



Contesting Perspectives In Morrison's Tar Baby

Dr. R.K. Sangsari Devi
Associate Professor
Department of English
Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, India.

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, upon its publication, brought controversial critical views. It became a great commercial success and was an important contribution to the growth of her literary career. The novel centers around the tumultuous relationship between two lovers from extremely different and conflicting economic and social backgrounds and its ultimate dissolution. Morrison draws on the African American folktale in the *Uncle Remus Tales* written by the white American writer Joe Chandler Harris. In this version, the white farmer, Brown makes a tar doll in order to trap a mischievous rabbit 'B' rer rabbit' who ruins his cabbage garden. However, the rabbit outwits the farmer by tricking him into letting him throw him bade to the Brier patch and thus making his escape. In this novel, Morrison continues the pre-dominant concern of her earlier works – the search for identity. Here she focuses on the conflict between traditional black folk values and contemporary Euro-centric aspirations. However, this present novel marks a further step from the preceding works in the magnitude and complexity of Morrison's treatment of this quest theme.

Keywords: Brier patch, tar, black, folk, Euro-centric

Tar Baby is set in the Carribean island of Isle de la chevaliers owned by a white millionaire, Valerian Street who is an inheritor of a candy company and even has a candy named after him. After his retirement from his confectionary business, Valerian comes to live in his island retreat, L'Arbe de la Crox accompanied by his young and beautiful wife, Margaret who was the former Miss Maine and his two faithful Black servant couple, Sydney and Ondine. Margaret and Valerian are not a happy couple because they have many differences but what they share in common is that they miss their son Michael together who never stays with them. Valerian is a kind employer to Sydney and Ondine. He looks after them as well as their niece, Jadine. Valerian's beautiful mansion has a green-house where he indulges himself in nurturing northern flowers by playing music to them. L'Arbe de la croix is apparently a paradise. However, we know that it is just an illusion. Beneath his benevolent exterior, Valerian is just another white exploiter. He builds his business by exploiting the Black people. He also controls Margaret's life and never acknowledges her individual freedom. His racist principles destroy her only friendship with Ondine because "she should guide the servants, not

consort with them” (Morrison 59). He controls the natural plant and animal life for “adjusting the terrain for comfortable living” (53) His cold detachment is seen in his isolated existence on the island. His only friend is Dr. Michelin, the French dentist. The story begins when Jadine Childs, Sydney’s and Ondine’s niece comes over to L’Arbe de la Croix for a Christmas family reunion. The couple had settled to adopt her when Jadine was twelve years old and had lost both her parents. Being childless themselves, they shower their love on her and sought the best for her. They instill in her “the American dream of material safety, of personal dignity defined by a steady job” (Carmean 69). Their dream materializes with Jadine’s accomplishment. She becomes a Sorbonne graduate with an advanced degree in Art History and successful Paris model who is being proposed marriage by a wealthy and handsome man. Jadine is proud of her ‘white’ image: “... an expert on cloisonné, having visited and worked with the Master Nape ... An American now living in Paris and Rome ...” (Morrison 116). She behaves more like the white Streets’ daughter and less like the Black Childs’.

As the novel opens, Valerian and Margaret argue over the anticipated arrival of Michael to join them for Christmas which sends an angry Margaret into her room. But moments later, she runs back, screaming at having discovered a Black man hiding in her closet. To everybody’s shock and amazement, Valerian, instead of making his arrest, invites him to be his guest. The man introduces himself to be Son Green, an outlaw from Florida who jumped ship to escape jail. He has been hiding in the house for several days and sneaking food. Jadine is terrified by Son’s wild appearance. Back in her room, Jadine indulges in the seductive pleasure of the seal skin coat, a gift from her white European lover Ryk until she is stricken with fear to discover Son behind her.

Son mocks her identification with the Streets and her ‘white girl’ image and taunts her pride upon her success in the white world. Jadine feels a deep hatred and anger toward such an uncivilized man. However, after Son cuts away his awful hair and makes himself presentable, Jadine finds herself irresistibly drawn towards him. In spite of her efforts to restrain, his raw masculinity stirs her passion. Soon after the disastrous Christmas dinner in the Streets’ home, Jadine and Son become lovers and escape to New York. There, Jadine experiences great happiness with Son. But Son does not feel so. Son sees in New York Black people “crying girls and the men on tippy toe” (216). Home for Son was some place far away in Elie which he began to long for. Finally, he succeeds in persuading Jadine to visit it. At Elie, she feels to be “with a pack of Neanderthals who think sex is dirty or strange or something” (257). The worst happens when she is haunted by the vision of the night women including her own mother, aunt Ondine, Son’s wife, Cheyenne, Rosa, the woman in yellow whom she met in her past and a host of women she met in Elie who come into her room and taunt her showing her their breasts while the woman in yellow, amongst them showed her three eggs.

The couple returns to New York. But their cultural differences grow so great that they finally split up. Jadine deserts Son and returns to L’Arbe de la Croix. Ondine attempts to initiate her into her familial responsibilities which Jadine ignores. At the end of the story, she takes a plane to Paris, to pursue her white dreams. Son pursues her to L’Arbe de la Croix. However, he is led by Therese, the blind old Black woman to the back shores of the island which is said to be haunted by the blind Black slave horsemen.

In the story, Jadine, the Black woman moulds herself into a typical Black bourgeoisie woman whose identification with the majority culture leads her to a rejection of her black identity. Jadine’s fundamental principle in life is industry as a key to success and freedom. Her perceptions and choices are shaped by the

materialistic values of the white capitalist society which makes her regard anything related to her own people and culture as backward, uncivilized inferior. It disconnects her from her roots and cultural identity. Falsely believing that success in the white world can assimilate her into it, her primary concern becomes the persuasion of a white definition of her 'self'. However, Jadine is often haunted by the memory of an incident where she came across a strange but strikingly beautiful black woman dressed in yellow at a grocery store in Paris while shopping for a grand dinner to celebrate her appearance on the cover of the Elle magazine. The woman is a symbolical representation of Black womanhood and its maternal power which splendor and wholeness contrasts to the vacuity of the culturally alienated Black woman. She is a personification of the retributive cultural voice against Jadine's shameful violation of her traditional and cultural role. But Jadine is too conceited and continues to lose herself in self-betrayal.

Son symbolizes the Black roots and elemental aspects, of life. His presence threatens Jadine's white image. At one point in the story when Jadine visits Sein de Vieilles, we see how she falls into the tar black slimy swamp there. She desperately clings to a tree to save herself from sinking deeper. While she struggles, the unseen female spirits hanging from the trees watch her:

They were delighted when first, they saw her thinking a runaway child has been restored to them. But on looking closer, they saw differently. This girl was trying to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant and mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness, knowing as they did, that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties (183).

Here, Morrison highlights the rich cultural significance of tar. She tells Thomas Le Clair: At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together, things like Moses little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together (McKay 122).

But as she observes, Jadine's tragedy is "that she wasn't. She could not know, she could not hold anything to herself (111). The women hanging in the trees embody the voice of tradition and ancestors. Her escape from them and resistance of the tar signifies her estrangement of her ancestors. On the other hand, her symbolic immersion in the tar completes her image as the white man's tar baby ready to lure Son, the Black man. Jadine tempts him with the pleasures of 'white' city life but Son sees only the dehumanization of Black people. On the other hand, Jadine cannot tolerate the rural and traditional Black values represented by Son's world of Eloë.

The night women represent once again, the spirit of Black womanhood, the images of breast and eggs signifying fertility and nurturance. They chastise Jadine for her denial of the nourishing heritage of her ancestral mothers. Jadine's confrontation of them dramatize the conflict between tradition and its abandonment. Their haunting becomes symbolic of the painful haunting of the guilt and fear for Jadine's abandonment of her feminine responsibilities. Each insists to save the other from what they perceive to be fatal. Jadine tries to strip Son off his folk ways. Son tries to rescue her from her selfish materialistic attitude to life but in vain: "Mama spoiled black man, will you mature with me. Culture bearing black women, whose culture are you bearing" (269). Their hostility culminates with Son's sexual assault of Jadine and his taunting tale of story of the white man's creation of the tar baby to trap the rabbit: "And you what he did? He made

him a tar baby. He made it. You hear me? He made it" (270).

The story obviously implies Son as the rabbit, Valerian as the white farmer and Jadine as his tar baby trap to lure the Black man to his fall. Jadine is shattered. She condemns Son for his inability "to forget the past and do better" (271) and decides to leave him. Son is rooted to the past while Jadine strives to forget the past to make progress. The unfortunate split between Jadine and Son warns against the loss, both for people to whom "the past is anathema" (Gates & Appiah 178) or those who ignore the present. Ondine attempts to initiate Jadine into her familial responsibilities but in vain.

While Jadine emerges as a self-centered character, Son also is not free from flaws. He is too vulnerable to her charms that he is willing to abandon his world and values. "Whereas Jadine rationalizes and fortifies in her selfishness, Son collapses and accepts Jadine's imperceptive view of Eloë" (294-295). Thus, he sets out to pursue her after she deserts him and is ready to surrender himself to her. Here the story shows how the white majority values threaten Black identity and values. Son's disappearance into the darkness of the forest at the end of the story signifies the redeeming essence of black existence and his restoration to his roots and origin.

The novel represents the conflict between opposing concepts of Black self-definition determined by tradition and the contemporary present ending without the possibility of a solution. The novel's ambiguous ending raises a lot of questions. While Jadine's disconnection from her roots endangers herself and also others, Son is redeemed by his folk-ways. But the question arises whether we should cling to the past and never look ahead to the future? If so, how will Son ever be able to function as a modern, twentieth century man? (Coleman 71). On the other hand, does Jadine's indictment point to the need for Black women to withhold their striving for freedom and concentrate more on their traditional responsibilities? Why does Jadine feel that Son is a man hard to forget? (Morrison 292). It shows that the roots cannot be severed easily. The inconclusive ending underlines the confusing position of the Black man and woman stranded between their past and present.

The biblical epigraph at the beginning of the novel defines these conflicting contentions within Jadine. In contrast to these characters who are victimized by the conflict black and white values, Therese's character boldly articulates an authentic Black voice. She is a blind and aged Black woman servant to Valerian. Once a wet nurse, her magical breasts still give sour milk. She is literally blind but is endowed with the power to see the past and the future. She is regarded as the descendent of the blind Black horsemen who inhabit the island and for whom the island is named. She knows Son's presence before anyone does. As the novel proceeds, her characters receive greater significance as Son's mother figure. She provides him food during his days of hiding. Her obsession with apples stresses her nurturing aspect. She boldly denounces Jadine who has sacrificed her roots and origin. She warns Son and succeeds in rescuing him from the clutches of Jadine who have forsaken her "ancient properties" and would destroy him. If we compare Ondine and Therese regarding their maternal role, Ondine lacks the stature Therese commands because while she fails in mentoring Jadine, Therese's becomes Son's maternal mentor who saves him. Therese's character thus represents an authentic Blackness, primal, pristine and nurturing.

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