. Notably through her gaze, Sula explored her emotion to the man and allowed it to dictate her behaviors. Sula's gaze, accordingly, subverted the objectification of women in the androcentric culture.

Like Sula, Emily's arrogance as an aristocrat and her love affair with Homer distinguished her from her community. Born to a southern aristocratic family, Emily was entitled to noble pride. She drove away the authority figures who visited her to demand taxes with a "dry and cold" voice (Faulkner, 2007, p.362). Whenever the townsmen saw her, she "carried her head high" (Faulkner, 2007, p.365). Emily's love affair with Homer also deviated from the hierarchical ideology. In a stark contrast to Emily's high social position, Homer was a northern laborer. Nevertheless, Emily was often seen driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy with Homer on Sunday afternoons (Faulkner, 2007, p.365). Emily even revealed her intention of marrying Homer by preparing for their wedding regardless of the class division between them. In this sense, Emily transgressed the social class boundary and thereby violated the hierarchical value.

4. The Segregation and Rumors

Nonconformity by the two heroines subjected them to the communities' punishment by means of segregation and rumors. Sula's rebellion against the male culture insulated herself from others. When people learnt of Sula's distinction from them, they labelled her a devil. "They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (Morrison, 1987, pp.117-118). Discerned in these women's comports is their vigilance about the deviant Sula. A union then was established to prevent the devil's attack. Obviously, Sula was excluded from this union.

Hostile as it was, the exclusion was not the only segregation Sula was subject to; what stroke Sula most was simply the loss of confidants, which was represented by Nel's change. Sula had long sought for a confidant with whom she could share her thoughts and feelings (Morrison, 1987, p.121). Sula's travel experiences had provided her insights into the demise of women's subjectivity in the male-dominant communities based on her observation, "no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand" (Morrison, 1987, p.121). Concurrently, she had also further explored her selfness from the multiplying experiences. A newly adapted self creates a new demand on a friend whom she can "rely upon, and confide in" (Biel & Harper, 2021, p.80). A new self needs a comrade to share her enlightenment and encourage her to go further. Nel appeared to be the only choice since "their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's" (Morrison, 1987, p.83). They used to be "interchangeable" and form their "oneness" to complete each other (Schreiner, 2019, p.42). Hence, she returned to the Bottom community in hope of communicating with another ego in Nel. It dawned on Sula, however, that marriage has stifled Nel's individuality as she saw that Nel "belonged to the town and all of its ways" (Morrison, 1987, p.120). Sula found that even this single confidant was assimilated by the community which robbed her of the only chance of finding a comrade who could conspire with her against the oppression, thus making her the only nonconformist in the community. Nel's change, to a greater extent, symbolized Sula's alienation from the townspeople.

Apart from the change in Nel, the departure of Ajax was also evident of Sula's isolation from her community. Ostensibly, Ajax was impervious to the phallocentric ideology. In Ajax, Sula found equality and respect that were absent in other men. He charmed her since "he did not speak down to her or at her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities" (Morrison, 1987, pp.127-28). Rather than silent Sula as other men did, Ajax encouraged Sula to voice her mind and explore her intelligence. Ajax's behaviors seemingly showed his effort to maintain an equal relationship. Graham Allan (1986, p.5) highly esteemed equality in a relationship by noting that equality is the "premise" of a relationship. Sula then developed a mirage that Ajax could join her battle against the patriarchal culture due to this equality. This mirage perished when Ajax later deserted her.

Ajax's leaving represented the androcentric culture's annihilation of Sula. Ajax's defenses of the patriarchal ideology is insidious in his recommendation of Nel to Jude as a wife, for Nel "[has] no aggression" (Morrison, 1987, p.83). A wife, from Ajax's viewpoint, should register

a "feminine meekness" (Mbalia, 2004, p.43). Ajax implied that, by choosing an unaggressive wife, a man could guarantee his superiority and domination in the family.

Ajax's phallocentric view was further illustrated in his change of act in the sexual intercourse with Sula. Ajax initially appeared to arouse Sula's consciousness of her desire as he "liked for her to mount him so he could see her towering above him […]" (Morrison, 1987, p.129). The delineation of their sexual intercourse gave an indication of Sula's transformation from the misery in her previous sexual relations with other men to the current joyful pursuit of her sexual pleasure. Ajax's specious respect to women contributed to this change, although an inference of Ajax's anti-gender stereotype could not be immediately established. When Ajax perceived that Sula desired to possess him, "[he] dragged her under him and made love to her with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton" (Morrison, 1987, p.134). The change in Sula's position from "above" to "under" literally implies the recovery of men's domination. "There was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender," said Sula (Morrison, 1987, p.123). If lying under men in sexual intercourse suggested women's surrender to men, Ajax's change in the sexuality seemed to exemplify this. Ajax considered Sula's possessive gesture a threat to his dominance, so he attempted to rebuild his control and defend his superiority by eliminating the threat. Ajax's deserting Sula could be interpreted as a male-dominated community's isolating Sula.

Like Sula, Emily's individuality also subjected her to the town's rumors. When people learnt of the love affair between Emily and Homer, rumors permeated the town. By scrutinizing the rumors, we perceive a transformation of people's attitudes from sympathy to criticism. When people first saw Emily together with Homer, they said "even grief could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige" (Faulkner, 2007, p.365). The townspeople plainly attributed Emily's love affair to her tremendous grief after losing her father. Since she had been under the excessive protection of her father, Emily was firmly believed to have leaned considerably on her father. The death of her father then invoked people's conjecture that she now had nobody to count on and ran into complete paralysis of life. The gossip, in this sense, conveyed people's sympathy for Emily. Later, when people saw Emily's persistence in dating Homer even though she knew that Homer liked men and was not "a marrying man", they said "it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people" (Faulkner, 2007, pp.366-367). The gossip here evinces a sense of criticism. Preoccupied with the hierarchical ideology, the townspeople expected Emily to behave like an aristocrat. Since she was the last Grierson in the town, people imposed on her the responsibility of maintaining the ethics and pride of the Griersons. To Marry Homer was inevitably considered to tarnish the reputation of the family.

5. The Effects of the Segregation and Rumors

Both protagonists project lonely images. Nel's changes and Ajax's departure announced Sula's failure in finding a comrade. Loneliness was then her companion till her death. When Sula was sick, Nel said, "You laying there in that bed without a dime or a friend…" (Morrison, 1987, p.145). With such a feeble body, Sula reaped no consolation nor caring from others. Even she had to admit that "the solitude she found in that desperate terrain had never

admitted the possibility of other people" (Morrison, 1987, p.123). Loneliness made a strong presence here.

Emily's loneliness was exuded by her silhouette at the window. When the townsmen sneaked into Emily's house to explore the source of the smell, they saw "a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol" (Faulkner, 2007, p.363). This image was displayed again as the townspeople said, "Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows…like the carven torso of an idol in a niche…" (Faulkner, 2007, p.369). The words *torso, motionless, idol* implied a woman without vigor. Framed by the downstairs window of a large house, Emily's silhouette was comparatively small. The sharp contrast between the big house and the small figure simply portrayed the loneliness of Emily.

Although both Sula and Emily were overwhelmed with loneliness, their experiences were different. Sula's loneliness could be attributed to her nonconformity to the community whereas Emily's was the outcome of her surrender to the community's subsumption of her. While "Sula's struggle to enjoy her fullest potential as a human being is a struggle waged against the Bottom community" (Mbalia, 2004, p.44), Sula knew that her struggle was the root of the segregation and she did not have to survive the segregation. If she had taken a step into the community, however small, she would have been embraced by others and integrated into the community thereafter. Yet she refused to behave the way others did. Thus, her loneliness was but her own choice. Just as she said to Nel at her death, "But my lonely is mine" (Morrison, 1987, p.143). Contrary to Sula, Emily's loneliness was imposed on her by others. She could have married Homer if she had stuck to her pursuit of love. The plight was that her decision to marry a northern laborer collided with the traditions and values that most townspeople advocated for. According to Crawford and Unger (2000, pp.98-99), people who did not conform to the way typical and normal individuals behaved were likely to be defined "stigma or deviance". And if "women", as Crawford and Unger (2000, pp.98-99) maintained, "are vulnerable to stigmatization", there would probably have been a stigma attached to Emily who was so determined to marry Homer. Interwoven in Emily's mind was the town folks' reproach and the worry of bearing a stigma that inflicted upon Emily such an overwhelming trauma that a withdrawal from the possibility of marrying Homer was the corollary. However, this action imposed upon Emily endless loneliness. It was the rumors that drove Emily into loneliness, which was, in Sula's words, a "secondhand lonely" (Morrison, 1987, p.143).

6. Conclusion

Individuals living in a community are expected to adopt its norms and behavior. Individuals who challenge the community norms are usually coerced into conformity by means of segregation or rumor. Both Sula and Emily violated their communities' values and suffered from the segregation and gossip from their communities. Subsequently, Sula firmly insisted on maintaining her individuality while Emily changed her mind about marrying Homer. Their actions, whether nonconforming or conforming, leave both protagonists in solitude. The tragedies of the two protagonists reflect the punishment a community inflicts upon its nonconforming members.

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