

Quest for safe Heavens in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate in 1993 for literature, the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African American literature, exposes the discrepancies of race and culture through her acclaimed novel Tar Baby.

Thus this paper exposes the nature of safe heavens people create for each other and they think them safe while the second person viewing it as unsafe tries to escape from it. One can observe the pattern first in the relationship of black and white and then there is the main relationship of the protagonists of the novel, Jadine and Son. Though both of them belong to the same culture as they are Afro-Americans, but Jadine loses her identity as a black woman and accepts white values. Son quite contradictory to Jadine, has a great sense of belonging to his community and culture. In spite of so many incongruities they (Son and Jadine) fall in love. This is further complicated by their different outlooks on life. Jadine and Son can be said to be a sociological study of two different cultures. He understands the conspiracy of the capitalists and attempts to kill Jadine's old white and capitalist ideology.

Keywords:

discrepancies; oppressors; bourgeois; colour; safe heavens; incongruities; capitalist; ideology

Paper

Toni Morrison, the Nobel laureate in 1993 for literature, the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African American literature, has been recognized as a strident voice for the exploited black people as well as a master craftsman of the dominant artistic form. Adorned with National Book Award for *Sula*, (1974) National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977), and the Pulitzer Prize, she has confirmed her permanent place in the heart of her readers. It is her passion for writing for the upliftment of society that has made her reach at the crest of popularity. The magic effects of her writings can easily be observed in America as before 1950 the Negroes (African American or black people) had no right to write or fight for their right but today Mr. Barack Obama, the Negro, is the first person of USA. It is the best example of indiscrimination (due to the sorcerous or genius effect of literature) that he was elected twice in the same and highest rank in continuation.

Tar baby is a fable for these modern times when old stories are unfamiliar to a recent generation that needs to learn its lessons as much, if not more, than the

previous generations. As a paradigm of black and white relationship, Morrison updates the tale, revises it to accommodate her form and to reflect her themes. To identify the pit falls of contemporary life for those who are running from the past,

“The novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before We don’t live in the places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel.”¹

By the year 1981, the year of her fourth book *Tar baby*, Morrison’s writing career was a stunning show, “Choreographed by the Madison Avenue machinery (which) spun into highest gear”. Morrison was, the reviewer continued, “the toast of the world”, appearing at parties and on television, giving readings and (arguably the most remarkable of these unveilings) appearing on the 30 March 1984, cover of *Newsweek*. Morrison’s by now familiar and unsentimental response to the magazine’s coverage was that she could not believe *Newsweek* will have a middle aged colored woman on its cover.”²

The title of *Tar Baby* invokes the African American folk fable that, with some variations, is told and retold in African communities and throughout American black community and has been popularized among non-black by Walt Disney. In a conversation with Toni Morrison, Charles Raus tells Morrison that this story was told by Uncle Remus, recorded by Joel Chandler Haris. Morrison tells that she never read the story but it was one of the stories they (as

children) were told. It is supposed to be a little funny story, but something in it terrifies her. What frightens her in the notion of the Tar Baby? It is a lump of tar shaped like a baby, with a dress on and a bonnet. It is a sunny day and the tar is melting, and the rabbit is getting stuck and more stuck. It is really quite monstrous. The rabbit approaches it and says good morning and expects it to say good morning back. He anticipated a civilized response and when he did not respond, he was outraged and therefore got stuck and went to his death of course as in most peasant literature, that sort of weak but cunning animal gets out of it by his cleverness. As in the previous novel *Song of Solomon*, Morrison in the present work also plays on the variations; re corrects it to make the people aware about the modern pit falls of literature and culture. She just gives these characters different roles, “Tar Baby being a black woman and the rabbit a black man. I introduced a white man and remembered the tar. The first that it was made out of tar and was a black woman, if it was made to trap a Blackman, the white man made her for that purpose. That was the beginning of the story.”³

The novel opens in a household of Valerian and Margaret Street on the Caribbean island of Isle De Chevaliers. The larger community is inhabited primarily by wealthy white American and indigenous blacks whose labour they exploit. Street household is composed of the Streets, their longtime devoted servants Sydney and Ondine Childs; and occasionally by Jadine Childs, the Streets protégée and Sydney’s niece. One Christmas season the tranquility of their paradise is disturbed when Son Green an African American fugitive is discovered hiding in Margaret’s bedroom closet. The Streets Childses are repelled by him but they cannot avoid his touch. His presence forces them to confront secrets they had previously ignored.

“Son might therefore be read as a Tar Baby to the extent that the other characters cannot escape his touch and are transformed by it. But he refers to Jadine as a Tar baby as well a figure created by white man’s institution to trap black men.”⁴ Despite or perhaps because of their differences, Son and Jadine find themselves in a passionate affair. Son is seduced by Jadine’s beauty and sophistication; Jadine is compelled by his earthly sensuality. When they move to United States, each is threatened by other’s world. Son cannot fit into Jadine’s life in New York. Jadine hopes to convince Son to get an education and become a professional. Her efforts to change him are no more successful than his attempts to have her at *Eloe*. Jadine first flees to Isle De Chevaliers and then to Paris. At the end of the novel, Son arrives on the Island to pursuit of Jadine, although it remains unclear whether any reconciliation between them is possible.

The novel exposes the nature of safe heavens people create for each other and they think them safe while the second person viewing it as unsafe tries to escape from it. One can observe the pattern first in the relationship of black and white and then there is the main relationship of the protagonists of the novel, Jadine and Son. Recognizing the people of African descent no matter where they are, share a common history and a common oppression, Morrison uses the Caribbean island as an island that presents conflicting trends of thoughts. By setting her novel in the Caribbean, Morrison is able to incorporate several different cultures, including the island natives, Philadelphian Negroes and Western imperialists who are mutually dependent upon each other due to the economic need but alienated from any sense of community. The respective myths of blacks and whites and of the people who have a sense of community, determines the relationship of the people on the island.

Morrison is aware of the viciousness of Capitalization and racism as she understands that all people of African descent have a common oppression and need a common solution. There is need to seek a common solution that can be achieved with the help of common struggle. However, in *Tar Baby* the struggle against race and class does not go beyond an individual, Son, the revolutionary protagonist who fails to realize that there are some Africans like Jadine who would refuse to struggle against evil forces though they are conscious of the fact that they are the primary enemy of African people. Morrison makes qualitative development in theme of the novel by introducing European Americans as the major characters first time in her novels. They play as the ruling class in the African’s oppression. Not only this, they also impose their own superior ideology upon some of the black people who in their own way reverse the order of the system in the end of the novel. Significantly Morrison does not choose European of the lower or the middle classes but those of the ruling class. It is not by accident that the work is more socialist in nature as it reveals the selfish individualism promoted by capitalism and its devastating effects on African people.

Valerian suffers from the arrogance afflicting the majority of his social and economic class. He is a typical capitalist who has made his fortune by exploiting the labour of the African masses and by stealing their land. “His wealth emanates from the production of the Candy, the main ingredients of which Sugar and Cocoa came from the Caribbean, once the sugar capital of Western world.”⁵ With his arrogance he rearranges the wild beautiful island to install his foreign presence possible, the arrogance that allows him, “to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort.”⁶ Although he had taken the Sugar

and Cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value as though the cutting of the cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value, but he turned it into candy the involution of it was really a child's play, and sold it to children and made a fortune in order to move near the jungle where the sugar came from and build a place with more of their labour and then hire them to do more of the work, he was not capable of and pay them again according the some scale of value that would outrage Satan himself and when these people want a little bit of what he wants some apple for their Christmas and take some, he dismisses them with the flutter of fingers because for him they are thieves and nobody knows the thieves better than he does and he probably thinks that he is a law abiding man. For Valerian one's worth as a human beings is measured only by inhuman values of wealth and status.

Valerian, however, does not sink completely in the white men's burden of responsibility for the planet's sorrow. He is part borne up by his acts of decency: giving stocks to Sydney and Ondine paying for their niece, Jadine's education, paying social security taxes to prevent them from ending up like many domestic workers who spend their lives tending other people's children and kitchens with no retirement income to sustain them in old age. In their words he tries to create a safe world for his servants and he believes that he himself is living in a world that cannot harm anybody and cannot be damaged by anybody. He thinks that he and his wife lead a moral life. Without any sin and crime far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife it is only an illusion like so many things. Jan Furman writes that the main sin of Valerian is his ignorance and innocence about the realities of life's little ironies that may seem little but can be taken as sin. Jan says,

“For all his worldly cynicism Valerian is essentially unaware of the harm he has caused and that he has allowed others to cause. He does not know that his presence in the Caribbean is an extension of Western colonialism or that firing Gideon and Therese for stealing apples is immoral since he had stolen much more from them a place in the continuing history of their island. Worst of all he does not know that his wife is a child abuser that Margaret systematically burned, pricked, cut their son Michael throughout his childhood.”⁷

Valerian does not know these things because he has not taken trouble to know. He is guilty, therefore, of innocence. He realizes that an innocent man is a sin before God. Sin is human and innocence is inhuman and therefore unworthy. No man should live without understanding the realities of life. The world of imagination and illusion is not safe always. Man is unable to bear realities if it is too late. Valerian is not an exception. This realization pushes Valerian into sudden old age. As Terry Otten demonstrates in Morrison's fiction, “those who sin against the flawed order become the agents of experience and so run the risk of freedom. Those who do not, are often doomed to spiritual stasis and moral entropy.”⁸ In the end only those with knowledge survive.

It is true that the ruling class in the United States consists largely of whites who own and control the means of production. But at the same time there are the same blacks who so ardently wish to belong to this class that they exhibit the same behavioral pattern, dress in the same manner, use the same language pattern and most unfortunately share ideology as those

of their oppressors, often referred to as petty bourgeois. This group of people exists between the two worlds. They are denied entry into the ruling class owing to their lack of wealth or their skin colour and they refuse to identify themselves with the African masses to which they owe allegiance. Sydney and his wife Ondine, the black servants in the Street family and Jadine their orphan niece represent the petty African bourgeois. Sydney Ondine and Jadine take pride in the qualities that make them valuable to Valerian's. as they define themselves almost exclusively to him, they become appendage rather than autonomous human beings. Ondine and particularly Sydney justify their servant status by being personal attendants to such a rich and important man as Valerian. Jadine is a beautiful and successful model accomplished in the arts and highly educated – "the epitome of ideal whitewomanhood."⁹ As Valerian's dependents, Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine exist only as the manifestations of the world that does not belong to them but they try to enter that world for safety of their future. To keep themselves happy and safe they, particularly Sydney refers himself as one of those industrious Philadelphia Negroes, the proudest people in the race. To some extent Sydney and Ondine are a foreign tp Isle des Chevaliers as Margaret and Valerian. They are self-described Philadelphia Negroes with a special status that sets them apart and above blacks from south or from the Caribbean. These other blacks are not Negroes with capital 'N' but strangers, people whose ancestors had not successfully emulated white enterprise and industry as Sydney and Ondine's people had done in Philadelphia.

They have removed themselves from the category of "Nigger", synonymous to the uncultivated and therefore unworthy. They acknowledge no boards and make no alliance with the other workers hired to

maintain Valerian's orderly peace of life. Therese who does the laundry and Gideon who handles yard chores are merely faceless bodies to Sydney and Ondine. To them all the Island women look alike and one yardman (Gideon) is a shiftless and unfathomable as the next. Ondine painfully reminiscent of Mrs Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* calls the Streets Kitchen 'my kitchen' and does not want it to be violated by other African masses as well as by Margaret the owner of the kitchen. Ironically they are surnamed Children for they seem really the Children of Valerian. Despite the good understanding they face the grave threats in living in that world or heaven of whites. The flop dinner party at Christmas clearly cuts and widens the borders between blacks and whites. When Ondine questions the firing away of the yardman, Valerian is angry –

"So what? All of a sudden I'm beholden to a cook for the welfare of two people I don't understand.

'I may be a cook, Mr Street but I am a person too ... Ondine was fuming now. The first time in her life she tries to boil water and I get slapped in the face. Keep that bitch out of my kitchen'. Ondine was shouting widely. 'You white freak

... Margaret who was shouting, Shut up! Shut up! You nigger! You nigger bitch!

Shut your big mouth, I'll kill you."¹⁰

Sydney and Ondine, have interior viewpoints that make their characters beyond stereotype. Morrison resists any urge to sanctify them as oppressed servants. They are not immune to the failings that afflict Margaret and Valerian. All are proud arrogant; all usurp power where they can.

Not only do they embrace the ideology of their employers but they also use the same negative jargon to refer to the people who look like them. The poor African masses are niggers who steal; in contrast the Children are Negroes, respectable Africans. It is a craze for responsibility that presents them seeing themselves as a part of African masses for example in seeking to disassociate from Son, Sydney proudly says

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“I am a Philadelphia Negro mentioned in the book of a very same name. my people owned drugstores and taught schools while yours were still cutting their face open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other.”¹¹

In the final scene of the novel, in Valerian’s greenhouse Sydney enters, as is his custom, with a tray of food. Instead of leaving it has usually does; he stays to feed Valerian with his hands, to assure him of his safety and welfare. Sydney changes other parts of his normal routine as well. In spite of Valerian’s objections he pours for himself a glass of wine and ignoring Valerian’s talk of moving back to Philadelphia, decides that he and Ondine like island’s warmth and that moving out of it, is out of question. In taking charge, Sydney unceremoniously revises his and Valerian’s roles. In brief Sydney and Ondine find a safe heaven for future.

Like the previous novels of Morrison, *Tar Baby* demonstrates the consistency in her technique and in her vision of human problems and motivation “Again the pattern of search is at the heart of the story. Here, however, in contrast to the explicit failures and triumph of Pecola, Sula, and Milkman, we see at its center two overlapping, interdependent, and unresolved quests those of Jude and Son.”¹² Significantly called Cooper Venus Jadine is a brown white

woman European African “she is an antithesis of black folk and community values.”¹³ She loses her identity as a black woman and accepts white values. She is a tar baby – a creation of capitalist America. Her behavioral patterns, dress language, association and ideology all are those of whites and demonstrate her hatred of Africa and all that is associated with it. Not surprisingly she is closer to the Streets than on Onlide and Sydney who slave for her. Sydney’s and Ondine’s surrogate daughter, Jadine is by association with her family a member of the staff. She is also on the staff indeed hired for a hiatus by Margaret as a companion. The two shop together, exercise together, and spend time in some mutual pursuit designed. She takes meals with the Streets and is served as they are by her uncle; her bedroom is upstairs next to Margaret far from the servants quarters Sydney and Ondine occupy near the kitchen.

Not only does she think like a European but she feels that she is a European. When Son’s presence at the house is discovered, she questions his reason of stealing as if she owned the house, “It depends on what you want from us?” Surprised by her irritational and suicidal association with the Streets, Son replies ‘us? You call yourself us?’¹⁴ Once this association is made clear it does not surprise us that Jadine often assumes the position of an adoring daughter to the Streets. It is her attempt to inherit in the other world that causes Jadine’s insecurity throughout the novel. She feels threatened by African women who are not only unashamed of their identity, culture and beauty but also proud of dignity and heritage. Evidence of Jadine’s obsession, with European looks and cultures and her own repugnance of all African things, is apparent in her response of Son. Her recognition of Son’s beauty comes only after he has cut off his dread locks and shaved his beard. In fact Jadine has so much absorbed

the white values that she is ignorant of traditional African principles that have ensured the survival of African people despite their dehumanized conditions.

Morrison points out the danger in Jadine's choices. The woman in the Paris Market, whether consciously or not, calls attention to something that is missing in Jadine. She has no connection to her cultural past and without it, Morrison suggests she is vulnerable as the very least. Feeling lonely and inauthentic she runs to the island in search of safety and authenticity. There Sydney and Ondine may offer her protection. They are people of her family and she seeks them out to find a sense of belonging but the island offers her no refuge. It is no home. She has never lived with them and she does not value their opinion. In fact she is a cultural orphan as Morrison tells Charles Raus:

“She is an orphan in true sense. She does not like connection unless they serve her in some way. Valerian, she speaks of because he did a concrete thing for her-he put her through school but she is not terribly interested in his welfare. Ondine and her uncle Sydney are people she uses a little bit.”¹⁵

She is cut off. She does not have what Ondine has. She needs a little bit of Ondine to be a complete woman. For Morrison the quality of nurturing is more essential. There should be the quality of adventure and a quality of nest. Jadine is a different kind of character for Morrison. She is not the rebel, thwarting connections that Sula is. She is not the mother woman than Nel is standing jealous guard over domesticity. She is not the cultural bearer that Pilate is Jadine is a modern radical woman who wants to be free from every feminine quality.

“The contemporary woman is eager her femininity becomes sexuality rather than femininity because it is perceived as weak ... because wants to be truly free ... for instance Ondine is a tough lady in an older sense of the world like Pioneers but she is keenly aware of her nurturing characteristics where as someone in Jadine's generation would find that a burden and not at all what her body was for. She does not intend to have children.”¹⁶

Jadine does not wish to belong to her ancestral black world and cultural ideologies not only because she is in frantic search of her individual self but also because she does not have her ancestors to point the way. In their arrogance Sydney and Ondine have tacitly encouraged their nieces' cultural disconnection as a sign of her and their success. They like her living in Paris and link her acceptance by their employer. But they do not heed the price of such acceptance, someone who is alienated from their culture a woman who does not know how to be a real daughter, Jadine never thinks of caring for her uncle and aunty. Being black Morrison suggests, is not only a matter of genetics, it is also a matter of culture. Ondine tells Jadine about what it means to be a woman but it is too late and all that she is really able to do is to express her regret.

“Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter she cann'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 for the respect of other women All you need is to feel a certain way, a certain way

about people older than you are. A daughter is a woman that cares where she came from and takes care of them that care of her. ¹⁷

Jadine's foil in the novel is Son Green. If she is retreat from black culture, he embodies its deepest currents. On the Island with its oozing rich association to African and the Caribbean, Jadine feels misplaced even as Son is easily at home. From the movement he jumps from the ship landing feet first in the soft and warm water, Son is embraced by the water lady as her own. His skin blends well with the water at night. Later on island unwashed and half stained, he is identified with the rest of nature. Son is the specimen of Morrison's travelling man. What Milkman discovers at the end of the story, Son already knows as he is rooted in cultured pride. Unlike Jadine, Son reflects a people class mentality. He possesses socialist not capitalist, tendencies. He continues to be "a human being capable of spiritual emotional and intellectual growth."¹⁸ In her characterization of Jadine and Son Morrison initially brings out the study of community and culture. Son is at once aggressive and passive logical and intuitive carnal and spiritual. He becomes the Christ like figure on the island and saves the people. He is an African Son who has sincere love for everything in general, African people in particular and African poor in special. Unlike Jadine Sydney and Ondine, who harbor no love for African struggling masses, who in fact see them as a nebulous entities struggling and suffering, Son looks at Gideon and compares this yardman with himself,

"(Yardman) was kneeling, dropping at the trunk of a small tree while he himself was so spanking clear clean from the root of his hear to the crevices between his toes ... now he was

near to crying as he had been since he had fled from home ... 'Thanks' whispered Son."¹⁹

Son quite contradictory to Jadine, has a great sense of belonging to his community and culture. He understands the conspiracy of the capitalists. He clearly understands that if African people in general are exploited then he too is exploited and that African people are not free, then he too is not free. He loves all black people with caring of class. Killing his wife by running his car into the bedroom where she sleeps with her thirteen year old lover makes him, fugitive. But for that he would probably have remained at home in Eloë, Florida. Once on the run he is indistinguishable for a time from the dangerous ones, the international legion of day labours who refuse to equate work with life. He refuses the rituals of success in materialistic ways, "because he never wanted to live in the world in their way."²⁰

In the novel Son is the only main character who honestly represents himself. He works like a precipitation agent to reveal the fake worlds of Margaret, Valerian, Ondine and Jadine. In spite of so many differences they (Son and Jadine) fall in love. This is further complicated by their different outlooks on life. Jadine and Son can be said to be a sociological study of two different cultures. The sophisticated accomplished Jadine epitomizing the best of white culture and the primitive Son representing the best of black culture. It is because Jadine so blindly accepts the white life style and more important, because Son so ardently loves her that she becomes Son's main target for political education. He attempts to kill Jadine's old white and capitalist ideology. Whereas Son is in tune with the devastating plight of African people there Jadine responds to material convenience and personal benefits. He tries

“to manipulate her dreams to insert his own dreams into her so would dream steadily the dreams he wants her to dream about yellow houses and white doors, which women opened and shouted come on in, you honey you! And the fat black black ladies in white dress minding the pie table in the basement of the church and the white wet sheets flapping on a line and the sound of a six string guitar plucked after supper while children scooped walnuts up off the ground and handed them to her ... he barely had time to breath into her the smell of a tar and its shiny consistency before he crept away ... he knew that at any moment she might talk back or worse press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey colored silk then into him and them who would mend the pie table in the basement of the church.”²¹

As they cannot resolve their differences, their relationship becomes violent which is manifestation of the psychic fragmentation of the culture as a whole as Denise Heinze points out-

“Jadine and Son could be no further apart culturally and ideologically had they been of different races.”²²

Their relationship turns into romantic Armageddon between the old ways and the new. “One had a past the other a future and each one bore culture to same the race in his hands. Mama spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture bearing black woman, whose culture you are bearing?”²³ In the novels Son’s moral authority flows from the past and the descendents of slave. It is they and he who must inherit the earth and not the Valerian Streets of the industrial world. ‘It is the disturbing message that Son brings to everyone and especially to Jadine. She has become too much like a little white girl who tries to change the heavens of black people without knowing their ancient properties. Morrison shows Jadine alerting

the dreams of Son. Jadine is the Tar Baby of the novel’s title like the tar baby of Uncle Remus’ fables that the people use to entrap Bre’r Rabbit. Morrison updates the tale revises it to accommodate her form and to reflect the themes. She views people do not live in places where we can hear those stories anymore. But new information has got to get out and there are several ways to do it. Unable to resolve their differences, Son and Jadine end the romances as individuals understanding more about the values of each other’s outlook of life but unable to reconcile these ways into a unifying relationship. Morrison leaves us wondering whether any people can regain sustenance lost in the past and respect for simple pleasure and lifestyles.

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