Ambivalent Status in Morrison's Tar Baby

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Abstract

This research article makes an attempt to explore, examine and analyze ambivalent status in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby by applying postcolonial perspective. The ambivalent status makes the people feel having no identity, dignity and sense of individuality in the country where they live and work. This paper mainly aims atanalyzing and interpreting the causes of identity loss of African-Americans by depicting character Jadine in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby. It also examines and scrutinizes with specific textual evidences the idea of African-American identity crisis focusing primarily on the pursuit of divided consciousness which can be termed as double consciousness, a theory propounded by W.E.B. Dubois. The researcher argues that,Jadine due to her ambivalent status in America, is torn apart or fragmented between being black in physicality and white in soul.

Key Words

Ambivalent position, identity crisis, doubles consciousness, class and African-Americans

1. Introduction

Morrison's Tar Baby, a love story of Jadine and Son, deals with their differences as two African-Americans. Jadine is a fashion model who studied art in Paris, whereas Son is a fugitive. Jadine and Son fall in love. They leave the island and move to New York to seek their fortune. Their relationship does not last long because of their class distinction, and they break up. Jadine plays the role of the tar baby in the novel: "modern white culture supersedes the black culture of her ancestors, giving her a sense of self [that] is based upon a denial of her own cultural heritage and an identification with one that is not her own" (Appiah 284). Jadine's education convinces her of the superiority of European culture over the culture of her African ancestors, and she attempts to justify why she distances herself from that culture.

Jadine is confused why she is not accepted in her black community. "She couldn't figure out why the woman's insulting gesture had derailed her – shaken her out of proportion to incident. Why she had wanted that woman to like and respect her" (44). When the sense of self is based on the denial of one's ethnic roots, one is certain to undergo psychic chaos and alienation. Hence, we might infer that the woman's gesture cracked the fragile shell of her self-esteem and exposed her narcissistic vulnerability. However, where did that vulnerability originate and of what did it consist? Its origins, we would say, lay beneath the color-line in the experience of parental loss. That experience left her with a triad of painful feelings: doubts about her own value; uncertainty about who she really is; and the conviction that she has no one to depend on but herself.

Analysis

Jadine struggles to be herself identifying neither with African nor with American culture by labeling them as "white-folks-black-folks primitivism" (277). Jadine does not want to get involved with the white and black distinction and considers such acts as the sign of primitivism and backwardness. As being a product of modern capitalistic America herself, a young, well-educated African-American, Jadine reveals her desire to identify herself with solely her success and achievements that she has acquired, but because of the role of culture for creating one's identity, Jadine fails to materialize her desire for creating her new identity devoid of any cultural attributes: "I want to get out of my skin and be the only person inside–not American–not black–just me?" (45). African-Americans actually live in two separate spheres while living in America: one where their own native black African culture and heritage dictate and the other outside sphere dominated by individualism and capitalism that of Whites. The theory of double consciousness of W.E.B. Dubois recognizes the divided self in blacks living in America. Jadine is an example of how African-Americans suffer from what Dubois calls "double consciousness:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a particular sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Dubois 2-3)

Jadine exemplifies "double consciousness" that acts on the minds of African-Americans as a whole. She is an African-American who does not identify herself primarily in terms of her African heritage but by her success in her modeling career. She internalizes white norms and sees herself through white lenses. Morrison, conversing with Charles Ruas, acknowledges, "The problem is to distinguish between those elements in ourselves as human beings, as individuals, and as a culture, that are ancient and pure or primitive that are there because they're valuable and ought to be there—and those that are primitive because they are ignorant and unfocused" (113).

Jadine is torn between the world of her patrons and her black community. Given her affinity with the dominant values, Jadine strives throughout the novel to break away from a conventional idea of blackness, attempting to carve out a new definition of self as well as a new cultural identity. Her quality of independence and her insistence on freedom and individualism are most clearly seen in her love of the urban mobility of

New York and her confrontation with the traditional black community in Eloe. For Jadine, New York feels like home, a place where she can be free and happy:

New York made her feel like giggling, she wanted to giggle, she was so happy to be back in the arms of that barfly with the busted teeth and armpit breath. New York oiled her joints and she moved as though they were oiled. Her legs were longer here; her neck really connected her body to her head. After two months of stingless bees, butterflies and avocado trees, the smart thin trees on Fifty-Third Street refreshed her. They were to scale, human-sized, and the buildings did not threaten her as if the hills of the island had, for these were full of people whose joints been oiled just like hers. This is home, she thought with an orphan's delight; not Paris, not Baltimore, not Philadelphia. (223)

Eloe, in contrast, symbolizes the racial, cultural and sexual constraints she has attempted to flee. These constraints define the night women of Eloe, who "were all out to get her, tie her, bind her [and] grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits" (262). Choosing to escape this cultural bondage, Jadine shows her decision to break with the past and move on to a better life in her parting remark to Son: "You stay in that medieval slave basket if you want to. You will stay there by yourself. Don't ask me to do it with you. I won't. There is nothing any of us can do about the past but make our lives better" (271).

Jadine enjoys her sexual freedom as a part of individualism and freedom advocated by white culture. Jadine finds "sheds and orchards to make love in and an open window of a schoolhouse with a teacher's desk wide enough for two" (259). She considers black culture and their thinking as primitive: "I am stuck here with a pack of Neanderthals who think sex is dirty or strange or something and he is standing here almost thirty years old doing it too. Stupid. "Stupid," she said aloud." (259).

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" (86). Instead of being revolted by this product that Mary Lupton calls "efficient commercial slaughter of innocence" (417), 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"(112). 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" (199). This coat embodies Jadine's own flesh. She identifies herself with this coat. It is black and was manufactured by white Europeans. It exactly expresses Jadine's personality.

Jadine is black but she is manufactured and treated as white. She does not like to be associated with blacks, considering them inferior and barbaric. More specifically, her behaviour points to unwitting racial self-loathing. Gideon calls Jadine, yalla, referring to her light skin which, in the African-American community, is a typically derogatory term. Gideon argues that "it's hard for them not to be white people. Yallas don't come to being black natural-like. They have to choose it and most don't choose it" (156). Gideon's statement here recalls Morrison's lament over the contemporary situation in which Blacks are now able to choose their blackness.

Jadine shares very little in common with women in her community. She notes that her differences are both physical and intellectual. This is the contradictions found among neither educated blacks who neither identify themselves with whites nor blacks. Jadine tries hard to reject her being associated with her blackness. She tries to create her own identity of being only American discarding her native black culture, but she fails utterly doing it. Even Jadine tries hard to be not associated with any black attributes that links her with black culture and heritage, she unknowingly subtly sometimes supports her black people and their culture. Son and Jadine dispute about the relation between the individual and the community s/he belongs.

Jadine refers to herself and the whole Street household with the pronoun us, thereby causing Son to ask her, "Us? You call yourself 'us'? . . . But you . . . you're not a member of the family. I mean you don't belong to anybody here, do you?" (118). Jadine's telling answer is: "I belong to me. But I live here" (118). After this remark, she tells him first that she is working for Margaret Street and talks only then about the Childs who are her remaining family. The sequence of her answer clearly points out Jadine's priorities. First of all she is herself, thereby considering her individuality and separateness as the highest value. By doing so, she conforms to the Anglo-American culture she is so immersed in.

The woman on yellow representing her native culture and heritage literally spat on her for discarding and demeaning their own black culture and not associating with it and promoting it. In spite of her success, however, there is something about Jadine's life that troubles her. This is why she is upset by the contempt shown to her by the African woman in the yellow dress, which carries herself with dignity, pride and strength as a black woman. Jadine realizes that she wanted the woman to like and respect her, but instead she is left feeling lonely and inauthentic. The problem is that Jadine has no real sense of what authentic blackness might be. She sees blackness only in terms of old stereotypes of the way black people supposedly are.

The woman's insult to Jadine had the powerful effect of challenging Jadine's choices: her white boyfriend, her trendy girlfriends, her parties, her picture on the cover of Elle and the way she lived her life. 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" (507).

Jadine acts on a desire to feel better about self, ideally, obtaining positive feedback from her near ones of black community. There is a positive aspect to unabashedly celebrating who a person is and feeling proud of that person. Jadine is confused and even questions her plans to marry Ryk, her white boyfriend. The same incident tormented her and forced her to re-think and ruminate further about her life as a whole, not only the good support and positive note of her white friends and her relatives.

Being black herself, Jadine never accepts her own identity and has a severe problem with self-acceptance of who she really is. She is trapped in this way by the Eurocentric education and cannot fly away from dominant white culture, which encourages her to love white and hate black. Both physically and emotionally, she is enslaved by white values and is trapped to not think or act beyond that. The entry of a black male character, Son, in the early part of the novel fulfils this need of hers. Son, the mysterious stranger who sneaks like a thief into a wealthy Caribbean mansion and lives for weeks hiding in closets nibbling on leftovers, tries hard to solve the confusion that Jadine is suffering and pursues her to bring back to her original self. Son is in total disagreement on the Eurocentric education system that helps create people like Jadine.

The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit . . . If they did not teach you that, then they did not teach you anything, because until you know about me, you do not know anything about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa. (227-8)

Son argues that Eurocentric education stereotypes black people and creates binaries and treats them inhumanly. Blacks are always represented as wild, aggressive, blunt and somebody that is meant to be subdued and exploited. Son wants Jadine to understand this and stop seeing her own self from the eyes of Whites. Son here speaks as representative of an authentic, legitimate blackness, not found in white history. Son's critique of a flawed American educational system is echoed in the words of the black public school official, Asante, in Obama's autobiography:

Noting that the American educational system is racist and therefore deficient, Asante states that it — is not about educating black children. Never has been. From the very start, the black child is learning —[s] someone else's history. Someone else's culture. Not only that, this culture he's supposed to learn is the same culture that's systematically rejected him, denied his humanity. (258)

This same view is shared by Gloria Anzaldúa and notes "cultural–[i] ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. Misinformed person is a subjugated people"(2219). Her Eurocentric education system encourages individualism and capitalistic society, where personal achievement is everything.

Jadine rejects the ancient properties of African people that Son, the African woman, and the night women, who visit her in a dream, embody. It is all because of her upbringing in white environment that always stereotypes the Blacks as inferior and of low status. It is the result of Jadine's love of white capitalistic values and culture and her reluctance to be associated with her own native culture that led to the loss of identify and she becomes unauthentic and blood traitor in the eyes of black community that surrounds her. Jadine, because of her having more American than African sensibility, considers Blacks as inferior and savage. Not only Jadine, her uncle and aunt, Sydney and Ondine Childs, the Cook and Butler in the house of Valerian Street also feel superior to the local black populace. Sydney remarks twice on how he is, "a genuine Philadelphia Negro mentioned in the book of that name" (284). Part of this feeling of superiority might be class-related. Jadine as well as her uncle and aunt are very proud of their positions in the Street house–they are industrious and hardworking.

Jadine describes Son's dreadlocks as, "physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to jelly. And with wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform-school hair. Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair" (113). Her description here betrays both Jadine's arousal by and repulsion at Son, feelings which underscore white responses to the black male as a (violent) sexual, racial, and existential threat. The rapist identity imposed on Son by Jadine and Margaret is an indication that shows the white paranoid fantasy of the black other and points to the legacy of the black rapist myth—the trauma of being treated and rated as an inferior other. The origin of the myth can be dated back to the time during Reconstruction when white people insisted on maintaining the political economy of patriarchy and racism. Black men are victimized by stereotypes. The black selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy as the image of the brute, untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling.

As Tommy Lott points out, the Whites' underlying assumption was that "black men are prone to rape because black people as a racial group are bestial" (28). The construction of black bestiality and inferiority is not only an indication of historicized racial relation but emerges as the real of racial antagonism, the irreconcilable difference in racial relations, which will always; remain in the symbolic order as a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality. Jadine since getting assimilated with white culture becomes white in her thinking and black in skin only. Jadine's way of life and way of thinking pattern is more inclined towards white culture. Jadine considers Son as a rapist and denigrates him by calling him nigger. This conversation between Margaret and Jadine shows the animalization of black people which a few of the white characters do throughout the novel.

Son's blackness, looked at through the white lens, is not only associated with the myth of the black rapist but aligned with the Negro-ape metaphor. This is the metaphor used by Margaret, the white hostess of L'Arbe de la Croix, to express the threat she senses posed by Son's presence in their peaceful world. Jadine has preoccupied the prejudice as Whites believe that black male possess animalistic passions and rape white females. This is a stereotypical concept developed by Whites against Blacks as weapon to suppress them. It is obvious that Son is accused of raping Jadine. It is only pretension and charge for the sake of charge against Son.

Conclusion

Morrison, in the novelTar Baby, shows the ambivalent position of African-Americans as a result of their confrontation with the seduction of white culture and the legacy of black heritage. Blacks are found being torn between the seduction of white culture loaded by capitalist values and the legacy of an African heritage. Jadine, the representative of African-Americans, struggles with what Dubois calls "the double consciousness" of blacks in their quest for a self-identity and authenticity. She loses her identity by surrendering herself to white ideology and disassociating with her black community. She abandons her black roots to serve whites, and she offers herself to be made a tar baby by whites to promote white supremacy.

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