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Literary Theories

Transforming Self: Crises of Identity in Tar Baby

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's magnum opus, *Tar Baby* (1981) has enlightened readers to the core, wherein she deals with insight into an enigmatic character who can be given many or no name. This literary piece is the significant requirement for Afro-American to compensate their African roots with their historical engrossment in Euro-American culture significantly. Morrison's fictions are so diversified that it is challenging for the readers to categorize her and place her fictions into any literary tradition. Her works reveal her obligation to the contemporary world as she distinguishes it and influences the readers to comprehend her entire belief system. Though she changes the organization of belief system by the means of her message, she investigates the attachment of individuals and society; tries to balance between unreasonable rudiments of human consciousness and the partitions of subjective and objective authenticity. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison tries to perceive a balance between the Streets' economic control and the reduction of the island's black residents. The novel takes the readers into a lush, almost dreamlike expanse of the Caribbean island called Isle Des Chevaliers during the year, 1970s. The study explores with the theme of individuality which appeared to be a noticeable feature in this novel. The main subject of the novel is the identity and the different refractions that are experienced amidst the social, psychological and individual circumstances in which they were steeped in.

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The idea of tradition has always been central to Toni Morrison's fiction. While each of her novels presents a different way of understanding (in increasingly complex ways) the importance of memory, heritage, and history for African Americans, the much-neglected novel, *Tar Baby*, offers perhaps the most interesting and internally complex meditation on the meaning of tradition.(393).

The opening quote serves as a succinct notion about Toni Morrison, who is one of the most influential Afro-American writers. The above mentioned comments were made by Yogita Goyal. She further highpoints her craftsmanship as “most interestingly, Morrison's generic choices open up a field of inquiry that—while leading to no neat answers—raises important questions about the place of tradition.” (Goyal 395).

Morrison's novel obliges opulent repositories of African American ethnic memory, stabilising and rejoicing the folklore, humour, linguistic tradition, spiritual belief and communal values that have shaped black life across generations. The most lucrative and tempting options for her craftsmanship was to interrogate the historical and ideological forces that threaten to erode their cultural inheritance. Morrison's master piece *Tar Baby*, published in the year 1981, divulges a profound individual investigation of the African American psyche, an exploration that is rooted in her philosophy. She constructs her character's identity according to the external settings where there is a treatment of presumption conventions. According to her, the black should without discrepancy take an account of individuality and their matters in their fight in contradiction of the discrimination of the whites. When one looks at Afro-American literature, one understands that along with indifference on the basis of society and culture, one also needs to cultivate a self-conscious historical perspective that can lend an amount of consistency and precision to the concept.

Tar Baby also deals with the emotional disposition of which absorbs Morrison more than the political and historical impression. From the start, Morrison knew that she had a straightforward undertaking: to persuade the readers that her oeuvre has value, that she demonstrates the violence and repression of Black who move through the violent protest to institutional transformation and alter perceptions. This scrutiny was sound, and that her approvals were centred on firm indication often cohabits with another approach which directly showcases her interpretation about an underlying factual background.

Black Literature in American is characterized by the assortment of stories concerning sexism, racism, sexual violence, discrimination, and nationalism. Predominantly, when an African American woman writes, her story reflects the lives of many black American who had experienced similar situations. In an interview, Morrison mentions:

Black people have a story, and that story has to be heard. There was an articulate literature before there was print. There were griots. They memorized it. People heard it. It is important that there is sound in my books -that you can hear it, that I can hear it. (Nellie McKay 47)

Morrison's narrative concerns how she wants the reader's thoughts to develop as they read about effort that contributes to the historic rights gathering. It is literature, which represents a culture belonging to her own, concerned about the inter-connectedness of the universe and the means in which her ancestors-familial and literary-are models for her life and writing.

The character of Jadine from the *Tar Baby* is very interesting at first glance that appears the least alienated, since she enjoys worldly success as a fashion model in Paris, encircled by wealth and sophistication. Yet her dislocation is profound. Her character is strikingly contrastive to other Africans wherein she is more adapted to western culture. Her sophisticated professional accomplishment grants a distinctive position in her traditionally denied to black woman. This positioned her broader sphere shaped by white norms. This aspect of achievement has become increasingly fragile connection to her cultural roots.

In the novel Jadine is derided by Therese as "eaten by the white people" (Morrison 156), a woman whose beauty and poise are commoditised within a Eurocentric gaze. Jadine's success depends upon her erasure: her hair, her skin, her very body are staged in ways that affirm white aesthetics rather than Black selfhood. Her estrangement from her cultural roots becomes clear in her inability to relate to Son, the man whose arrival disrupts the fragile balance of the island. Morrison does not cast Jadine as villainous, but as a woman suspended in the chasm between opportunity and authenticity. She belongs everywhere and nowhere: too Black for effortless assimilation, too Westernized to find grounding in ancestral heritage.

One can notice that capitalism initiated as a structuring force for individual crises in *Tar Baby*, moulding not only the physical landscape of Valerian Street's Caribbean mansion but also the interpersonal relationship that evolve around it considerably. A retired candy magnate named Valerian showcased the exploitative history of Western capital, particularly its ties to colonial Black labour. His wealth, transposed into the artificial splendour of his estate, creates a space where Black servants like Gideon and Therese are simultaneously indispensable and invisible. They are alienated in the most material sense: necessary for the functioning of the household but excluded from any form of cultural or economic belonging. This asymmetry resonates with Marxist theories of estrangement from labour, as Morrison underscores how capitalist accumulation displaces and dehumanizes those whose work sustains it. (Mbalia 45)

Another third significant woman character in the novel, Ondine, illustrates a generational mode of rupture. Being as a Valerian's servant, she leads a life of domestic subordinate; sustains self-esteem in the phase of persistent expurgation. She is presented as a contrary character to Jadine, she has not chosen integration, contrasting Therese; she does not exemplify mystical confrontation. As an alternative, her sagacity of belongingness is not aggressive, the true sense of corrodes without spectacles.

She clearly understood the characterisation of a strong woman that can be created only through her confrontation with Margaret, wherein she ultimately reacts and speaks back against abuses endured during Margaret's violent mothering of Michael. She becomes compassion, determine, and uniform that makes this literary piece more dynamic and transforming. She has developed this definition of womanhood, dedicated to these tasks formed by society, although they are not emotionally prepared to understand it.

Although women's growth in history has been recorded numerously, it is apparent that their participation in social development as still being limited in the scope of evolving opportunities is an essential point to ponder about. The issue of women's empowerment and gender equality is at the top of the many agendas across the world, as gender inequality is widespread in all cultures and all realms. Having direct exposure, Morrison was interested in portraying the realistic scenario.

Morrison's vibrant notion about projecting her vision to the world most often through the eyes of her female characters is indeed dynamic. It is a universal concept of creating one's own identity that is associated with a significant characteristic of individual associated with the principles of self-awareness, and independence of the real kind which is shaped by social mobility. The main message that Morrison wants to convey to the men is to help to create a better society for women which lack in them at least need to have minimum social mobility. In a way, Ondine is also equally victim of her fate because she never had the opportunity to experience rising social flexibility. And the consequence of which, she was never considered as a human entity by the whites and separated from her own ability to calm authority. She learned to be breaking only in silence; she understood racism as a ubiquitous mechanism that cannot be done away with easily. In spite of being in all the odds, she senses the worth of being free.

Morrison suggests that individual crises can only be transformed through effort and testimony that names discrimination. This gives broader scopes in the field of psychology. Taking the context of the three women in the novel, one can highpoint what bind these women is not solitary but dissonance. Referring to the character of Jadine, who does not follow Therese's ancestral knowledge and he condemns her for this assimilation. On the other hand, Ondine begrudges Jadine's while envying her prospect. Their senses of individuality are not identical but interlocking, mapping a spectrum of transforming self.

Jadine has lost touch with her culture and suffers from alienation as a consequence. Like the powerfully presented Son, she needs to rediscover her fundamental being by learning and living the myths of the Isle de Chevalier. Whether she is capable of or interested in doing so remains doubtful, however, and the unresolved tension between Son and Jadine reflects Paquet's conclusion about rifts between the self and community in contemporary African American life. (Middleton, xiv)

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Morrison novels are full of richness and vitality and the researcher is very absorbed in her representation of the certainty of life familiarity. Her complexly fragmented vision of the Africans is at the core of her fiction and is best understood in the growth of the characters. Her resilient affection is specified to the divine world and the examination of spiritual fields, which is regularly observed as what emerged her as an eminent writer. Remarkably, "In *Tar Baby*, blackness is active and productive; it is an approach to history and knowledge that requires certain aesthetic strategies. Several critics of *Tar Baby* have explored the link between blackness and aesthetics. (Krumholz, 265)

Viewed from the comprehensive perspective, *Tar Baby* exhibits a crux position in her sustained exploration of identity crises consciousness. As mentioned in many junctures, her works deal with numerous concerns that over and over again interrogates the psychic and social ruptures produced through race, gender inequality, and cultural displacement particularly. It might not be too inaccurate to mention that even a strong feminist-oriented work like *The Bluest Eye* can be termed “Feminist” in the true sense of the word, wherein the disastrous failure of Pecola Breedlove. She embodies the most demoralising form of identity crises wherein she is stuck in internalised estrangement in which dominant standard of beauty colonise the self that erode the possibility of self-love.

In her another recognised literary work, *Sula* she transfers her focus to the bond between Nel and Sula that is eventually splintered by the restraining beliefs of community, gender and patriarchal morality. In *Song of Solomon*, she broadens the perspective of identity crises in Black male, wherein she presents masculine-centred narratives. Figures such as Pilate exposed to persistent marginalisation of women whose social conventional structures exist beyond.

Like all her earlier novels, Morrison enables her readers with artistic method and her profound engagement with human complexities experiences in *Tar Baby*. She facilitates a great sense of commitment to mould her character’s individuality mostly used for the purpose. Certainly, through the means of her character, she blends a symbol of richness, narrative depth, individual identity and most importantly human behaviour. Dorothy. H. Lee, a critic, highpoints:

Again the pattern of search is at the heart of story. Here however in contrast to explicit failures and triumphs of Pecola, sula and Milkman we see at its center two overlapping, inner dependent and unresolved quests those of Jade and Son. (Lee, 355)

Significant labelled as a “copper Venus,” Jadine exhibit a complex and profoundly conflict cultural position. As an African descent, she is shaped in European education and Western ideals; she undergoes anxiety of racial hybridity and cultural displacement. Remarkably enough, one can notice that “The denouement impels us to have mixed emotions doubts about Jadine's final triumph. Her success in articulating and holding to a new definition of black female identity is made to depend heavily on an unfeeling attitude toward the “parent” who raised her.” (Erickson, 19, 20)

As mentioned early, she loses her sense of individuality as a black woman and completely engrossed with white values. She is the “tar baby” a creation of capitalist America. Her mannerism, lifestyle, fashion, language, association and ideology are inclined completely with the whites and this demonstrates a sense of hatred with Africa and all that is associated with it. Dwelling in European culture not only made her think like a European but also made her closer to the Streets than to her uncle and aunt.

In concluding with *Tar Baby*, Morrison pushes readers toward the recognition that alienation is not merely the consequence of oppression but also the inevitable accompaniment of striving. The search for autonomy, belonging, or survival inevitably produces estrangement whether from community, history, or self. Morrison’s work thus resists the temptation to romanticize either tradition or modernity, insisting instead on the complexity of women’s negotiations with both. A passage from *Tar Baby* that speaks directly to this tension is when Jadine reflects on her impossible position between freedom and belonging:

They wanted her to stay there, to be the kind of woman they could use. But she wanted to be free. And freedom meant being alone. (236)

Morrison’s notion about inner battle for liberty replicates and reflects prominently through the above mentioned lines that describes the autonomy of “freedom” severs her community and belonging giving the impression of estrangement. Crisis of identity in this novel is not a cure for alienation rather it’s a means of living with its contradiction, an understanding that is initiated from estrangement itself. Morrison by showcasing the character of Jadine presents her struggle to gain a sense of self and to state her association to African Americans with the autobiographical elements, left with the options of either surrender her hard-won independence to enter a traditional role, or remain separate. In this content, taking reference from the text, She was not in their world. She was in her own. And if she wanted to be in theirs, she would have to give up hers. (123)

From this perspective, Morrison’s contribution to identity crisis thought is twofold. First, she expands her ideology beyond the single axis of gender, showing that women’s alienation is shaped by the converging forces of racism, capitalism, and historical displacement.

Second, she resists the narrative conventions that would resolve alienation into reconciliation, insisting instead on estrangement as both the burden women must carry and the revelation that exposes the truth of their condition. To read *Tar Baby*—and Morrison’s canon more broadly—is to confront the limits of resolution itself. Her work asks readers not to seek easy answers but to dwell in the discomfort of fracture, contradiction, and incompleteness.

A through the reading of the novel divulges that the novel is full of gender stereotypes without explanation; conversely, it flourishes the sociobiological elements of gender development that supports the theories asserting that gender is culturally fabricated and refined. To read *Tar Baby*—and Morrison’s canon more broadly—is to confront the limits of resolution itself. Her work asks readers not to seek easy answers but to dwell in the discomfort of fracture, contradiction, and incompleteness.

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