Escaping from Existence and Embracing the Other: An Analysis of *Sula* from the Theory of Levinas

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**Abstract:** *Sula*, the second novel of Toni Morrison, not only depicts a daring girl who breaks the traditional chains that imprison women, but also presents the black people’s attitude towards life and death. By applying Levinas’ theory on the other, this article analyzes the state of existence and philosophical significance hidden in the novel from the point of existence, existent and the other.

1 Introduction

In 20th century, Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish French philosopher, challenged the Western tradition of identity by proposing his thought of the other. He holds the view that the Western philosophy tradition is virtually an implicit egocentrism, an attempt to exclude strangeness and the other, though in its so-called self-pursuit. Therefore, his central thought is embracing the other, a total strangeness which is what I am not beyond understanding. As a jew, Levinas knows what Jewish have gone through in the history, such as anti-semitism and holocaust. The persecution of his beloved ones and his own drifting life result in his sophisticated thinking about violence hidden in the ideology of identity. *Existence and Existent* published in 1947 was his reflection on traditional philosophy when imprisoned in the concentration camp. The book illustrates the darkness of existence, the loneliness of existents and the possibility of escaping from the existence. The author starts his first exploration to the theory of the other, and tries to make the philosophical construction on human’s state of existence. In *Sula*, Morrison demonstrates a panorama of the black people’s living condition from which readers can get a better understanding of their attitude towards life and death as well as the author’s reflection on existence. Similar to the Jewish people, the black people are subjected to the discrimination, segregation and persecution from the mainstream society. They, as Levinas writes, are born to deal with the oppression imposed by the white who aim to dominate the whole world with their ideology of identity. Morrison in her novel also delivers her philosophic thinking on the possibility of transcending the miserable existence. Hence, it offers a totally brand-new perspective to analyze *Sula* by utilizing Levinas’ theory of the other.

2 The Dark Existence

Levinas deems that existence precedes the existents, and before the existents emerge, it is a being without existents. French word “il y a” (there be) is used to refer to “existence itself”. The word “il y a” has no definite name and no one knows it. Different from “light”, a prerequisite for all the existence in traditional western philosophy, “il y a”, in Levinas’ words, is an existence without light, a dark experience to humans. He prefers to employ the image of “dark night” to describe “il y a”, for what it brings to humanity are uncertainty, insecurity and fear. The experience of insomnia is used to further illustrate “il y a”, which consists of endless consciousnesses without subject and intention. In Levinas’ theory, the existence can be explained by the word “il y a”, which resembles the dark night and insomnia. The former one filled with dangers, oppression and insecurity intends to devour the existents within; the latter one is an experience in which awareness is out of control and falls into abyss. In *Sula*, Morrison depicts a world where the black people find their existence as dark as night and have no consciousness to change but to exist.

At the beginning of the novel, the author explains how the name of “Bottom” comes. “In that
place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood......it was called the Bottom”. This name comes from a “nigger joke” that the white slave owner does not want to pay his promise and plays a trick on his black slaver, declaring the land up high in the hills is “bottom” when the God looks down. A barren place is then called as “Bottom”, which is supposed to be fertile. On the one hand, it is an absurd joke to indicate the oppression and discrimination from the white; on the other hand, the joke is an implication that the black people have been living at the bottom of the society. Here, “where the planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter”; Shadrack, suffering from psychic trauma and physical wound from the war, is arrested simply for strolling on the street; Nel and Sula are forced to change their route to school because of white bullies. That’s how the black people live, to deal with both natural disasters and social living predicament. The existence to them is, as what Levinas describes, endlessly dark night filled with oppression, discrimination, and insecurity. “The black people would have disgraced, but they had no time to think about it.” Living under this situation, the black people have no intention to change but to accept it, and even regard it as a joke, a sad one to imply their unconscious helplessness. They fall into the collective insomnia, struggling in the endless darkness.

3 The Lonely Existent

Levinas puts forward that we need to count on subject’s consciousness to end this unknown insomnia of “il y a”. Consciousness is considered as something here and given a specific position. Then he identifies it as an existent, one that splits from the invisible existence of “il y a”. He proposes the conception of “hypostasis” that the existent emerges from the boundless existence and realizes its own existence by setting up a distance with the existence. The “hypostasis” aims to “acknowledge a subject by obtaining a position in the unknown existence of ‘il y a’”. As “a monad and a loneliness”, it has “a position” in the existence. “I” am a hypostasis and have to stay alone to keep my own existence, otherwise “I” will disappear among the dark night of “il y a”. That is my destiny. The heroine in Sula is such a lonely existent who finds her isolated position in the world by breaking every traditional chain that imprisons woman.

After her best friend Nel gets married, Sula starts a lonely ten-year journey, traveling from cities to cities and meeting different kinds of people, only to find them identical in the way of living. Refusing to accept the traditional female role as a caring mother and a docile wife, Sula defies everything imposed on her by the patriarchal society. Although growing up in a family where her her grandma Eva sees it a unshakable duty to take care of men and her mother Hana treats men as the supreme guests by satisfying them sexually, Sula endeavors to live an experimental life by sleeping with men casually. Confronted with the collective insomnia of the black community, Sula is courageous to fight against the oppression from the white mainstream world and male-dominated society. She emerges as an isolated existence by stepping away from the darkness of “il y a”. She never fears the solitude, for the solitude only belongs to her, while the solitude of the black women is created by others and passed down to them.

4 Escaping from the Existence and Embracing the Other

Although Levinas emphasizes that my loneliness is inevitable after escaping from “il y a”, I have to get out of the loneliness. “We have to recognize that loneliness, one of the symbols of existence, is not the primary question to be reflected on. The question is to escape from the existence instead of loneliness.” In other words, escaping from the loneliness is simply to transcend existence or to transcend the invisible oppression from “il y a”. Thus Levinas puts forward his thought of “embracing the other”. “The other” in his book refers to “what I am not”. It embodies a diversity which is able to dispel the overwhelming uniformity of “il y a”. With regard to death, Levinas treats it as one way to escape from the existence, for death helps humans realize the diversity of existence.
and open my closed isolated existence. In this world, suffering is unavoidable to everyone. “The complete sharpness of suffering lies in its impossibility of escape.” In suffering, one is close to death. The impossibility of staying away from suffering indicates something will happen and puts one on the verge of it. That is how death comes about. Approaching to death signifies a certain relation with the total other, a strangeness which consists of diversities and cannot be assimilated. Morrison creates a special day in the novel, namely the National Suicide Day, from which the author expresses her view on death and existence.

In *Sula*, incidents of death are easy to be found, such as Eva’s burning of Plum, Hana’s sudden burning and the accidental drowning of Chicken Little. But the most mysterious one should be the National Suicide Day, created by Shadrack, a black veteran from World War I. Suffering from the psychic trauma and physical wound, he realizes the necessity of preparing for the unexpectedness of death and dying and sets the third day of January as the National Suicide Day to remind the black people of it. His efforts of spreading his message contribute to its institution into people’s thoughts, language and lives. “Easily, quietly, Suicide Day became a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio.” When Sula accidentally swings Chicken Little into the river, she runs to Shadrack’s house with fear that he might see what she did. And she comes across with Shadrack, who just comes back and relieves her with a simple word “always”. What he wants to tell her is that life is full of uncertainties with unexpected death. Shadrack’s view on death, to some degree, has an impact on Sula and enables her to scare nothing. Even when she is severely sick in bed, she embraces the death like the redwood with her own vitality and dignity, different from the other women who wait to die like the stumps, coward and humble. In Levinas book, death is a way to escape from the dark existence and ubiquitous uniformity. Sula, an unique female warrior, is excluded by the mainstream world. Death to her, can be a best way to embrace the abundant possibilities.

5 Conclusion

As a member of marginal group, both Levinas and Morrison have a deeper insight into the existence of their communities. The ultimate destination of Levinas’ theory is to advocate the possibilities of existence, opposite to the traditional western philosophy characterized by uniformity and identity in an attempt to wipe out the diversity. From the dark existence to the lonely existent, the philosopher desires to unfold the other, a total strangeness that transcends the overwhelming pain from “il y a”. Likewise, Morrison puts forward her way to cope with the predicament in *Sula*. Shadrack dispels the horrors of death by setting up the National Suicide Day; Sula escapes the uniformity of existence by embracing the other. To analyze *Sula* from the perspective of Levinas offers us a new angle to interpret the existence and death in the novel, thereby contributing to a combination between literature and philosophy.

References


