



DEPRIVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN TONI MORRISON'S "TAR BABY"

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ABSTRACT



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Toni Morrison's "Tar Baby" represents a new type of radical woman Jadine as a purely individual self. Jadine denies her own Black cultural heritage for the attainment of her individuality in White culture. At the same time Morrison describes the tragic consequences for African- American people when they blindly follow and embrace the ideals of white society. Jadine loses her parents at very early age and is adopted by her uncle Sydney and her aunt Ondine. They work for white family. Jadine is trained, educated and lived through the capitalistic white world, loves Son, who is the representative of African culture. Son fails in his attempt to imbue the black community values for which Jadine also belongs. Both Jadine and Son are incapable of accepting each other's values and they break their relationship. Jadine feels safeguard and security in White culture than in Black culture. Her fear to lose her self-esteem in patriarchy results in her deprivation of black cultural heritage which suggests that her selfhood is only partial.

Key Words: Cultural Heritage, Equality, Literacy, Individuality.

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Tar Baby is the first of Toni Morrison's novels with white people as central characters. This novel sets on a Caribbean Island, the Isle des Chevaliers, the home of a retired American candy mogul, Valerian Street, a White man, who is a representative of capitalistic society. By setting her fiction in Caribbean, Morrison wants to include many different cultures including the island natives, Philadelphia African- Americans, and Western imperialists who are mutually dependent on one another to fulfill their financial needs but at the same time are separated from sense of community. Barbara Christian observes that the Geographical background of characters plays an important role in African – American heritage as,

As in the ancestral African tradition place is as important as the human actors. For the land is a participant in the maintenance of folk tradition. It is one of the necessary constants through which the folk dramatize the meaning of life, as it is passed on from one generation to the next... And a change in place drastically alters the traditional values that give their life coherence. (65)

In "Tar Baby" Morrison states Jadine, the female protagonist, " has lost her ancient properties"(308), that is black cultural heritage. Jadine consciously deny her African culture as She has rooted in the white capitalistic culture. Despite attempts to reinforce her racial and cultural awareness Jadine rejects her African lineage and exists in White

culture. What can be pointed here is that Jadine does not consciously lose her cultural bearing as a black woman. For nowhere in the novel does she receive rites of initiation into her cultural values in her most impressionable years.

Morrison describes the tragic consequences for African- American people when they blindly follow and embrace the ideals of white society. Racial discrimination emanates not only from the White but also the African – American society. Here in “Tarbaby” Jadine dies culturally and spiritually because she mimics white values and is alienated from her native culture. In these novel Whites do not hate African- Americans but African- Americans hate African- Americans. Jadine feels that she is not an African- American but a Euro- American. She is a modern woman who has no respect for the culture and norms of African- American people. At a very early age she losses her father and mother and is adopted by her uncle Sydney and her aunt Ondine. As Sydney and Ondine work for the white family of Valerian and Margaret Street, she is raised under the care and protection of the Streets. As a result, she losses touch with both the worlds, African-American as well as White. She desires money and fame. She gets lured by glitter and glamour and considers her aunt as backward. Ondine teaches her the idea of woman:

Jadine a girl has to be a daughter first, she has to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, She can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man- good enough even for the respect of other women. (283)

She objects immediately:

“There are other ways to be a woman, Nandine” Jadine went on. “ Your way is one, I Guess it is, but it's not my way. I don't want to be . . . you. . . . I don't want to be like that kind of woman”. (284)

The folklore of tar baby serves as a motif in this novel. It takes its point of departure from the old folk tale of Br'er Rabbit:

A farmer sets out a tar baby dressed in bonnet and skirt to trap a troublesome rabbit. The rabbit hits the tarbaby when it

does not answer any good morning. He gets stuck and when caught he begs the farmer, “ boil me in oil , skin me alive but please don't throw me in the briar patch”. The farmer falls for the trick. So he throws him in briar patch and the clever rabbit escapes. (Leclair 27)

In the context of this folklore, Jadine Childs is the tar baby who traps Son, the African- American man who stands for the Afro- Centric values but falls prey to the White materialistic values that she represents. In addition to this, Morrison also suggests another meaning for tar baby:

I found that there is a tar baby in American mythology I started thinking about her. At one time a tar pit was a holy place, at last important because tar was used to build things. . . . It held things together. For, the tar baby goes comes to mean the black woman who can hold things together. (Leclair 122).

This is the quality of tar-to hold things together- that Jadine is missing, and as a result she acts as a tar baby created by Valerian to catch a rabbit, Son , who is the bearer of the African-American culture and values.

Valerian Street, a white man, is representative of capitalistic society. He is a person who runs after money and has made his fortune by exploiting the labour of poor African- American people and by taking their land. He insults African- Americans which shows his inhumanity towards them. He is always unconcerned about his workers, which is why Ondine shouts, “ I may be cook, Mr. Street, but I am a person too” (208). Valerian measures a person's worth by the wealth that he owns. He wishes to control other people's lives; he spends his money in order to impress others. For instance he buys expensive dresses for Margaret and bears Jadine's college expenses.

Sydney, Ondine and Jadine mimic the behavioural patterns, dress, and language of their white masters. Ondine and Sydney feel privileged to be the servants of such important and rich masters. Ondine calls the Streets' kitchen “my kitchen” and adopts her master's culture as her own. Sydney proudly reveals his ignorance of African

culture, "I am Phil-a-delphia Negro . . . My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other" (164).

Jadine often thinks of herself as an adoring daughter of the Streets. She keeps herself away from African- American values and is ashamed of her heritage. 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 Sydney and Ondine are all the family she has, Valerian provides everything for her. Jadine never understands that Valerian has been taking care of her because her uncle Sydney and her aunt Ondine have been working for the Streets all the lives. However, all the education that she receives does not tell her anything about her own people and her history. Thus Jadine is trained, educated and brainwashed to ignore her own history and culture.

Jadine has so absorbed capitalistic values that she considers Son primitive, backward and uncivilized in the initial stage of her relationship and also in the final stage when she gets an opportunity to live with him in Eloë, Son's birthplace. The very presence of Son in L' Arbède La Criox, the home of the Streets, is repulsive to her in the beginning but later on changes into a fascination with him. As a result, she falls in love with blackness. Son's very presence restores something of her African-American awareness and forces her to recall the guilt she had felt two months ago when a beautiful African woman in a canary yellow dress spit on her in disgust in a Paris street:

The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress? The woman walked down the Aile as though her many-coloured sandals were pressing gold tracks on the floor.
. . . . the woman turned her head sharply around the left and looked right at Jadine. . . . with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her Teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below. (42- 43)

After this incident Jadine begins questioning her life and its directions. The encounter with the " woman in yellow" causes her to realize that her acceptance of Western values has denied her the potential for

exploring and realizing her own history and culture. She is made to evaluate herself on the basis of a visual exchange and gesture that offer an external definition of self by the " other".

However, once she accepts Son, she moves away from her whiteness to meet the genuine authenticity of blackness represented by Son and his world. In his company Jadine temporarily finds something that is something restorative in his impulsiveness and powerful African-American pride. When Son takes her to his lost garden in Eloë, it is apparent that she cannot live in this world of poverty, ignorance and isolation. Eloë, embodies all the "blackness" she had long struggled to escape.

Yet their trip to Eloë is very important. It is here on the island that she learns about authentic blackness and love. After the trip with Son, Jadine begins to confront her own inner ambiguities and tensions. On one occasion She walks into forest in order to get out of the swamp and suddenly finds herself sinking in a quagmire. Mud covers her from her waist down and 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. Jadine is so far away from her community that she becomes a part of the West. The familiar world at Eloë is shockingly new to her, and she is unable to become one with African- American people. In Eloë, Jadine for the first time realizes her nudity when aunt Rosa accidentally finds her naked in bed. She reflects, " No man had made her feel that naked, that unclothed. Leers, lovers, doctors, artists – none of them had made her feel exposed. More than exposed. Obscene" (255).

On the island Jadine is exposed for the first time to various dimensions of African- American selfhood. An overwhelming and recurring image that seems to occupy her imagination is that big-breasted women. While most men have looked upon Jadine purely as an object of lust, these women offer her a vision of different kind. Jadine is taught by them the principle of nurture and the significance of one's own African – American womanhood. In a waking nightmare she comes across African- American woman who expose their breasts in defiance. The women in her dream have not forgotten their ancient properties. Jadine,

however, wants to be a new type of African-American woman, a woman whose life is not based on traditional experience.

Unlike Jadine, Son is a lover of his native land. He embodies African – American values, whereas Jadine embodies white values. He loves to be in a natural environment and is attuned to nature. He feels emotional sensitivity for struggling African people. He sees himself as a member of exploited class although he himself is not exploited. He is the only one who changes Jadine to some extent, but that change is very little. She thinks that she cannot adapt to his world, and Son too feels the same way. When Jadine insists on Son getting a law degree so that both can be employed and educated, he protests, “ I don’t want to know their (white) laws; I want to know mine” (265). And he comments on Jadine’s apathetic attitude : “ what the hell kind of education is it that didn’t teach you about Gideon and Old man and me. Nothing about me” (267).

Son does attempt to disabuse Jadine of her capitalistic ideology, but that change is momentary. She resists any efforts on his part to sensitize her to the life of African- American people. But She feels her hope in the light of New York as, “This is home, she thought with an orphan’s delight; not Paris, not Baltimore, not Philadelphia. This is home” (223). As Jadine loves New York and sees it as her home, it is not surprising that she hates Son’s Eden, Eloe, which is just the opposite of New York. When Jadine goes to Eloe, she behaves like a typical European tourist. She takes photographs of poor people, laughs at them and insults them. Moreover, because she has a longer association with Europeans than with Africans, her ways are, in fact, more European than African. For Jadine Eloe is the blackest thing she has ever seen. It is, indeed too Black, too much like Africa and its culture for Jadine. Thus, She goes back to her sophisticated world of fashion, forgetting that she is also part and parcel of the same race. When She finds that Son cannot be changed, She says,

I can’t let you hurt me again. You stay in that medieval slave basket if you want To. You will stay there by yourself. Don’t ask me to do with you. I won’t. There

Is nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better, that’s All I have been trying to help you do. That’s the only revenge, for us to get over.

Way over. (274).

Both are incapable of accepting each other’s values. Jadine cannot accept the African-American past, and Son cannot accept her White present. As a result, their relationship collapses. Instead of going back to woebegone days, Son and Jadine, in particular, and all African- American people, in general, must extract the positive things from traditional Africa and modern capitalism, with Africa as a center in order to forge a new society.

Jadine feels safeguard and security in White culture than in Black culture. To construct her independent self she feels, “ that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside-not American – not black- just me?” (45). As a new woman she expects respect and equality from the opposite sex. At the same time she perceives the reality that male domination survives everywhere. Horrified by the existential reality of exploitation of woman Jadine resolves to preserve her individual female sexuality through her education and self-esteem. She herself expressed her fear of losing her ‘self’ as, “ the submitting of the female self to the blind sexual instincts and drives can become a dangerous loss of self” (132). Thus she represents herself as a new kind of black woman, who can deny even her own black culture for the sake of attaining self independence.

Jadine is not totally negating herself from her black culture but emphasis on her choices which are more oriented towards the Western culture, that accounts for her upbringing than her own black culture that failed to provide her the requisite nurturing in the most important phase of her life. Jadine is a contemporary feminist, and certainly a break from the stereotype woman. Her consistent attempts to define herself as a model in the white culture can be accepted as her one means of self-expression for female identity. But her subsequent denial of her racial awareness from which she has evolved as a black and a female, even after self-identity in the White cultural context, can be argued as her partial self- awareness. Her failure to

reconcile to her racial heritage however remote after her reconciliation to her ascribed American identity, suggests that her selfhood is only partial.

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