



Research Paper

Clash of Colour among Women in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby

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ABSTRACT: The major circles of reality in American society replicate the power and powerlessness in American society – the first, a large circle of white people, mostly men, experience power and influence; far away from it, and the second is a constricted space or a small circle inhabited by the black people, regardless of sex, who experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. The third circle is enclosed within the second one, in which black women experience pain, remoteness and defencelessness portraying a concrete picture of how blacks are treated by whites.

KEYWORDS: Black, Exploitation, Pain, Whites, Remoteness

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I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is one among the contemporary writers of the African American literature, who has redefined African American writing in more ways than one. One of the important themes of African-American literature is the struggle of black American's fight for their human rights. The black position in American society is very worst especially the government law that kept them in a low social order. The struggle between black and white begins in literature with W.E.B. Dubois's *The Soul of Black Folk*, which portrays the racial prejudice in the minds of the blacks caused by the white America.

Racism and Sexism signify the traumatic condition under which African-American lived in white America. The systems of societal and psychological restrictions have critically affected the lives of blacks in general and African-American women in particular. Right from the days of slavery, the blacks, irrespective of sex had realised the cruel reality of racism. Judged from the white man's standards of life and beauty; the black man's life became unbearable. Sexism, which is more oppressive physically and mentally, is the cause for grievance to the black women, who were sexually exploited both by the black and the white men.

The black people were ill-treated and pushed to the margin and especially the black women, being the victim of racism, sexism and classism. It was under this traumatic condition lived the blacks particularly the black women in white America. Racism begins in the plantation, where the white masters brought the African slaves in chain to work as labourers to fill their treasury. The basic myth is that cultural superiority is brought by white skin, who are more intelligent and virtuous than the blacks and blackness is connected with sin and dirt.

The black women writers having felt their need to break the myths viewed the social issues through the eyes of the black female protagonist. They made their heroines understand and welcome their strength as well as weakness and to love themselves before they learn to love others eventually substantiating, that women is responsible for their own emotional development. The blacks do not feel free and comfortable in their city. They feel the pain of being black in America. Richard Wright's *Native Son* mainly deals with the psychological and social pressure on the black man.

This observation illuminates the socio-political implications behind Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Inspired by the climate of revolution and evolving black consciousness of the sixties, a period characterized by an almost evangelical struggle for personal and racial identity, Morrison chooses, as the basic theme and subject of her first major work, the obsession of black with an American standard of beauty that seems both inescapable and destructive. And, as Morrison herself states, "the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world" (1).

Jadine Childs is another character who is desperately searching for love. Jadine, the main heroine of *Tar Baby*, has achieved some of the goals which Pecola and Pauline Breedlove desire such as beauty, power, success and freedom. At the same time she has lost her bonds with the black world because she has internalized

the myth of white beauty. Jadine is a green-eyed light-skinned black woman who lives her life in between the world of white culture and her own world of black culture, but fitting into neither of them.

Twenty-five years old model with a future of great promise is Jadine. She graduated from Sorbonne and she is an actress as well, who has had a “small but brilliantly executed role in a film” (2). Sydney and aunt Ondine, work for a wealthy Valerian family. Her uncle and aunty took her to the Caribbean island of Dominique after the death of her mother. Though Jadine is black she was brought up by the white family, hence her thoughts and actions are like the whites. Her life thus becomes different from that of other black women. The lost bond with her own black world is caused by the Valerians, the owners of the mansion, who live on Isle des Chevaliers. The white family finances Jadine’s education in the cosmopolitan Paris and this starts Jadine’s modeling career.

The central motif of Tar Baby is the beauty of black and white in which Jadine searches for love. Margaret Street and Jadine represent beauty, where Jadine feels proud that she is a part of white world. She knows in and out of the white culture and she was educated according to the white world. Jadine encounters symbols of white beauty in the cities all around the world which she visits during her modeling career. Jadine realizes that being a black woman in a white world means to be different. However, she manages to be a model whose pictures adorn Paris magazines. In spite of the fact that she is an adorable person, she is apparently not happy.

This unhappiness is demonstrated in an accident when Jadine is buying food in the supermarket. She comes across a lovely, perfectly self-possessed black African woman in the dairy section who is characterized as “mother/sister/she [...] unphotographable beauty” (2). Jadine is aware of her own photographable beauty and this woman’s unphotographable beauty. The woman represents what Jadine desires for and at the same time fears. Jadine is also haunted by the thoughts of the striking woman in “her long canary yellow dress” (2). Morrison depicts this woman as somebody who resists white beauty. Jadine is also troubled by “the skin like tar against the long canary yellow dress” (2). The brightly coloured clothes remind her of the clothes worn by some black women. Importantly, this woman has no shopping basket. She solely places three eggs “between earlobe and shoulder” (2). This woman looks at Jadine and spits out.

A moment like this intensifies Jadine’s feelings of love and black woman as she remembers: “When you have fallen in love, rage is superfluous; insult impossible. You mumble “bitch”, but the hunger never moves and never closes. It is placed, open and always ready for another canary-yellow dress, other tar-black fingers holding three white eggs;” (2). The image of the black woman as mother completely derails Jadine. Jadine’s hunger for this woman is seen as a result for Jadine’s desire for her mother and for love. This also reveals Jadine’s loss of her identity. As Sandra Paquet observes: “It triggers an identity crisis at the moment when [Jadine] ought to have felt most secure as a successful model and student – her marketability assured by beauty and education” (3).

The important place for Jadine is Isle de Chevaliers, because it is a place of escape, where she comes to be with her family, it’s a kind of home like and a place where she decides the next step in her career. Jadine comes to Isle de Chevaliers to spend her Christmas vacation with her black aunt and uncle, where she also finds time to think about herself. As the narrator remarks: “This vacation with light but salaried work was what she needed to pull herself together” (2). Jadine works and lives in Europe in the European way. Jadine is a girl who has a social status, though she is black she lives with this status among white people family. But as time passes she realizes that is how African Americans are being treated, where as she has got a very good chance to live life the other way in the white world.

Tar Baby offers many images of white beauty. Jadine’s value is demonstrated by comparing white and black art, saying: “Picasso is better than an Itumba mask” (2). The paradox is that Jadine studied art history in Paris but got a degree which ignores her own black world and teaches her to internalize the white world. Jadine prefers Ave Maria to gospel music. She is definitely consumed by white beauty. This clearly shows how much she has distanced herself from black culture.

Jadine is black but she is treated like a white girl. The kind of accommodation a person is offered plays an important role in the world dominated by white beauty. Sydney and Ondine, the black servants, live “up over the downstairs” (2). Jadine is placed in the upper rooms on the second floor. Gideon, Therese and the other black natives who do odd jobs outside the house stay separated from the mansion. This reveals the positions these people occupy in the family. Sydney and Ondine’s room inside the house shows their acceptance in the Street family. On the contrary, Gideon and Therese have no room in the house and they belong to the community of the island. Although Jadine is black, she lives at the top of the house.

This shows Jadine’s attitude to her black world. Jadine lives in a world dominated by white beauty and does not admit that she is black and should be treated like black. This occurs when dining with the Valerians while her adoptive parents, Sydney and Ondine, serve her meals. She feels like a white girl who should be treated like a white – who should be hovered about. However, Gideon and Therese do not assimilate to the white way of life in the house. They resent the whiteness with which the mansion is interwoven.

Valerian is a wealthy business man, who accumulated his wealth in the candy business. Jadine's education was paid by Valerian in Caribbean soil, where ingredients like cocoa and sugar are grown, which is very important for candy business. Paradoxically, these ingredients grow in the field which were laboured and cultivated by black slaves. In other words, black people carried out Valerian's business and wealth. Here it is important to note that Jadine's study is because of the hard work done by the blacks in Valerian's field.

Jadine's clothes are another example of an area where white beauty is very dominant. As a model, Jadine must look good in photographs. She wears "natural raw silk...honey-coloured...[dresses]" (2). The jewellery which she wears costs about thirty-two thousand dollars. Her earrings belonged to Catherine the Great, "the Empress of all the Russians" (2). Jadine's nickname reflects "copper Venus" (2). Jadine's beauty resembles a Roman goddess of love and beauty. As Malin LaVon Walther summarises: "This image presuppose a universal standard of female beauty which is actually based on white criteria" (4).

Jadine's beauty represented in the photographs, her education and wealth change her life, but she is also deeply influenced by Son Green, the filthy young black man. He is not initially a member of the Valerian mansion. After being discovered in the mansion in Jadine's closet, he is invited to stay. He is a kind of intruder with "wild, aggressive, vicious hair [...] uncivilised, reform-school hair, mau, mau, Attica, chain-gang hair" (2). Jadine is attracted to him. When she looks at Son, she sees "the small dark dogs galloping on silver feet" (2), which symbolizes Jadine's attempt. When Jadine first sees Son, she is full of strange feelings. The reason is that she realizes she had not seen a black man like him for more than ten years.

Son meets Jadine and he perceives her white beauty, though she is black skinned Jadine feels somehow allied to Son. According to Son, what is jeopardizing Jadine's life is the white beauty she has adopted too. Jadine is an example of a black girl who is not able to identify herself with her own black world primarily because of the place she lives in and her success in her fashion career in the white world. Until Jadine meets Son she thinks she is self-confident and self-sufficient young woman, but after seeing Son her past is being rewinded. This kindles Jadine who starts pondering about her past and began to think intensely about herself. As Jadine describes: "I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside – not American – not black – just me" (2). Jadine is not able to live freely in the white world, nor the black world. Son, her future lover, seems opposed to Jadine's lack of awareness of her black world.

Jadine is beautiful in the magazine cover and to the standards of white beauty, and she also wants to be beautiful all the time. On an excursion with Son to a remote part of Isle de Chevaliers, Jadine wears "an expertly crushed white cotton halter and a wide, wide skirt that rich people called 'peasant' and peasants called "wedding" (2). Jadine, who is unfamiliar of this part of the island walks into a mossy area and her white skirt gets covered with black slime and her skirt gets spoiled. This scene is like telling Jadine though she follows the white culture she is black. In this scene Jadine comes into dangerous contact with blackness. She is afraid of this blackness which symbolizes her past. Jadine is happy in her white clothes. This blackness symbolizes Son as well.

Jadine once receives an expensive Christmas gift from her French white fiancé. The coat he sends her is made from "the hides of ninety baby seals stitched together so nicely you could not tell what part had sheltered their cute little hearts and which had cushioned their skulls" (2). Instead of being revolted by this product that Mary Lupton calls "efficient commercial slaughter of innocence" (2), Jadine loves it. Sinking into its blackness, "she lay spread-eagle on the fur, nestling herself into it. It made her tremble. She opened her lips and licked the fur. It made her tremble more" (2). Symbolically speaking, Jadine is dazzled by this kind of dead black hide. Elizabeth House claims that Jadine demonstrates "her lack of altruism through wearing apparel" (2). This coat embodies Jadine's own flesh. She identifies herself with this coat. It is black and it was manufactured by white Europeans. It exactly expresses Jadine's personality. She is black but she is manufactured and treated as white.

Clothes are also important for Son. As a runaway, he first appears on the Isle de Chevaliers as a smelly guy. Once clothed and bathed, he becomes desirable to Jadine. As Jadine expresses: "In a white shirt unbuttoned at the cuffs and throat, and with a gentle homemade haircut, he was gorgeous" (2). At first sight Jadine is afraid of Son. But when he changes his clothes and wears a white shirt, Jadine is amazed by his beauty. Son does not value luxury clothes. He sees them as products made by the suffering of others.

Son is contrary to Jadine, where he rejects everything that is white, even when he desperately needs money, he does not take it from Valerian, since it's from a white hand. Son is always happy and feels strong for being black skin and tries to rescue Jadine who is trapped in the white culture. He wants her to "have dreams about yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement" (2). Son's dream of domesticity has some implications for his hometown in Eloe where he grew up. Son lacks the strength to change himself. His life is full of deprivation and death. He says: "I don't have a real life like most people, I've missed a lot" (2). He leaves Eloe as a fugitive, avoiding arrest for his wife's death. He may not have meant to kill his wife Cheyenne, but he is responsible for her death.

To punish her for being unfaithful with another man, Son drunkenly drove a jeep through the wall of their house. Cheyenne died in the flames. Since then, Son has wandered. He becomes a drifter with no idea how to settle down. He cannot find his position in the society. Jadine and Son gradually fall in love. Jadine is so affected by the touch of his finger on the sole of her bare foot and by his "laughing into the sky" (2). that she thinks of making love to him. Son tries to rescue Jadine from white beauty and Jadine tries to rescue Son from being an uneducated, "cultural throwback" (2). She wants Son to enroll in college, to leave behind him the life dominated by blackness.

Son questions the value of an education which neglects his blackness. Finally, despite his love for her, Son realizes that Jadine is "a model of industry and planning [...] that is all the power there is or ever will be and I don't want any of it" (2). From Jadine's conversation with Son it is clear that she is satisfied with her education. They quarrel a lot and in one of these arguments Jadine highlights Valerian: "I was being educated [...] I was learning how to make it in this world" (2). In my opinion, "making it" is the need to act white and "make it" in white society. This world is the world in which Jadine lives – the white world. Son's black world of Eloe is not good enough for Jadine. Son wants to settle down in Eloe while Jadine wants to live her life in New York. By contrast, Son sees New York as a place where "the black girls were crying" (2).

Jadine describes New York as "place which oiled her joints and she moved as though they were oiled" (2). Jadine sees New York as a basket of the white culture. She is happy there and she declares that "this is home" (2). New York is a place where Jadine makes her good money. But Son still insists on Eloe, his hometown in Florida. This is the first moment when it becomes apparent that their relationship is doomed. Jadine and Son pull in opposite directions, split between loving and hating New York. Jadine agrees to take a trip to Eloe, hoping that she will find there something that she unconsciously searches for. But once there, against Son's hopes, the split between them widens rather than narrows. Jadine soon makes her decision to escape the attraction of Son. She subsequently boards the plane to Paris where she is surrounded with the luxurious things of the white culture.

Another character who is caught by white beauty is Margaret Street, Valerian's wife, who is in close contact with Jadine because of Jadine's rather fair complexion. Margaret represents, as Walther indicates, "the mainstream culture's reification of white standards of female beauty" (2). Margaret is helpless. She lives a pampered lifestyle in which her "beautifully manicured hands do nothing but look beautiful" (2). She grows up as a poor girl who is first isolated because she does not like a member of her clan, and then she is admired for good looks. She is truly aware of her beauty as a teenager and she is forced to exploit it. Whether she likes it or not, she embodies white entrancing beauty.

When Valerian first sees her, he has to have her. He might not realize it, but he wants her because she has bright red hair and striking white skin, the same colours as the candies which are "red and white in a red and white box" (2), and are called after him. He marries Margaret when she is only seventeen. Margaret discovers that this cold and lonely life of beauty is not for her and she begins to be friends with Ondine. Valerian stops Margaret's friendship with Ondine because he sees it as undignified to talk with servants. Even though Margaret enjoys a calm life on the estate, she despises it. As a result of her hatred she physically abused her son Michael when he was a toddler.

The main characters of Jadine and Son are so different, but each has something which is vital to the other. Jadine is a black materialistic woman with no connection to her blackness and her past. Son is a black man with a strong connection to his blackness and to his past. He is left unfulfilled, lonely and unstable. Son has a past, Jadine has a future and each one carries his or her culture. Jadine feels that they cannot live together. However, they both realize that they love each other and how difficult it is to be lonely.

Jadine prefers whiteness to her own blackness and her black boyfriend. Like Pecola, Jadine succumbs to white beauty. She succeeds in something which Pecola and Pauline never obtain – beauty, power and success, but also at the same time she fails at love. Jadine is not a superficial human being. She is a loving and sensitive woman. But she carries emptiness in her heart. She feels only pain and troubles. In spite of the fact that she succeeds in many things, she loses one of the most important things – love. She is insecure about her white European boyfriend Ryk when wondering: "What if it isn't me he wants, but any black girl who look like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops that I don't have to straighten my hair" (2). This reveals Jadine's desire for love and for white beauty.

Toni Morrison depicts the authentic picture of the niggers through her novels. Morrison deal with a number of subjects but the main widespread themes in her novels are the inner lives of black people, predominantly black girls, and the racial struggle among the blacks, their expedition for identity, the internalized racism and child rape. In this novel, Morrison gets across a very powerful idea that is found in every society today.

II. CONCLUSION

To slip back to the novel once again, the tone of Morrison's novels as a whole is, of course, dark. The protagonist of the novel Tar Baby suffered in the hands of both blacks and also the whites. Here the author is interested in the struggle for individual rights in general and women's rights in particular. Jadine, the black women struggles individually towards freedom and selfhood and also struggles individually for self-recognition and love. Toni Morrison's novel Tar Baby is like a coin having racial discrimination on the one side and black female's sufferings on the other side. Thus Morrison's protagonist Jadine is created as timeless heroine.

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