

Essentialism and Self-Identity Construction in Toni Morrison's "Sula"-Take Sula and Shadrack as an Example

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Abstract. From around the end of the First World War to the mid-1960s, as the voices of the exploited and oppressed black groups were drowned out by white supremacist ideas, black people generally suffered from racial discrimination, and the stereotypes brought about by social essentialism impact of impressions. The construction of identities of marginalized black groups becomes a matter of concern. For Toni Morrison's novel "Sula", the existing research has obtained the image analysis of the characters in "Sula", the symbolic meaning in the novel, the construction of character identity, and the embodiment of traditional culture in "Sula". However, few studies have combined essentialism and identity construction and Sula's and Shadrack's analyses. Therefore, this thesis explores the embodiment of essentialism in "Sula", as well as Sula and Shadrack's resistance to essentialism and self-identity construction and combines theoretical analysis and textual analysis. Sula used her unique and heterogeneous behavior to break through the shackles of social essentialism on black women. In contrast to most black women, she constructed her self-identity in a different way from most black women, which can be better understood using Plato's "cave theory". Shadrack created "World Suicide Day" to resist the uncertainty of death and the prejudice brought by social essentialism and used Sula as a "mirror" to re-construct his identity, which can be used in Lacan's "mirror stage" theory to explain.

1 Introduction

Toni Morrison (February 18, 1931-August 5, 2019) is an African-American female writer emerging in the literary world in the late 1960s. Her works are passionate, short and poetic and are famous for their keen observations on the lives of African Americans. His major works include "The Bluest Eye" (1970), "Sula" (1974), "Song of Solomon" (1977) and "Asphalt Boy" (1981). Toni Morrison's works present the history of blacks in a very imaginative way, emphasizing the subjectivity of blacks and women in American society and history, as well as the subjectivity of African-American literature in the history of American literature.

"Sula" is a novel written by American writer Toni Morrison. The time span of the story of "Sula" was from around the end of the First World War to the mid-1960s when the black civil rights movement and women's liberation movement were on the rise. The novel takes the friendship between the heroine Sula and her girlfriend Nel and Sula's growth experience as the main line and describes the living conditions and life changes of the "lower class" in a legendary and magical black community in Medlin, Ohio, over the past 40 to 50 years.

From around the end of the First World War to the mid-1960s, black people were generally affected by racial discrimination and stereotypes brought about by social essentialism. However, at the time, the voices of the displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed black

communities were drowned out by white supremacist ideology. The construction of the identity of the black group has become an issue worthy of attention.

For Toni Morrison's novel "Sula", most of the existing studies are on the image analysis of the characters in "Sula", the symbolic meaning in the novel, the construction of character identity, and the traditional culture in "Sula". However, few studies have combined essentialism and identity construction and Sula's and Shadrack's analyses.

In order to fill the research gap, based on Toni Morrison's novel "Sula", this thesis combines theoretical analysis and text analysis, taking Sula and Shadrack as examples to explore the embodiment of essentialism in "Sula", and Sula and Shadrack's rebellion against essentialism and self-identity construction. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, this article is divided into three parts. In the introduction, the author will introduce the background, purpose, and significance of this research and the article's structure. The first part mainly focuses on the theoretical basis supporting the thesis. In the second part, the article will study the embodiment of essentialism in "Sula", which can be divided into the manifestation of essentialism between whites and blacks and the manifestation of essentialism between blacks and negroes. The third part discusses resistance to essentialism and self-identity construction in "Sula" from the perspectives of Sula and Shadrack.

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2 The theoretical basis of the study

2.1 Essentialism

"Essentialism" is a kind of knowledge view and epistemological line with the basic characteristics of "essential category", "essential belief," and "essential pursuit". Essentialism gradually took shape in the West after the 17th century, and its influence has continued in contemporary times. Its origin can be traced back to the rationalist Plato in ancient Greece.

Metaphysical essentialism differs from psychological essentialism in that the latter is not a worldview but a method of describing entities about consciousness [1]. There are four key points that are considered to constitute essentialist thinking. The first aspect is the causal mechanism of the individual. The second aspect is an innate instinct: the assumption that an object will always follow its intended course [2]. According to this criterion, the development of entities at all times can be predicted by nature. The third aspect is invariance [3]: no matter how the observed representation of an entity changes, it cannot affect its essence. The fourth aspect is the potential for inductive things [4]: this implies that entities that share common features may differ in their essence even if they are similar except for their essence. Numerous studies have shown that the essentialist way of thinking predicts the stereotypes people have.

Social essentialism is the essentialist belief applied in the social domain by treating social categories as natural categories. To be precise, social essentialism is an intuitive theory about social categories; that is, members of the same social category have the same intrinsic essence, which endows their category membership and leads to explicit similarities among them. Social essentialism consists primarily of the following set of interrelated beliefs: (1) Naturalistic beliefs that membership in certain social categories (e.g., white/black, male/female) is biologically determined and uncontrollable; (2) Discrete beliefs of category boundaries, that is, the boundaries between categories are strict and absolute; (3) Homogeneity beliefs, that is, members of the same category have common attributes, making them similar to each other and different from members of other categories; (4) Stability beliefs, that is, category membership is stable over time and situation; (5) Causality beliefs, that is, members of the same social category share a potential, stable causal essence, and that essence makes this kind of person [5].

2.2 Self-identity construction

"Identity" refers to people's interpretation and construction of personal experience and social status in a cultural context. "Social identity" refers to a person's membership in a social group to which that person has emotional and value significance. Identity construction refers to a series of processes of self-definition and continuous revision of self-construction.

2.2.1 Lacan's "Mirror Stage" theory

Lacan believes that children start the process of self-construction based on the identification with the mirror image from the stage of the mirror image. Young children discover themselves in the process of gazing at images that are not themselves. Therefore, young children realize self-construction in recognition of countless others. "The self is formed in the process of identification with another complete object, and this object is an imaginary projection: a person supports a fictional and unified sense of self by discovering an object in the world that can be identified with" [6]. From this, it can be concluded that in the process of children's self-construction, part of the "self" they construct actually comes from the projection of the outside world in their self-consciousness.

2.2.2 Plato's "Theory of the Cave"

In "The Republic", Plato put forward the famous "cave theory". In a dark cave, several people were tied to stools with their backs to the cave entrance, unable to move. Behind them was a wall, and beyond the wall, there was a fire, and the light from the fire cast shadows of things on the wall at the bottom of the cave, and the bound man could only see the shadows on the wall. They thought things really looked like shadows on cave walls. Until one day, a man broke free and escaped from the cave. He saw the outside world and immediately ran back to tell those who were still tied to the stool: the real world is outside, and there are only falsehoods and shadows here. However, when this person untied those who were tied up, those people became angry with embarrassment. They had long been accustomed to accepting the "truth" of the shadow, and they stoned the person to death. Finally, they got up the courage to go out. Some people were afraid to accept the heavy truth and fled back to the hole. Some stayed and went on to explore new and amazing worlds [7].

Therefore, if the "cave" is regarded as "imprisonment", and the shadow reflected by the firelight on the wall is regarded as a one-sided, narrow and unreal idea imposed on oneself by others, people's cognition of the shadow on the wall is the construction of the self and the world, then, it can be seen that the construction of the self is not completely objective and correct, and is often affected by the environment and external forces. To construct the self accurately and authentically, one must possess the courage to surpass limitations and engage in proactive exploration.

3 The embodiment of essentialism in Sula

Essentialism in *Sula* mainly refers to social essentialism, which is reflected between whites and blacks and between blacks and blacks.

3.1 Manifestation of essentialism between whites and blacks

The essentialism between whites and blacks in "Sula" is firstly reflected in whites' cognition of blacks. One of the examples is that the character in the story, Shadrack, was innocently caught by the police and taken to jail after leaving the hospital and was charged with unwarranted vagrancy and alcoholism. Here, according to the theory of social essentialism, the police are mainly influenced by the "causality beliefs"; that is, they believe that all blacks share the "essence" of being a vagabond and drinking, so it is taken for granted that Shadrack is also a vagabond and drinking criminal. As another example, when Jude comes home and complains in front of his wife and Sula, Sula suggests, "I know a white woman who doesn't go out after six o'clock for fear of one of you Who will catch her. Do you think this is love? When they see you, they think of rape. If they do not get the rape they are looking for, they will shout that someone has raped them so that their efforts to find it will not be in vain" [8]. Among them, white men and women are influenced by the "homogeneity belief" and "stability belief" in social essentialism theory, that is, they believe that black men have the common attribute of the rapist, and it does not change with time and place. To sum up, the essentialist cognition of white people to black people in "Sula" often thinks that black people are negative, violent, indecent and so on.

The essentialism between whites and blacks in "Sula" is also reflected in the cognition of blacks to whites. This can be better reflected in the character Helene in the story. When Helene set off to her grandmother's funeral, "the demeanor was poised, the posture was graceful, and she would add a beautiful dress. She bought some dark brown wool and matched it with three-quarter yards of velvet. Using these materials, she sewed herself a thick and elegant dress with a neckline and pockets made of velvet"[8]. It can be seen that Helene tried her best to dress elegantly and beautifully and imitated the clothes of the models in the magazines to cut the clothes, wanting to assimilate into white society. Surrounded by white mainstream values, it is difficult for black people like Helene not to be influenced by white culture. Later, after Helene got on the train, she showed a provocative smile to the white conductor, trying to please the white conductor with a smile. In these two cases, Helene was influenced by the "homogeneity belief" in the theory of social essentialism, that is, that white people have a common attribute, that is, to dress elegantly and dignifiedly and to have a higher status than black people, which is the difference between white people and black people. Therefore, she believes that white people have more noble aesthetics and hopes to integrate into white society by dressing and pleasing white people by smiling so as to gain acceptance in white society.

3.2 A manifestation of essentialism between blacks and negroes

The essentialism between blacks and blacks in Sula is firstly reflected in the cognition of black men to black

women. First of all, black men tend to have a negative impression of black women, believing that their money interests are paramount and that they can do anything for money interests. An example of this is the black male in the story who speculates about the whereabouts of Eva's missing leg. They believe Eva may have let the train break her leg on purpose and demanded compensation or sold the leg. Among them, black men are influenced by the "homogeneity belief" in the theory of social essentialism; that is, they believe that all black women value money interests first and are unscrupulous. Second, black men generally perceive black women as accessories to black men. In the family, black women should be loyal to black men and should provide black men with emotional value, such as security, comfort, authority, and more. For example, Jude, in the story, often seeks comfort from Nel and shows his authority in front of Nel. As another example, black men "They stubbornly believe that all intercourse between white men and black women is rape, because it is unimaginable for a black woman to be willing. In this sense, they have no interracial difference of the malevolence of intermarriage from that of white men" [8]. From this example, it can be seen that black men believe that black women are appendages of their black men, belong to them, obey them, and cannot accept their association with white men. According to social essentialist theory, the first example shows that there is a "causality belief" in the perception of black women by black men, that is, the belief that black women have the essence of being loyal to their husbands and becoming their subordinates, and it is this essence that makes them black housewife. The second example shows that black men's cognition of black women has "discrete beliefs of category boundaries"; that is, the boundary between blacks and whites is absolute and insurmountable, so it is against morality for blacks and whites to marry.

The essentialism between blacks and blacks in "Sula" is also reflected in the cognition of black women to black women. In "Sula", black women show their obedience and attachment to men and are willing to pay for men. For example, during Nel's visit to a sick Sula, Nel says, "You can't be all by yourself. You're a woman, and you're a black woman. You can't act like a man. You can't put on an air of independence and walk around, do whatever you want, take whatever you want, and throw whatever you want" [8]. From this, it can be seen that Nel believes that black women depend on black men to live and do not have the ability that some black men have and rights. For another example, in the story, Eva blames the black women for not taking good care of their husbands' daily life. This shows that Eva believes that the job of a black woman is to take care of her husband's daily life and serve her husband. These two examples embody the "causality belief" in social essentialism theory.

4 Resistance to essentialism and Self-Identity construction in Sula--Taking sula and shadrack as examples

Toni Morrison is one of the most important contemporary American writers. The central theme of Morrison's novels

is the historical fate and spiritual world of American blacks, talking about their experiences of finding themselves and establishing cultural identities in an unjust society. At the same time, As a female writer, Morrison's novels not only focus on the fate of American women and black women but also show simple feelings beyond race [9]. The characters Sula and Shadrack in "Sula" both rebel against essentialism and construct their own identities.

4.1 Sula's resistance to essentialism and Self-Identity construction

4.1.1 Seurat's revolt against essentialism

To some extent, Sula's life is devoted to practicing the rebellion against essentialism related to blackness. This article selects two examples that are more representative and classic to illustrate.

When Sula and Nel were threatened and bullied by white boys on the road, Sula dared to walk away from the white boys and let them stop bullying her. Sula did not hesitate to cut her own fingers with a knife to resist. Judging from the extremeness and cruelty of this method, Sula's attitude towards resisting white people's discrimination and bullying against black people is very decisive. What she wants to resist strongly is white people's discrimination against black people's status and the essentialist image of black people who swallow their breath and are easy to bully. On the other hand, she chose a self-harm method to scare off the opponent instead of confronting the opponent head-on. The implicit meaning that can be seen from this is that the blacks did not have enough strength to compete with the white group at that time, so they could only temporarily retreat the opponent through deterrence. This way is embarrassing, but we have to admit Sula's courage and wisdom.

Another example is Sula's affair with her good friend Nel's husband. Nel and Sula were originally good friends with similar temperaments to each other. However, after Nel and Jude got married, Nel's temperament changed and became no different from other black women who provided services that provided emotional value. Sula then has a relationship with Nel's husband, Jude. This includes Sula's dissatisfaction with Nel's changes and her opposition to this unequal marriage relationship, so she resists an abnormal way of having an affair with her good friend's husband. What she wants to fight against is the accessory status of black women in marriage and the essentialist impression that black women are attached to black men.

4.1.2 Sula's Self-Identity construction

Sula's self-identity construction is based on going against the outside world.

When Sula was young, she understood the discrimination and bullying of blacks by whites from the "bottom" of the living environment of blacks. However, it was not until she and Nel were personally bullied by white boys that she deeply realized the pain and made up her mind to resist. Later, from her grandmother Eva's

obedience to men and her friend Nel's obedience to her husband, she saw the dependence of black women on men and the unequal status in marriage. So, she made up her mind not to be like other black people. Her self-identity is constructed as courageously resisting white people's discrimination and bullying against black people and never being reduced to a housewife and a male accessory.

Sula rebelled against the shackles imposed on her in a deviant way. She rejected her nation's traditions and values and scoffed at social norms. She drove away her grandmother; she spurned marriage. Instead, she indulged herself, regarded men as "toilets", and had sex not only with white men but also with her friends' husbands; she despised religion, went to church without wearing underwear, and more. In such a resolute way, Sula tried to break the traditional barriers, break free from the shackles of fate, and hope to construct her own identity through this [10].

To sum up, it can be seen that Sula's self-identity construction can be explained by Plato's "cave theory". Essentialist notions between whites and blacks and between blacks and blacks are like the shadows of firelight cast on a wall. Most black people are like people who are tied to the wall in a cave, and they can only see the "projection", that is, the essentialist concept of black people that exists in society, and blindly accept it. Moreover, Sula is like the person who bravely left the cave and explored the outside world. Sula bravely broke through the shackles of social essentialism, challenged it, actively explored her self-identity and re-constructed her self-identity.

4.2 Shadrack's resistance to essentialism and Self-Identity construction

4.2.1 Shadrack's revolt against essentialism

After experiencing the war, Shadrack was severely traumatized. First, he could not accept the uncertainty of death; second, he could not accept the mutilation and deformity of his body; third, he resented being considered a vagabond and alcoholic criminal.

The society's malice towards blacks and the impression of social essentialism deeply shocked Shadrack, so he decided to face death and resist social essentialism. He later created "World Suicide Day" as a way to escape the uncertainty of death and escape society's essentialist image of black people.

4.2.2 Shadrack's Self-Identity construction

Shadrack's self-identity construction process can be explained by Lacan's "mirror stage" theory, that is, in the self-construction process, part of the "self" constructed by him actually comes from the projection of the outside world in self-consciousness.

When Shadrack saw his hand grow too big in the hospital, he subconsciously thought that his body was mutilated. So later in prison, he could not wait to look at his reflection in the water, that is, the "mirror". He saw that he was still a black man, and he breathed a sigh of

relief. At this point, he constructs his own identity as black. However, due to the trauma after the war, his self is still incomplete, and at this time, Sula becomes the "mirror" of his self-construction [6].

When Sula runs into Shadrack's house in a panic because she accidentally drowned the chicken, Shadrack sees his own shadow in Sula's fear of death, so he replies, "Always." It is intended to tell Sula the truth about the impermanence of life and death. Later, Shadrack has always used Sula, a girl who dared to break through the shackles of essentialism, as her "mirror" to construct her own identity. After Sula's death, Shadrack lost the "mirror" of self-construction and thus realized that "World Suicide Day" is no longer meaningful. The construction of Shadrack's identity ended with Sula's death.

5 Conclusion

Essentialism in Toni Morrison's "Sula" mainly refers to social essentialism, and it is mainly reflected in white people's belief that black people are negative, violent, and indecent, black people blindly worship white culture, black men consciously control and possess black housewives, and black women think they depend on their husbands.

The characters Sula and Shadrack in Sula both rebel against essentialism and construct their own identities. Sula used her unique and heterogeneous behavior to break through the shackles of social essentialism on black women. In contrast to most black women, she constructed her self-identity in a different way from most black women, and we could use Plato's "cave theory" for a deeper understanding of her behavior. Shadrack created "World Suicide Day" to resist the uncertainty of death and the prejudice brought by social essentialism and used Sula as a "mirror" to re-construct his identity, which can be used in Lacan's "mirror stage" theory to explain.

Sula and Shadrack in Toni Morrison's "Sula" are both rejected by the black community and have similar tragic fates. They also have the spirit of resistance to society's essentialist concept of blacks and the awareness of self-identity construction. Sula represents many black women who are bound by family and social status and conveys concern for black women. Shadrack represents the blacks traumatized by the war and expresses concern about the psychological condition and self-remodeling of the blacks after the war. Sula's death and the disappearance of the black community, this tragic ending reflect the difficulty of black people's resistance to essentialism and the road to self-construction and the fact that black people's resistance is far from enough alone. A strength that unites the black community and the black collective is needed. The embodiment of essentialism in Sula is worthy of reflection in reality. Sula and Shadrack's self-identity construction methods are worth learning and thinking about.

This study explores the embodiment of essentialism in Toni Morrison's "Sula" and the self-identity construction of Sula and Shadrack but fails to analyze in detail the meaning of the essentialism and self-identity construction

in "Sula" for blacks to strive for racial equality and resist racism. Based on this study, future research can explore the significance of essentialism and self-identity construction in "Sula" to blacks' struggle for racial equality and resistance to racism.

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