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SULA'S EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVEL ENTITLED SULA Kebebasan Eksistensial Sula dalam Novel Sula Karya Toni Morrison Ratna Asmarani [Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Diponegoro Jalan Prof. Soedarto SH, Tembalang, Semarang, Pos-el: ratna_asmarani@yahoo.com](#) (Makalah diterima tanggal 14 Februari 2014—Disetujui tanggal 25 April 2014) Abstrak: Makalah ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji permasalahan seputar kebebasan eksistensial tokoh utama perempuan muda kulit hitam. Beberapa konsep digunakan dalam kajian; yaitu, eksistensialisme perempuan kulit hitam, lecut balik eksistensial, feminisme yang mengandalkan kekuatan, dan feminisme kulit hitam. Kajian juga dilakukan dalam kerangka kritik feminis. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa tidak mudah bagi perempuan muda kulit hitam untuk mengkonstruksi, menyimpan, dan/atau menerapkan pemikirannya yang kritis berkenaan dengan kebebasan eksistensialnya sendiri. Ada berbagai lecut balik eksistensial yang harus dihadapinya. Akhirnya, tokoh perempuan yang bersikeras menyimpan pemikirannya yang kritis berkenaan dengan kebebasan keberadaannya tersebut, setelah ia gagal menerapkannya dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, masih harus menghadapi akhir yang tragis. Kata--Kata Kunci: eksistensialisme perempuan kulit hitam, lecut balik eksistensial, feminisme yang berbasis kekuatan, feminisme kulit hitam. Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the problems concerning the existential freedom of the young, black, female, main character. Several concepts are used in the analysis; namely, black women existentialism, existential backlash, power feminism, and black feminism. The analysis is also done in the frame of feminist criticism. The result of the

analysis shows that it is not easy for a young, black, female character to construct, keep, and/or perform her critical opinion concerning her own existential freedom. There are various kinds of existential backlashes that have to be faced by the female character. Finally, the female character who insists on keeping her own critical opinion concerning her own existential freedom, after she fails to put it into practice in daily life, still has to face a tragic ending. Key Words: black woman existentialism, existential backlash, power feminism, black feminism. INTRODUCTION Existential freedom, the freedom to construct and apply personal opinion in his/her existence, is a crucial problem in someone's existence. The problem is different for men or women. Not all people can succeed in possessing the existential freedom. Courage, critical thinking, the empowering way someone is brought up, high education, and supporting friends are some of the factors that may help someone to possess and keep the existential freedom. Existential backlash is the counter-attack to the existential freedom that has to be faced especially by women. Toni Morrison's novel entitled Sula raises the complicated problems surrounding the existential freedom that the young, black, female, main character strives very hard to achieve. Based on the focus of the novel, it is interesting to 121 ATAVISME, Vol. 17, No. 1, Edisi Juni 2014:121—133 analyze why Sula, the female character in the novel, has to face a tragic ending. To make the discussion easy to follow, it is useful to analyze some related points; namely, the existential freedom and existential backlashes of the female character and her resistance to her existential backlashes because all of these will lead to the tragic ending of the female character. An analysis on the existential freedom of the black female character focusing on the existential backlashes using the concept of black women existentialism has not been done by others except in Ratna Asmarani's dissertation (2010) comparing the three novels of Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Beloved, focusing on the existential freedom of the black female characters. THEORY To analyze the existential freedom in Toni Morrison's Sula, several concepts are needed. The first one is feminist criticism. This is the frame of the analysis, in which feminist criticism: "reads writing and examines its ideology and culture with a woman-centred perspective" (Humm, 1995:51). Since the focus of analysis is on a black female character, and because the frame of analysis is the feminist criticism, the concept of black feminism is needed to understand the agency of the black female character. Black feminism as a national organization emerged in 1973 pioneered by Doris Wright to accommodate the aspirations of the black women (Whelehan, 1995:107). According to hooks—bell hooks is the pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins—a black feminist theorist, black women "have a lived experience that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology" (Hooks, 1984:15). Thus, black feminism "relates to 'real life,' to women's day-to-day experience" (Hooks, 1996a:60). hooks (1995:15) also supports black women to be able to "talk back" like a bell hooks "a sharp-tongued woman, a woman who spoke her mind, a woman who was not afraid to talk back". For hooks (1992:193), a change in the life of black women, "occurs only when there is action, movement, revolution" Meanwhile, hooks also realizes that for feminism to succeed "women and men must share a common understanding—a basic knowledge of what feminism is—if it is to be a powerful mass-based political movement" (1996b:418). Collins (1991:22), another black feminist theorist, adds that black feminism basically refers to black women's struggles to obtain "human dignity and empowerment". According to Collins, empowerment: involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge, whether personal, cultural, or institutional, that perpetuate objectification and dehumanization. African American women and other individuals in subordinate groups become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group and disciplinary ways of knowing that foster our humanity as fully human subjects (1991:230). The concept of black feminism hints at the concept of power feminism, which according to Wolf (1994) has several characteristics, some of which are: Encourages a woman to

[claim her](#) individual [voice rather than merging her voice in a collective identity](#) ... Is un-- apologetically sexual ... [Acknowledges that](#) aggression, [competitiveness, the wish for autonomy and separation, even the danger of selfish and violent behavior, are as much part of female identity as are nurturant behaviors](#) (1994:138). 122 Sula's Existential Freedom ... (Ratna Asmarani) Meanwhile, the concept of existen-- tialism introduced by Sartre in his phe-- nomenal book Being and Nothingness, discusses not only the three modes of being but also freedom and conflicts in human's existence. The three modes of being according to Sartre are "being--in-- itself," "being--for--itself," and "being--for-- other." The first is the existence without consciousness and it is commonly con-- sidered as the existence of nonhuman beings. The second is the existence of hu-- man beings with its main characteristic of possessing consciousness that enables humans to negate or make choices. The third is the social existence of humans in which conflicts unavoidably exist in their relations to others since each side wants to be subject by making others as object (Sartre, 1992:800). Thus, conflict is the characteristic of the social relation of hu-- man beings in Sartre's concept of exis-- tentialism. Meanwhile, freedom is: "... [by oneself to determine oneself to wish \(in the broad sense of choosing\). In other words success is not important to](#) free-- dom" (Sartre, 1992:803). Thus, freedom is actually the characteristic of a con-- scious human being in which with his consciousness, a human being has the freedom to choose, whatever the result of his choice is. [Since the focus of analysis is on](#) a black [female character](#) and since Sartrean existentialism does not include women, the more so black women who are restricted not only by gender, but also by race and class, the concept of black women existentialism is needed. Basically the concept of black women existentialism places black women on the position of subject denied to them because of their race and sex. Since only two of Sartre's modes of being concern conscious human beings, those two are modified for the existence of black wom-- en. Thus, the second mode of being for black women is the "black--woman-- being--for--herself" which is the existence of a black woman with her conscious-- ness. In this mode of being, the black woman can use her consciousness to criticize her existence which is shad-- owed by the specific oppressions re-- lating to her race, gender, and/or class. In the third mode of being, "black--wom-- an--being--for--other," a black woman with her critical con--sciousness is face--to--face with other hu--mans whatever their race, gender, and class are. In this relation, the emergence of conflicts is unavidable since each side struggles to be in the subject position (Asmarani, 2010:51— 52). Another concept that is used is the concept of backlash since the female main character experiences negative re-- actions due to her opinion and/or ac-- tions concerning her existence. The con-- cept of backlash is first introduced by Faludi as follows: "[an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard--won](#) victo-- ries [that the feminist movement did manage to win for women](#)" (Faludi, 1992:12). This concept [is](#) still in [the](#) so-- ciological level. Since the problems faced by the female character is in the existen-- tial level, the concept of backlash is brought to the existential level. It be-- comes the black woman existential back-- lash which means a concept to criticize the ideology of black woman existential backlash. This ideology is very specific because it operates on the black woman modes of being and it collaborates with the race, class, and gender as well as the beauty myth oppressions which are against the black women from the lower class. This ideology hampers and de-- stroys the black women's existence which has been constructed bit by bit in full difficulties in their modes of being (Asmarani, 2010:59). 123 ATAVISME, Vol. 17, No. 1, Edisi Juni 2014:121—133 METHOD The analysis on Toni Morrison's novel entitled Sula is done through a contex-- tual analysis which is "[simply an analysis of a text ... that helps us to assess that text within the context of its historical and cultural setting, but also in terms of its textuality – or the qualities that char-- acterize the text as a text](#)" ([http://www.unl.edu/english/sbehrend t/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis](http://www.unl.edu/english/sbehrend t/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html).html accessed February 17, 2014). The qualitative method used is supported by a close reading which is

focused on the character, especially the character of the female main character, and other characters related to the main character. Sartre's existentialism and black feminism are combined to form the black woman existentialism suitable to analyze the main topic of the analysis. FINDING AND DISCUSSION Sula's Existential Freedom Sula, the black female main character whose name is used as the title of the novel, is a young, black girl living in a black community in an imaginary town called "the Bottom" in Lorrain, Ohio. She is described as having a specific opinion concerning the freedom of her own existence which differs very much from the black community's normative values. Actually, the indication of Sula's different opinion concerning her existence is already symbolized by the birthmark on the eyelid of one of her eyes. Here, the triggers and the forms of Sula's existential freedom will become the main concern. The Triggers of Sula's Opinion on Existential Freedom There are several factors that trigger the development of Sula's opinion on her existential freedom. The first factor is the situation of her grandmother's household. Since her father's death, Sula and her mother, Hannah, live with her grandmother, Eva, in her grandmother's house. However, Eva's house is not an ordinary house. It is a house which at the same time also functions as an inn and which is built gradually without any fixed plan as shown by the quotation below. ... a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specification of its owner, who kept on adding things: more stairways ... There were rooms that had three doors ... others that you could get to only by going through somebody's bedroom ... woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove ... where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink ... (Morrison, 1973: 29, 31). It can be said that Eva's house radiates freedom, spontaneity, intimacy, warmth, openness combined with a touch of disorderliness here and there. Brought up in such situation, young Sula grows as an independent girl full of the spirit of freedom. This is reflected in her daydreaming: "spent hours in the attic ... through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of a someone who shared both the taste and the speed" (Morrison, 1973:52). Young Sula dreams of an adventurous life accompanied by someone---the sex is unknown---who understands her completely. In other words, her imagination concerning her future life does not include a domestic life with a husband and children in its frame. However, it does include someone with which she will lead her life. The second factor triggering Sula's opinion on the existential freedom is her friendship with Nel. Young Sula Peace and young Nel Wright meet in school 124 Sula's Existential Freedom ... (Ratna Asmarani) and since then they have become close friends. They need and complete each other like two sides of a coin. Both young girls uniquely form a deeply-thought view concerning their existence as black girls: "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (Morrison, 1973:52). Their unique opinion and their closeness set them apart from the black community, if not socially then psychologically. They become one complete unit, one view on their own existence. The next triggering factor is her mother's words that she incidentally overhears. At that time, her mother is having a conversation with other mothers and they are talking about their daughters. Her mother's words that deeply influence Sula are: "Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (Morrison, 1973:57). These words make Sula realize that mother-daughter relationship is not without any reserve. It cannot be taken as granted. One cannot totally depend oneself on that relationship. Later, this realization makes her form a conclusion that blood relationship does not mean that one cannot feel detached and criticizes each other. That is why when her mother is accidentally burnt to death she watches with interest not with shocked feeling. Her unexpected reaction is detected by her perceptive grandmother (Morrison, 1973:78). It is also this realization that makes Sula has no burden in

having a hot argument with her grandmother ended in sending her grandmother to the old people's home (Morrison, 1973:94). Another triggering factor is the incident with Chicken Little, the young black poor boy, who accidentally meets young Sula and Nel. Intending to make the little boy happy, Sula swings him around and around. Unexpectedly, this action ends in disaster when the little boy's hands slip from Sula's grab causing him to directly fly towards the deep lake and inevitably get drowned (Morrison, 1973:60–61). This deadly accident and her inability to confess her role in the accident make her realize that she herself is not a dependable person. She is not the person who can take responsibility for others. This incident and her mother's words drive Sula to the opinion that nobody and no relation, however close it is, is dependable. One should not rely on others for one's life. Sula's opinion on the existential freedom is also triggered by her mother's loose sexual relationship. As a woman who simply loves maleness, Hannah, her mother, has many short sexual relationships with others' husbands whenever she wants. This leads Sula to think [that "sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" \(Morrison, 1973:44\)](#). For Sula, sexual relationship is not a sacred action should be done under legal marriage. It is a free action between a woman and a man under the short mutual agreement with no further responsibility on the either side. Forms of Sula's Existential Freedom Sula begins to practise her specific view of life on her own existence. One drastic step she takes is leaving her home town to continue her study. This is a daring action since her peers have never done that. However, this action is not surprising in the Peace family. Her grandmother, Eva, had done that when she was young due to financial hardship. Being left by the husband with three little children, she decided to leave her children with a black family and go to town. After eighteen months, she returned as a one-legged woman with a sum of money and a regular income 125 ATAVISME, Vol. 17, No. 1, Edisi Juni 2014:121–133 every month. This leads to a never ending rumour that she deliberately had a train accident resulting on a cash and a monthly insurance payment (Morrison, 1973:34). Back to Sula, she never tells anyone about her plan, not even to Nel, who chooses to follow a normative rule and role. She gets married to Jude Green. Sula does not prevent Nel's choice, she even helps the wedding preparation. However, she leaves the town silently when the wedding party is still in progress. Nel, who sees Sula's leaving, also does not prevent her friend's choice: ... [she saw through the open door a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road ... Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and that she was smiling; that something deep down in that liveness was amused \(Morrison, 1973:85\)](#). [Sula also practises her view on loose sexual relationship. In big cities, she has many lovers. Actually, this is also part of her effort to find her other half who completely understands and supports her opinion on the existential freedom.](#) When she was young and still in that small town, she found that her other half, her soulmate who understands her completely without any question, is Nel. Since Nel has chosen her own way of life, Sula tries to find the substitute of Nel. Unconsciously influenced by the heterosexual ideology, Sula tries to find it among the men she meets on her adventure in the big cities. However, the result is disappointing: ["She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman" \(Morrison, 1973:121\)](#). When she returns to the small town, the Bottom, after leaving for ten years without a single news, she already has a fixed idea on what kind of existence she would like to have. She expresses her opinion directly without any pretense to her grandmother who wants her to lead a domestic life of marrying and having children. She loudly and firmly says [that: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" \(Morrison, 1973:92\)](#). [This is](#) an existential statement strongly indicating Sula's existential freedom. It means that Sula prefers to focus on herself in order to fill in her existence with choices that she has taken. It also means that she does not care about the norms, social or moral, generally followed by the black community where

she lives. Following her existential statement, Sula really leads a life free of any norm in "the Bottom." She turns upside down many conventions and norms. She decides not to have a family of her own. She has no intention of having a husband and children and takes the gender roles as a wife and a mother like Nel. She continues having many short-time lovers including Nel's husband, regarding them as sexual partners only and treating those lovers with no love or respect. She also never tries to follow the conventions of socializing, such as praising other's food in church's fair and she even does not wear underwear on joining that event (Morrison, 1973:115). The Existential Backlashes in Sula's Existence Sula's existential freedom is considered uncommon or even controversial by the black community. There are many reactions that she has to face, either from her own grandmother or from the other members of the community. This reaction is termed as the existential backlashes because it serves as a counter attack to the existential freedom of a woman who wants to have her own way to fill in her existence. 126 Sula's Existential Freedom ... (Ratna Asmarani) The first existential backlash comes from Sula's own grandmother. This happens a moment after Sula enters Eva's house after leaving it for ten years. Her grandmother criticizes her clothes which according to her grandmother's conventional view is too open and too expensive: "Where is your coat? ... Them little old furry tails ain't going to do you no more good than they did the fox that was wearing them" (Morrison, 1973:91). Her grandmother also scolds her unconventionality of coming abruptly after sending no news at all for ten years (Morrison, 1973:92). Her grandmother directly reminds her to get married like what other women do: "... When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you" (Morrison, 1973:92). Sula, strongly holds her opinion of her existential freedom, not only rejects her grandmother's words straightforwardly, she returns them with a threat, and even finally sends her grandmother without any warning to an old people's home specifically for poor people (Morrison, 1973:112). Sula's unexpected action towards her own grandmother raises many negative reactions from the black community resulting in a kind of community banishment. The next existential backlash is done by Nel. The trigger is that Nel sees with her own eyes Sula's sexual intercourse with Jude, Nel's husband, resulting in Jude's leaving his family out of shame because Sula does not love him at all (Morrison, 1973:112). Nel directly ends their friendship and does not want to involve in whatever ways with Sula. Nel, who at first tries to understand Sula's craving for freedom, now cannot tolerate it anymore. She is deeply wounded by Sula's sexual action with her husband driven by a moment of desire only. On the part of Sula herself, she does this because she has no boundary of anything called sacred thing protected by legal marriage. Her loose sexual view drives her to do short sexual action with whoever as long as there is no force involved, even though that man is her close friend's husband. Sula faces another existential backlash from the black men in the community. Vulnerable against Sula's strong sexual temptation, they try to protect their own adulterous tendency by blaming the other side, in this case Sula. They accuse Sula for her loose sexual action and construct this further into a rumour that Sula has slept with white men. It is a disgusting, intolerable, and unpardonable action according to their view (Morrison, 1973:113). Besides from the black men, Sula's free actions of messing with the conventions also get negative reactions from the black women. Sula's return is considered as a bad omen symbolized by the unusual coming and death of thousands of robins (Morrison, 1973:112). There is also a rising rumour that Sula watches with interest when her mother is accidentally burnt to death (Morrison, 1973:112). Sula's birthmark is also thought as a negative element symbolizing the ashes of her mother's burnt body (Morrison, 1973:114). In general, they accuse Sula as the root of all evil things happening around them such as the incident of a little boy who broke his leg in front of Sula's house (Morrison, 1973:113) or the incident of an old man's sudden death due to being choked by chicken bone when he saw Sula (Morrison: 1973:114). Although not all of these

accusations can be verified as Sula's mistakes, the black community has already positioned Sula as "the pariah" of the community and they exile Sula (Morrison, 1973:122). Sula also gets an existential back-- lash from an unexpected person, that is, from Ajax. He is Sula's last lover whom she already considers as her true 127 ATAVISME, Vol. 17, No. 1, Edisi Juni 2014:121—133 soulmate because both of them worship a free existence. However, when their free relationship is growing smoothly, unconsciously Sula begins to lead a do-- mestic life style. She starts doing things closely related to the gender role of a do-- mestic woman such as paying attention to her appearance, putting accessories on her hair, waiting for Ajax, cleaning the bathtub, setting the table for dinner, making the bed, and pampering Ajax (Morrison, 1973:131—133). These are the things mostly avoided by Ajax, the true believer in the freedom of existence. Realizing that Sula has changed, Ajax de-- cides to leave her as soon as possible without a word of goodbye (Morrison, 1073:134). Ajax's action serves as the existential backlash for Sula since it cuts short Sula's dream even before it fully flourishes. Another existential backlash that has to be faced by Sula is from a mysteri-- ous disease. After Ajax's sudden depar-- ture, Sula experiences a painful empti-- ness, sorrow, and confusion. At this time, a mysterious illness creeps into her body and is quickly in charge of Sula's body. It is very painful, and Sula describes it as follows: Pain took hold. First a fluttering as of doves in her stomach, then a kind of burning, followed by a spread of thin wires to other parts of her body. Once the wires of liquid pain were in place, they jelled and began to throb. She tried concentrating on the throbs, identifying them as waves, hammer strokes, razor edges or small explosions (Morrison, 1973:148). This mysterious illness becomes the existential backlash to Sula because it blocks her physical freedom and her control over her body. Even it finally ter-- minates the existence of Sula's body (Morrison, 1973:149) and this means the termination of Sula's existence since body and soul cannot be separated in their existence. Body is the way to be in the world, thus the termination of body is the termination of a human being's ex-- istence. Sula's Resistance to the Existential Backlashes Facing incessant existential backlashes does not make the strong--willed Sula gives up easily. Although she never shows any aggressive reactions to the existential backlashes directed to her, it does not mean that she is afraid. She just does not care about all those negative re-- actions. Her indifference infuriates many people and make them hurl stronger backlashes at Sula (Morrison, 1973:113). Instead of responding to the back-- lashes, Sula, who is basically a solitary type of person, prefers to enjoy the exile. She lives in her grandmother's house without having any social communica-- tion with others. However, she insists to keep her opinion of the existential free-- dom. If there are so many backlashes from the outside world towards the ap-- plication of her existential freedom, she does not mind retreating and keeping her opinion in her mind only. For Sula, the most important thing is her critical mind, her critical view of what she really wants in her existence. She does not care whether others will agree or not. She val-- ues her mind more than others' accep-- tance. This can be seen from her words to Nel who visits her after hearing that she is dying. This is their first and last face--to--face meeting after their friend-- ship was broken several years ago. "... And besides, I never loved no man because he was worth it. Worth didn't have nothing to do with it." "What did?" "My mind did. That's all" (Morrison, 1973: 144). 128 Sula's Existential Freedom ... (Ratna Asmarani) Thus, it can be said that Sula is a true existentialist who at the same time is the representative of power feminism. She is critical concerning her surround-- ing and what she wants in her existence. She also has the courage to express her opinion and to practise her choices for her existence. Although her freedom in making and practising her choices result in many existential backlashes, she does not mind. What is important for her is her opinion concerning the existential freedom, not the success of her choices. The Tragic Ending of Sula It cannot be denied that the existential backlahes directed towards Sula have certain impacts on Sula's existence lead-- ing to her tragic ending. Here, the im-- pacts will be analyzed

on three levels; namely, on Sula's body, on Sula's consciousness, and on Sula's social life. One thing that directly has negative impact on Sula's body is the mysterious illness. So far, Sula's body has been described as healthy and enviable for the woman: "[Sula did not look her age. She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck](#)" (Morrison, 1973:115). Her body is also desirable in the eyes of the men: "... [made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her—just to get the saliva back in their mouths when they saw her](#)" (Morrison, 1973:112—113). In short, Sula's body before the illness is a body that does not cause any problem for the owner. This condition changes after the sudden attack of a mysterious, painful illness. The illness succeeds to make Sula's body lose her function. She is very weak and even almost unable to move her arms because the illness causes too much pain that drains her energy: "[Several times she tried to cry out, but the fatigue barely let her open her lips, let alone take the deep breath necessary to scream](#)" (Morrison, 1973:148). The illness even finally can terminate Sula's existence forever. Sula is dead: "[She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead](#)" (Morrison, 1973:149). This is the tragic ending of Sula's formerly healthy, sensual, and enviable body. The existential backlashes that keep coming also produce certain effect on Sula's consciousness. Although Sula has to face many negative reactions towards her opinion on the freedom of her existence, she sticks firmly to her opinion. Nothing can make her give up her critical opinion because her critical opinion is herself, the representative of her existence. Even Ajax's leaving her cannot shake her opinion on the freedom of her existence. It is true that for a while, with Ajax around her that makes her feel contented believing she has found her true soul mate, she loosens a bit of her strict existential freedom. In her comfort, she is lured into typical gender roles formerly avoided (Morrison, 1973:131—133). Although Ajax's abrupt leave at first serves as an existential backlash to her, as already discussed in the previous subtopic, later this bitter experience strengthens her opinion that there is nobody to depend on or to trust and that she has only herself and her opinion on her existential freedom. Sula's crystallized opinion is implied in her words to Nel on her deathbed: "My mind did. That's all" (Morrison, 1973:144). In other words, the various negative reactions does not make Sula abandon her critical opinion, instead they strengthen her ability to criticize the taken-for-granted norms. The ending of her critical conversation with Nel indicates her critical thinking that keeps flourishing although her body is deteriorating: 129 ATAVISME, Vol. 17, No. 1, Edisi Juni 2014:121—133 "[Oh, they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me.](#)" [The sound of her voice was as soft and distant as the look in her eyes. "After all the old women have lain with the teenagers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jail-birds ... then there'll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like"](#) (Morrison, 1973:145—146). Thus, it can be said that all the existential backlashes that strike Sula's consciousness from various direction and in various ways do not lead to the tragic ending of her opinion, instead it makes her opinion on her typical existential freedom getting more unshakeable until the termination of her physical existence in death. The negative reactions from the members of the black community, both men and women, greatly influence Sula's social life. She is cut off from the social circle. Nobody wants to socialize with her, except Shadrack, the crazy war veteran. However, Shadrack's friendly attitude towards Sula increases the community's negative reactions and gives them more justification to avoid Sula (Morrison, 1973:116—117). Thus, Sula's opinion about the existential freedom raises conflicts with the black community resulting in a social exile. However, this situation does not influence Sula's existence a little bit. She still feels contented with her existence as far as she still has her critical opinion even though it is just for her own sake and limited in her own mind. The community's

existential back-- lashes crystallize in one total action to-- wards Sula's existence as a whole. The community does not only react nega-- tively to her opinion and avoids any contact with her when she is alive, but the community does not want to involve in whatever form when she is already dead either. This results in the indiffer-- ent attitude when the news of Sula's death spreads. Nobody wants to do something relating to the burial of Sula's dead body: "None of the women left their quilt patches in disarray to run to the house. Nobody left the clothes half way through the wringer to run to the house. Even the men just said "uhn," when they heard" (Morrison, 1973:172). Thus, Sula's dead body is left on her deathbed for more than a day until Nel takes care of it using Sula's expensive death insur-- ance (Morrison, 1973:173). Evidently, being a solitary type of person, Sula has officially prepared the burial of her dead body anticipating if nobody is willing to do it. To sum up, it can be said that the tragic ending befalls Sula is caused by her insistence on keeping her personal existential freedom which is considered controversial by black community where she lives. Her firm resistance to the va-- rious existential backlashes speeds her tragic ending in the level of her physical existence and her social existence. The mysterious disease brutally terminates her physical existence and the social ex-- ile ignorantly leaves her dead body un-- attended for more than one day. How-- ever, her personal opinion on the exis-- tential freedom is still intact. Neverthe-- less, it vanishes together with the tragic ending of her physical existence. The Ideology of Toni Morrison The analysis on the black female charac-- ter of Sula written by Toni Morrison (born 1931) using feminist criticism as the frame of analysis shows that Sula, the black female fictional character, is a rep-- resentation of black feminist ideas. She is a daring female who based on her lived experience constructs her personal 130 Sula's Existential Freedom ... (Ratna Asmarani) opinion on the existential freedom and is brave enough to apply it on her social life. Through Sula, Toni Morrison trans-- mits her ideology of feminism, especially black feminism. Toni Morrison conveys her idea that a black woman should have critical opinion on her own existence. The lived experience should make a black woman dare to construct her own concept concerning what she wants to do with her own existence. A black wom-- an should also have the courage to voice her decision about her own life. How-- ever, Toni Morrison also warns about the persisting patriarchal ideology. Toni Morrison does not ignore the fact that patriarchal ideology is still lurk-- ing under many disguises to hinder a black critical woman to progress. In Sula, she shows that one of the forms of the patriarchal ideology is the existential backlash. This kind of backlash is always ready to castrate any progress made by a black woman whether on the physical, psychological, or sociological level. Toni Morrison also portrays the irony that the supporters of existential backlash are not only the male gender, but also the female gender and they may have a close and or blood relation with the targeted black woman. In other words, Toni Morrison makes the readers aware that it is diffi-- cult for a black woman to construct her own existence, it is more difficult to voice it, and it is most difficult to apply it. Patriarchal ideology permeating in every aspect and layer of life gives no space for a critical black woman to, borrowing Sula's defiant words to her grandmother, "make myself" (Morrison, 1973:92). However, it is easier for a black man to follow the kind of life he has chosen for himself, as in the case of Ajax, the male version of Sula. No social criticism, no social punishment, and no social exile happen to Ajax. He is free to live his life as he wants. Through what happens to Sula, her black fictional character, Toni Morrison reminds the readers that a black wom-- an's struggle to lead her own life is im-- possible to be realized if it is not sup-- ported by other black women. In other words, personal struggle will be easily castrated. Black women must unite to face the patriarchal ideology if they want to have their own free existence. How-- ever, Toni Morrison implied that every-- thing in extreme is not good. Sula's ex-- treme application of her concept of exis-- tential freedom in the form of legalizing free sexual life even with married men and carrying it out in a despising manner is terminated by the death of

her physical existence. This is how Toni Morrison punishes her fictional character who is out of the track. At the same Toni Morrison also reminds the readers not to carry out the idea of black feminism according to one's whim against any rule because the result is chaos not harmony. Black feminism aims at a harmonious existence in which black men and black women respect and empower each other. CONCLUSION The novel entitled *Sula* written by Toni Morrison contains the idea that it is not easy for a woman to construct, to keep, and/or to apply her critical opinion concerning her existential freedom. A woman may be able to construct in her mind what she really wants in her existence. She also may be able to keep her critical opinion in her mind. However, once she tries to express and/or practise her critical opinion concerning her existential freedom, she has to face so various existential backlashes. *Sula* in Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a good example. The way *Sula* is brought up and the surrounding environment inspire her to 131 ATAVISME, Vol. 17, No. 1, Edisi Juni 2014:121—133 become strong-willed, free, and critical. However, her grandmother who was daring and unconventional when she was young, is now the first and the strongest opponent. Turning out to be mellow and to follow the conventions with the passing of time, the grandmother, with all effort, tries to domesticate *Sula* by reminding her the gender roles that she is supposed to bear. Her close female friend, who understood her when they were young, now also gradually follows the norms and the gender roles for women. The strictly normative black community is the same. In general they think that *Sula*'s opinion on the freedom of self is controversial and cannot be tolerated. Thus, they execute many kinds of negative reaction. Even *Sula* herself unconsciously cannot totally free herself from the internalization of the gender roles. When she feels contented with her existence after finding the male soulmate she has looked for for years, she begins to settle and to adopt domestic way of life which actually contradicts her own free, adventurous spirit. Her change results in another existential backlash in which the male soulmate who possesses a truly free, adventurous spirit quickly leaves her. This backlash is followed by another one, a mysterious disease, which terminates her existence. Thus, it can be said that no matter how strong-willed a woman is, the attack of the existential backlashes is too strong for her to hold out. These backlashes do not only come from the external side, which is visible and thus easier to handle, but also from the internal side, which is invisible and thus much more difficult to realize and to handle. Moreover, the backlashes can take the nonbiological form such as words, gossips, gestures, indifference, or they can take the biological form such as a sudden, mysterious illness. The doers of the backlashes are various, close-circle people such as relative or friend, or wider-circle people such as members of the community. Besides that, the doers of the backlashes can be men or women themselves. In brief, existential backlashes have various facets so that they are too difficult to be handled by a single woman, no matter how strong-willed or prepared she is. BIBLIOGRAPHY Asmarani, Ratna. 2010. "Kebebasan Ekstensial [Tokoh Perempuan Kulit Hitam dalam Tiga Novel Toni Morrison: The Bluest Eye, Sula, dan Beloved](#)." Disertasi. FIB-UI [Behrendt, Stephen C. 2008. Contextual Analysis](#). An Article. (<http://www.unl.edu/english/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html>) accessed February 17, 2014) [Collins, Patricia Hill](#). 1991. [Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment](#). London: [Routledge](#). [Faludi, Susan](#). 1992. [Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women](#). London: [Vintage](#) hooks, Bell. 1984. [Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center](#). Boston: [South End Press](#). -----, 1992. [Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism](#). Boston: [South End Press](#). -----, 1995. "Talking Back" in *Women Images and Realities*. A Multicultural Anthology, eds. Kesselman, Amy; McNair, Lily D., Schniedewind, Nancy. (p. 13—16). Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company -----, 1996a. "Feminist Theory: A Radical Agenda" in *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories*, editor. Mary F. Rogers, consulting editor George Ritzer. (p. 56—61). New 132

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