



THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY OF AFRO - AMERICAN WOMAN IN TONY MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*



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Abstract :

African – American woman have a unique place in American life and literature. The identity of black women is unique because they still belong to a distinct group and they have been obliged to share a specific cultural experience in the American society. As black women have liberated from the slave past, a sense of the need for self – worth has awakened in their hearts. Now they are finally ready to establish this individuality and prove to the world that they existed. It lays bare the problematic nature of black woman relationship within the context of a racist, sexist and capitalistic society, with the passage

of time however conditions changed. *Tar Baby* is a study in alienation of westernized black women, in her values, outlook and way of life. Partly, the tragedy ensues due to a thoughtless following and imitation of white male values. Morrison discerns the hideous outcome of such a blind following and creates an exquisite epiphany in *Tar Baby*, reinstating black values and black heritage.

Keywords :

alienation, conflict, homeless, oppression, culture

Research Paper :

Being an African – American woman, Toni Morrison has projected African – American feminist consciousness in her writings. A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about woman's life and problems and feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. African – American woman have a unique place in American life and literature. Morrison knows this, and therefore she says "There is something inside (them) that makes (them) different from other people. It is not like men and it is not like white women. (Parker, 1979:255).

In the body of black American fiction written by this feminist writer, crucial issues like female alienation and oppression are mirrored and artistically dealt with. The very title of the novels, *Tar Baby* is based on a folktale. Ironically, Morrison also refers to the importance of tar in the African world. In

this background, Jadine is a Tar Baby who traps Son, the black woman who stands for Afro – Centric values but becomes a victim of white materialistic values and the world order represented by Jadine.

Jadine is an example of an African American woman, who does not identify herself in terms of her African American origin, or by the place, she was born in, but by her exceptional beauty, which has landed her a well – paid career in modeling industry. She thinks of herself as being self-confident and self-sufficient young woman until she encounters Son. His sexual attractiveness to her and the fact that he comes from outside and away from everything. Jadine identifies herself with, brings about Jadine to pose questions about her identity. Jadine abruptly finds herself haunted by ghosts of her African American identity and of her past. Jadine has been living according to her upbringing, her education and her motherlessness, but phenomenon of Son induces in her discomfort and as Audi claims “fragmentation”. Through Jadine, it can be clearly seen what happens to the identity of a person who is an orphan and who is fundamentally homeless.

In fact, *Tar Baby* a journey of a black woman who struggles to come to terms with her aspirations as a modern materialistic black woman as the metaphor of “tar” indicates. It is the struggle of modern black woman for self-fulfillment. Jadine is a black woman who ultimately loses her roots from both the words, and becomes a double orphan, a pariah figure. At a very early age she has lost her father and mother, and is adopted by her uncle, Sydney and aunt, Ondine. As Sydney and Ondine work for a white for a white family called the Streets. As a result, she loses her touch with the words of both the Streets and of the Child. In *Jadine Child*, Morrison depicts the problems of a contemporary black woman as :

There are several levels of the Pariah figure working in my Writing. The black community is pariah community. Black People are pariahs. The civilization of black people that lives Apart from but in juxtaposition to other civilization is a pariah Relationship. In fact, the concept of the black in this country. Is almost always one of the pariah. But a community contains Pariah it that is very useful for the conscience of that Community. (Tate, 129)

Tar Baby seeks to illustrate the consequences of rejecting one’s cultural heritage in one’s quest for wholeness and self-actualization. One such view is expressed by Marilyn S. Mobley who says : “Jadine’s quest for wholeness is unsuccessful because she accepts values and mores of white middle-class culture without question and she rejects the very cultural construction of race and mothering that could heal and transform her consciousness”. Since at the end of the novel, Jadine rejects both Son, her lover, and Sydney and Ondine her uncle and aunt, who epitomize what is most valuable in African heritage, it is suggested that Morrison indicts, Jadine for trying to affirm her identity outside her familial and historical connections.

If not her rejection of Son, her rejection of Sydney and Ondine ‘disturbs’ the reader, partly because Morrison places. Jadine’s assertion of her definition of black female identity side by side with her open towards Ondine because as Peter Erikson rightly says : “Her (Jadine’s) success in articulating and holding to a new definition of black female identity is made to depend heavily on an unfeeling attitude towards the parents who raised her.

It is made clear in the novel that all the Jadine has achieved in terms of her education and her modeling career has been possible because of the generosity of Valerian Street as a favour for the loyal service of her uncle and aunt at L’ Arbe de la Croix. Son is partly right, when, accusing Jadine of forgetting what her uncle and aunt have done for her, he says : “They are the ones, who put you through school, women, they are the ones. Not him (Valerian). They worked for him all their lives”. Jadine eloping with Son after the abortive Xmas dineer at L’ Arbe de La Croix. Without letting either the Streets or her “Parents” know about her whereabouts also creates an ‘unfavourable’ picture of Jadine. And the last encounter between Jadine and Ondine, before the former finally flees to Paris, further jeopardizes Jadine’s image. Ondine tries to persuade Jadine. To reconsider her decision to go to Paris for she feels it is fraught with danger for Jadine. On her part, Jadine suspects that Ondine is suggesting that it is Jadine’s duty to support her aunt and uncle, that Ondine wants Jadine to ‘parent’ them. It is then that Jadine tells Ondine, rather tactlessly no doubt, what perhaps has prompted commentators to quote evidence of Jadine’s unfeeling attitude to her aunt and uncle.

While one accepts the validity of argument that argument that Morrison is examining Jadine as an orphan, the novel also offers the validity of looking at it as an examination of a young, highly educated black woman’s efforts at freeing herself from the stranglehold of her culture’s conventions and restrictions. Morrison may not have celebrated Jadine’s triumph in rejecting her familial and historical past. On the contrary, the reader is left with a sense of apprehension about the consequences of a Jadine’s flight to Paris. But Jadine’s aversion for and her struggle to free herself from the bonds of her

heritage, and her quest for self-actualization are also examined, less directly though it is done. In other words, there is a possibility of seeing the negative aspects of Jadine's struggle for self-confirmation and therefore seeing it as Morrison's indictment of Jadine rather than as an attempt on the author's part to examine the direction of Jadine's life and how difficult human choices are—especially the choices for a black woman of Jadine's kind who wants to search for her identity even if it leaves her emotionally and spiritually uncertain.

Jadine Child is a tar baby who traps, Son, the black man who stands for Afro-centric values but falls a prey to the white materialistic values and the world order that this is represented by Jadine. In addition to this, Morrison also suggests another meaning of the word Tar Baby :

I found there is a tar lady in African mythology, I started Thinking about her. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at Least as important, because tar was used to build things..... it Held things together. For, the tar baby comes to mean the black Woman who can hold things together. The story (the novel Tar Baby) was a point of departure to history and prophecy (Leclair, 27)

It is this quality of tar-to hold things together—that Jadine is missing and as a result she acts as a Tar Baby created by a farmer (the white man) to catch a rabbit Son, the black man.

Morrison describes Jadine as a person who loses her identity as a black woman, internalizes the white values and forces Son, a criminal turned lover and later on her husband, to abandon his identity as a Blackman. She internalizes white values so much so that like any other white woman, when she finds Son in her closet, she thinks that being a black man he would rape her. Son's response is very revealing: "Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you? Quite contrary to Jadine, Mr. Street protects Son and tries to help him. (TB 121). Jadine thinks that Mr. Street was mistaken. She says "I Know you are an animal because I smell you". (123).

Though Jadine is a black woman, she is an anti-thesis of the black folk and community values. (Coleman, 64). She is Sorbonee educated, widely traveled, leading the life of an internationally successful model, who keeps herself away from the black values and ancient properties and is ashamed of herself away from the black values and ancient properties and is ashamed of herself and her heritage. Michael, son of Margaret and Valerian, asks her as to why she was studying the history of her own people and her race. (TB 90). Thus, by neglecting the history of her race, she rejects her real self and in place of it, she tries to transplant the white "Self".

Though Sidney and Ondine are all the family she has, Valerian provides everything for her. But she never understands that Valerian has been taking care of her because her uncle. Sydney and aunt Ondine have been working for the Streets all their lives. However, all the education that she receives does not tell her anything about her own people and their history. Thus, Jadine is trained, educated and brainwashed to ignore her own history, culture and also the history and culture of African-American people. By living in a white house and by living in the Proximity of white culture, she learns more about the whites and their values. Hence, she considers Son as backward in the initial stage of their relationship and in the final stage when she gets an opportunity to live with him in Eloë, the birthplace of Son. The very presence of Son in L' Abre de la Croix, the house of Streets was repulsive to her in the beginning but later on her detestation turns into fascination for him. As a result, she falls in love with blackness. Son's very presence restores something of her black awareness and prompts her to recall the guilt she felt two months before when a beautiful African woman in a canary yellow dress spit on her in disgust in a Paris street". (Otten, 1-7).

Morrison shows Jadine's confusion about her cultural identity through her reaction to African women. Jadine is a black woman who has been hitherto played by Western rules and values. After this incident in the market, Jadine begins questioning her life and the direction in which she is heading, she travels to the island to be with her relatives and benefactor in order to think and sort out her confusion. Thus, her encounter with the woman in yellow causes her to realize that her acceptance of Western values has lost her the potential for exploring and realizing her own history and culture.

In the company of Son, Jadine temporarily finds something that is restorative in his impulsiveness and powerful black pride. However, Son cannot live comfortably in Jadine's self-destructive paradise. When Son takes her to his lost garden in Eloë, it is apparent that she cannot in his world. For it, apparently a world of poverty, ignorance and isolation, Eloë, in fact embodies all the blackness she had long struggled to escape. (Otten 161) Their trip to Eloë is also very important. It is here on the island that she learns about the authentic blackness and love Son has for Jadine.

The journey to Eloë is, in fact, a journey into the heart of Africa. It is after this trip with Son, that Jadine begins to confront her own inner ambiguities and tensions. On one occasion, for instance she

walks into the forest in order to get out of swamp, and suddenly finds herself sinking in a quagmire. Mud covers her from her waist down threatens to pull her in deeper. The image is that of a woman cut in half. Half of her covered with blackness, the other half white.

Once Jadine and Son move to New York, Jadine, for the first time, gets the feel of a home. It is here she learns what a home is. In company of Son, she comes to realize: "This is home, she thought with an orphan delight, not pairs, not Baltimore, not Philadelphia. This is home. (223). In addition to this, gradually she comes to feel unorphaned as Son cherishes and guards her. They live their life in a Texan way and love each other.

On the island, Jadine is exposed for the first time to various dimensions of black selfhood. An almost overwhelming and a recurring image that seems to occupy her imagination is that of big-breasted women. While most men have looked upon Jadine purely as an object of lust, these black women offer her a vision of a different kind. Morrison systematically builds up a dynamic contact between images of breast and frequent references to the female sex organ.

Symbolically, Jadine is taught by them the principal of nurture and meaningfulness of one's own black womanhood. The women's breasts are an important symbol of black womanhood. The breast is a source of nourishment and essence of womanhood. In a waking nightmare, Jadine comes across the black women who expose their breasts in defiance. The woman in her dream has not forgotten their "ancient properties". Jadine, however, wants to be a new type of black woman, a woman whose life is not based on traditional experience. She is exposed as a person who changes religious beliefs or a *Tar Baby* who is both slippery and rootless.

Morrison's *Tar Baby*, portrays how African – American women, under the white duress, suffer at many levels. Jadine loses her ethnic self when she attempts to emulate the white concepts. She fails in this attempt and seems to be removed away from the white consciousness finding herself lost. She is representative of African American Subaltern who is misguided severally by her own instincts and also by the environment she has been brought up in. Like her uncle and aunt, she exiles herself from her ethnic self while living in an oppressive parochial world. Her attempts to internalize white values forces Son to abandon his identity as a blackman making him doubly others. L'Arbe de la croix, in fact, is a site of oppression where we see the baleful impact of capitalism on the marginalized people displacing their real self into others.

Toni Morrison in her novel provides a very detailed description of the different experiences of the African American woman who have been in search for their identity. She deals with multiple oppressions that contribute to the identity formation of the African Americans, in general. She explores African American woman by a process of going deeper into the main characters' past. What is essential here in Jadine's conflict with herself when she cannot preserve a sense of her identity. Being completely removed from home, her roots; she is not capable of funding her true connections to home, to her past. Morrison in this novel *Tar Baby* depicts the struggle of an African American woman who tries her best to keep her identity and individuality despite the effects of her love who wants to make her like the other women of his childhood, like her aunt who too wants to chain her past and her white industrialist, who wants to bind her to his world. Jadine is caught in between two cultures. Society does not support anyone who wants to come up in life. The Black society wants Jadine to be like them and the white society doesn't accept her for the only reason that she is black.

The prices she pays for sticking on to herself is very high. She loses Son, the relationship with the ondin's weakens and she does not have Valerians help too. She flies off alone and determined. Some might see flies off alone and determined. Some might see this as defeat, but Morrison's story of the soldier ants narrated in the novel's end says that the queen ant is the dominant force and this reveals Jadine's power and strength giving possibilities rather than defeat.

The racial inequalities, the search for identity and the disharmony that exist in the psyche of the character are due to the disharmony outside the community, which help the character to survive through struggle by erasing the pain. The character enlightens the aspect of hope in hopelessness.

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