T.C.
ISTANBUL BEYKENT UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE PROGRAMME

ROOTS OF RESISTANCE: SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM IN PLATH'S THE BELL JAR AND MORRISON'S SULA

Master's Thesis

Thesis Prepared By
Malak AMMAR

İstanbul, 2025

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Malak AMMAR

Student No.
2220028014

ORCID ID
0009-0005-2075-6037

Advisor
Asst. Prof. Dr. Mehtap SARIARSLAN

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OATH STATEMENT

This study entitled "**Roots of Resistance: Second-Wave Feminism in Plath's The Bell Jar and Morrison's Sula**", which I submitted as a Master's Project / Thesis - Doctoral Thesis, was written by me in accordance with scientific ethics and precedents. I state and confirm with honor that I have obtained all the information in this thesis in accordance with academic and ethical rules, that all the works I have used are cited in the sources and that they are cited wherever they are used in my work, and that I have not violated any patent or copyright rights 12.06.2025

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Prof. Dr. Vi*** MA***
(İstanbul Beykent Üniversitesi)

ÜYE
Doç. Dr. Nu*** Em*** K***
(İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi)

Name and Surname : Malak AMMAR

Supervisor : Asst. Prof. Dr. Mehtap SARIARSLAN

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ABSTRACT

ROOTS OF RESISTANCE: SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM IN PLATH'S THE BELL JAR AND MORRISON'S SULA

The primary objective of this study is to examine how the central concerns of second-wave feminism, such as the fight for gender equality, seeking autonomy, and resisting patriarchal society, are addressed in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Sula* by Toni Morrison through the lens of feminist literary theory. Using a comparative approach, this study explores how the novels portray the feminist struggles while revealing how feminism has historically prioritized the experiences of white, middle-class women and excluded the realities of many others, especially women of color. Morrison, with *Sula*, introduces a long-overdue intersectional analysis of how race and gender affect the lives of Black women; she expanded the movement to include marginalized voices, while *The Bell Jar* tells the emotional cost of social expectations on young women like Esther Greenwood. Both novels remain relevant and offer essential insight into contemporary conversations on gender equality and feminism.

Adı ve Soyadı : Malak AMMAR

Danışmanı : Asst. Prof. Dr. Mehtap SARIARSLAN

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ÖZ

DİRENİŞİN KÖKLERİ: PLATH'IN ÇAN KAVANOZU VE MORRISON'UN SULA'SINDA İKİNCİ DALGA FEMİNİZM

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, ikinci dalga feminizminin cinsiyet eşitliği mücadelesi, bireysel özerklik arayışı ve ataerkil topluma karşı duruş gibi başlıca meselelerinin, Sylvia Plath'ın *The Bell Jar* ve Toni Morrison'ın *Sula* adlı romanlarında feminist edebiyat kuramı çerçevesinde nasıl ele alındığını incelemektir. Karşılaştırmalı bir yaklaşım benimseyen bu çalışma, söz konusu romanların feminist mücadeleleri nasıl tasvir ettiğini analiz ederken, feminizmin tarihsel olarak beyaz, orta sınıf kadınların deneyimlerine öncelik vererek, özellikle renkli kadınlar olmak üzere pek çok kadının gerçekliğini dışarıda bıraktığını da ortaya koymaktadır. Morrison, *Sula* ile ırk ve toplumsal cinsiyetin Siyah kadınların yaşamları üzerindeki etkilerine dair uzun süredir ihtiyaç duyulan kesişimsel bir analiz sunmakta ve feminist söylemi marjinalleştirilmiş sesleri kapsayacak şekilde genişletmektedir. Öte yandan *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood gibi genç kadınların toplumsal beklentiler karşısında yaşadığı duygusal yükü yansıtmaktadır. Her iki eser de güncelliğini korumakta ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ile feminizm üzerine süregelen tartışmalara önemli katkılar sunmaktadır.

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GLOSSARY

Autonomy: The ability of an individual to make independent choices and govern one's own life. In feminist literature, autonomy is often portrayed as a key element of women's liberation from social, cultural, or familial constraints.

Feminist Literary Criticism: A theoretical approach that analyzes literature through the lens of feminist theory, seeking to understand how texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge gendered norms. It emphasizes the representation of women, power dynamics, and patriarchal ideology in literature.

Intersectionality: A term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how various forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and others, interact and overlap in the lived experiences of individuals. In literary analysis, intersectionality allows for a more nuanced understanding of how race, gender, and other identities shape characters and narratives.

Patriarchy: A social system in which men hold primary power in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. Feminist theory identifies patriarchy as a central structure of oppression that influences institutions, relationships, and individual identities.

Second-Wave Feminism: A feminist movement that emerged during the 1960s and continued into the 1980s, focusing on a broad range of issues, including reproductive rights, workplace equality, legal inequalities, and sexual liberation. It is often critiqued for centering the experiences of white, middle-class women while overlooking race, class, and cultural differences.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background of Second-Wave Feminism

The second wave of feminism, a transformative movement that shifted the global fight for gender equality, was influenced by and built upon the foundations of the first-wave feminist movement. The first wave of feminism emerged in the 19th century, growing out of reform movements, particularly those that fought for human rights. Women's activism inspired feminists in the French Revolution, the Temperance Movement, and the Abolitionist Movement. As the historian Manisha Sinha said, "If not all female abolitionists became women's rights activists, pioneering feminists owed their public careers to abolition." This illustrates the connection between abolitionists and female struggles; women who fought against slavery also fought for gender equality.

In the late 19th century, when the first wave of feminism emerged, its primary focus was on women's right to vote and have legal rights. According to historian Ellen DuBois (1998), the women's suffrage movement aimed to claim their right to vote and expand women's role in the public sphere. The movement advocated for property rights, pushed for women's access to education, and fought for better working conditions, which later led to some but limited labor laws. The first wave reached significant milestones, but it had notable gaps; it focused solely on upper to middle-class white women while excluding the voices of working-class women and women of color (hooks, 1981). As a result of these gaps, second-wave feminism emerged, working to broaden the feminist agenda to include sexuality, intersectionality, and fighting structural discrimination (Freedman, 2003).

The second-wave feminist movement emerged in the 20th century at the height of social change, influenced by the civil rights movement that wanted to end racial segregation. Aspiring women who participated in the civil rights movement saw the contradictions. While the movement championed the idea of universal equality, women, in practice, were still marginalized in many aspects of society (Evans, 2015). As historian Ruth Rosen (2000) argues, the Civil Rights Movement

"inspired many women to question their status as second-class citizens" and brought the idea of gender consciousness to life.

After World War II, the wartime labor force faced a shift; many women were laid off from their jobs because they were no longer needed, although the war requirement demonstrated that women were capable of playing important roles in society and not being secondary to men. (Freedman, 2003). This created two branches of the women's movement. One of them was influenced by Betty Friedan, who wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which criticized the image of a happy housewife and exposed the psychological harm of pressuring such roles on women. Friedan interviewed her classmates and realized that the happy marriage image of a man at work and a satisfied housewife was so far from reality that they were trapped in roles that suppressed their potential. Friedan herself was significantly inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), the French feminist philosopher who criticized society's view of women. As de Beauvoir famously said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p.267), highlighting how gender roles were forced on women from birth, what to be, do, or act.

Friedan's book sold over three million copies in its first three years and sparked a revival of the feminist movement (Friedan, 1963). Middle-class women got together to promote women's social and political equality. The same year The Feminine Mystique was released, President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act of 1963 into law (Equal Pay Act, 1963). The new law stated that women were no longer paid less than men for performing "comparable work" in the same position. Under the leadership of labor activist Esther Peterson, a group of women in the White House produced this Act. In 1961, Peterson was named chief of the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau. She persuaded President Kennedy to form a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. Peterson worked with the group and then, on behalf of the Kennedy administration, sent a draft of the Equal Pay Act to Congress.

This branch is often referred to as Liberal feminism, mainly focused on legal and political equality, including wage equality, access to job opportunities, and education (Tong, 2009). Liberal feminists fought for reform within the system. Liberal feminists in 1966 established The National Organization for Women (NOW), which advocated for legal gender equality and declared the following: "We, men and women who hereby constitute ourselves as the National Organization for Women, believe that the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America,

and toward a fully equal partnership of the sexes, as part of the world-wide revolution of human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders" (NOW, 1966).

The other branch, Radical Feminism, initially consisted of young college women or recent graduates. Most of them were middle-class and white but deeply influenced by the Black Civil Rights Movement, which addressed racial oppression and gender-based inequalities. Unlike liberal feminists, who focused on public issues, radical feminists handled private sphere issues. The goal of Radical Feminism was to effect revolutionary change; they addressed issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, harassment, and male control over women. They also underscored women's autonomy over their own sexuality and reproductive rights as central to their liberation. According to scholars such as bell hooks[1], Radical Feminism arose out of necessity in light of the systemic and deep-rooted inequalities that continued to prevail despite the achievements of the earlier feminist movements (hooks, 2000). Intersectionality between race and gender was crucial in fighting oppression, as noted by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989).

The Civil Rights Movement was happening when the second wave of feminism emerged. African American men and women still had to struggle against racism, violence, and segregation to exercise their fundamental human rights. The Jim Crow regulations, literacy requirements, and grandfather clauses continued to prevent African American men and women from exercising their right to vote even after the 19th Amendment, which guaranteed voting rights to both men and women. African American women were once again battling for their rights as women and for fighting against racial oppression.

Later on, two new laws were applied: The Griswold v. Connecticut Supreme Court decision in 1965 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Griswold v. Connecticut, 1965; Civil Rights Act, 1964)., Both gave women legal protections and inspired them to keep fighting for women's equality. Employers were prohibited from discriminating against workers of race, religion, sex, or nationality under Title VII of

[1] bell hooks spelled her name in lowercase letters to shift attention away from her identity and toward her ideas.

the Civil Rights Act (Civil Rights Act, 1964). In addition to the Civil Rights Act, the Supreme Court's 1965 decision forbade anybody from restricting women's access to birth control or other forms of contraception. Many women gained greater independence in their private and public lives as a result of these court rulings. However, many women of color were still denied the right to vote.

Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female, written by Frances M. Beal in 1969, describes the experiences of African American women throughout the feminist movement. Her piece highlights how black women are exploited in society and the distinct struggles faced by black and white feminists (Beal, 1969). Beginning with the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973, black women began to organize as distinct feminist groups by the 1970s. Similar goals led to the formation of the Combahee River Collective in 1974; their statement notes, “We are committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

Also in 1981, author Gloria Jean Watkins, known as bell hooks, the author of *Ain’t I A Woman?* Black Women and Feminism analyzes the current movement and criticizes mainstream feminism for excluding the issues black women face in their fight for equality. "Although the women’s movement motivated hundreds of women to write on the woman question, it failed to generate in-depth critical analyses of the black female experience". Instead, she created a new form of activism through black feminism. She states, "Although the focus is on the black female, our liberation struggle has significance only if it takes place within a feminist movement that has as its fundamental goal the liberation of all people" (hooks, 1981).

Although women saw themselves in hooks's works, Alice Walker presented "Womanism" as a new form of black feminism. Walker first used the term in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*: Womanist Prose, which is a compilation of political and personal pieces that introduce readers to womanism, drawing inspiration from the African American cultural meaning of the term "womanish". Walker defines a womanist as “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (Walker, 1983). Black

feminism and womanism go hand in hand. According to Walker, the womanist is "a Black feminist or feminist of color."

Influence of the Second-Wave Movement on Literature

The second-wave feminist movement profoundly transformed the use of feminist literary criticism and literature. Although feminist literary theory existed prior, it was during the second wave that it emerged as one of the most popular approaches to text analysis. The movement transformed how literature is analyzed and extended into the domains of philosophy, history, sociology, religion, and cultural studies. Second-wave feminism introduced women's voices and experiences into the scene, challenging traditional analysis through the critique of outdated discourses.

Gill Plain and Susan Sellers note, "Feminist literary criticism properly begins after 'second-wave' feminism. However, feminist literary criticism did not emerge fully formed from this moment. Rather, its eventual self-conscious expression was the culmination of centuries of women's writing, of women writing about women writing, and of women and men writing about women's minds, bodies, art, and ideas" (2007, p. 4).

Furthermore, Carolyn Dinshaw (1999) highlights the impact of literature, stating, "texts affect lived lives, and… if women had relatively little opportunity to author texts, they nonetheless felt their effects" (p. 14). These writers suggest that the second wave of feminist criticism served as a critical means of recuperating women's agency in literature and creating a safe space for women's voices and experiences.

Introduction to *The Bell Jar* and *Sula*

Literature at this time became a powerful medium for criticizing and commenting on the institutionalized oppression of women. Women writers criticized social norms through texts and challenged the issues they faced. Sylvia Plath and Toni Morrison are two iconic authors who emerged from the movement. Choosing their classic novels, *The Bell Jar* and *Sula,* as the ideal medium to base the analysis of central themes of the second-wave movement, both authors effectively critique the same issues and create complex and relatable characters that women can identify with.

The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, is a reflection of feminist issues, offering insight into the situation of women in the 20th century. Her

only novel, published in 1963, is a semi-autobiographical work that examines in depth the psychological struggles of a young woman as she battles suffocating gender roles, loses professional and personal opportunities due to gender discrimination, and faces pressure to conform to a traditional trajectory of marriage and motherhood.

Through the inner mind of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, a young woman who seems to have it all: a prestigious internship in New York and a promising academic future, she finds herself constrained by the roles that women were expected to follow. As a result of these pressures, Esther's mental state descends into crippling depression, which Plath symbolizes by the image of the bell jar that traps her beneath its suffocating weight (McClanahan, 1999). Plath's depiction of emotional turmoil highlights the restriction of gender that dominated society during that time. *The Bell Jar* explores the consequences of prioritizing personal desires over society's expectations, the desire for freedom, independence, success, and self-awareness instead of fitting in the ideal feminine identity (Tyson, 2016). *The Bell Jar* is a raw exploration of mental health and its connection with gender. Plath fought for women's independence and valued mental health. These demands reflect women's hardships of that time and resonate with the feminist aspirations for autonomy and equality (Showalter, 2012).

If *The Bell Jar* portrays the institutions of health care as disguised forms of patriarchal control, its decentered structure calls for precisely the second-wave feminist critique that emerged in the years following its publication (Ferretter, 2005).

Sula by Toni Morrison, published in 1973, tells the story of the complex friendship_between Sula Peace and Nel Wright in a Black society as they face harsh expectations. Sula is a liberated and rebellious woman, while Nel chooses the traditional route, which explores themes of intersectionality, womanhood, race, and community. This difference in the life decisions of the two friends creates a rift in their friendship, which shows the conflict between conventionality and autonomy. *Sula* depicts how the lives and the freedom of two black women can be affected by social pressure. Morrison's book challenges gender roles and the limitations of the female identity in Sula's complicated life, mirroring what the second-wave feminist movement sought to remedy, particularly the necessity for women to redefine themselves not just

within the general patriarchal culture but also within their community. She portrays how race and gender affected the destinies of Black women and how they struggled within the internal cultural expectations and broader societal context (Jordan, 1995).

Toni Morrison's *Sula*, a contemporary novel about female friendship, offers a view of female psychological development that defies traditional male-centered interpretations of female development and calls out for an expansion of the women-centered paradigm. Both the novel's subject (minority experience) and its treatment implicitly critique psychology's usual focus on the experiences of middle-class white women, who are often bound by conventional social relationships (Gillespie & Kubitschek, 2003).

These novels serve as powerful manifestations that reflect the critical issues of the movement, highlighting the diversity of women's experiences. Although differing in literary style, they strongly identify with the main concerns of the second-wave movement, criticizing the discrimination and isolation that women sought to change. With *The Bell Jar* and *Sula*, these writers developed great works that challenged societal roles and promoted the autonomy and power of females. These works are important to understanding the dependent relationship between literature and the feminist agendas of the 20th century. Morrison and Plath rose to be symbols of feminist literature through their artistic expressions and personal struggles.

Significance of Studying the Novels Together

By comparing *Sula* and *The Bell Jar*, I will explore the connections between the two distinct novels, revealing how different backgrounds shape women's destinies and highlighting the diversity of feminist literature.

Second-wave feminism was criticized for being exclusive to the experiences of white women, despite the movement's influence by the civil rights movement, which aimed to end segregation. Comparing these two novels will help bridge the gap in that discourse, particularly the absence of black voices in early feminist thought. I have selected *Sula* to shed light on the marginalized experiences, as it offers different perspectives that shaped feminist struggles.

Although the two novels come from different racial and cultural contexts, they share central themes of feminism. They tackle these universal concerns in contrasting

ways: *Sula* grapples with the complexity of racism, and *The Bell Jar* confronts traditional gender-based expectations. In researching the subject, I discovered that both novels have been analyzed individually, but there is a gap in comparative studies of the two novels. This gap presents an opportunity to explore new ideas regarding how they resonate with one another under the feminist umbrella.

By connecting these novels, I aim to contribute to the ongoing research in feminist literature and, thereby, to social change. These novels facilitate the expansion of feminist literary theory, which includes intersectionality, a contemporary approach. This research enhances our understanding of the novels and illustrates the power of literature as a tool to fight for gender equality.

Thesis Statement

The objective of this thesis is to analyze how the core concerns of the second-wave feminist movement are presented in *Sula* by Toni Morrison and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, and how *Sula* fills a gap in feminist literary studies by emphasizing the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in shaping the complexities of each character's experiences and identities. Ultimately, this analysis explores the impact of literature on feminist theory and its lasting influence on contemporary discussions about gender equality.

CHAPTER 1: *THE BELL JAR* AND FEMINIST STRUGGLES WITH IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963), one of the most iconic American authors of the 20th century, was born in Boston, renowned for her confessional poetry and the novel *The Bell Jar.* Her early life was marked by achievements and profound pain; her father's death deeply affected her and traumatized her throughout her life, as she was only eight years old at the time. Her relationship with her mother was strained by emotional distance, and her marriage to the poet Ted Hughes was turbulent, marked by both creative inspiration and deep emotional turmoil (Kroll, 1976). I am running a few minutes late; my previous meeting is running over.

1.1. Overview of The Bell Jar: Sylvia Plath's Life, Feminist Narrative, and Historical Context

Plath's mental health degraded in her teenage years and was a constant shadow that followed her till her untimely death. She suffered from chronic depression and attempted suicide in 1953 when she was only twenty-one years old, an event that led her to be hospitalized and resort to electroconvulsive therapy (Plath, 1963). These inner conflicts are the essence of *The Bell Jar*; the semi-autobiographical nature of the novel allows us to look into the psychological toll that these societal pressures took on Plath herself (Hughes, 2000). It follows the mental struggles of Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, who is an extension of Plath's own life. When Plath fictionalized her life, she created a personal and political narrative, where she showed the consequences of rigid roles. Especially, in the 1950s and 1960s, when women were expected to conform to roles as wives and mothers and nothing more, the novel is interpreted as a critique of the societal obligations on women (Sexton, 2010).

The novel follows the life of Esther Greenwood, a bright and ambitious woman, who works at a New York City magazine as one of the lucky women to win an internship. At first, everything seems to be on the right path to success, but her life in the city soon unravels as she is pressured to fit into the tailored role of the perfect woman. The story follows her gradual breakdown, leading to a suicide attempt and

hospitalization. This narrative is fundamental to explore the feminist thought since it reveals the gender limitation of women's freedom (Dunn, 2017).

Esther, Plath, and many women from the second-wave movement suffered internal conflict as a direct response to the pressure to conform to traditional feminine ideals, which they eventually fought against. As the feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter notes, Plath's portrayal of mental illness and the alienation felt by women in a patriarchal society is a key feature of the feminist analysis of *The Bell Jar* (Showalter, 1992). Esther's interactions with men throughout the novel reinforce this feeling of alienation; these men, such as Buddy Willard, exemplify misogynistic behavior. Plath uses Esther as a protest against the oppressive norms and limitations that they impose on women.

To fully grasp the feminist significance of *The Bell Jar*, it is necessary to connect the novel with the cultural sphere of the 50s and 60s. After World War II, women were no longer needed in the workplace and were replaced by men who returned from the war. They were encouraged by the media, advertisements, and even educational systems to marry, have children, and be in their "rightful" place, cooking dinner for their husbands who had just come home from work. The post-war advertisement of domesticity created a world where female ambition was met with ridicule, skepticism, and even abuse.

Betty Friedan, author of The Feminine Mystique (1963), was an important figure in the second-wave feminist movement. Her book highlighted women's dissatisfaction with the role of a homemaker, arguing that it limited women's potential and made them unhappy. Friedan's argument resonated with many women in the 1960s because she challenged the notion of the "happy housewife" that had been cultivated throughout the 1950s. Similarly, Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, follows, illustrating the intense psychological stress that many women experienced in trying to conform to conventional gender roles.

In the 1950s and 1960s, women were offered education and employment, entering the workforce. However, they faced low-quality employment, often limited to teaching, nursing, or secretarial positions. Esther's frustration with her internship experience at the Ladies' Day Magazine portrays the limited options for women and

the dilemma of choosing between career aspirations and fulfilling the expectations of marriage and motherhood, echoing the greater problems that women faced during that period (Walker, 1993).

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* explores the mental health challenges, social expectations, and gender roles that affected women during the 1950s and 1960s. Through the character of Esther Greenwood, Plath critiques the traditional role imposed on women while also illustrating the psychological toll these expectations had on women's sense of identity. By grounding the novel within its historical context and tying it to Plath's life experiences, we see how *The Bell Jar* is both a personal story and a universal feminist critique; in many ways, it is a story of countless women who have felt trapped by social expectations. To this day, it resonates as an important work for understanding the complex intersection of mental health and social expectations in the 20th century; through Esther, we see not just Plath's pain but also her courage.

1.2. Feminist Themes in *The Bell Jar*: Identity, Autonomy, and Resistance to Traditional Roles

Esther's search for identity lies at the heart of *The Bell Jar*. In the novel, Esther battles against social pressures that demand women prioritize domesticity over personal aspirations and desires. Simone de Beauvoir addressed these points in The Second Sex, arguing that women have historically been confined to a state of "immanence," trapped within roles defined by others, rather than achieving "transcendence" through self-determination (de Beauvoir, 1949).

One of the most significant and memorable images that describes Esther's struggle perfectly is the fig tree analogy. Esther pictures herself sitting beneath a fig tree, with each fig representing a potential life path, such as marriage and children, a career as a poet, or travel. She says,

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet, and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was

Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. (Plath, 1963, p. 73)

The metaphor describes Esther's paralysis and her inability to choose one path and sacrifice the rest, encapsulating the feminist theme of choice, or rather, the lack thereof. Esther's dilemma is not as simple as choosing a career over a family; it is about the pressure to sacrifice one role in favor of the other because the act of choosing a fig would mean letting go of all others. The imagery of the figs rotting as she hesitates to choose shows how women in the 1950s were forced to make early, irreversible decisions about their futures. Women's choices have been historically influenced by the patriarchal structure that pressures them to conform to defined roles (de Beauvoir, 1949).

Esther resists the patriarchal rules that limit her; she rejects traditions by refusing Buddy Willard's idea that all she can be is a wife and mother. However, she suffered for her resistance as she was met with battles that flipped her whole life. Her story became a feminist commentary on the hardships women face in achieving autonomy within a society that stifles every bit of it. The fig tree analogy remains significant to this day, as it embodies many feminist ideas and the universal fear of missing opportunities and the unfair sacrifices of other choices due to systemic inequality.

At that time, getting married was often seen as the pinnacle of a woman's life. However, for Esther, marriage was not romanticized; she saw it as a trap that would take away her freedom. A pivotal moment in the novel is when she refuses Buddy Willard's marriage_proposal. She saw Buddy as a man with moral rigidity and a patronizing attitude; for her, he embodied the patriarchal structure that allowed men to control women. Buddy expects Esther to remain "pure" while acting on his freedom of sexual experiences, which conforms to his double standards and alienates her. Esther's disinterest in Buddy and her refusal to subordinate her desires to those of her partner are reflected in her rejecting the marriage proposal. As Plath said, Esther "hated the

idea of serving men in any way" (*The Bell Jar*, p. 120), a sentiment that highlights the broader rejection of an institution that benefits men over women's expenses.

Esther also resisted the idea of motherhood, which at that time added more constraints to women's freedom. In the 1950s, women were expected to prioritize having children above any personal aspirations; these ideas led to Esther's defensive, revolutionary nature. What sets Esther apart from the glorification and romanticism of motherhood during that era is her rejection of the physical and psychological sacrifices childbirth entails. It also mirrors the critique in *The Feminine Mystique*, where Friedan says that the idealization of motherhood places women in roles that take away from their identity.

Plath also reflected on the restrictive nature of femininity, such as how society pressures women to adhere to specific unspoken rules, including modest behavior, focusing solely on their appearance for the male gaze, and being obedient to men. Esther dismissed these aspects of femininity, and it is evident throughout the whole novel. She repudiated the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her appearance and how women tend to change who they are to meet men's desires, which is shown by her interactions with her peers. For example, her internship at the magazine where fashion and beauty are of primary concern serves as a satirical critique of how these articles groom women to fit the social structure designed by men. Esther's agitation at these gendered rules broadens her rejection of superficial prescriptions on women.

The Bell Jar critiques the patriarchy; we see these roles challenged by Esther's rejection of every role that requires women to sacrifice their desires and ambitions. These themes are primary concerns of second-wave feminist thought, where women ought to dismantle the norm that relegates them to the domestic sphere. Plath shows not only her struggles but also the barriers that stand between women and individuality.

Esther Greenwood's psychological breakdown is deeply examined in *The Bell Jar*, particularly in the context of the social expectations placed on women in the 1950s. Throughout the novel, Plath provides a glimpse of Esther's feminist awakening and rejection of imposed notions of femininity through moments of self-reflection and rebellion. By analyzing key passages, we can see how Esther negotiates her sense of

self, freedom, and the social obligations that shape her, making the novel a critical text within the feminist discourse.

Towards the end of the novel, one of the starkest examples of Esther's attempt to reclaim her sense of self is found on the novel's final pages where she states, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (Plath, 1963, p. 243). At this moment, Esther is preparing for an interview that will determine whether she can be released from the mental institution, but the significance of her words extends beyond that; it reveals her battle for survival. *I am* is a tool of existence, her resilience against every oppressive structure that confined her. This crucial moment can be analyzed by studying Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), where she argues that women are always denied subjectivity, instead being reduced to their roles as housewives and mothers. Esther's fight against these challenges encourages us to understand her character in a feminist reading.

Another important passage that underscores the feminist criticism in *The Bell Jar* is Esther's contemplation of marriage and its implications for women's freedom. She recalls Buddy Willard's condescending view on women, stating, "I knew that despite all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners, a man watched a girl he was engaged to, to see if she fit in the slot he had prepared for her," (Plath, 1963, p. 85). This quotation shows Esther's understanding that marriage is a far more instrumental and oppressive social scaffolding than a romanticized ideal. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) provides a critique of this form of social subjugation, arguing that women were encouraged in that period to seek satisfaction and fulfillment only through marriage and household imagery, which led to considerable discontent and alienation. Esther's refusal to accept this fate aligns with Friedan's argument that women had other choices beyond the confines of domestic life as wives and mothers.

Plath critiques patriarchal authority through Esther's relationships with male figures, especially within the medical field. Esther recalls undergoing electroshock therapy at the hands of Dr. Gordon. She describes the experience as filled with visceral horror: "With each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant" (Plath, 1963, p. 143). This violent image dehumanizes the nature of this treatment. It highlights a broader problem and a

powerful critique of psychiatry as an institution completely dominated by men, which has used women's bodies and minds for control and discipline (Showalter, 1985). In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter (1985) reveals how women who have mental illness have been regarded as degenerates and not proper women, blindly following societal norms instead of facing individual issues. Esther's experience with psychiatrists shows how her breakdown is not viewed as a consequence of subjugation, but simply a condition that needed treatment.

What enhances the feminist critique in the novel is Esther's thoughts on purity and the sexual double standards. She articulates her dissatisfaction about women being expected to stay pure while men enjoy sexual freedom. "I could not stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (Plath, 1963, p. 81). Friedan (1963) and succeeding feminist scholars argue that such norms contribute to women's subjugation, making them even more reliant on men for social and economic sustenance.

From these passages, the novel gives insightful feminist criticism of mid-century gender norms and patriarchal control. Esther's rejection of marriage, her struggle with male dominance and structured oppression, and her final declaration of self in "I am, I am, I am" reflect her resistance to a structure that is intended to constrain and shape her. By analyzing the theories and perspectives of Friedan, Beauvoir, and Showalter, we see how the novel anticipates key feminist ideas that shaped the 1960s and beyond.

As Simone de Beauvoir explains, female identity is constructed through social processes rather than being inherited. Esther's life exemplifies this idea as she attempts to break free from the idealized mold of womanhood. In Leslie D. Edwards's *The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar*, she argues that the novel focuses on "feminist issues of victimization, gender constructs and mental health," which illustrates the social phenomena that entrapped Esther psychologically (Edwards, 2011, p. 267).

Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique introduced "the problem that has no name," a term that describes unhappy women in their domestic roles. As Sarah R. Fine argues in *A Feminist Analysis of Mental Illness in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar*, Esther's

mental breakdown is a direct consequence of the gendered limitations placed on her," reinforcing that social pressure was the core reason for her distress (Fine, 2009, p. 72). Her rejection is a fight against a system that sees femininity as submission.

Plath's depiction of Esther foreshadows central ideas of second-wave feminism, which fought against stereotypical gender norms and pursued women's independence. *The Bell Jar*, according to Carol A. Westing, "is a critique of the cultural climate of the 1950s and its effect on the psychological well-being of women" (Westing, 1991, p. 134). Westing also argued that Plath's novel "presents a feminist response to the ideals of femininity perpetuated by mainstream American society during this period." This correlates with the second-wave feminist critique of the personal and professional restrictions women encounter.

Esther, while pursuing her career as a writer, exposed the sexism in the publishing world; her male counterparts often overlooked her work. The industry regularly overlooks women's contributions, exposing social biases. Literary scholar Diane Bonds argued that "Esther's struggle to reconcile her ambitions with societal expectations resonates with women across generations, illustrating the timelessness of Plath's critique" (Bonds, 1990, p. 50).

Esther also faces another challenge in academia, a domain that has also been traditionally male-dominated. From her experiences within the academic circle, it is clear that the intellectual works of women are considered less important. Male professors and colleagues frequently treat their female peers as if they are merely adornments, rather than treating them as real scholars and professionals. Regarding *The Bell Jar*, Perloff, like many other critics, has noted, "the male-dominated society alienates the protagonist, reinforcing the idea that intellectual aspirations are not meant for women" (Perloff, 1972, p. 520).

Another significant problematic aspect of the novel is the branch of medicine that deals with mental disorders, especially psychiatry. Esther's experiences with male doctors reveal yet another mistreatment of women's mental health and a paternalistic approach by male physicians. Physicians' treatment of women in this field is often marked by control instead of genuine care. Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester said that "Esther's psychiatric treatment, particularly electroconvulsive therapy

administered by Dr. Gordon, mirrors real-world psychiatric practices that sought to discipline and silence women rather than heal them" (Appignanesi & Forrester, 1992, p. 217).

Plath wrote the male characters as a personification of the patriarchal structure. Buddy Willard, for example, embodies the condescending man who treats women as inferiors. His hypocrisy towards Esther's sexuality and his demeaning attitude reflect the double standards that dismiss women. "Almost every single male character in the novel serves to do Esther some sort of harm, whether it is emotional, mental, sexual, or physical" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 307).

Esther's struggles show the challenges women face in both the public and private spheres. She faced systematic sexism in her work life, and in her personal life, she was pressured to conform to traditional roles that stifled her. Literary critic Lynda K. Bundtzen argued that "*The Bell Jar* is deeply critical of the rigid gender roles that defined women's lives in the 1950s" (Bundtzen, 1983, p. 76). Plath exposed the barriers that confined women and offered ideas that remain relevant today in discussions of gender and societal norms.

1.3. Gender Expectations, Psychological Struggles, and the Liberation Struggle in *The Bell Jar*

In the novel, Plath paints Esther Greenwood's mental breakdown not as a failing or weak personality but as a raw response to the suffocating stereotypes of the 1950s. Esther's depression and desperation are tied to society's demand to conform to restrictive roles and are not personal flaws. Plath illustrates this connection through Esther's inner thoughts and alienation from the vibrant world around her. Esther's time in New York, for example, despite being surrounded by opportunities and the bustling energy of city life, leaves her feeling detached from this reality and overwhelmed by isolation. Plath writes, "There was a sense of something about the atmosphere in the city that was not for her, something alien and inexplicable" (Plath, 1963, p. 95).

Esther's struggles intensified as she contemplated her future, often pondering the limited possibilities available to her. This struggle reflects the broader feminist critique of the period. As Fine (2009) puts it, "The psychological distress present in

Esther's story is a direct result of a culture that restricts women to pre-established roles, with little space for individual fulfillment" (p. 75). Here, Plath sheds light on the institutionalized nature of women's oppression.

One of the compelling scenes in Esther's experience with her mentors and peers is when she confronts indirect discouragement for pursuing literature, and her identity begins to unravel. In one passage, she recalls the patronizing behavior of male peers who imply that her creative writing is unrealistic and too ambitious. As Perloff (1972) remarks, “Esther’s internal disintegration mirrors the cultural message that a woman’s value is limited to her ability to conform to traditional roles” (p. 515).

Esther's experiences with the medical field showed how the systemic degradation of women caused her mental distress. During treatment sessions, the clinical detachment and dismissive attitude of male doctors dehumanized her. Appignanesi and Forrester (1992) state, “The methods used to treat Esther’s mental health issues are emblematic of a system that prioritizes control over compassionate care, reinforcing the notion that women’s pain is often minimized” (p. 217). These encounters illustrate the flaws within the health care system, but, more importantly, are indicative of societal tendencies in labeling people who do not conform as pathological or abnormal.

The Bell Jar is a raw and powerful exploration of how societal pressures shape mental health through such examples. Esther's depression and anxiety are direct reactions to a culture that forces women into restrictive roles, mirroring the arguments of both Friedan and de Beauvoir. Friedan (1963), in her work The Feminine Mystique, argued that the domestic confines imposed on women resulted in a sense of unfulfillment, while de Beauvoir (1949) said that women are "made" by society into the "Other," pushed away from realizing their full potential. Esther's experiences are a microcosm of broader feminist concerns, documenting the psychological cost of living under rigid gender inequality.

Plath's portrayal of Esther's mental state is a result of every unfair situation women faced during the mid-20th century. By presenting Esther's inner agony and emotional isolation, Plath creates a picture wherein the outcomes of systemic gendered oppression resonate with the feminist movement and are echoed by the feminist

critique of yesterday and today. She portrays the suffocating social obligations and the alienation Esther feels through the bell jar metaphor that represents the psychological barrier between Esther and the life of autonomy and self-expression. Plath's imagery does not stop at decoration; instead, this serves as a comment on how mid-20th-century society clings to confining women in inflexible roles and expectations. At its core, the bell jar represents the inevitable and distorting influence of societal norms. Esther describes her experience in that instant of acute introspection: "I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my sour air" (Plath, 1963, p. 178). This vivid depiction shows how the bell jar allows for an environment where reality is warped and self-determination is severely limited. It serves as a double metaphor: first, as a physical barrier, like an invisible enclosure, entrapping Esther within an oppressive, predetermined space; and second, a psychological one that makes her twist her perception of herself and the world surrounding her.

Elaine Showalter (1985) noted that the bell jar "captures the stifling nature of the societal expectations imposed on women, effectively encapsulating the psychological isolation that results from being forced into a singular, preordained identity." As Showalter stated, Plath uses the bell jar as a critique of the social forces that reduce women to "mere objects" of domesticity. The metaphor is a symbol of Esther's quest for autonomy; it grows more powerful as she spirals into depression, capturing not just her sense of entrapment but also distorting her sense of time and space. In the novel, the obstruction of the bell jar illustrates that even if a woman were to attempt an escape, the psychological scars of these imposed limitations remain, defeating her at every step.

As Fine (2009) states, “The psychological suffocation that Esther experiences is emblematic of the broader cultural suffocation many women face, a system that demands conformity at the expense of individuality” (p. 77). The bell jar is a metaphor for the smothering conditions in society that ensnare women's identities. Plath criticizes not only the outer conditions of patriarchy but also the internalized consequences these conditions have on the psychological health of women. The use of the metaphor is repeated throughout the novel, emphasizing its importance. With each reference to the bell jar, the extent of Esther's internal conflict is further elucidated: her desire for independence is ever thwarted by the forces of society surrounding her.

The bell jar is also a symbol of multiple faces that signify an oppressive society, the internalization of cultural roles, and the lasting obstacle to women's freedom. By using this metaphor, Plath reflects not only her private despair but also her fight against the patriarchal system that represses women. As Showalter said in 1985, "Plath's bell jar is as much a portrait of cultural confinement as it is an intimate glimpse into the psyche of a woman caught between the demands of tradition and the yearning for liberation." This analysis, textual evidence, and scholarly commentary place *The Bell Jar* within the feminist literary canon, which continues to challenge and encourage conversations on gender and autonomy.

One of the central issues in *The Bell Jar* is the internal struggle of Esther Greenwood between her desires and the harsh expectations imposed by the 1950s American society. When Esther reflects on her future and the possibilities open to her, she thinks about the choices that society presses upon her, feeling that preset expectations taint every possible avenue. Esther's resistance to social roles is not in her failings but in the cultural and social issues that confine women. In the novel, while thinking about marriage, she admits, "I felt I had no right to live a life that was not my own" (Plath, 1963, p. 81). This sentiment indicates a profound existential crisis. She is torn between a socially accepted life and her desperation to forge an identity of her own; the turmoil in Esther's mind reflects what Betty Friedan famously wrote about in The Feminine Mystique, that the pervasive dissatisfaction among women who are forced to relinquish their dreams to fulfill prescribed roles, arguing that women’s inability to pursue their ambitions in favor of getting married led to emotional and psychological distress (Friedan, 1963).

Similarly, Esther's struggle is connected with Simone de Beauvoir's, arguing that woman is a political Construct of a role that, at times, traps women into a place that closes them off. Esther's refusal to be identified as a wife or mother and even her opposition to such a role is a rejection of the feminine identity. Her experience serves to support de Beauvoir's theory that women need to transcend society's ordained immanence in order to attain total independence.

Esther's brief moments of lucidity and despair further emphasize the tension between personal desire and societal pressure. She is overcome by isolation and the

feeling of failure because she cannot live up to her desires. For example, frustration sets in when, at one place, she has to confront this expectation of a "pure" woman who is submissive and accepting. She finds herself berating the social issue as she says, "I could not see how I was ever to be free in a world that insisted I remain in this narrow cage" (Plath, 1963, p. 112). The preceding passage highlights her pain while simultaneously being representative of the feminist struggle regarding the restrictions on the lives that women have.

Fine (2009) writes in *A Feminist Analysis of Mental Illness in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* that "Esther's internal strife reflects a culture that devalues female autonomy and subjects women to roles that undermine their true potential" (p. 75). This suggests that Esther's psychological struggle is not only a personal case but also part of a societal issue that second-wave feminists fought for.

The mental deterioration of Esther Greenwood reflects the bigger problems women faced in mid-20th-century America. Her depression and anxiety reveal the psychological consequences of a society that confines women within rigid roles. For example, the extreme alienation felt by Esther during her internship in New York City shows how professional contexts became a man's world and served to enhance her despair. As Fine (2009) asserts, "the cultural norms of the 1950s contributed significantly to the silent epidemic of mental health issues among women, driven by an expectation to conform to a single, narrow role" (p. 77). It places her struggles within the larger perspective of feminist critique that later nourished second-wave activism. Esther anxiously feels that surrendering to one of these societal functions would ultimately erase any prospect of a self-satisfying life, whether through marriage, housekeeping, or subservience.

Her struggle against social pressure was not a sign of her breakdown; it was a symbol of the shared suffering of women who wish to be independent and self-determining. Her mental breakdown and persistent sense of isolation are a result of a society that prioritizes conformity over individual expression. As Perloff (1972) has put it, "the psychological fragmentation witnessed in Esther's narrative is a direct outgrowth of a culture that valorizes submission over self-assertion" (p. 515). Esther thus becomes a case study in the broader feminist struggle against mental health stigma

and the denial of women's rights to self-definition that remains central to feminist discourse today.

A feminist psychoanalytic approach further explains Esther's inner conflict by describing how the psyche internalizes and reproduces patriarchal structures. Elaine Showalter (1985) contends that “the inner conflict experienced by female protagonists is often a reflection of the external imposition of societal norms that undermine female subjectivity” (p. 135). By applying this psychoanalytic theory, the dissociation and depression of Esther can be well interpreted as a result of being around people who relentlessly devalue women's ambitions. Her inability to reconcile her desires is a subconscious internalization of patriarchal values. As scholars have pointed out, such a conflict reflects a broader cultural dynamic: the pressure to conform to externally defined roles creates a fragmentation of the self, leaving women in a state of continuous war with their inner identity (Showalter, 1985).

In other words, the feminist psychoanalytic perspective not only describes the causes of Esther's turmoil but also underlines the broader feminist message of the novel: True freedom can be achieved only by breaking down the patriarchal norms internalized within one's psyche.

1.4. Plath’s Connection to Second-Wave Feminism: Literary Icon, Feminist Voice, and Personal Struggles

Sylvia Plath's personal turmoil and unique confessional style have made her an icon, and she has long been regarded as a significant figure in literature in feminist debates. *The Bell Jar* is a reflection of an engagement with the ideas of independence and self-definition central to second-wave feminism. As Elaine Showalter (1985) remarks, Plath’s writings “transcend simple biographical readings, emerging instead as a powerful critique of the oppressive forces that shape female identity” (p. 139). Her confessional narrative has captured not only agony and despair but also an eruption of denial of all things holding her back from her potential. Weaned from her autobiographical elements of loss within the family, turbulent relationships, and struggle to assert her creative voice, it addresses the feminist demand for self-definition by women on their terms.

There are no questions about separating Plath's feminist identity from her public persona and her literature. First, through her determination to broach subjects that were taboo due to the facilitation of mental illness and the suffocating nature of prescribed femininity, she challenges the status quo. As critics have noted, Plath's life and work embody the contradictions of a society that simultaneously lauds and suppresses female ambition (Wagner-Martin, 1994). In her art, Plath voiced not only her torments but also the precepts of later feminist writers who expressed their complex emotions on being a woman in a man-dominated world.

Esther's conflicted feelings about achieving both professional and academic success highlight a broader feminist struggle. Despite having privilege and possessing intellectual potential, Esther still feels that she will be expected to give up her goals in favor of traditional femininity. Her inner thoughts are crowded by this conflict between her desires and what society expects of her. This embodies the larger argument of second-wave feminists: women's full potential is stifled by patriarchal cultural boundaries. As Fine (2009) says, "Esther's disillusionment and eventual mental collapse are symptomatic of a culture that denies women the space to pursue their aspirations" (p. 75). Her struggle, flecked with moments of both fierce independence and doubt, speaks to the very core of second-wave feminist thought. The novel presages those feminist debates that exploded into the public domain, most of which revolved around mental health and the right to self-definition. In doing so, *The Bell Jar* turns into a narrative that documents a woman's descent into despair and critiques the social structures that make this kind of decline unavoidable.

Understanding *The Bell Jar* requires an understanding of the connections between Esther Greenwood's experiences and Sylvia Plath's struggles. Esther's struggles resemble the ones Plath went through herself: depression, difficult decisions about fulfilling the career of a literary woman, meeting societal expectations, and strained relations with men. For instance, Plath sought validation within the male-dominant literary world, an intuition that Esther experiences through her persistent alienation in the glamorous but superficial circles of New York professional life. As Kroll (1976) notes in *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, Plath's internal conflicts "mirror the very essence of Esther's discontent, as both the author and her protagonist grapple with the weight of expectations that leave little room for genuine self-expression" (p. 145).

CHAPTER 2: SULA AND INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM: RACE, GENDER, AND RESISTANCE

Toni Morrison (1931–2019) redefined literature as an African American writer, scholar, and editor. Her upbringing in the middle-class Black community of Lorain, Ohio, significantly influenced her writings. After finishing her studies at Howard and Cornell, she elevated Black voices in publishing as a senior editor at Random House. With lyrical prose and daring critiques of race, gender, and history, her novels, such as *Sula, Beloved,* and *The Bluest Eye,* center around the lives of Black women. In 1993, she was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (Peach, 1995).

2.1. Toni Morrison, Black Feminist Thought, and the Historical Context of *Sula*

Morrison's dramatic rise to the literary forefront occurred during a pivotal time in the United States, when the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s reshaped the cultural landscape. It was also a time when second-wave feminism emerged, which, in fighting for women's rights, overlooked the intersectional issues facing Black women. In response to this, Morrison's writing presents a compelling counter-narrative that challenges the racism in white feminist movements as well as the Black patriarchal systems in her society.

In her own words, Morrison once described writing as an act of "rescue" on behalf of Black women's voices from the forces of erasure and silencing (Morrison, 1993). Her literary career was shaped by this vision of offering rich, multidimensional presentations of Black women's lives that are free from the reductionist and stereotypical portrayals which was the norm in much of American literature. Morrison's work is to fight the stereotypical character of a Black woman, replacing her with a character that delves into women's complexities and achievements.

Morrison's contribution to the literary movement, in the context of Black feminism, can be seen in her influential novels such as *Beloved* (1987), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and, of course, *Sula* (1973). As she explored Black identity, Morrison created a vision of feminist debate that was firmly based on Black cultural

identity and ruthlessly critical of the gendered oppression faced by Black women in the U.S. These books, and especially *Sula*, force readers to confront the social and cultural structures that limit women's freedom, especially women of color yet also show us the resilience and strength born of their struggles.

Sula (1973) centers around the friendship between two Black women, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, from a place called Bottom, a predominantly Black community in Medallion, Ohio. The bond between them is intense and intimate, as children, formed through a shared perception of the world and a need for connection. Despite their closeness, the girls are shaped by fundamentally disparate home environments. Nel is raised in a traditional home with her mother, Helene, who reveres propriety and obedience. “The girl became obedient and polite… until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (Morrison, 1973, p. 18). Sula, in contrast, is raised in a chaotic, communal home with no respect for social conventions. “A pot of something was always cooking on the stove… newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left out for hours” (Morrison, 1973, p. 29). These contrasting upbringings will pave the life trajectories each of these women will ultimately take.

As adults, Nel and Sula part ways. Nel conforms to societal expectations, marries, has kids, and settles into the life of a respected woman in her community. Sula rejects such expectations, moves away to pursue education and seek independence, and later returns as a woman of scandal and insurrection. Her refusal to apologize for her sexual freedom, especially her decision to sleep with Nel's husband, marks the point when their friendship turns, and she becomes a symbol of the varying values between them.

Morrison’s writing never allows its readers to be comfortable in a division of right and wrong. For example, Nel questions her choices, finding the emptiness in her conformity, reflecting on the childhood loss of Chicken Little, she realizes that "what she had thought was maturity, serenity, and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation" (Morrison, 1973, p. 170). Even Sula, who seems to embody freedom and independence, longs for the "common" pleasures of love and security. These internal contradictions expose the fault in binary thinking, where virtue

is attributed to Nel and vice to Sula, or where one way of life is assumed to be better than another.

This theme is deepened by Morrison's use of place and metaphor. The novel opens with the destruction of Bottom, a Black neighborhood demolished to make way for a golf course, a space once full of "nightshade and blackberry patches," which is both nourishing and poisonous, representing rootedness and displacement. Morrison (1989) says that "nightshade is an unusual plant… toxic," while blackberry is "common" and "nourishing," showing how these symbolic motifs coexist in a complex world. By associating Sula with nightshade and Nel with blackberry, Morrison initially seems to confirm their opposition, only for the narrative to subvert these affiliations. Each woman has inner contradictions: Nel is drawn to darkness and ambiguity, while Sula craves stability and intimacy.

In 2002, Morrison reflected upon the questions that drove her writing: "What is friendship between women when unmediated by men? What are the alternatives for Black women beyond the validation of their society? What are the risks of individualism in a racially homogeneous and socially static community?" To answer these questions, Morrison creates a narrative where loss and love, betrayal and growth intersect.

Toni Morrison's novel was published during an era of change in American history, driven by the force of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of the second-wave feminist movement. The fight for racial justice and gender equality marked the 1960s and 1970s; however, one of the problems with these movements was the absence of the voices of Black women who struggled. Although the Civil Rights Movement was primarily centered on racial justice for Black men, while mainstream feminism focused on the needs of middle-class white women, Black feminists began to fight for universal equality that addresses the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class (Collins, 2000).

Sula, released in 1973, did not fit white feminism's standards but challenged wider problems. It explores the lives of Black women who are subjected to both racism and the expectations of their community for femininity in depth. Sula's moral ambiguity and rejection of motherhood and marriage reveal a great deal about how

Black women throughout history have been pressured to uphold family and social values, often without regard for their freedom (hooks, 1981). Nel's path illustrates how conformity was the most commonly available route to survival and respectability.

Morrison does not give us easy answers; instead, she presents us with complex women whose lives challenge readers to consider the cost of resistance and conformity. Just as Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized in later years, her notion of intersectionality suggests that Black women's identities and oppressions are never singular (Crenshaw, 1989).

2.2. Feminist Themes in *Sula*: Autonomy, Female Friendship, and Defiance of Social Norms

In *Sula,* Morrison critiques the roles of Black women within both the white patriarchal hierarchy and internalized community expectations. Sula Peace challenges the traditional feminine roles of a wife, mother, and caregiver, seeking to break free from the mold. Whereas women in the community are supposed to lead lives that serve others, Sula chooses selfhood, her path, a symbol of radical female independence.

From the beginning, Morrison distinguishes Sula from the other women in her life. She breaks away from the limits of femininity within her society, “She had no center, no speck around which to grow. Not even an imaginary one. She was a loose string of a woman… She was, in fact, as eager for death as she was for life.” (Morrison, 1973, p. 118). This shows her need for self-creation, a feminist stance that defies the cultural presumption that women exist for men or children. As literary critic Deborah E. McDowell describes, Morrison builds Sula as a "disruptive female presence," a woman who refuses to be contained by both patriarchal and community expectations (McDowell, 1989, p. 57).

Sula's resisting marriage is her idea of fighting against a society where women’s values are judged by their domesticity. The town views Sula as a threat, not because she causes harm, but because she refuses to follow rules. "You cannot be walking around all independent-like and not expect the world to slap you down," complains one of Sula's neighbors (p. 122). Morrison uses this line to describe how freedom for Black women, as well as women in general, is condemned instead of

celebrated. As literary critic Trudier Harris states, "Sula's self-centeredness is her freedom, and her freedom is what threatens those around her" (Harris, 1991, p. 69). In contrast, Nel Wright conforms to the traditions of her community by getting married early and starting a family. She is praised as "good," yet as time passes, we can see that Nel's conformity has left her emotionally exhausted. She eventually realized, "All that time, I thought I was missing Jude… but it was Sula" (p. 174), suggesting that the life she was conditioned to desire has failed to fulfill her. Morrison indicates here how "acceptable" positions can also be forms of silent erasure.

In *Sula*'s revolutionary self-definition, Morrison breaks down the walls that have been placed around Black women's lives. She does not present Sula as an alternative utopia, but as a needed disruption, with every pore of her existence she questions: what would it be to have a Black woman live for herself?

At the heart of *Sula* lies the raw and complex friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two women whose friendship transcends childhood but ultimately falls apart due to social pressure and personal choices. Their friendship is a rich and powerful exploration of Black female identity, created by the opposing forces of freedom and conformity, identity and tradition. Growing up, Sula and Nel form a deep bond, connected by their need to escape the emotionally draining homes they inhabit. “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph were forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (Morrison, 1973, p. 52).

As they mature, they part ways. Nel follows the path of conformity, marriage, motherhood, and respectability, while Sula rejects the roles laid out for her; her community shuns her for her refusal to play the same role. When she sleeps with Nel's husband, Jude, it is an act of ultimate betrayal, not simply of friendship, but of the fragility between rebellion and order. “You had Jude,” Sula tells Nel, “and the others. I had myself” (p. 144). Here, Morrison suggests that Sula's fidelity has always lain with her autonomy, even if it means sacrificing human connection.

This rupture in their friendship is a sign of a deeper conflict between two visions of Black womanhood: the self-sacrificing woman who preserves tradition and the self-defining woman who resists it. Literary critic Barbara Christian says, "The

breakup of their friendship shows how difficult it is for Black women to forge lasting bonds in a society that pits them against each other through prescribed roles" (Christian, 1985, p. 220). Nel's anguish at the end is her realizing, "It was Sula all along" (p. 174), is not just mourning the loss of a friend, but of the unchosen life. It is the anguish of recognizing the strength of Sula's freedom, even when she resents it. Morrison shows us how women's friendship can be both freeing and brittle, especially under the suffocating weights of gendered and racial expectations.

In *Sula*, Morrison creates a figure who refuses to conform to the social and moral principles traditionally imposed on women, particularly Black women in her culture. Her resistance is internal, quiet, and personal: she rejects matrimony, resists the idea of motherhood, and refuses to be the moral guardian of the community. For this, she is seen as dangerous, not for what she will do but for what she will not be.

Sula's choices render her "evil" to Medallion, but Morrison sees this situation as complicated. Her autonomy upsets the town because she refuses to be tied down to a man, a house, or a child. "She was not a witch, but she was different," Morrison writes. "She had no passion for order and no patience with restraint" (Morrison, 1973, p. 118). Her defiance is not one of violence or protest, but of the extreme act of nonconformity; she simply chose to be different.

“Had she not been touched, truly touched and given a glimpse of what life could be? Had she not lived for that moment, for that unencumbered presence in the world?” (Morrison, 1973, p. 137). Her rebellion extends to sexual freedom, which leaves her to be threatening in a society that follows strict norms of femininity. Sula's relationships are noncommittal and shallow; her independence is immoral to her community, but Morrison invites the reader to view it as liberty, a woman making choices regarding her own body, community, and desires.

Even in death, Sula is merciless. She looks at Nel and says, "How do you know? About who was good? How do you know it was you?" (p. 146). In this query, the entire moral structure of the novel is rewritten and reframed, questioning whether living to obey society's mandates is inherently right. As literary critic Deborah McDowell phrases it, "Sula does not submit to any definition of womanhood but insists on her meaning, at great personal cost" (McDowell, 1989, p. 60).

Sula's refusal to comply with traditional expectations speaks to what bell hooks calls a "feminist refusal," the refusal to live one's life as designed by others, particularly in a world that only sees Black women as servants or sacrifices. She forces the town to project their repressed desires, frustrations, and fears upon her. Morrison writes, “Their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their misfortunes was identified, they had leave to protect themselves” (p. 117). By refusing to be a wife, mother, or servant, Sula is a force of resistance, not perfect, but powerful. Morrison does not suggest that Sula's existence is painless, but she gives her something rare: agency. In doing so, she prompts readers to consider the cost of conformity and whether a woman's worth should be determined by how she fits into traditional roles.

Sula is filled with passages that reflect its feminist foundations. Through language and symbolism, Morrison creates a language where Sula Peace is a model of female self-definition. One of the most potent statements of Sula's philosophy is when she tells Nel, "I do not want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison, 1973, p. 92). This is a direct refusal of the patriarchal definition of women to others as wives, mothers, and caregivers. Feminist academics like bell hooks (1981) illustrate how these kinds of roles constrain Black women, who are expected to serve others' needs over their own. Here, Morrison's writing adheres to Simone de Beauvoir's original thesis in The Second Sex, that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 283). Like de Beauvoir's model of selfhood beyond socially constructed femininity, Sula seeks to be self-defining, even at the cost of love, acceptance, and belonging.

When Sula returns, the town perceives her as a moral disturbance, blaming her even for the harsh weather. "The wind was sucking the ground and clouds from the sky and had the sound of a big animal in pain… The very weather seemed to turn against them," (p. 105). This description resonates with Hélène Cixous's concept of the "monstrous feminine," the woman who refuses inscription into patriarchal discourse and becomes something awful and unfamiliar (Cixous, 1976). Sula cannot be categorized easily. She talks and acts on her own terms, not as a representative of others.

The killing of Chicken Little, for example, at the start of the novel, possesses feminist symbolism. After Sula let go of his hands and he drowned, she and Nel retreated into silence. "Their eyes met and held. Then Nel said, 'Come on.' And they walked away from the water, the thing to do with their hands was to hold them still… And it was Nel who said, 'I saw it first,' and Sula who said, 'It is all right now'" (p. 61). Their innocence is broken, and they begin to bargain with guilt and secrecy. It suggests a coming-of-age womanhood that resides not just in biology or domesticity but in moral contradictions and complexity.

Most notable is Sula's confrontation with Eva, who calls her selfish and rootless. Sula, unfazed, retorts, “You think I don’t know what you’re doing, old woman, sitting there with your gray tongue flicking out trying to make me feel ashamed. You can’t do it. I don’t live by what you live by. I ain’t you, and I ain’t her” (p. 92). At this moment, Sula claims her identity outside of generational conditioning, rejecting the sacrificial role that defined Eva's mothering. It is what Cixous would describe as a refusal to "speak in the language of men," or to live by inherited scripts.

Morrison's use of literary language alone is an act of feminist expression. The novel begins with the destruction of the Bottom, a symbolic removal of Black communal memory, "where the hills were the color of eggplant and no more sweet bay bushes grew" (p. 3). Losing their Land, as the loss of women's voices in history, positions the novel as a reclamation. In the novel, Morrison writes a Black feminist narrative that undermines good/evil, wife/whore, nurturer/destructor dichotomies. In her final chapter, Sula says, "I sure did live in this world" (p. 174), a final assertion that living openly, even in rebellion, is itself an act of meaning and resistance.

Sula resonates strongly with Black feminist theory, particularly the work of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, which explains how race, gender, and class intersect in the experiences of Black women. Morrison critiques patriarchy as well as the internalized structures within Black communities through Sula's independence and the community's reaction to it.

bell hooks insists that Black feminism must challenge why Black women are singled out within power systems. In *Ain't I a Woman?* she states, "The black woman's presence in the feminist movement is a sign of hope. It is a sign that the movement can

grow beyond racism, beyond class elitism, beyond anti-male sentiment" (hooks, 1981, p. 16). Morrison embodies this hope through a character like Sula, outside the dominance of white feminist and patriarchal structures. Sula's rejection of traditions is not born of feminist theory but out of the desire to live freely. In doing so, Morrison brings hooks's vision of feminism alive based on a Black woman's experience and not abstract theory.

hooks condemns the idealization of self-sacrifice that defines Black women, saying, "Black women have been socialized to be caregivers, to define their identity in terms of service to others. To be loving, to be supportive, to nurture, and to give, these were the only definitions of womanhood they were offered" (p. 84). In *Sula*, this idea is embodied in the contrast between Sula and Nel. Nel follows the path of self-sacrifice, marrying, having children, and doing what she is expected to do. Sula, however, refuses to define herself through others.

Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, broadens this critique by detailing how Black women construct knowledge based on their marginality. She argues, "Black women's ideas have long been suppressed, but they constitute a rich site of knowledge that resists both racial and gender hierarchies" (Collins, 2000, p. 252). Sula's voice, while ostracized by her neighbors, serves as a counter to what Collins calls the "matrix of domination," an interconnected system of race, gender, and class oppression. Sula does not battle against these forces head-on; instead, she remains outside of them, refuses to participate in the social rituals that justify them.

Collins also emphasizes the power of self-definition: "Controlling images are central to the maintenance of white supremacy. Challenging these images is essential to Black women's liberation" (p. 69). Sula fights the image of the obedient, caring, nurturing Black woman simply by existing. She is sexual without shame, she is childless voluntarily, and she is rebellious even when facing death. “It’s terrible. I know it is. But it’s worse to watch somebody you love crumble before your eyes. I did not make myself. I didn’t want to be like my mother. I sure did live in this world.” (Morrison, 1973, p. 174) a defiant claim of self in a world bent on defeating her.

In *Sula*, Morrison recenters Black women’s voices from both mainstream feminism and Black nationalist discourse. She voices the women that hooks and

Collins identify: those who are neither saviors nor saints, but honest, raw, complicated, and autonomous women existing in a world that aggressively seeks to define them. Morrison doesn't just participate in Black feminist theory; she helps create it. “If there's a book that you want to read, but it has not been written yet, then you must write it” (Morrison, 1981, p. 19).

2.3. Intersectionality in *Sula*: Race, Gender, Identity, and Community Expectations

Sula deeply critiques second-wave feminism by illustrating how race intersects with gender, ultimately broadening feminist discussion. Second-wave feminism is defined by white women's quest for equality, focusing on central issues such as reproductive freedom and employment discrimination; however, *Sula* adds an essential element that had been missing: the experience of Black women living through both racial and gendered oppression. Morrison expands and evolves the white feminist ideologies by involving Black womanhood and confronting the racial complexity of feminist struggles.

In the novel, Sula’s refusal to conform to societal norms is a rejection of both the traditional roles of white and Black women, as well as the race and gender constraints imposed by her community. Sula, as a Black woman in Medallion, resists the roles assigned to her as a woman and as a Black woman, whose definition is not limited to those mediated through race or gender. As Sula declares:

I don’t want to be good. I want to be me. I am not a good girl. I don’t care about your ideas of good. I’m not asking for permission, and I am not apologizing. I want to live my life on my terms, and if you cannot deal with it, then that is your problem, not mine (Morrison, 1973, p. 93).

bell hooks' recognition of Black women's labor and the struggle to define oneself aligns with this idea. hooks writes, “The problem of identity for Black women is one of the most significant, because it involves not only how we are defined by others but also how we define ourselves” (hooks, 1981, p. 79). Sula's decision to forge her own narrative, separate from the traditional roles, is an assertion of Black

feminism; she does not follow white feminist values or the gender expectations in her community.

Patricia Hill Collins's writing also emphasizes the distinct experiences of Black women with race and gender, highlighting how they differ from those of white women. She argues, “Black women are placed in a subordinate position, but we have always found ways to resist, to define our own humanity” (Collins, 1990, p. 62). Sula's quest for self-definition is a manifestation of this resistance to racial and gendered subordination. By refusing to accept the roles imposed by the community, Sula reclaims her identity on her own terms, rejecting both the white feminist ideals that overlook race and the Black community's scripts for womanhood.

Morrison challenges second-wave feminism's fixation on a monolithic, often white, feminist experience by portraying a character like Sula. She skillfully combines race and gender to highlight how Black women experience intersectional oppression in a patriarchal, racially segregated society. Sula's experience clarifies how gender and race blend to produce a character like Sula. As a woman who does not conform to the norms, her journey highlights the intersectional oppression in the lives of marginalized women.

However, Sula's rejection of these roles leads to her alienation from her community; people in town view her disobedience as immoral. As one character reflects, “She was a woman who lived alone, and that was not the way a woman was supposed to live. Her life was scandalous, a violation of every idea the community had about womanhood” (Morrison, 1973, p. 111). Sula's nonconformity is a resistance against the intersectional systems that limit her to the nurturer and caregiver positions, positions rooted in histories of both slavery and post-slavery Black lives (Morrison, 1973, p. 118). Sula's existence disrupted the need for traditional femininity structures in both the Black community and the broader social context. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that Black women's resistance to such imposed roles is also seen as disruptive, illustrating how Black women's resistance to traditional gender rules leads to their marginalization.

In addition, Sula's sexual freedom is part of the reason she is shunned. When Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, the reaction of the community is swift and brutal, and

her act is not only a violation of friendship but also of gender and racial expectations. Sula's sexuality is a transgression of the moral standards of both the Black community and the white community at large, both of which seek to regulate women's bodies. As Sula's grandmother, Eva, explains, "You can't have no kind of relationship with them that don't involve some of their nasty shit. You can't, because they're white folks and they're not going to let you" (Morrison, 1973, p. 118). This shows how Sula's sexuality, when practiced outside the boundaries of acceptable gender roles, is punished. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) explains, this is an example of how race and gender converge to create a particular kind of discrimination that is unique to Black women.

Through *Sula*, Morrison reveals the complex lives of Black women, illustrating how race and gender intersect to form an identity. By doing so, Morrison defies the intersectional forces meant to keep Black women oppressed, narrating a story of resistance and self-definition in a world that demands conformity.

From a young age, it is clear that Sula will not conform to the expectations of her community. Morrison writes, "Sula was not a girl to be cajoled into obedience… It was not in her nature to submit to the requirements of the community, and she never saw the necessity of it" (Morrison, 1973, p. 115). This highlights Sula's rejection of the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman, particularly the expectation that Black women should exhibit maternal virtues. Unlike Nel, who embraces motherhood and the traditional lifestyle, Sula does not want this life; instead, she wishes to forge an independent one.

Sula's choice not to be a mother is a gesture of strength and self-determination that was named rebellious and selfish by society. "The men looked at her and wondered what she had done to make them look at her like that. The women knew. They knew because they had done it too: had lain with men, had the children to prove it, and then lost them or had them taken away. However, she had no children" (Morrison, 1973, p. 113). This quote reflects how the community sees her; a woman without children seems unnatural or threatening. What makes Sula the "other" is her lack of maternal ties, and it is a choice. Her pursuit of individual freedom and autonomy defies the very essence of the community's definition of womanhood.

Morrison contrasts Sula's disobedience with her mother, Eva, the selfless Black mother figure. Eva, unlike Sula, is the ideal example of maternal selflessness. In a scene, Morrison writes, “Eva had given up her leg for her children… She was the one who carried the responsibility for the family, and no one questioned her decision” (Morrison, 1973, p. 112). Eva's sacrifices, although understandable, highlight the social obligation imposed on Black women to be caretakers, even at the cost of losing themselves. This difference between them is representative of the novel's critique of the limited roles for Black women. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes, the ideal of motherhood is often imposed upon Black women, denying them their agency and individuality, and reducing them to mere mothers.

Throughout the novel, Morrison explores the connections between race, gender, and power, using Sula's life to combat systemic injustice. Sula and Nel reflect on the different lives they lead, particularly in their relationships with men, and they realize how Sula's rejection of the conventional roles is evident in her relationship with men, particularly in her attitude toward love and loyalty. In a conversation between the two women, Morrison writes, “You don’t know what’s going to happen. But you do know it is going to hurt. You know, Nel, you know, because there ain’t no place to run. There is only one way to be free” (Morrison, 1973, p. 92). Sula is aware of the inevitable pain of existing in a world not designed for her freedom, a world where the weight of racial and gender expectations rests on the shoulders of Black women.

The novel also shows how Black women are torn between the violence of a racist world and the patriarchal rule in their community. Sula's very existence resists these two-fold oppressions. Describing her return to Medallion after years, Morrison writes, “There were no men in Sula’s life, and so no reason for anyone to care about her” (Morrison, 1973, p. 140). Morrison critiques the notion that a woman’s worth is tied to a man. In Sula's case, she is devalued because she is not defined by having a man, reflecting the deep-seated patriarchal belief that women, especially Black women, are incomplete without the validation or support of a man. Morrison uses Sula's independence as a radical rejection of these norms, and she becomes an outsider who will not submit to these ideals of femininity.

Morrison continues to criticize the dehumanization of racial oppression that occupies the lives of Black women an example of this is when Sula is reflecting on the existence of the town's Black residents: “They were so caught up in the illusion of things that they were willing to pay for them with their souls” (Morrison, 1973, p. 105). This passage underscores how racial oppression, poverty, and disenfranchisement end in self-deception and complicity in structuring a violent system. She also criticizes how the intersection of gender and race limits the agency of Black women when she describes Eva's sacrifice for her children: “She was a woman who made all the decisions for her family. But she had given up her leg for them. And the price was the price of her whole life, that is what it cost” (Morrison, 1973, p. 112). Eva's sacrifice represents the tremendous toll of patriarchal expectations on Black women who are positioned to be nurturing and caring.

Morrison's critique of racism and patriarchy is shown in the way that Sula is treated by her community as a stigma for practicing her freedom. Morrison writes, “They were all turned against Sula because she would not be the kind of woman they wanted her to be, the one they thought she should be. Sula’s refusal to comply with these expectations was seen as a moral failing, as if her independence was a crime” (Morrison, 1973, p. 118). This quote explains how Black women are punished for defying conventional gender norms, and how gender and race intersect to define the boundaries of acceptable behavior within both the wider society and the Black community.

2.4. Morrison’s Feminist Legacy: Expanding the Boundaries of Feminist Criticism through *Sula*

Sula is a groundbreaking intervention in feminist literary criticism that decenters Eurocentric models and presents Black womanhood as raw, rebellious, and complex. Contrary to mainstream second-wave feminism, which reflected the interests of white, middle-class women, Morrison challenges these narratives that excluded them. Through Sula Peace, Morrison creates a character who resisted traditional models of femininity, such as marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, issues often dismantled by white feminists. Morrison writes, “Because each had discovered years

before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph were forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (Morrison, 1973, p. 52). This quote shows how Black women have been excluded from mainstream narratives of freedom and success, thereby necessitating alternative notions of selfhood and identity.

bell hooks (1984) observed that early feminist thought often overlooked matters of race and class, effectively silencing the voices of Black women. Morrison's work is a literary corrective to this exclusion. By placing the daily lives of Black women in the Bottom, Morrison provides a vibrant image of how racism and sexism intersect in daily life. Sula's refusal to conform becomes an act of radical feminism, empowering autonomy over conformity and identity over expectation.

While Morrison significantly broadened the feminist discussion, her approach is distinct from that of mainstream second-wave feminism in several important respects. The feminism of *Sula* is not driven by group action or legislative reform but by personal resistance and moral complexity. Sula's defiance is highly individualistic. This personal freedom came at the cost of solitude and alienation, which led to questioning the limits of independence without a community.

Scholars such as Deborah E. McDowell (1987) argue that Morrison's writing complicates feminist ideals by avoiding binary oppositions, such as good and evil, conformist and rebel, and mother and non-mother. Morrison provides narratives that compel readers to grapple with moral and social ambiguity and does not offer prescriptive models of liberation. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) continues this line of thought, stating that Black feminist thought can be defined both as an intellectual tradition and as lived experience, which Morrison adeptly enacts through her characters' lives.

It is also true that Morrison's feminism is latent rather than manifest. Her characters rarely use the language of feminist theory, yet their lives stage its defining concerns. This has the disadvantage of diminishing overt political mobilization but enriches the philosophical richness of feminist theory. Thus, Morrison's work is to be considered as both literary and political, as well as poetic and theoretical.

Sula's legacy continues to influence current feminist discourse, particularly in intersectional discussions. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory acknowledges how race, gender, and class interact to produce and influence women's experiences. By introducing a character whose issues are entwined and cannot be divided into distinct categories of race or gender, Sula foreshadows this approach.

Morrison's influence remains relevant and essential in contemporary social justice activism, such as #SayHerName and reproductive justice organizing. These movements are an extension of Morrison's work for Black women's voices to be heard. Authors like Morrison have a direct influence on organizations like the Black Feminist Future, which promote intersectional, community-led activism.

Sula also inspires conversations in academia and literature. Black feminist and postcolonial courses often include Morrison's work to explore how narratives of resistance and complexity enrich a broadened concept of womanhood. As Audre Lorde (1984) asserted, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (p. 138). Morrison's *Sula* embodies this truth, reminding us that feminist freedom must be constructed for the complexity of women's lives.

In her work, Morrison transformed feminist criticism to be more expansive, inclusive, and intellectually rich. Her writing compels readers and critics to examine how power, identity, and resistance operate within and against the boundaries of race, gender, and community.

CHAPTER 3: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *THE BELL JAR* AND *SULA*

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison's *Sula* address feminist concerns directly, although they differ in cultural and historical contexts. *The Bell Jar* addresses the repression inflicted on young women in America in the mid-20th century and the choking ideals of domesticity and conventional femininity that then dominated. Esther Greenwood's experiences illustrate the conflict between women's personal aspirations and social roles, a central theme of second-wave feminism, in keeping with Betty Friedan's criticism of household ideals (Friedan, 1963). Esther's eventual collapse is a reaction against the constraints of social demand for women to choose between personal success and domestic contentment.

3.1. Shared Feminist Foundations in *The Bell Jar* and *Sula*: Identity, Autonomy, and Acts of Defiance

Sula discussed the same feminist issues while broadening the discussion to involve race and class, specifically the lives of Black women in America during the early 20th century. Morrison's writing illustrates how Black women navigate societal expectations, particularly within a restrictive society where gender expectations are as rigid as they are in *The Bell Jar*. Sula's resistance to gendered roles, her rejection of marriage, motherhood, and deference to social conformity, however, is more than cultural resistance, and she becomes an icon of feminism. As hooks (1981) says, resistance to patriarchal norms is likely to take different forms in different cultures, and Sula's resistance also offers a critique of gendered norms as well as the racially inflected limitations of women's agency.

Both novels, differing in terms of environment and characters, share a common concern with feminine identity, liberty, and defying imposed strictures. Together, they form a necessary component of the feminist literary canon, each author presenting a unique lens through which to view the struggles and successes of women as they navigate their own cultures. Both novels broaden feminist discussions, critiquing any structure established to restrict women's lives.

The quest for identity in *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* is a struggle against cultural and social forces; nevertheless, how Esther and Sula embark on this process testifies to the

contrasts in feminist negotiation of identity. Whereas both women seek independence, the paths they take speak to their different experiences as women within two very different societal frameworks. Esther's fragmented identity reflects the constraints placed upon her as a young woman in 1950s America. At the same time, Sula's defiance of social expectations indicates an even more extreme assertion of autonomy in response to institutionalized racist and gendered oppression.

In the case of Esther Greenwood, the process towards identity is fragmented. Her conflict is internal, her ambitions and desires conflicting with the limiting roles that society expects of women. Her intellectual need for fulfillment clashes with the necessity of being an ideal mother and domesticity. However, it is not that these roles are inherently in conflict; instead, Esther views them as constricting by nature, as they form a "bell jar" that encloses her. Her fractured self is the result of the conflict between her desires and the roles society prescribes, leading her to question herself and her identity. While she does struggle against these roles, it is a passive struggle filled with inner conflict.

On the other hand, Sula's search for identity is marked by her rejection of conformity. Unlike Esther, Sula does not suffer fragmentation because she rejects reconciliation altogether. While Esther internalizes the conflict between self and society, Sula externalizes it, unapologetically rejecting the roles and values her community, and by extension, society, assigns to her. Sula's road to self-definition is not about compromising between individual will and social role, but rather about eliminating social roles. Her resistance to being defined by marriage, maternity, or conventional morality is based not on inner turmoil but on an aware, intentional choice to form herself in terms of herself alone.

Sula's rejection is not a rejection of the roles women play but a rejection of such roles. In Medallion, the Black world that is isolated and walled off from the rest of society, where Sula lives, women are often defined in terms of their relations with men, marriage, and motherhood. Sula negates this construction, refusing to buy into the values that would limit her freedom. Her refusal to fit, while deviant according to others, is a feminist refusal to be defined by the world outside herself. This radical act

of self-definition, while confining, allows Sula to define herself as a self-made woman, not governed by the expectations of the world.

However, while Esther is imprisoned by the bell jar of the world's expectations, Sula's act of self-definition leads to her exclusion. This is a paradox: Sula's choice of independence comes at the cost of community and connection, as her rejection of traditional roles also distances her from the people she wants to rebel against. In contrast to Esther's internal fragmentation, Sula's external rejection of conformity forces her to be alone, but not one of uncertainty or self-doubt. Instead, it is a result of a deliberate choice to forge an existence beyond the limited roles that her culture would assign her. Through this juxtaposition, the novels reveal the feminist idea that identity cannot be unambiguously categorized within traditional gender roles, and that the search for a self-true to one's inner desires can either lead to personal disintegration or defiant autonomy, depending upon the social environment.

The two books illustrate how the search for identity is shaped by cultural constructs that constrain women in narrow terms. As Esther's fragmented identity captures the psychological cost of trying to fit oneself into societal expectations, Sula's resistance illustrates the strength of resisting oneself amid social exclusion. These two narratives respond to the broader feminist concern of autonomy and tension between personal desires and societal roles. In the context of second-wave feminism, such works react to the movement's challenge of the limiting of women's identities and call for women to assert agency over their own lives (Crenshaw, 1991).

Autonomy is a primary feminist theme in both *The Bell Jar* and *Sula*, as each of the protagonists struggles to define social structures that shape her identity. The question of self-definition, who determines a woman's role, purpose, and worth, stands at the heart of both novels, though their protagonists address this question in very different ways. Within the framework of second-wave feminism, which claimed for women the right to define themselves beyond the terms of domesticity and male approval (Friedan, 1963), both Esther and Sula illustrate the ambivalences and costs of striving for autonomy.

Esther Greenwood's mental illness complicated her quest for autonomy, which consistently blurs the line between breakdown and rebellion. She rebels against the

roles assigned to her: wife, mother, secretary, not out of rebellion, but out of a profound psychological disturbance. Her refusal to marry Buddy Willard or pursue the traditional domestic existence is her first significant act of self-definition. Esther cannot imagine being married without feeling "as if [her] head were in a sack" (Plath, 1963, p. 83), which shows her rejection of traditional roles. However, her autonomy is restricted, society pathologizes her resistance, institutionalizes her revolt, and attempts to rehabilitate her through psychiatric treatment. This parallels what feminist scholars such as Chesler (1972) have described as the medicalization of female dissent, the practice of diagnosing women who resist patriarchal norms as unstable or crazy.

Sula Peace, on the other hand, fights for a radical form of autonomy. Unlike Esther, whose resistance is an internal struggle, Sula's resistance is external and unapologetic. She makes conscious decisions to live alone, to be non-monogamous, and to reject the maternal and labor that define womanhood in her community. In doing this, Sula takes on what bell hooks (1981) says is Black women's right to create their lives and desires beyond the agenda of white and Black patriarchal societies. Her insistence that "I don't want to make somebody else.". I have to make myself" (Morrison, 1973, p. 92) shows her aim to build herself by herself.

Where Esther's autonomy is fragile and consistently challenged by institutional authority, Sula's is constant and militant, even at the cost of isolation. Both, however, challenge the assumption that a woman's value lies in her conformity to established roles. Both novels condemn the limitations placed on female autonomy and reveal how asserting self-definition can be a successful feminist act, even when such autonomy is punished or misconstrued by society.

Hand in hand with autonomy goes the theme of resistance; each character's resistance to patriarchal conventions is a site of feminist struggle. Second-wave feminism highlighted not just the personal as political but also the power of resistance to structures that delegitimate female experience and agency (De Beauvoir, 1949/2010). In this regard, both Esther and Sula can be read as feminist rebels, though the tone, degree, and implication of their resistance vary.

Esther Greenwood revolts against the social scripts for women in subtle acts of resistance that are widely interpreted as symptomatic of madness. She views marriage

as a trap and actively resists the idea that women must be fulfilled by domesticity. Her revolt is possibly most evident in her rejection of psychiatric hospitals that try to "cure" her by reshaping her into a compliant, marriageable woman. Her rejection of psychiatry is not only personal but political; it is a critique of the way mental health institutions have historically been employed to enforce female obedience (Chesler, 1972). Esther's hospitalization and electroshock therapy are symbolic of what society will do to suppress nonconformity. Her final moment of autonomy, as she is walking toward the psychiatrist's office to determine her release, suggests a fragile but significant reassertion of identity.

Sula's rebelliousness is based on her rejection of communal expectations, and more specifically, those of Black womanhood. She transgresses moral, sexual, and familial norms, not from a site of confusion but from an active rejection of playing by the rules that curtail her freedom. In a community where respectability is regulated through gendered norms, Sula is a character who embodies everything women are not supposed to be. Her uprising is both personal and political; she revolts against not only male authority but also against gendered expectations ingrained within the Black community itself. Her cross-racial friendship with Nel, her rejection of marriage, and her defiant sexuality make her a threat to the patriarchal order, echoing Morrison's broader enterprise of derailing idealized conceptions of Black womanhood (Christian, 1985).

Resistance in the novels is not depicted as victorious or easy. Instead, it is costly: mental breakdown, social exclusion, and isolation. These characters represent the courage required to resist patriarchal norms; every act of rebellion substantiates the feminist ideal that women should be free to live their lives as they choose. They also serve to remind us of the deep-seated patriarchal institutions and how acts of individual rebellion can radiate outward into more generalized political critiques.

To fully comprehend how *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* express feminist concepts of identity and autonomy, one must refer to the language, imagery, and symbolism of each novel. Both novels are rich in personal rebellion and psychological tension, both in form and substance.

Sylvia Plath, in *The Bell Jar*, uses the image of the bell jar to represent Esther's psychological isolation and entrapment. The bell jar, as Esther describes it, is "a stifling glass dome" that seals her off from the world, distorting her perception and stifling her sense of self (Plath, 1963, p. 185). The way Esther experiences her depression, not only as internal suffering but as external constraint, is reflective of a broader feminist critique, the crushing societal expectations imposed upon women become psychological suffering. Her moments of understanding, such as her realizing that "I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest" (Plath, 1963, p. 77), illustrate the paralyzing feeling women experience when they are faced with the choice between oppositional identities. Plath here challenges the restrictive binary of the Madonna/whore complex and criticizes the narrow range of feminine identities.

In *Sula*, Morrison achieves another form of psychological and social tension. Possibly the most touching evidence of Sula's determination to be her own and not have society determine how she lives her life is when she is chastised by her grandmother, Eva, for never having children: "You ain't nothing but a thing. something I made up. You better had married that boy when you had the chance" (Morrison, 1973, p. 92). Sula's revolt in response, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself", sings a call to unifying feminist principle: the right of self-definition. Morrison's emphasis on dialogue, repetition, and fragmentation mirrors Sula's fractured yet defiant self. The moral absolutism invoked upon women generally, and especially Black women who exceed norms, is a tale device that exhumes the women's world, and Sula is its heroine. Moreover, Morrison uses multiple viewpoints and spiral narrative time highlights that identity is not fixed but instead always negotiated, a concept integral to feminist theory.

Both authors, through structural narrative and symbolic imagery, construct female characters whose identities are shaped by opposition. Neither book tells stories about women in conflict; both embody those conflicts within the very form of the writing itself, encouraging readers to grapple with the complexities of autonomy, social isolation, and feminist definition.

The feminist themes that bring *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* to life when read in light of key feminist theoretical constructions, namely those presented by Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, and others, become more apparent. These theories provide tools for reading the larger meanings of Esther's and Sula's decisions and of the social forces that limit them.

Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex*, that women become "the Other" in a patriarchal world, is deeply resonant with Esther Greenwood's experience. Esther's inner conflict is created by her inability to reconcile who she wants to be and what society determines. Her breakdown can be seen as a response to the realization that her self is not hers to create. Her resistance to these roles is an act of feminist resistance to the second-wave problem of imposed domesticity and the absence of self-authorship.

bell hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, critiques how white, middle-class feminism often overlooks the intersection of race and gender, particularly for Black women. Sula is a figure for hooks' vision of a feminism that is not constrained by white norms but is instead radical and self-defined. Sula's refusal to perform Black respectability, through her rejection of commitment to gendered community responsibilities, is consistent with hooks' argument that "oppression cannot be resisted if it is not named" (hooks, 1981, p. 15). Sula names and resists her oppression by refusing to conform, not quietly or apologetically, but through her unapologetic presence.

Feminist autonomy theory enhances this comparison. Marilyn Friedman (2003) emphasizes "relational autonomy," or the idea that autonomy is not isolated but is created within one's social and cultural context. While Esther's autonomy is undermined by internalizing societal expectations, Sula attempts to construct a self-determined life, even if that life is in tension with being a part of the community. In both cases, autonomy is not guaranteed; it is a continual negotiation, made more complicated by race, class, and mental health. The theories describe how each character illustrates the second-wave feminist emphasis on agency while showing the limitations of a feminism that does not account for intersectionality, a case that Morrison, especially, argues through narrative structure and character development.

Together, Beauvoir, hooks, and autonomy theorists enable us to cast Esther and Sula not only as literary characters but also as embodiments of feminist philosophical dilemmas. Their struggles are emblematic of greater questions about how social structures can enable or suppress the agency of self-definition. It is in these theoretical paradigms that we understand that resistance and autonomy are not abstract but lived, harrowing experiences for women within patriarchal societies.

3.2. Diverging Feminist Realities: Racial, Cultural, and Historical Contexts in *The Bell Jar* and *Sula*

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison's *Sula* are based on broadly different social and historical contexts, shaping the feminist discourse of both novels. *The Bell Jar* is set in the early 1950s, a post-World War II America in a time of economic optimism, Cold War anxiety, and strict gender conformity. White middle-class women were urged to perform domestic roles established as patriotic duties (May, 1988). Esther Greenwood's breakdown is a consequence of the smothering impact of what Betty Friedan (1963) called "the problem that has no name," exposing the cost of femininity in an ostensibly safe society. In contrast, *Sula* covers the years 1919 to 1965, following the lives of Black Americans in a segregated racial culture. The Bottom, the Black community, is an example of spatial and social marginality, an ironic name for land that was offered as desirable yet kept its people in material and symbolic isolation. Morrison depicts a world in which racial oppression is systemic and intergenerational, from limited access to jobs to racialized violence. As Madhu Dubey (1994) says, Morrison retrieves Black communal memory by lending a voice that was previously absent from national discourse. Where Esther's life affords superficial privilege, middle-class education, world travel, and therapy, Morrison's women have none of these supports. In *Sula*, trauma is met with silence, ritual, or community, but not institutions. Cheryl Wall (2005) argues that Morrison's historical imagination positions Black women "at the center of their own cultural and historical narratives," a radical departure from Plath's more autonomous representation of white womanhood.

This is not a contrast between segregation and repression of gender, but a description of two distinct feminist realities. Esther's collapse was a result of those

privileges that became suffocating, while Morrison's characters survive, still resisting in a world that affords them no room for mistakes. They influence how both novels project the possibilities and constraints of female autonomy.

The feminist awakenings of Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* and Sula Peace in *Sula* occur in utterly different racial realities, demonstrating how race not only shapes lived experience but also determines the lines and paths of resistance open to women. Esther's whiteness, even if unspoken in the novel, affords her some access in society and taken-for-granted individuality that Sula, a Black woman, is systematically refused.

When Esther navigates the emotional limits placed upon being female in 1950s America, her travails occur under a system that still locates her experience in a normative position, as Michele Wallace (1990) makes clear. Mid-century white feminisms too habitually ignored how whiteness itself acts as a privilege, even during those times when women were combating patriarchal constructions. Sula's self is forged at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Morrison never lets the reader forget that Sula is Black in a society built to exclude her. She is not merely supposed to conform to patriarchal definitions of gender but to uphold the moral code of a racially educated community shaped in the fire of survival. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explains, Black women have long had to navigate a "matrix of domination," where race, gender, and economic status intersect to limit autonomy. Sula's rebellion, therefore, is more than individual resistance; it is a disruption of a communal order built as much out of resilience as conformity.

Esther, in a way, wishes to escape. Her rebellion is inner, psychological, and very private. She does not consider race, nor is she forced to; her social identity provides her with the freedom to turn inward. Sula, however, is never invisible. Her body, choices, and visibility are always read and policed by her society. As Barbara Christian (1985) observes, Morrison will not separate gender from race, and demands that "Black women's lives cannot be understood apart from the communities they come from."

The cultural demands made Esther and Sula demonstrate how gender roles are connected to race and class. Esther, as a white middle-class woman in 1950s America,

is confronted with a model of femininity constructed around domesticity. As historian Stephanie Coontz (1992) notes, the 1950s nuclear family ideal was a political fiction, not a historical norm, one that bound women, such as Esther, into narrow roles, even as they had gained independence during the war years.

Sula, on the other hand, is confronted with an equally rigid but different set of expectations. As a Black woman in early-to-mid-20th-century America, she had to embody strength, dignity, and respectability on behalf of the Black community. The image of the sacrificing Black mother or the respectable churchgoer hangs large. According to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), in her theory of the "politics of respectability," Black women were often called upon to present themselves as virtuous and disciplined so they could dispel racist stereotypes and rescue their communities from further destruction.

Both are punished for putting themselves first over social duty, but the punishment differs. For Esther, punishment is internal: depression, isolation, and imprisonment. For Sula, it is social: demonization, exclusion, and moral condemnation. As Hortense Spillers (1987) argues, Black women in US literature often bear the burden of both racial and gender representation, and they must not only survive but symbolize survival itself.

These cultural norms highlight a distinction within feminist experience. White women, like Esther, are bound by idealization; Black women, like Sula, are bound by morality and judgment. Both are in opposition, but the discourse of opposition is framed by the roles to which they are bound, not as women but as racial subjects.

The styles of Plath and Morrison are indicative of the cultural and ideological underpinnings of each novel. Plath's *The Bell Jar* is marked by inner psychological realism that invites readers into the disrupted inner world of Esther Greenwood. Its language is clinical yet poetic, restrained yet emotionally exposed, capturing the claustrophobia of a young woman's descent into madness in a culture that lacks a vocabulary for her crisis. Critics such as Christina Britzolakis (1999) have noted how Plath uses language both to mirror and fight against the repressive forces of 1950s gender ideology, rendering the interior monologue a war zone for sanity and

authenticity. The story's emphasis is limited and disconnected from society, focusing on Esther and reaffirming a white, individualistic style of literature.

Morrison's *Sula* employs a rich and communal narrative derived from African American traditions. Her prose shifts in perspective, interspersing a multiplicity of voices and communal remembrance. Morrison's prose is heavy with biblical references, mythic form, and the rhythm of the spoken word, a form that, as Trudier Harris (1991) indicates, functions not just as narrative but as a means of cultural preservation. The Bottom, with its whispers, traditions, and rumors from the ancestors, is not a backdrop but a character itself. Morrison's narrative resists linear time and single vision in a way that resonates with what Barbara Christian (1987) calls a Black feminist aesthetic that is nonlinear, symbolic, and affectively resonant instead of empirically "objective."

These divergent styles align with the worlds that each writer strives to represent. Plath's psychological realism is a product of a literary tradition that privileges introspection and individual agency, but that tends to presume a universal subject that is middle-class and white by default. Morrison, writing in counter-tradition to this, creates a counter-narrative in which language reconstructs community memory and restores lost voices. Her appeal to folklore is not decorative; it is political. As Ashraf Rushdy (1993) argues, Morrison's style "revises historical silences," offering modes of address unavailable to traditional Western realism.

So, Plath and Morrison do more than tell different stories, and they establish different modes of knowing. Plath's writing immerses us in the chaos of a fragmented mind struggling to make sense. Morrison's writing is outward, insisting that identity is shaped in conversation with other individuals, living, dead, and imagined. These styles not only mirror the thematic concerns of the authors but also their place in literary history. Plath, as a writer working within the white modernist tradition of the postwar period, and Morrison, as a founder of Black feminist and postmodern literature, self-consciously changed the canon.

The feminist ideas of *Sula* and *The Bell Jar* are rooted in the broader concepts of womanhood, power, and resistance. Plath's feminism in *The Bell Jar* is individualistic; her rebellion is inward, psychological, and quite often isolating. She

does not seek solidarity outward, nor does the novel provide a path to freedom. As Lisa Appignanesi (2008) points out, Plath's feminism is part of a lineage of existential critique, where the alienation of the individual serves as the grounds for questioning the radical. Esther's refusal of conformity is a personal act of revolt. However, it occurs in a world where feminism is still in its nascent stages and relatively unaware of the complexities of race or class.

In contrast, Morrison's feminism in *Sula* is intersectional and communal. While Sula herself resists society's norms in ways that echo feminist rebelliousness, Morrison declines to remove her experience from the Black social fabric. The novel portrays womanhood as a web of relations between mothers and daughters, friends and neighbors, and the self and society. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes, this is a hallmark of Black feminist thought: “a collective wisdom shaped through dialogue, lived experience, and interdependence.”

Plath's feminism critiques domesticity and mental health within white patriarchal cultures, yet it does not address race or class. Morrison, on the other hand, begins from the premise that any questioning of gender must be sensitive to the racialized and classed conditions of Black women's lives. bell hooks (1984) argues that feminist theory, as it tends to universalize womanhood based on middle-class white experience, pushes aside women of color from the debate. Morrison's Sula acts as a corrective, bringing to the forefront voices long marginalized in feminist narratives and showing how freedom is different when one's body is already marked by centuries of exclusion.

This difference in feminist narratives reveals the limitedness of Plath's context and the expansiveness of Morrison's. Suppose *The Bell Jar* offers a faithful and scorching depiction of one woman's psychic entrapment. In that case, Sula offers a structural, historical, and communal vision of what it means to be a Black woman in America. By doing so, Morrison is pushing feminism toward what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) would later term "intersectionality," decades in advance of the term's naming. Plath maps the self; Morrison maps the system.

To fully understand the conflicting feminist thoughts in *The Bell Jar* and *Sula*, it is necessary to draw on theoretical frameworks that supplant the traditional, often

whitewashed, model of feminist criticism. Critics such as Patricia Hill Collins and Barbara Christian have offered the foundation for understanding how race and cultural specificity shape feminist theory. These theorists not only prove the significance of Morrison but also expose the limitations within white feminist narratives like Plath's.

Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) is foundational to learning to articulate how knowledge is constructed through the intersections of race, gender, and class. Collins says that Black women's experiences cannot be explained through wide-ranging feminist theories built on white, middle-class experience. This is illustrated in *Sula*, where Morrison firmly refuses to offer womanhood as a single thing or a determinable category. For example, Sula's resistance and Eva's control make empowerment and suffering more complicated, as their choices are not inherently feminist or unfeminist, but rather products of histories of enslavement, racist systems, and cultural survival. By doing this, Morrison follows what Collins has called an "outsider within" position: a position of knowledge that resists dominant discourses from the margins (Collins, 2000).

Barbara Christian, in *The Race for Theory* (1987), criticizes the way academic feminism has generally prized theoretical abstraction over lived reality, and more particularly the lived reality of Black women. She argues that novelists such as Morrison challenge literary as well as theoretical conventions by requiring narrative strategies that speak to her audience. Morrison's rejection of universalizing pain or reducing identity to gender categories only is a Christian call for criticism based on feeling and cultural reality. In contrast, *The Bell Jar* fits better within literary modernism, wherein the protagonist's crisis is worked through the individual psyche and the metaphor.

This opposition highlights a central critique within intersectional theory: that white feminism has consistently failed to factor in difference. bell hooks (1981) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) both highlight how early feminist theory universalizes womanhood without consideration for how race and class shape the experiences of oppression and liberty. *The Bell Jar*, despite being so potently effective in its depiction of mental illness and societal expectations, demonstrates this limitation; it speaks from one position but tends to be read as though speaking for all. *Sula* resists such

generalization, insisting that feminism will have to encompass multiplicity, contradiction, and cultural specificity.

By placing these novels in dialogue with Black feminist theory, we understand that literary feminism has to include all. Plath voices a white woman's pain in a culture that silences her desires. Morrison voices Black women living through not only patriarchy but institutional erasure. These novels, and the theories that encompass them, remind us all that feminism must be plural and historically attuned in order to be genuinely liberatory.

3.3. Intersectionality and the Limits of Second-Wave Feminism: A Comparative Lens on *Sula* and *The Bell Jar*

The theory of "intersectionality" in the past decades has been so important in feminist discussion, offering a model to examine how different types of oppression connect and shape lives. Emerging from the writing of scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality initially emerged as a reaction to her critique of anti-discrimination law and its failure to deal with the combined discrimination faced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw argued that isolating race or gender will not fully express the experience of individuals who were affected by them. This theory, based on the lives of women of color, transformed feminist theory by challenging the assumption that all women are uniformly oppressed. Rather than identity being approached as universal, intersectionality understands it as complex, circumscribed by race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states that the "matrix of domination" is not additive but interdependent; the systems of oppression function together, and not in parallel. Intersectionality thus becomes not just a theoretical idea but a moral imperative: to tell a more complete, truthful account of inequality.

Morrison accomplishes precisely this in *Sula*. Her narrative occurs at the intersection of historical, racial, and gendered forces, but never reduces her characters to these categories alone. Instead, Morrison shows us the intersections between race, class, and gender in Black women's lives and refuses to dominate one over the other. The environment, the Bottom, a Black community in Ohio during the early 20th

century, is itself the result of racial injustice, created by a fraudulent land swap that says much about African American marginalization and displacement (Morrison, 1973, p. 5). Sula Peace, as a character and symbol, moves through this world not as a static figure of resistance, but as one whose self is shaped at the crossroads of systemic inequality and individual desire. Her refusal to mother or marry, her sexual agency, and emotional detachment from communal expectations are not easy assertions of personal freedom; they are acts indistinguishable from the restrictions of her race and class. Morrison reports, for instance, that "Sula was distinctly different. Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own, made her completely free and alone" (p. 118). Her isolation is not only emotional; it is the price of Black female autonomy in a culture where womanhood is defined relationally. Morrison, therefore, highlights the way structural oppressions shape even the most intimate decisions.

Sula also challenges the class hierarchies within Black communities themselves. Nel, for example, internalizes respectability politics; her hopes to marry Jude and build a "proper" home are an exercise in a survival strategy founded on class aspiration. Her betrayal by both Jude and Sula is therefore not merely emotional but ideological, as it represents the collapse of the safety she believed conformity would bring. Morrison uncovers that race, class, and gender not only intersect but complicate each other, at times brutally. These points of intersection are inscribed on personal and emotional maps, rendering intersectionality not merely a theory but an affective reality.

In contrast, *The Bell Jar* remains relatively unexplored in terms of racial and ethnic differences, and this absence says a great deal. Esther Greenwood's narrative is rooted firmly in the psychological disintegration of a white, young, middle-class woman confronting the contradictions of domesticity in America during the 1950s. While the novel is a biting critique of women's limited roles, particularly in terms of sexuality, motherhood, and work, it does so within a homogenized cultural environment. The women Esther encounters, from Doreen to Joan, share the same social background, and there is no indication of sensitivity to racial injustice or class differences outside the immediate context of gender. This is not a matter of character failure but a limitation of scope. Plath's concern is keenly internal and self-centered, making the psychic price of gender mastery apparent. However, it works within the

framework of white, middle-class womanhood, which is embedded in the ideal as the universal feminine subject.

This absence shows broader tensions throughout second-wave feminism, particularly in its early moments. As bell hooks (1984) has argued, much of the early rhetoric of the movement came from white, middle-class women whose critiques often excluded women of color and working-class women. The feminist "we" assumed in works such as Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) did not encompass the domestic labor or institutional racism experienced by Black women. While Esther's madness remains poignant and politically timely, their representation within a largely raceless and class-neutral world exposes the very silences that later intersectional feminism sought to expose. The novel's elision of these concerns is no accident; it is an artifact of a still-emerging feminist consciousness grappling with gender but not yet its intersections.

By reading these novels together, the difference is not just about what each book is about. Instead, the more profound and more significant difference lies in their approach to feminism. *Sula* challenges identity as multiplicity, constantly being made and affected by external hierarchies. *The Bell Jar* is preoccupied with the fragmentation of the self in reaction to gendered roles, but does not situate that struggle within other sociopolitical systems beyond patriarchy. It provides depth in terms of psychological characterization, but stops short of investigating how race or class may reorganize or intensify those pressures. This comparative limitation does not lessen the worth of the novel, but situates it in a smaller area of feminist narrative.

This difference in scope becomes even more evident when we consider the theories of scholars like Collins, Crenshaw, and McDowell. Collins (2000) argues that Black feminist thought springs from "situated knowledges," knowledge that results from surviving multiple oppressions, often beyond the reach of dominant feminist theory. Morrison's story is an expression of this understanding, a form of knowing that is felt, shared, and historically aware. Similarly, Crenshaw's (1989) contention that anti-discrimination law fails Black women because it fails to take into account their multidimensional oppression mirrors Morrison's criticism of social institutions in *Sula*. While not always intentionally political, the novel is a kind of literary jurisprudence.

Deborah McDowell (1987), discussing African American women's writing, insists on the need for a "double critique," one that criticizes both racism and sexism simultaneously, without their syncretism. Morrison's novel is outstanding in demonstrating this richness, having a coherent story yet remaining vigilant.

The Bell Jar, while less intersectional, nonetheless carries lots of theories. It renders the psychological price of conformity to gender, especially in a culture that seeks perfection, purity, and silence. In its presentation of mental illness, it is a critique both of the medical establishment and cultural norms pathologizing women who do not conform. This aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) theory of "structural intersectionality," which explains how institutional responses to inequality are discriminatory in and of themselves. While Plath does not use this paradigm along class or racial lines, she does offer a scathing critique of how the psychiatric profession re-performs gender norms. Esther is not just depressed; she is being disciplined.

Reading *Sula* and *The Bell Jar* together expands the feminist narrative, compelling us to seek out both the structural and the psychological, the individual and the communal, the visible and the silenced. Neither of the novels presents us with the whole picture of womanhood, but they offer us richer, more complex terms. One gives us the soul turned inward; the other, the soul struggling with a world that is defined against it in terms of its color, class, and gender. Moreover, this is the brilliance of intersectional reading, not simply to read what is present, but to see what has been omitted. Doing so makes space for the feminist practice that is not simply inclusive, but transformative.

3.4. Contemporary Resonances: *The Bell Jar*, *Sula*, and the Ongoing Feminist Conversation

The Bell Jar and *Sula* are relevant to modern feminism, in a world grappling with mental illness, social expectations, and agency, these books remain essential touchstones of feminist theory. It is through their incisive depictions of women living under oppressive structures that they transcend their immediate historical contexts to speak to readers across generations.

The themes of societal expectations, mental illness, and personal agency developed in both *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* have grown in relevance over the decades, especially within the context of ongoing feminist narratives. Since mental illness is still a priority in contemporary feminist discussion, *The Bell Jar* is still relevant in its depiction of the mental breakdown that women experience when confronted with society's expectations. Esther Greenwood's depression is not an individual psychological issue but a representation of universal societal pressure of suffocating gender roles and unrealistic expectations of femininity perpetuated in the 1950s and 1960s. These are challenges that are increasingly recognized today, as modern discussions of mental health and wellness, and particularly among women, continue to disrupt the stigmatization of emotional suffering.

Sula depicts the search for autonomy within the constraints of race, gender, and communal expectation. The novel's portrait of Sula's embrace of social nonconformity, both in her opposition to normative domesticity and in her rejection of the exigencies of Black respectability politics, captures feminist efforts today to overturn constrictive, gendered expectations.

Both novels mirror the concerns and subject matter that have reached the forefront of modern feminist movements, such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, reproductive freedom, and intersectional feminism. The #MeToo movement directly calls upon the intersection of Esther Greenwood's experiences of sexual objectification and violence in *The Bell Jar* with the public confrontation of sexual harassment and assault. More broadly, Esther's situation illustrates the silencing of women's voices by a culture that too frequently trivializes their experiences. The modern-day feminism with the #MeToo movement has brought these kinds of debates to the forefront, calling for accountability, justice, and reconfiguring power dynamics among women and men. Going back to Plath's writing, we are struck by how ageless women's struggles to maintain their dignity and security in the context of systemic violence and discrimination continue to be.

In the same manner that Sula offers us a window into Black women's anguish, and thus is a crucial text for the Black Lives Matter generation, so too does Morrison's

framing of Sula's battle with social and racial injustice reveal contemporary struggles with injustice and inequality.

Both novels also resonate with contemporary debates on reproductive rights. Esther feels forced to follow these roles, and her breakdown is interpretable as a metaphor for the limitations on women's agency over their bodies. This is one of the most important feminist causes of our time: the fight for reproductive justice, for access to birth control, abortion, and fair healthcare, with Esther's feelings of confinement and helplessness reflected in the inalienable right of women to have a say in their own reproductive lives. This problem is further problematized as race, gender, and class intersect in determining the freedom to decide on one's body and life.

Novels such as *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* have led feminist scholarship and activism for decades. These novels not only represent women's oppression but also serve as instruments of knowledge, resistance, and the reimagining of gendered possibilities. During an era in which art and activism connected, literature remains a powerful tool of feminist activism. Both novels provide the reader with a space to process the emotional and psychological toll, offering both catharsis and insight. Literature and activism converge; these novels do not offer critique alone but call for social change. *The Bell Jar,* as a foundational part of feminist discourse about mental health, works to inspire modern feminist movements by informing today's mental health justice and the struggle for emotional liberation.

Similarly, *Sula* has been given new and sustained life in Black feminist thought; Morrison's deconstruction of race, class, and gender thus becomes the new starting point for more intersectional feminist activism. This is evidence that literature can serve as a reflection and catalyst for change, providing ways for scholars and activists alike to learn from and challenge the systems of oppression that remain constant in contemporary women's lives.

The place of both novels in feminist literary theory and curriculum is significant. The novels are widely taught by educational institutions, frequently as mandatory reading for feminist theory, psychology, and literature courses. As feminist scholars continue their efforts toward voice inclusivity in the literary canon, *Sula* and *The Bell Jar* maintain important positions in classrooms, where they encourage

students to think critically about gender, mental illness, and the complexity of women's lives.

As feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Patricia Hill Collins have noted, literature remains a central tool for questioning feminist ideologies and feminist critiques of mainstream feminist thought. The ongoing academic popularity of the two novels is testament to their utility in charting feminist thought through diverse historical and cultural contexts. Being included in university curricula keeps feminist literary studies a vibrant discipline, with the canonical texts continuously being reinterpreted in light of present struggles.

The reading of *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* together enables one to perceive feminist development and the depth of feminist voices more delicately and effectively. The two books, with their significantly different portrayals of women's lives, both reveal the difficulties women face in mediating between social conventions, personal desires, and the broader political structures that govern their lives. While *The Bell Jar* is a critique of the expectations piled on white, middle-class women, *Sula* enters the feminist conversation by analyzing the intersecting pressures of race, class, and gender that shape the lives of Black women. One is compelled to read both books to conceptualize feminism as a movement that is not monolithic but always in motion, rooted in diverse lived experiences. These two novels, together, are responsible not only for women's plight as a subject but also for the widespread feminist movements that still shape the political and social atmospheres of today.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examines the feminist concerns in The Bell Jar and Sula, two influential novels that address the themes of autonomy and identity. Employing a comparative feminist and intersectional approach, this study demonstrates how Sylvia Plath and Toni Morrison critique dominant narratives of womanhood while writing from distinct racial and cultural perspectives. The analysis affirms that The Bell Jar highlights the psychological burden of gendered expectations in mid-twentieth-century white American society. Simultaneously, Sula investigates the oppressions of race, gender, and class in the lives of Black women. When read together, these novels emphasize the significance of intersectionality and contribute to the larger landscape of feminist literature.

Throughout the thesis, literary criticism, feminist and intersectional theories, and historical context are employed to identify the differences and commonalities between the novels. In Chapter 1, the focus on The Bell Jar reveals the inner turmoil of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, as a representation of second-wave feminism during the 1950s and early 1960s. Drawing on the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, Esther's struggles against restrictive gender norms are viewed as a symptom of a broader social disease affecting women in patriarchal post-war America. Chapter 2 illustrates how Sula demonstrates Morrison's deconstruction of conformity through the protagonist, who defies social norms. Inspired by Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, Morrison's works critique mainstream feminism and highlight the concerns of women of color. Chapter 3 argues that, despite significant differences in their narratives, The Bell Jar and Sula share similar themes, such as the quest for self and a rejection of traditional roles. The distinction arises from the alignment with the agendas of first-wave and second-wave feminism, which were confined to the experiences of white middle-class women, thus allowing Black feminist thought to challenge this limitation and advocate for intersectionality.

This thesis builds on and elaborates the themes of second-wave feminism while incorporating intersectional theory. The second wave, which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, followed the first wave of feminism, which focused on suffrage and

equality before the law, but further expanded to advocate for reproductive freedom, workplace equality, and legal equality. However, the initial focus of the movement drew criticism and a call for it to be more representative of all women. Academics highlighted how power systems produced certain forms of oppression for women of color, particularly bell hooks, who fought against the exclusion of Black women and argued that true liberation must include all the oppressed.

This study asserts the role of literature as a tool for feminist resistance. Both Morrison and Plath critique the psychological and social constructs of patriarchal cultures through their works, serving as a powerful medium for politics that offers insights inaccessible through statistics. As Carolyn Dinshaw says, "texts affect lived lives" (1999, p. 14), which is evident in how individuals identify with literary representations of gendered bias.

In a world that continues to grapple with systemic injustice, reproductive injustice, racial violence, and mental health stigma, the concerns addressed in the two books remain relevant to feminist politics today. Morrison's depiction of Black female subjectivity engages with current controversies surrounding whether feminism is inclusive. Plath's portrayal of identity crisis and depression also addresses how women navigate the demands of the 21st century. Activism in the current fourth wave of feminism, exemplified by movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, illustrates how a blend of both feminist tropes continues to influence today's activism.

This comparison prompted us to expand feminist literary criticism, which not only provides a deeper understanding of the texts but also, as Audre Lorde (1984) says, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” Feminism that overlooks race, class, or colonial histories is incomplete. This thesis represents the ongoing de-centering of privileged narratives through relational reading of these texts, examining how literature speaks against difference, and how authors who never interacted can still engage in a silent dialogue that transforms literary criticism.

Ultimately, Plath's gradual and quiet breakdown and Morrison's fierce independence speak not only to their time but also to a global feminist struggle. Feminism must, therefore, encompass all women and not a singular narrative; it should

be rooted in solidarity that acknowledges differences. As Arundhati Roy (2003) once wrote, "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." Such works as The Bell Jar and Sula help us to listen more attentively to the pain, as well as to the dreaming, becoming, and fierce beauty of women who write themselves into freedom.

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SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION

This thesis addresses gender inequality and the exclusion of marginalized voices within feminist discourse by analyzing *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* through feminist and intersectional perspectives. It brings attention to how literature reflects and critiques societal structures, especially those affecting women and women of color. By highlighting the limitations of white, middle-class feminism and promoting more inclusive narratives, the study raises public awareness and encourages critical thinking. Its findings can support educators and activists in fostering more equitable and diverse cultural and academic environments. In the long term, this research contributes to social change by advocating for intersectional representation in literature and feminist theory, reinforcing the importance of inclusive dialogue in both education and society.