

Social Identity Theory in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract: The concept of identity and its formation is one of the most basic notions in the field of social psychology. Many psychologist and sociologists have presented their theories based on this concept and the psychosocial progress of its formation in social contexts. Henry Tajfel, a prominent social psychologist, in his Social Identity Theory has divided an individual's identity into two parts: "personal identity" and "social identity". He believes that social interactions and bonds affect identity and accentuate our membership in different groups, playing a role in shaping and reshaping our personality. Toni Morrison's novel titled *Sula* (1973) is among the books depicting the process of identity formation in suppressive social contexts in a white dominated society. The novel traces the life and death of a young girl in a racist and sexist community and depicts the process of her individuation and the forms of her personal and social identity construction under the influence of her life events and experiences as an African American female. The present paper attempts to probe into the identity formation of Sula, the protagonist who bears the title of the novel and lives in a repressive social and cultural context.

Keywords: Henry Tajfel, identity formation, social identity theory, *Sula*, Toni Morrison.

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Introduction

As an important and controversial subject in the field of social psychology, the concept of self and identity has attracted the attention of many researchers and authors. As a matter of fact, self-concept is an umbrella term that includes personal, social, cultural, religious and collective aspects of an individual's life. Social psychologists believe that because of social interactions, the self-concept as a person's understanding of his or her own being is shaped, reshaped and influenced by many factors such as the environment, cultural and historical background, family status especially parental relations, religious beliefs, etc. (Adjaero, 1996, p.59).

One of the basic preoccupations individuals are obsessed with is the question of "Who am I?" and "How am I perceived by others?" Each of us can provide a list of characteristics he or she uses to describe him or herself to others; these characteristics include factors that may change from time to time. The self, as the fundamental part of human psyche has turned into an important field of study for psychologists and researchers. In the next few pages, focusing on Sula in Toni Morrison's novel, we will outline the progress of theories and researches about the subject of self-concept and the way it is formed in social contexts in relation to other individuals and groups in the society.

Discussion

Nowadays, theories of selfhood and identity have become popular among critics of literary texts. In the following lines will briefly discuss some major theorists and their theories of identity before moving on to discuss the novel and its characters.

Freud's rebellious student, Jung considers our persona (identity) as a socially constructed concept affected by social institutions such as family and school. Although he believes in collective psyche, he does not deny the function of these institutions in the process of individuation. He claims that this collective unconscious lies beneath our personal unconscious and is inherited as a group memory in all people:

I have chosen the term "collective" because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are

more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals (1959, p.30).

He refers to identity as "ego" and explains that our memories, our understandings and our mental and physical states are our personal unconscious closely related to our self-image. Jung believes that our self-realization and oneness is achieved through a long process affected largely by the events and experiences around us. Like his instructor, he claims that all of us are filled with unfulfilled desires and instincts suppressed by civilization:

The sight of a child...will arouse certain longings in adult, civilized persons longings which relate to the unfulfilled desires and needs of those parts of the personality which have been blotted out of the total picture in favor of the adapted persona (1959, p.39).

Erik Erikson is the other psychologist who draws attention to the concept of identity, especially in children. In his article *Introduction to Child Development*, he explores eight stages of psychosocial development and explains that the way individuals are perceived by others play an important role in their identity formation. He believes that if our identity from a very early age is shaped strongly in a peaceful atmosphere, we will have a confident personality in our adulthood.

He depicts an eight-staged process in which individuals go through in the process of their individuation and identity formation:

1. Hopes: Trust vs. Mistrust (Oral-sensory, Birth-2 years)
2. Will: Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt (Muscular-Anal, 2-4 years)
3. Purpose: Initiative vs. Guilt (Locomotor-Genital, Preschool, 4-5 years)
4. Competence: Industry vs. Inferiority (Latency, 5-12 years)
5. Fidelity: Identity vs. Role Confusion (Adolescence, 13-19 years)
6. Love: Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young adulthood, 20-24, or 20-39 years)
7. Care: Generativity vs. Stagnation (Middle adulthood, 25-64, or 40-64 years)
8. Wisdom: Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Late adulthood, 65-death) (Craine, 21)

The stage in which the individual starts to challenge his existence and ask "Who am I? What can I be?" also known as the Fidelity stage is the time when identity is being shaped. Erikson considers this stage as the most important stage in an individual's psychosocial developments:

What is unique about the stage of fidelity is that it is a special sort

of synthesis of earlier stages and a special sort of anticipation of later ones. Youth has a certain unique quality in a person's life; it is a bridge between childhood and adulthood. Youth is a time of radical change—the great body changes accompanying puberty, the ability of the mind to search one's own intentions and the intentions of others, the suddenly sharpened awareness of the roles society has offered for later life (1964, p.20).

Erikson refers to the problems and clashes that individuals face in their life as "identity crisis" and explains that by navigating these crises with the help of our parents, teachers and friends, we can successfully gain a strong identity (Ibid, p.23). According to him, prosperous social interactions and emotional intimacy with other members of the society can help individuals develop social skills and satisfy social bonds.

The psychologist George Herbert Mead has a definition of identity, dividing the self into two important aspects: the "I" as the subject, self-organizing the individual's attitudes and impulses, and the "Me" as the object self, known by the others in social contexts (Mead, 1934). Mead believes that the "Me" part plays an important role in the identity formation process, highlighting the fact that others, through their attitudes, reactions and viewpoints, affect our identity and individuation. As Mead theorizes, the relationship between identity and society (the interactions between "I" and "Me") is similar to the chicken-egg relation in which social structures and conditions shape the person's identity and in turn, this identity and its interactions with other forms of social structures tries to construct the society. As he notes in his book *The Philosophy of the Act*: "This is an experience within which individual and the environment mutually determine each other" (Mead, 1938).

Professor Derek Lader in his book *Social and Personal Identity* makes this idea clear:

The self is both social and psychological in nature. It is neither exclusively psychological nor social. Something of the self always stands apart from the social world. At the same time the self can only exist within a social context... Everyone is influenced by the society and it makes its indelible mark on us. It's great error to think that there is no such a thing as society or that we

are separate, self-sufficient individuals. Everyone is influenced by family, friends, education, ethnicity, work, class, gender, politics and history (Lader, 2004).

Yet he emphasizes that "although each of us is profoundly influenced by our surrounding society and social relationships, we are also unique individuals. We respond to life's problems and circumstances quite differently from anyone else. This capacity is a reflection of our personal identity and allows us to experience life in a way that is distinct from others" (Lader, 2004).

Social Identity Theory

Henry Tajfel is a well-known social psychologist in the twentieth century. His experiments and theories such as *Social Judgment Theory*, *Theory of Intergroup Relations* and *Social Identity Theory* are considered as the basic theories in the field of social psychology (Tajfel, 1982). He believes that a human being, as a social creature, tends to form groups and live together (Tajfel, 1984). This tendency and our membership in different social institutions cause our various behaviors and actions in these contexts. Tajfel's experiments show that our in-group and out-group attitudes and our tendency to favor our in-group members, values, beliefs, and principles is the basic reason for racial discriminations and ethnic biases (Tajfel, 1982).

His Social Identity Theory proposes that from the very beginning of our lives, we start to categorize ourselves due to the gender, sex, appearance and social class that we belong to (Ibid, 23). This categorization is done by individuals not only for themselves but also for others around them. Our minds put different people in the social contexts in various groups such as black, white, male, female, girl, boy, woman, man, etc. Tajfel believes that this social categorization leads to the creation of different groups in the society and the individuals' tendency to join these groups and show biased behavior due to their in-group and out-group attitudes (Ibid, p.24). This social identification and social categorization, according to Tajfel, leads to social comparison in which the individual compares his/her physical, psychological and social characteristics to other members of the society (Tajfel, 1984).

In this process of identification and comparison, the individuals form two binary oppositions in their mind: "we" and "they". According to Tajfel, if the person feels

that "we" are better than "they", then his/her self-esteem will be maintained and internalized. Otherwise the individual will suffer from low self-worth and inferiority complex, such as minority groups and outcasted people (Tajfel, 1982).

In other words, social categorization of individuals into different classes and groups is in direct relation with their self-esteem and self-schema. Tajfel observed that collective identities are often imposed on minorities, especially those with low social status and social prestige, which consequently leads to the identity crisis these groups suffer. Members of these groups are often devalued and stigmatized leading to inner conflicts for a stable identity, or outer conflicts resisting to authorities (Tajfel, 1982, p.65).

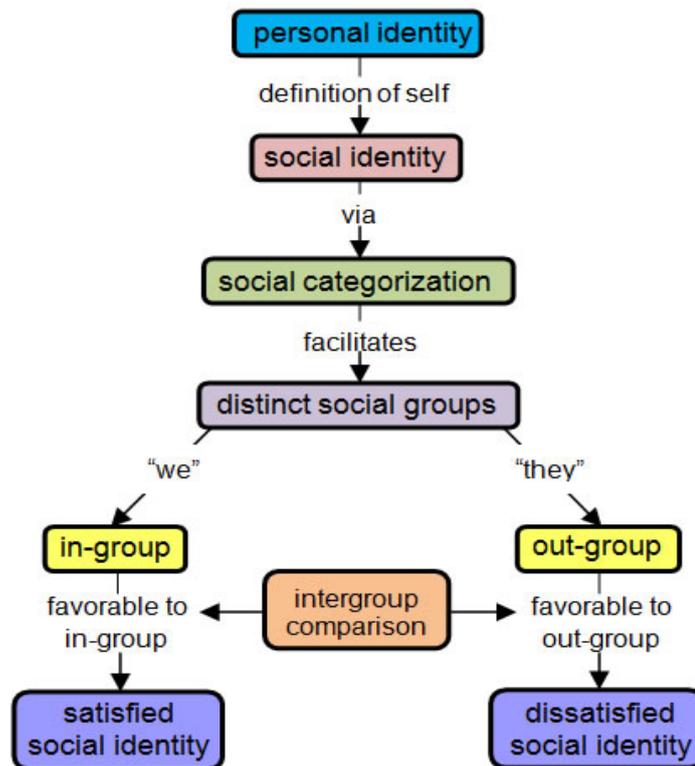


Fig. 1. Tajfel's Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory and *Sula*

As a novel depicting the identity formation process in its main character's life, "*Sula* is the story of a girl who is a rebel against all society, all conventions and nearly all moralities" (Bloom, 1999, p.63). Even in her deathbed, she seems to be proud of her free and rebellious life:

-Sula: You think I don't know what your life is like just because I ain't living it? I know what every colored woman in this country is doing.

- Nel: What's that?

-Sula: Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world (p. 193).

Through these rebellions, Sula's identity is shaped, reshaped and affected by her social and cultural context in a black community: "Sula disregards the social norms and quests desperately for freedom and a united self out of a chaos around her" (p. 68). In spite of her name, "Sula Peace", she cannot find any resolution in her individuation. As we can see at the end of the story, in her deathbed, Sula confesses that she had not found the true essence of love in her life.

According to Henry Tajfel's theory, Sula appears not to have a good and acceptable social identity in her community: "A demon in the eyes of her community, Sula is a kind of Lilith, taking sexual satisfaction where she will" (Bloom, 1999, p. 51). As Morrison clarifies:

In a way her strangeness, her naiveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings' had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she longed for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous (p. 26).

Sula's identity formation is accompanied with her self-creation through independence from her family and society. Her rejection of social norms and values shows her will to live freely as a self-dependent girl. In the face of problems such as violence, racial discrimination, sexism and poverty, Sula tries

to cope with life's hardships and shape her own identity with her hands. She leaves the town of Medallion in search of "herself". She goes from city to city for a period of ten years, which shape and reshape her identity to the point of a big change in her appearance and her behavior at the time of her returning. Sula, as the symbol of a rebellious female character in a black community, is the major character who deals with issues of identity formation in social contexts such as family, school, church and her town.

In her individuation process, Sula faces sardonic comments from her community members, blaming her for awkward and unconventional behaviors. Even in her family, she is not well-received and does not enjoy a positive self-image, both physical and psychological. Sula's birthmark, as well as her rebellious actions, lead to her low-schema and alienation from her society. This alienation and loneliness affects her identity formation during childhood, causing a strong friendship between her and Nel. As Morrison illustrates: "They are solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into techno-colored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quiet like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream" (p.63). Despite their different cultural and social backgrounds, they remain good friends till Sula's death.

Overhearing her mother saying that she does not love her daughter, Sula feels not loved by her family. As a result, she leads a strange childhood without any care, attention and support. According to Henry Tajfel, individuals are strongly affected by the way people treat them. Sula is abandoned by her community because of both her physical and behavioral differences (Tajfel, 1984, p.20). Her social identity is shattered through the negative feedbacks she receives from the members of this community. The absence of vital concepts such as love, belonging and attachment in Sula's life results in her frustration and anxiety, and forces her to leave town in search of a new life.

Her process of identity formation takes place in disastrous conditions in which she is deprived of parental care and attention, leading her to the state of rebelliousness and disregard for social norms. This theme of familial relationship and its influence on an individual's identity can be seen in other characters of the novel as well. Nel, Sula's friend, is a real girl of the family, enjoying her mother's care and attention which makes her feel complete.

After a dreadful experience on a train, however, Nel realizes her misery as a black girl:

It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly (p.35).

But things go the other way around too. After this incident, Nel tries her best to be different from her mother and starts to shape her own identity:

Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery, she stared out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut. 'Me,' she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, 'I want... I want to be... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful (p.26).

Nel's life of purity, maturity and attachment is full of respect, dignity and obedience. She believes that these elements can complete her identity formation process as a woman for her family. Like Sula, she decides to form her personality and take control of her life.

Besides Sula and Nel, there are other characters going through their individuation and "search for themselves in an alien world- white and male." (Bloom, 1999, p.32). Hannah, Eva and Shadrock are among these individuals who are the victims of a hostile white dominated society, trying their best to survive and pull together their devastated lives.

Sula's grandmother, Eva, had different life experiences because of her husband's abandonment, upbringing her three children with the little money she earned from the insurance for her lost leg. As a strong woman, she can be considered as one of those black women who accept their skin color and try to cope with the mental and physical problems they face in a racist society. Eva proves that through hard and challenging situations, she can deal with the disastrous events of life and manage them well. As we can see, she is able to construct a boarding house and make it and house many boarders and family members.

Eva has a strong personal and social identity which has been formed through years of hardship and loneliness. Furthermore, obvious signs of

Eva's influence on Sula's identity formation can be seen. Her free character (disregarding the social rules and conventions) affects Sula's behavior in different contexts, allowing Sula to enjoy herself and disobey the social rules. Like her grandmother, Sula goes through life stages and deals with her experiences as a Black woman. But the important point about Eva's story is the miserable destiny at the end of the novel, in a nursing home:

Her once beautiful leg had no stocking and the foot was in a slipper. Nel wanted to cry—not for Eva's milk-dull eyes or her floppy lips, but for the once proud foot accustomed for over a half century to a fine well-laced shoe, now stuffed gracelessly into a pink terrycloth slipper (p.199).

Sula, deals with the concept of identity and its formation in oppressive social contexts in various ways. The issue of womanhood and its formation in black communities is well investigated in this novel. Different characters in the story deal with life problems and experiences in the path they have chosen for themselves. For example, Shadrack, a black survivor from WWI, has chosen his life style as a strong man controlling the situations in his life. He does not let suppressive forces take control of his life and drives his destiny himself. Even death cannot rule over him:

It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day (p.12).

But this character, like the other Black characters in the novel, cannot escape from the miseries of his skin color:

He fought a rising hysteria that was not merely anxiety to free his aching feet; his very life depended on the release of the knots. Suddenly without raising his eyelids, he began to cry (p.15).

Conclusion

As an anti- racist novel, *Sula* explores the life of black characters who go through their process of identity formation in hard suppressive social contexts. As outlined in this paper, different characters in the novel are highly affected

by this context and also by the events in their life due to their skin color. Their social and personal identity is formed in this atmosphere, leading them to a miserable destiny. Their race, as a stigma, is the main root for their low self-esteem and shattered self-schema. Their identities are shaped and reshaped under tough conditions in which they suffer discrimination and cruelty, as Franz Fanon depicts: "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white... ."

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