

The Internal Battle of Jadine in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby

M. Geetha¹, Dr. K. Muthuraman²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University

²Professor of English, Department of English, Annamalai University

Received: 10.07.2024

Revised: 14.08.2024

Accepted: 03.09.2024

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is predominantly concerned with the problems encountered by black women in the racially oppressed environment in the US. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison portrays the inner battle of a single woman, Jadine, to balance her optimistic white lifestyle with her African American heritage. This is the only novel of Morrison wherein white characters participate in the life of the black protagonist and play a vital role. Sydney and Ondine are shown as being generously employed by Valerian and Margaret Street, who gleefully take advantage of their little niece Jadine, the protagonist of the novel.

Keywords: American, Morrison, African, Jadine.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's fiction comes from inside her own mental universe, which has been moulded by her experiences as a black woman, formal education in English and the classics at Harvard and Cornell Universities, and the black society she was raised in. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison portrays the inner battle of a single woman, Jadine, to balance her optimistic white lifestyle with her African American heritage. This is the only novel of hers wherein white characters actively participate in the life of the black protagonist and hold important roles. Sydney and Ondine are shown as being generously employed by Valerian and Margaret Street, who gleefully take advantage of their little niece Jadine, the protagonist of the novel.

The novel focuses more on the issues that arise from the intricate class structure within the black subculture than it does on the relationships between black people and white people. While some members of the majority culture observe these developments with amusement and others with disgust, the novel occasionally expresses judgement and occasionally reserves it.

Tar Baby is a continuation of her former issues as well as a divergence from her previous novels. The novel advances and integrates the central idea of Morrison's three previous novels. Her first creative liberation occurs when she places her creations on the Caribbean Island of Isle des Chevaliers, which is owned by retired Euro-American candy billionaire Valerian Street. Karen Carmean, in Toni Morrison's *World of Fiction*, aver:

For the first time, she presented -both black and White characters who play major roles. She extended her canvas, moving from the 'village' setting typical of her first three novels to the Caribbean and beyond ... *Tar Baby* contains some of Morrison's very best writing, and comes off as something of tour de force. (62-63)

According to Morrison, Jadine is one of the novel's "tar babies," a product of capitalist America. She hates black people and anything connected to them because her conduct, appearance, language, and beliefs are all those of the white people. She is more loyal to the Streets than she is to Sydney and Ondine, who both lust for her. She and her benefactors and surrogate parents are staying on the island for several months.

Jadine goes to supper with the Streets. Margaret finds the time she spends at the table to be extremely taxing as usual. After spending many years with Valerian, she never learned table etiquette, and today she commits a small error for which Valerian chastises her. While Margaret views Valerian's time on the island as merely a holiday, Valerian informs Jadine that he plans to remain there until the day he dies. Jadine also learns that Valerian adored his son - possibly even more than Margaret did. Margaret was never truly in love with Michael. She would take him outside on the days she felt a strong attraction to him. She would ignore him the rest of the days. She simply taught him how to whine, and he used to moan about everything and anything.

It becomes more and more evident as the narrator presents the household characters that they all have some things in common. Every individual seems to be cut off not only from other people or from a haven, but also from a certain custom or set of common principles. To make up for their deficiencies, every character - whether consciously or unconsciously - adopts a role that helps them hide and eventually avoid any indications of distinction that could otherwise intrude.

There is fear in Valerian's home when the wanted person shows up. William Son Green had entered the Street home after arriving on the island, where he had remained hidden for around a week before being discovered. Upon approaching him, they discover Sidney brandishing a revolver at the man. Instead of giving the intruder over to the police, Valerian surprises everyone by asking him out for a drink. The Valerian home will never be the same after he arrives. Son startles everyone in the household and shattering their illusions with "skin as dark as a riverbed, his eyes as steady and clear as a thieves" (113).

Like a contemporary version of the Brier Rabbit, he is a vagabond who goes by several aliases and social identities, a "running man" who shows "an inability to stay anywhere for long" (143). He was raised in the predominantly black Florida community of Eloë and is currently being held accountable for the unintentional death of his cheating wife. Terrified and confused, Ondine thinks the man upstairs was not a Negro, or one of them. According to Sydney, he is a "stinking ignorant swamp nigger ... a wild-eyed pervert" (100).

Jadine finds him repulsive, smelling like an animal, and she questions whether he can tell one black person from another when Valerian invites him to supper. She yells at him in disbelief when he walks into her room without warning. She detests the smell coming from him. Valerian enters her bathroom, uses all her amenities, cleans himself, and wraps himself in her towel as she descends to protest to him. When her husband extends an invitation to Son to remain at their home and eat supper with them, Margaret is taken aback. She believes that this invader will ruin her Christmas meal and interfere with her son's stay. He later apologises to everyone for his impolite attitude. Son is drawn to Jadine because she is conditioned by her affluent European education and is unaware of her own blackness; Son's presence awakens some of Jadine's black consciousness, much like Guitar does in *Song of Solomon*.

Jadine wants to transform him so that he fits within her refined, white world. She is powerless to resist him once he starts to display his sophisticated side. Still, she finds herself drawn to his unadulterated, raw force. He once informs Jadine, "I have personally discovered that there is something in you that can be smelled" (99). Furthermore, it cannot be hidden by a million-dollar earring or a sealskin suit. When Son comes at Valerian's house, Jadine is given the chance to re-discover her "other" true self.

Christmas Eve is a complete bust because no one shows up. Everything that has been prepared is a waste. As usual, Michael lets us down. Valerian chooses to ask the servants to make up for this setback. Everything is going well until Valerian informs them that Gideon and Therese have been sacked because they stole some apples. Ondine becomes quite upset and wonders why he is doing it. Sidney backs her in her demonstration. They believe that consultation was due.

Valerian urges them all to leave when the fight reaches its climax, but Ondine is furious and will not go. Ondine jumps up and hits Margaret after she tosses a glass at her. She goes on to explain her hatred for Margaret, a sadist who used to burn her own child with cigarettes and pierce him with pins. Because she feared losing her career, Ondine kept her love for him a secret. Valerian is heartbroken to hear this. He cannot even move.

Valerian's home is severely shaken by Ondine's confession, turning it into a "demoralised house" that is stunned into quiet for a while. Although Son serves as the impetus for disintegration, Jadine remains the novel's focal point of opposition due to the dubious relationship between maternity and nurturing. Jadine runs from a warped picture of mothering gone wrong, just as she did from the real, maternal presence of the African woman. Jade also gets the chance to develop her own alternative social model due to Son's compliance.

Following the Christmas dinner fiasco, Jadine and Son make the decision to cohabit. She does not want anyone else on the island to know about her affair with Son, so they travel to New York. Their lives are good at first. Jadine experiences what she refers to as an orphan's delight - a sense of being almost at home. Son, however, perceives the city from a gloomier and darker angle and perceives a completely different race of people. The two lovers appear to be in harmony and pleasure, despite this. Son insisted on going back to Eloë, where he intends to help Jadine rediscover her cultural heritage. In *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison*, Terry Otten outlines their primary distinction:

But clearly Son cannot live comfortably in Jadine's self-constructed paradise ... Jadine had long struggled to escape. To Son it represents the opposite: self-worth, wholeness, and human values. (76)

Jadine despises Eloë, Son's Eden. She is more European than African due to her long contact with European culture. Eloë and Son, in her opinion, are too black and too like African culture. She is adamant about not joining the crowd.

Jadine has been sleeping in a small, windowless room that gives her the impression that she is in a cave, a grave, or the shadowy womb of the earth. The artwork here represents Jade's reluctance to conform to the many accepted cultural conceptions of what it means to be a woman and a Black person. Her disapproval of traditional maternity and culture is demonstrated by her unable to identify or relate to the women of Eloë.

Jadine and Son frequently argue and have conflicts. She was initially forced to sleep at Aunt Rosa's home. Son goes to bed with her the following day. She encounters a terrifying situation. In her fantasy, every woman she is ever known shows up to witness them making love. She believes that these women are all trying to harm her, bind her, or tie her up. Jadine believes that these "night women" are criticising her for eschewing the conventional motherly role in favour of pursuing financial success.

Jadine quickly decides she wants to get away from this "black world" and the allure of being a tar baby. She is eager to return to Paris and resume her work. She does not want Sidney and Ondine to become too dependent on her and limit her independence. Son quickly follows her as she leaves for France, arriving on the island to look for her. He meets Gideon and Therese, who are sympathetic to him. They force him to meet Alma, who witnessed her board the aircraft. Though she is unsure of her exact destination, she informs him that Jadine is on her way to Paris. Son makes the decision to visit the island and inquire. Given that it is pouring and no one would put him in a boat, Gideon is opposed to the idea. Therese offers to take him. She asks him to find the location after dropping him off at the far end of the island.

Jadine is a black woman who becomes a double orphan after losing her roots in both worlds. She was taken up by her uncle Sydney and Ondine after losing her mother and father at a young age. She is looked after and protected by Valerian and Margaret Street because Sydney and Ondine are employed by Streets. Jadine thus becomes disconnected from the worlds of the Streets and the Children. She avoids the archaic qualities and black values because of her education and international fame. She feels self-conscious about her background. The question of why she was studying art history at a pretentious institution rather than learning about the history of her own people and race is posed to her by Michael, the son of Margaret and Valerian. She so rejects her own self and attempts to transplant the white self by ignoring her race's past. She learns nothing about the past and culture of her own people from all the education she gets.

Jadine has been brainwashed, indoctrinated, and educated to disregard both her own history and culture as well as the history and culture of African Americans. She gains more knowledge about white people and their ideals by being in a white house and being surrounded by white culture. As a result, when she first meets Son and later, when she has the chance to live with him in Eloë, she views him as being behind. She was initially disgusted by Son's mere existence in *L'Arbe de la Croix*, the home of Streets, but eventually her dislike of him changes to intrigue. She consequently develops a passion for blacks. Her black awareness is somewhat restored by Son's presence, and she is reminded of the shame she experienced two months prior when a stunning African woman in a canary yellow outfit spit on her in disdain on a Paris Street. When the black woman in the yellow dress challenged Jadine, she was forced to face her cultural background.

Jadine is severely and permanently affected by the woman's seeming response to her; she can never get rid of the image of the woman or the expression in her eyes when she spits at her. The African woman's "arrow of saliva" is obviously an indication of her contempt for Jadine and everything she stands for, but she was unable to understand why the offensive gesture had taken her by surprise and caused her to become unbalanced. Jadine momentarily finds solace in Son's impulsiveness and strong black pride while they are together.

Son cannot live in Jadine's devastating paradise with ease. It becomes clear that she is unable to survive in Son's world when he shows her his lost garden in Eloë. It seems to be a world of ignorance, poverty, and isolation. Eloë represents everything that Jadine has long battled to break free from. Their journey to Eloë is also crucial since it is here, on the island, that she discovers the true nature of blackness and the depth of Son's love for her.

Son and Jadine's trip to Eloë is a voyage across the centre of Africa. It is quite illuminating and educational for Jadine. These night women are also aware that Jadine was essentially struggling to escape them, and they were amazed by the girl's intense desperation to be free and to be someone else entirely. Like the female communities in *Song of Solomon*, these night women are a positive force that are determined to erase the dark, unconscious past of Jadine's identity, cure her of her inauthenticity, and bring back the ancient qualities that she has lost due to her disconnection from her culture.

Following her visit to Eloë, Jadine starts to face her own inner conflicts and uncertainties. To escape the swamp, she ventures into the forest, only to find herself submerged in a quagmire. Her waist down, mud covers her, threatening to draw her further under. The picture is of a halved woman. Her black hair covering half of her, her white half.

Jadine finds the world of Eloë's families startlingly unfamiliar, and she struggles to integrate with the Black community. When Aunt Rosa discovers Jadine nude in bed at Eloë, Jadine becomes aware of her nudity for the first time. Jadine and Son is a sociological analysis of the two opposing cultures, with the sensuous, primitive Son embodied by the best aspects of black culture and the refined Jadine embodying the best aspects of white culture. Together, they stand for the schizophrenia that comes with being black in a predominantly white country.

Ironically, the conflict between them creates animosity based on race. As Denise Heinze, in *The Dilemma of 'Double-Consciousness': Toni Morrison's Novels*, avers: "Jadine and Son could be no further apart culturally and ideologically had they been of different races" (37). Their relationship turns violent because they are unable to work through their disagreements, which is an example of how the culture is becoming psychologically fractured. In essence, Son serves as a reminder of Jadine's heritage, which she tries to ignore, while Jadine stands for fake values and false relationships.

Because of her addiction to the white world, Jadine will never be able to return to the simple life of Black people. Son, in a similar vein, can never mature into a middle-class black individual who accepts Western notions of meaning and worth. Their relationship has been adversarial since their first meeting since Son fights for the interests of the underprivileged black people, while Jadine fights for the interests of white people. Given how drastically different these interests are from one another, their relationship can only last as long as one of them is willing to adapt. Son wants to bring Jadine's people's predicament to her attention.

Unfortunately, though, Jadine does not change - rather, the opposite occurs. Son is incredibly enthralled, corrupted, and allows the world of white people to take advantage of him. Son is tricked into becoming the tar baby, Jadine, who despises African Americans in general and Son specifically by her gullible adherence to white ideals. In convincing her of these values' detrimental repercussions. Son becomes ensnared. Since nothing works out in either Jadine's or Son's advantage, they are both at a loss. Jadine, to succeed in a white culture, has to give up her black background since she is torn between her sexuality and her ethnicity.

Tar Baby uses biblical and religious implications to illustrate the transition from innocence to experience. Son is persuaded to return to his roots, while Jadine returns to her previous way of life in Paris. Son goes back to the Isle des Chevaliers but is unable to find Jadine. Therese tells him to look to his own people, who are waiting for him back, and leave Jadine to her counterfeit life. At last, he withdraws to the island's riders, and it is believed that he has joined them in their ceaseless meanderings through the forest, akin to the rabbit that is tossed back into the briar patch.

In *Tar Baby*, the black women's pain and exploitation are relatively gentler and less than in her previous novels. With her newfound insight, Morrison can offer a workable solution to the long-standing exploitation, oppression, and suffering of them by giving her female characters a voice to oppose their oppressors.

In *Tar Baby*, the conflicts between generations within the black community are expressed, and the concept of black female womanhood is redefined - not in terms of genetics, but in terms of the decisions women make. In addition to tensions between generations, the novel portrays problems between the various classes stated earlier, which are embodied by the characters in the novel. The idea of choice is important because the decisions one makes either contribute to or alleviate tensions between different classes and generations.

Morrison believes that Africans can only move forward by uniting in their common struggle against capitalism and white oppression. She investigated the worst of the African enslavement era. She believes that while slavery was still in its infancy, Africans' status as second-class citizens whose labour was abused had not changed all that much. According to her, Africans should not be impeded by white people's ideologies; instead, they should teach the next generation about their history, much like Solomon did in *Song of Solomon*, and they should not fight a lonely war, like *Tar Baby* did.

Morrison criticises the white educational system once more in *Tar Baby*, arguing that it provides no life skills or anything practically useful to help students survive in this world. She makes the implication that this kind of education simply prepares students for aristocratic lifestyles and assumes that those who attend such institutions are vastly superior to others in their class.

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