



Cultural conflicts in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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Abstract

Blacks were subjected to multiple oppressions by Imperialistic powers. As a result of this exploitation, they kept away from their culture and traditions. Culture of community plays a vital role in survival of human being. Blacks were subjected to white standards, traditions and hegemonic culture which are alien to them and as a result had devastating effect on their survival. This paper is concerned with the exploration of cultural conflicts in *Tar Baby* (1981) by Toni Morrison. It examines role of their cultural heritage and traditions in black women's development in the American society. *Tar Baby* is studied as the basis for this analysis, because it depicts the cultural differences and their effect on the development of the black people in different forms, especially on women's life.

Keywords: hegemony; tradition; culture; community

Introduction

Toni Morrison, a leading African American woman writer, whose work explores the different aspects of the black's lives under capitalist world. The uniqueness of Toni Morrison's writings lies in revealing the beauty and hope in the darkness of America. Morrison seeks to produce literature which is indisputably black and her imaginative excellence lies in her balance between black culture and modern progressive way of life. Although firmly anchored to the cultural heritage and social concerns of black Americans, her works exhibits the universal mythic patterns and overtones.

Tar Baby (1981) is considered as most complicated work of Toni Morrison as it explored the thematic and aesthetic issues. Morrison explores not only the relationships between races, gender and class but also exposes the ill effects of dominant culture in the relationship between black men and women who were subjected to different culture. Culture of a society is associated with their ancestral history. In *Tar Baby* (1981), Black culture and communities are part of the African American heritage.

Culture is as a way of life and their way of celebrating festivities of a group of people or community. Art, literature, costumes, customs and traditions of a country reflects the culture of its community that makes the pattern of human activities. Therefore, Culture, in opinion of Stuart Hall "is the sum of the available descriptions through which societies makes sense of and reflects their common experiences." (33) Culture is studied under the cultural studies. So it is opt to discuss *Tar Baby* (1981) in the light of effects of cultural hegemony.

Toni Morrison sets her fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981) in a Caribbean island, the Isle des Chevaliers outside the geographical boundaries of America. The novelist has incorporated the different cultures of natives, migrants and western colonialists who are dependent on each other to meet their needs and at the same time they are isolated from each

other in a sense of community. So, the place of the community plays an important role in the novels of Toni Morrison as land and communities are part of African American heritage as Babara Christian pointed out 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. Setting then is organic to the characters' view of themselves. And change in place drastically alters the traditional values that give their life coherence. (65)

Tar Baby (1981) is a failed love story of Jadine and son Green who are different from each other in their attitude towards dominant class and their traditional culture. Morrison has described the consequences of the African American people who blindly follow the ideals of dominant white society. Jadine, the protagonist of the novel, is alienated from her native culture and died spiritually and culturally as she mimics white values as brought up in a western culture. She considers herself as a European not African American. She has no respect for African American values. In this novel white does not hates blacks but Black hates Blacks as observed in the epigraph of the novel as "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chole, that there are contentions among you" (*Corinthians*, 1:11) Blacks are divided within the community.

The most devastating effects of the cultural hegemony are explored through the main character of Jadine Childs. She lost her mother and father at very early age and brought by her uncle Sydney and her aunt Ondine. As her uncle and her aunt work for American white capitalist family of Valerian and Margarete Street, she grown up according to European values and lost her connection with African American heritage. She

craves for money and fame as pointed out by James Coleman as “an antithesis of the black folk and community values.” (64)

American considers blacks as primitive race and treats them as subhuman and considers them as a source of manual labour. Jadine also acquired same attitude from white American towards fellow blacks. When she finds Son Green in her closet, she thinks that since he is a black man, he will rape her as “You rape me and they’ll feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger” (Morrison, 163) and Son’s response is very revealing that “Rape? Why you little girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?” (Morrison, 163) Morrison here reveals devastating effect of dominant culture on the black people.

Jadine thinks herself as well groomed and keeps herself away from the African American values and feels ashamed of her own culture and traditions. She considers herself as emancipated girl who follow the standard of white American values and culture. She is convinced of her abilities, confident of her beauty and charm. But she encounters insult by the beauty of a black woman in yellow dress when she was shopping in Super Market for a party thrown to celebrate her success and could not understand “why she had wanted that woman to like and respect her.” (Morrison, 47) The image of that woman haunted her throughout the novel by reminding that the black woman has retained all that she has rejected all African American traditions and culture as Babara Christian has pointed out the purpose of presenting the black women in yellow dress by Morrison as:

Toni Morrison uses the image of the African woman in yellow dress as a symbol for the authenticity that the Jaded Jadine lacks. It is this woman’s inner strength, beauty that haunts Jadine’s dream and throws her into such a state of confusion- cultural confusion. (244)

Thus, the encounter with woman in yellow dress compel her to realize that her acceptance of Western values and culture has denied her the potential for exploring and realizing her own history and culture.

However, when she accepted Son Green, she moves away to Eloë to meet the genuine authenticity of blackness represented by Son Green and his world. It is here she learns about the authentic blackness and love. Here, Jadine is self conscious and self sufficient while Son represents the black community. She refuses to understand the old age concerns of her aunt Ondine and her wish to live with Jadine which is a part of African American culture and traditions to look after old age parents as she says that:

Please don’t need me now, not now. I can’t parent now. I cannot be needed now. Another time, please I have spent it all. Please don’t need me now. (Morrison, 280)

Thus, she evades from her responsibility of looking after old age parents. When Ondine tells her the idea of a woman as:

Jadine, a girl has to be a daughter first. She has to learn that. And if she never learns how to be daughter; she can’t never learn how to be a women. 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. Now you didn’t have a mother long enough to; learn much about it and thought I was doing right by sending you to all them schools and so I never told you it and I should have. You don’t need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain way, a certain careful way about people older than you are. (Morrison, 281)

Jadine don’t accept her advice and objects immediately as “There are other ways to be a woman, Nandine, your way is one, I guess it is, but It’s not my way. I don’t want to be like you. I don’t want to learn how to be the kind of woman... I don’t want to be that kind of woman.” (Morrison, 282) Thus, Morrison reveals the disturbing effects on a child brought up according to the traditions and values of a hegemonic culture.

Tar Baby (1981) traces the ill effects of cultural alienation on Jadine, the protagonist. Jadine does not hesitate to accept the white culture. Because she had lost her parent at the age of 12, and had a break from her traditions and culture. Ondine and Sydney, her uncle and aunt, and care taker, widened this gap by sending her to the boarding school in a European culture. The adult Jadine feels equipped with white culture and considers her a part of it and African American culture is alien to her.

Jadine is unfamiliar with her own black culture. She forgets her own culture, ancestors and community to become successful. She is not only keeping herself away from the black culture but also make choices of western culture with which she brought up. She is not aware of artistic qualities of her culture but also alienated from the understanding of the core beauty of her own culture. She typifies her adoption of European culture in her behaviour, actions and in her beliefs and rejects the suggestion of her external behaviour. She is against the idea of being defined “what a black woman is or ought to be” (Morrison, 121). She has her own criteria and defined herself according to those criteria. Toni Morrison wants to alert all the women who are disconnected from her community and culture through the character of Jadine.

She is self oriented and has a very narrow definition of self. She gives more importance to self identity which is more important for her development than to identify herself with the two cultures and declares that “I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside – not – American – not black – just me?” (Morrison, 48). She has disagreement with Son and argues that “you stay in that medieval slave basket if you want to. You stay there by yourself. Don’t ask me to do it with you. I won’t.” (Morrison, 271) She even refuses to be a daughter of Ondine and to marry Son.

On contrary to Jadine, Son Green strongly believes in communal bond and spirituality. Son is brought up in the black community which is oppositional to the white culture. He has got sufficient cultural nourishment from black community. When Jadine insists on him to pursue a law degree and become employed in a decent manner, he refuses to be made by Jadine and responds that “I do not want to know their laws, I want to know mine” (Morrison, 263). He is not materialistic like Jadine and proud of his place in his community. He denies Jadine’s offer to succeed economically because he fears that these material plans would lead a genocide of class totally and responds as “you think I won’t

do all that company shit because I don't know how? I can do anything! But I'll be goddamn if I'll do that one." (Morrison, 270) Jadine represents western culture while Son is pure product of black culture as pointed out by Wilfred D Samuels as:

His dread locked hair is more than chic; he is Africa's son the bearer of its culture and values its black Messiah come to save Jadine from the streets of Babylon. (85)

Both Son and Jadine have different perception of culture. Jadine represents western culture and Son is bearer of Africa's culture and values, who risks his life to save Jadine from her benefactor. He accuses Jadine for being more loyal to her white master than to him and feels irritated at her attitude towards accepting white traditions and wants other fellow blacks to be look like them and blames her to "turn little black babies into little white one's; you turn your black brothers into white brothers; you turn your men into white men and when a black woman treat me like what I am, what I really am, you say she's spoiling me" (Morrison, 270).

The most critical part of the novel is cultural conflict between Jadine and Son as one of them is detached from her cultural roots and other is committed to his cultural roots heritage. Son loves Jadine and Jadine loves western culture. He lives for her but she is self centered. He is an angry black man and lives according to the rules and values of his cultural system. He is like a Tea Cake in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Sandra Paquet points out that "(Son) the ancestral figure is iconoclastic folk hero as lover who wants to take her home to the folk as his bride" (500). Son wants to rescue Jadine from the exploitative system of capitalism.

Like a capitalist, Jadine wants to control over Son but he didn't surrendered himself against his cultural values. They go in two different ways. Jadine reminds him of his inauthentic existence and remind him that his own people are waiting for him. Son returns to his people with the horseman for never ending journey as:

There... are you sure?... If she answered he could not hear it, and he certainly could not see her, so he went... he ran. Lickety split. Lickety split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right" (306).

Son loses Jadine but retains his cultural lifestyle. He gains wholeness but Jadine does not able to clear her cultural confrontations and continue in living in fragmentation. Son and Jadine have irresistible attraction towards each other and want to use and abuse the other. In way of controlling each other, they lose each other in the end and both go in different path. Son is a positive man and returned to his black community.

In *Tar Baby* (1981), a love story of Jadine and Son, Morrison develops a cultural relationship between man and woman as Eleanor Tylor states that

It is a story of a man in search of nourishment and of a woman whose nourishing power, cut off from sory of a world where pretension wars with authenticity and where people who live in the world must choose, for there are

guides. And those guides throughout the fabulous fiction of Toni Morrison, are legion. They are, for instance, women who, like those to whom *Tar Baby* is dedicated, are representative of culture of a time, of a magnificence perpetually preserve in human history" (149)

The conflict between the life and humanism of black culture and lifeless and materialistic white culture reign throughout the novel. Jadine finds herself between the white culture of Paris and black culture of her lover. On the other hand, Son finds himself torn between his black culture and bourgeois culture of his lover. Jadine emerges as a hard driving, self-centered and materialistic black girl who has no affiliation towards her black people and folk past, while Son is black man with strong fraternal feeling and strong connections with black folk culture.

Through *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison wants to express her firm belief in the importance of cultural knowledge of heritage. Though, she didn't provide a suitable alternative existence for her people and this is the thematic weakness of the novel. Cultural conflict, in form of class struggle, is the dominant theme throughout the novel. Morrison's heighten awareness is not sufficient in providing a suitable solution to the plight of African American peoples as pointed out by Nellie McKey as:

A unified African people who control over their own destiny, Who see Africa at the core of their existence, who abide by The principles of humanism, collectivism and egalitarianism, And who extract and utilize only those positive elements from Traditional African culture as well as other culture. (160)

Thus, *Tar Baby* (1981) can be interpreted as a cautionary warning to black people in which Toni Morrison narrates an African American story to expose the danger of white middle class aspirations of the black woman and to illustrate the consequences of her social and cultural misbehaviour. Although the novel explores these consequences of the tensions inherent in the binary oppositions of the black and the white, the poor and rich, the female and male, the African and European, the central reasons for Jadine's divided consciousness is her rejection of the cultural constructions of race and mothering that are part of her African American heritage.

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