

'The Ancestor as Foundation' in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison makes use of elements of 'Black art' as a literary technique in her fictional works. She has developed her own theoretical concept of this art in her essays and critical writings. The focus of this paper is to analyze how she applies her theoretical concepts drawn from oral tradition into her fictional works through a study of her characters and storytelling technique in *Tar Baby*. The novel can be considered a reinvented folktale in which the author has presented relevant complicated issues of identity set against the backdrop of colonization. The paper highlights Morrison's use of folkloric elements both stylistically and thematically in her recreation of an African American folktale by embedding it in a contemporary tale that reveals the complexity of a postcolonial identity in the face of cultural erosion. Central to this is her concept of ancestral wisdom, found in the ancestors, as a source of cultural identity, which is the major theme of the novel.

Keywords- Black Art, Literary Technique, Folktale Reinvented, Cultural Identity, Colonization

Toni Morrison is an important figure in the literary world whose presence is noted not just for her fictional works but also for her incisive views as a literary critic and cultural commentator. She positions herself as a black

writer whose literary career was spurred because of the absence of herself as a subject in the literature that she read. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* was conceptualized to address this lacuna she found in mainstream American literature. Since then, she has established her oeuvre by developing a distinctive body of writing that focuses primarily on the lives of the African Americans and their cultural values, creating what she calls literature that is "irrevocably, indisputably black" ("Memory" 332). She does this by drawing on the oral tradition of her own African folkloric culture and incorporating aspects of their art in her fiction. Also, a recurrent theme that is found in all her novels is the invariable presence of an ancestor figure, an elder, who functions as the culture bearer in the community. Morrison has explicated on her literary art in various essays and critical writings such as "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," and in numerous speeches and interviews.

The novel *Tar Baby* (1981) is based on a popular African American folktale. Memory becomes an important factor while drawing from oral sources. In "Memory, Creation and Fiction," Morrison explains that she depends on the ruse of memory and invention, "because I cannot trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me know the truth about my own cultural sources" (328). Therefore, in the writing of *Tar Baby*, she relied on memory to recollect the told story and "refused to read a modern or Westernized version the *told* story" (ibid 332). She asserts:

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality... the critical voice that upholds tradition and communal values and that also

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provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions. (ibid 331)

Further, in her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison identifies the link between folklore as ancestral wisdom and the ancestral figure as the foundation of cultural identity: “when you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself” (344). Through this she also calls attention to the relationship between individual identity and community.

Donald Haase notes that “the typical African American storyteller is an old woman (8). In a tribute to the storytelling tradition in her family, Morrison dedicates *Tar Baby* to the many women at whose feet she first learned both to listen and to tell stories, including her mother and grandmothers. She asserts that “folklore may have begun as allegory for natural or social phenomena...but folk lore can also contain myths that re-activate themselves endlessly through providers – the people who repeat, reshape, reconstitute and reinterpret them” (“Unspeakable” 30). Drawing on this repository of stories, she reinvents and reinterprets the Tar Baby folktale in the novel and does what she calls “dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal” (LeClair 123). Morrison is interested not in “re-telling the tale” but in “working out a piece of lore, a folk tale” (“Unspeakable” 30).

The folktale is believed to have probably originated in Ghana but became uniquely American through retellings on Southern plantations. The Tar Baby story is associated with the popular trickster figure Br'er Rabbit. In the tale, Br'er Fox attempts to trick his arch enemy Br'er Rabbit by placing a sticky doll made from tar in its path (the Tar Baby). After Br'er Rabbit gets stuck to the doll, he tricks Br'er Fox into helping him escape. In another variant of the tale, Br'er Rabbit is also interpreted as representing a black slave who tricks or outwits his white master. A white farmer makes the tar baby to trap a rabbit that

keeps eating the cabbages in his garden. When caught in the trap, he manages to escape by cleverly getting thrown into the briar patch and outwitting the master (Haase 9). The ‘Tar Baby’ is a metaphor of entrapment. In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison reverses this common perception saying:

“Tar Baby” is also a name like, like “nigger,” that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall...at one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things...for me the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. (122-3)

Morrison’s recreation of the tale begins with a highly symbolic setting that weaves together the fable of Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby with the destruction of nature under the guise of civilization and progress. What distinguishes *Tar Baby* from her earlier novels is having colonization as its central concern. The primary setting of the story, the Caribbean island ‘Isle des Chevaliers,’ “three hundred years ago had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it” (Morrison 6). It symbolizes a virgin world where civilization by forced labour has disturbed the balance of nature (Traylor 137). It now has “magnificent winter houses” that were built by importing labourers from Haiti to clear the land. But the “clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue sky of the sky were no longer permanent” (Morrison 7).

The re-created white farmer in *Tar Baby* is Valerian Street, a candy manufacturer who has accumulated his wealth by exploiting on the labour of the African masses. The roots of his business are in the Caribbean soil where the main ingredients of candy- sugar and cocoa are produced. On his private island, he detaches himself and retreats into his green house where he grows plants that are not native to the area. As noted by Philip Page, Valerian’s house is

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“the symbol of hegemony over nature, blacks and females, and its ill effects suggest the damage inflicted by that system” (110-11). By building a replica of his childhood house to enjoy his childhood memory, he attempts “to alter the law of nature and to establish his own law” (Mori 98). His recreated paradise called L’Arbe de la Croix is reminiscent of the plantation homes during slavery which functioned under a hierarchical set-up with the ostensibly benevolent white owner as master, the loyal black house slaves like Ondine and Sidney, and the field slaves like Gideon and Therese, natives of the island. Thus Morrison’s recreated tale also alludes to slavery and the plantation era.

Son, the ‘Brer Rabbit’ of the story enters into this house as an intruder, and disrupts the seeming order in the Street home. A poor and uneducated black refugee who jumps ship and swims ashore, he is a thief who comes to steal food like the rabbit in the folktale. Son is set in contrast to Valerian, with his abundant knowledge of the natural world. However, his presence in the house causes chaos and disorder. He triggers the residents of the Street household to express their suppressed and hidden feelings at the Christmas dinner. As Aoi Mori argues, the chaos and “confusing turmoil caused by Son is the antidote necessary for establishing new order” (100). Valerian is made to painfully learn his failure as a father and Margaret, finally freed from her repressed past, tries to reconcile with Ondine. This incident destroys the hierarchical structure in the house and dethrones Valerian. Son’s character as the Brer Rabbit however, departs from the folktale hereafter, as he is no longer the one who tricks or outsmarts people. Morrison merges the roles of characters and Son dissolves into the Tar Baby and loses his authoritative power when he meets and falls in love with Jadine.

Jadine Childs, the ‘Tar Baby’ of the novel is an orphan who is alienated from her

African American roots by circumstances of her upbringing. She has been educated at posh schools by her uncle and aunt with financial help from Valerian Street, for whom they work. Raised to be separate from black folk life and culture, economic security and social advancement are the core values of her upbringing. She has assimilated into the white world as an educated fashion model. When she returns from school therefore, Jadine experiences crisis of identity. She does not fit into any category as she is neither a field slave like the hired help nor a house slave like her aunt and uncle; nor is she a member of the ruling class like Valerian. Without an identity and a culture, she is both a literal orphan and metaphorical cultural orphan. She is on a quest for selfhood, but rejects the values of her surrogate parents, thereby losing her ancestral relationship with folk culture. She has an education in art history but is ignorant about her own culture and history. Her knowledge of western aesthetics rather makes her despise African art: “Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of *his* genius, not the mask-maker’s” (Morrison 72).

According to Philip Page, “Jadine is divided between glitzy, white materialism and her maternal and racial instincts, and she can only see the two as mutually exclusive choices” (116). Her decision to lean more towards the former points out the power of capitalism in stripping away an individual’s culture. She had just been chosen for the cover of *Elle* when she encounters the woman in yellow at a supermarket in Paris, who spits at her in contempt: “a woman much too tall...the skin like tar against her canary yellow dress...that woman’s woman – that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty – took it all away” (Morrison 43). The woman who represents the real strength of African American women makes her aware of her inauthenticity. She is aware of her cultural orphanage but continues

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to shun her culture. Jadine is the antithetical Tar Baby who rejects Afrocentric values in pursuit of all things Eurocentric - the Tar Baby made by the white man and placed as an obstruction in the path of those who intrude in the white man's territory.

Morrison presents the community as the source of racial empowerment. Jadine's separation from her community keeps her ignorant of her own culture and values. Her aunt Ondine later owns her failure to teach her these values: "I never told you nothing at all and I take full responsibility for that" (Morrison 283). But she realizes this too late because Jadine is already far too detached from her ancient properties. Her easy assimilation into white society is related to the loss of her mother in early childhood. Her mother's death and her upbringing away from home deprive her of a supportive community and female solidarity as she continues to stay away from the matriarchal circle. As she is about to leave for Paris in the end, Ondine tries to explain to her what a daughter is, in the hope that she would care for them in their old age: "Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first... a daughter is a woman who cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her (Ibid). Jadine's reply clearly indicates her total detachment from her roots:

There are other ways to be a woman... 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 you're talking about because I don't want to be that kind of woman. (Ibid 284)

Seen in the light of Morrison's notion of the ancestor as foundation, Jadine's cultural orphanage can be attributed to Sidney and Ondine's failure to keep her connected to her heritage and allowing her to be influenced by Valerian's values. Mori observes that Ondine's failure to communicate their cultural values to Jadine is because she is also alienated from her

community. Living on the isolated island, she forgets how the community functions. "Without this memory, Ondine is unable to guide Jadine toward any kind of self-sustaining integration into the black community" (Mori 103). In Morrison's novels, women are the culture bearers who pass on the ancestral memory and ancient properties of traditional black culture. With Jadine being motherless, and Ondine forgetting her responsibility, this role is played by Marie - Therese, in *Tar Baby*.

Therese, a blind former nursemaid who now works as a washerwoman for Valerian, is considered a witch because she is able to commune with nature and has second sight. She is the one who knows how to rescue Son when he gets stuck to the Tar Baby. She also has the qualities of the trickster. Son was in danger of losing his ancient properties and at risk of having his values negatively transformed like Jadine. He was incapable of freeing himself. Even though he was determined to follow Jadine to Paris and find her, Therese tricks him out of the briar patch by taking him to the back of the island, and giving him the option to choose freedom, to be reconnected to his past. She tells Son "there is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties ... You can choose now. You can get free of her... Go there. Choose them" (Morrison 308). She sends him to join the mythic blind men of the island. Marie- Therese has not lost her ancient properties. In fact, she is "the keeper of history and is the center of Black female authority in *Tar Baby*" (Beaulieu 131). Therefore, she is the ancestor figure in the novel, and Morrison's tar baby - "the black woman who can hold things together" (LeClair 123).

According to Trudier Harris, Jadine is antithetical to African American folk tradition because "the culture she bears is not that with an African base but that with a basis on notions of realizing the American dream" (Morrison 127). In the end when she rejects everything

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and everybody and decides to return to Paris and “begin at Go”, it is a decision to reinvent herself without the strictures of any kind of attachment. She becomes a true orphan, free to create herself as she desires. However unconventional her choice may be, by escaping the confining, tarlike strictures of community and responsibility, Jadine embodies the trickster’s urge to escape the strictures of the tar and its quality of survival. Her character demonstrates the ambivalence of ‘tar’ and suggests that its binding properties which can hold things together are equally restrictive. Through Jadine, Morrison suggests a new sense of individuality that may be achievable as she transcends race and gender, depending only on her individual self for wholeness.

Though Morrison values and draws extensively on her African American tradition, she equally questions its strictures and limitations. Considering their history of slavery, any return to the past for the African Americans is reminiscent of a return to their subservient status. Therefore, “by allowing these multiple readings, Morrison incorporates the ambiguity and amorality of classic trickster tales while preventing a reductive connection between her work and the folk tradition” (Beaulieu 255). Her art therefore presents an alternative rendering to the mainstream narrative.

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