



IN SEARCH OF 'ANCIENT PROPERTIES': TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*

KRITIKA SHARMA

Assistant Professor (Ad-hoc), Department of English, Hindu College
University of Delhi
Email: kritikash.english@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison, a Nobel prize winning author, has become one of the strongest literary voices to emerge from the African American community. Most of her novels interrogate the meaning of blackness, in settings both historical and contemporary. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison explores the consequences for the black community of any sort of disengagement from a historical consciousness. The black man/ woman's relationship to a traumatic communal past that continues to affect the material and psychological conditions of their daily lives, becomes the subject of this particular novel. Through the character of Jadine, Morrison reflects on the contemporary black woman's relationship with something that she calls 'ancient properties,' a sense of history, and historical being. This paper explores Morrison's treatment of the black community's engagement with history and the question of authenticity as well as an authentic existence in *Tar Baby*, through the characters of Jadine, Son, Sydney, and Ondine.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, black history, authenticity, community

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Toni Morrison's 1981 novel *Tar Baby* can be seen as a fictional examination of questions raised by the changes brought about in African American communities and their consciousness by the Civil Rights Movements. Like most Morrison novels, *Tar Baby* deploys folklore and vernacular language to foreground her concerns with identity, oppression and subversion. The novel constitutes of dialogues that are both interracial, challenging the White American's ordering of the world as well as intraracial where the confrontation is between a privileged black middle class materialism and the vernacular discourse of the folk community. The novel begins with a dedication that reads:

For
Mrs. Caroline Smith
Mrs Millie McTyrie
Mrs. Ardelia Willis
Mrs. Ramah Wofford
Mrs. Lois Brooks
- and each of their sisters,
all of whom knew
their true and ancient properties

The 'ancient properties' here is an important phrase because it alludes to a concern both implicit and explicit in the entire novel. Towards the end of the novel when Therese is trying to persuade Son to not go looking for Jadine, she says, 'Let her go. Forget her... She has forgotten her ancient properties' (305). Throughout the novel, Jadine is disconnected

from both the races and classes that she is surrounded by. Conversely, throughout the novel, she is trying to find herself an identity that belongs to either. Jadine identifies with the modern ideologies of female fulfillment. In doing that however she seems to have lost sight of what can be called an African consciousness. While elsewhere in the novel, W.E.B. DuBois is obliquely referred to, Jadine probably is an apt embodiment of the double consciousness that DuBois alluded to. This paper will talk of the class consciousness of Jadine later. Here, it would engage with the question of authentic identity that preoccupies both Jadine and Toni Morrison. Jadine, in the novel, occupies the strange position of both having transcended her race and still finding herself defending her racial identity in front of every other character.

A successful model, she is acutely conscious of her blackness, of her status as a 'Copper Venus' (118). Her character showcases the pitfalls of white middle class aspirations for black women. When the novel begins, Jadine is a guest at Valerian's estate in the Caribbean island. She has a fiancée back in France where she has come from, but she finds herself wondering if the person 'he wants to marry is [her] or a black girl' (48). Jadine wants herself to be seen in terms that are not racial. But it is impossible for her to transcend her race. She is upset by the fact that Margaret in their conversations 'kept her alert about things she did not want to be alert about,' (64) mostly, her blackness. She wonders if she should be ashamed for 'liking Ave Maria better than gospel music' (74). After Son's arrival in the estate, in her conversation with Margaret, Jadine is upset over the fact that she had just volunteered the use of the word 'nigger' but Margaret took it too far with using 'gorilla'. (129) Constantly then, Jadine finds herself defining her identity in terms that are both having transcended race and still inevitably racial. She is someone who, as Therese, or Ondine or even Morrison would say, has forgotten her 'ancient properties'.

In a 1994 interview with Judith Wilson in *Essence* magazine, Morrison claims that Jadine 'has lost the tar quality, the ability to hold something together that otherwise would fall apart – which is

what I mean by the nurturing ability. That's what one surrenders, or can surrender, in order to do this other thing – in order to go and get a degree in art history, learn four languages and be in the movies and stuff. That sounds like I am putting it down; I'm not. I'm saying that the point is to be able to do both' (O'Reilly 65).

Jadine, in following a successful career in the white world, has surrendered the 'tar quality'; she is unable, what Toni Morrison calls, 'to do both'. In the novel it is the woman in yellow whom Jadine sees in the departmental store in Paris who signifies the 'ancient properties'. For Jadine, after their confrontation, the woman in yellow becomes the symbol of the authenticity that the jaded Jadine lacks. The woman is unapologetic about her appearance and her blackness. There is something so 'powerful' about her eyes that they 'burn the eyelashes' (45). She is described as the 'woman's woman – that mother/ sister/ she; that unphotographable beauty' (46). Her beauty cannot be photographed because unlike Jadine's, it cannot be co-opted by the dominant society. It is jarring for Jadine when that woman looks back at her and spits, in a gesture that is damning because it signifies that Jadine, by falling in with the white society she considers herself a part of, has committed an act of betrayal towards her community, or race, or black womanhood. In a 1985 conversation with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison says that that woman in yellow 'is the real chic. The one that authenticates everything. The one that is very clear in some deep way about what her womanhood is.... A complete individual who owns herself. She is the original self' (O'Reilly 65). It is her confrontation with this original self that makes Jadine question her identity and she consequently comes to the Caribbean to grapple with the question. She makes Jadine, who has a degree in art history and a successful career as a model question her cultural heritage. It is however, with the arrival of Son that Jadine has the opportunity to rediscover her other self. In the episode in the swamp, while Jadine is waiting for Son, the mythic women of the swamp, the tree women seem to claim her happily 'thinking that their runaway child had been restored to them' (182). It is Jadine's 'runaway' status that she is

forced to confront in the Caribbean especially with the arrival of Son. What she has run away from is her ancient properties, her consciousness of being not only black, but a black woman. Not only does she not have a sense of community, she also doesn't have a sense of black womanhood, which in Morrison's novel is often established through the sense of a 'motherline.' This sense of community of women, of generation after generation of black women handing down to their daughters a sense of racial memory, a special consciousness as well as the privilege and the burden of maintaining a sense of history is something that is alluded to in both the dedication to the novel and in the Foreword.

Son enters the novel as the typical black outlaw of the European American stereotype. His signifying trait is his racial and cultural difference from other characters in the novel. He is a decentralizing force who challenges Jadine about her education and its value to her as a black woman. Elliot Butler Evans claims that Son is 'a black male whose existence is informed by an ideal and authentic black culture' (158). Often, he is identified with the feminine and the maternal. However, he cannot really be considered the authentic bearer or healer of culture that he initially appears to be. He lives through the script of traditional patriarchal masculinity. He is violent, even though his acts of violence in the novel are often trivialized or justified. A very common interpretation of the title of the novel, through the frame of the folk tale of the 'Tar Baby and the Briar Rabbit' is to see Jadine as the tar baby, whose temptation the briar rabbit Son cannot shake off even at the end when he is still looking for her. But this seems to be a fallacious interpretation. Seeing Jadine as a tar baby implies that Son is the victim or the wronged one, but that cannot be upheld by the novel. In the novel, Son is as much an instrument of violence as he is a target or victim of. He forces himself on Jadine, and elsewhere expresses a desire 'to insert his dreams into her' (119). For the black woman, black men like Son are figures as oppressive as white men. It is perhaps through the figure of Son that Morrison seems to question the notion of authenticity itself. He enters the novel as the 'authentic' black man who makes the other blacks in the estate question their sense of

race. Albert and Ondine in their conversation claim that Son is a 'nigger' whereas they are 'negroes'. Son however never questions his own racial identity which too is problematic in certain ways.

It is also through the character of Son that Morrison brings in the question of class. The beginning of the novel describes the settling of the Caribbean in terms from the discourse of capitalism. It revises the capitalist discourse of 'development' and 'improvement' with alternate definitions of violation and destruction of the natural environment. From the very beginning then, the novel lays thematic emphasis on class struggle. Racism is coequal but also consequential of African-American's class exploitation. Racism and sexism become by-products of capitalism and imperialism. For Sydney and Ondine, for example, freedom is synonymous with money. They cannot leave their positions at the household of the Streets unless they save enough money. The whites and the blacks in the novel moreover, signify opposing class interests. The novel then interrogates the possibility of an alternative, if African Americans reject a capitalist life. There is a definite irreconcilability of the interests of the ruling classes and the subject classes. However, no viable alternative existence is offered by the novel, perhaps because the claim that the novel wants to make is that there isn't any. Valerian represents American capitalism. He is the master of a candy empire, the raw ingredients for which come from the Caribbean, which has been effectively colonized by America. Valerian's life in the Caribbean too is a kind of posed pastoralism – he has symbolically created another plantation there – where the staff too is segregated into types. Gideon and Therese are relegated to the yard while Sydney and Ondine to the house. At the dinner table after Valerian fires Yardman and Therese, Son wonders how Valerian 'had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort' (202).

Sydney, Ondine and Jadine belong to a different class – they are the petty bourgeoisie, and show practically the same ideology and the same behavioral pattern as the dominant white ruling class. They talk in the language of the white

capitalist as is evident in their reactions to the arrival of Son. Sydney proudly claims their affiliation and belonging to the lineage of the Philadelphia Negroes, DuBois's industrious negro community of Philadelphia. Ondine refers to her place of work, the Streets' kitchen as 'my kitchen' and does not want it violated by the presence of other/ lesser black people – the masses that constitute the Yardman and his companion. Jadine, perhaps most of all, is a creation of capitalist America. She, one of the eponymous tar babies in the novel represents that which is built by the European as a trap for other Africans, an artificial lure. She is the successful, assimilated African American then that the Negro masses should aspire to be.

The working class, is constituted in the novel by Yardman or Gideon, among others. The fact that no one refers to him by his name, and that his companion who the inhabitants of the villa always take to be a different woman but always call her Mary, while her real name is Therese, is certainly representative of the fact that the working masses are denied individuality and humanity. It is in the figures of Gideon and Therese though that we also see acts of subversion. Therese's defiant silence in the face of Ondine and her prejudices is one instance of this. They are not, however, free of the consequences of their subversion, consequences moreover that bear upon them in mostly in economic terms. By the end of the novel, since they have been fired from the estate, their daughter has to find employment as a janitor in the women's washroom in the airport and the two of them have to look for petty work elsewhere. It is in Son however that we see expressions of a working class mentality. He is described as belonging to the 'great underclass of undocumented men... an international legion of day-laborers and musclemen... Some were Huck Finns. Some Nigger Jims...' (166). He has socialist, and not capitalist tendencies. Moreover, he is not only race conscious but also class conscious. He sees himself 'appropriated, marketed and trivialized into décor'(168). He condemns Sydney, Ondine and Jadine's behavior, claiming that they are trying to be what they are not. They are 'black people in whiteface playing black people in blackface' (216). His project with Jadine then is not

only of racial education but also of political education. He tries to convert her into someone who is not only conscious of her racial heritage and consequently cultivate in her a sense of community, but also into someone who is class conscious and thus make her realize that by giving in to white American notions of beauty and success, she is participating in and aiding a discourse that is harmful to that heritage. Little changes in Jadine however. The class suicide that Son demands of her is not something that she gives in to.

The title of the novel has a double intertextual reference. Through the invocation of masks, which Morrison alludes to in the Foreword with reference to African tribal masks, through the folk tale of the 'Tar Baby' itself and through the Biblical story it is connected to, the novel alludes to different aspects of the African American self in contemporary America. The first line of the novel 'He believed he was safe,' with its invocation of and ambiguity about safety, is perhaps symbolic of the precariousness of the African American consciousness in present day America. Referring to the title of the novel in a 1981 interview, Morrison talks of having read of 'a tar lady in African mythology... at one time a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses's little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together' (O'Reilly 67).

Tar then, with its property of stickiness, is representative of the African American woman's privilege as well as burden of holding things together. As quoted earlier, the project for Morrison – is 'to be able to do both,' to both get degrees and employment and material success but to also always remember, to keep hold of what she calls the 'nurturing ability', to perhaps also keep hold of one's heritage, cultural and racial. That is something however that is not really realized in the novel. Perhaps that is Morrison's project then, in talking of the importance of keeping hold of ancient properties, she also expresses the difficulty, though perhaps not the impossibility, inherent in that task. One way of keeping hold of the ancient properties, in Morrison's world, is through the motherline,

through the legacy of mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. But in *Tar Baby*, Morrison also problematizes the idea of motherhood. Motherhood here manifests itself in cruel, often violent acts, as evidenced in Margaret's treatment of her son during his infancy. Jadine has lost her ancient properties because of the absence of a mother figure in her life; Ondine, despite her lecture on motherhood to Jadine never presents a viable alternative to Jadine. Jadine thus has no sense of (a female) community that she can claim membership with. The appearance of the spirits of all those women when she is with Son in his hometown is downright terrifying to her. This is a lack moreover which is not filled even by the conclusion of the novel. The end seems to suggest that black colonized citizens are doomed to a state of perpetual homelessness. In Jadine's case moreover, there is ambiguity around the purpose and the final fate of her move back to Paris. Her disconnect with her 'community' too is never resolved.

The ambiguity of the conclusion also arises from the treatment of Jadine's rape by Son. Even in its description, the inherent violence in the act of rape is downplayed. As John Duvall argues, 'the rape is rhetorically constructed to deny the reader's awareness of the violence' (332). Jadine's reaction too is in the same vein. She leaves Son but does not ever, out loud or in her mind, condemn, or even really acknowledge the rape. In another interview, Morrison claims that what [the rape] suggests is 'that the one who is "more right," counterintuitively might be Jadine, even though she still has much to learn. At the very least. The scene should make problematic those discussions that identify Son as a source of value in the novel' (Duvall 335).

Even Jadine then, who has forgotten the ancient properties, might be, according to Morrison, 'more right'. At any rate what Morrison seems to imply is that not only is there no one source of 'value,' the notion of value itself is problematic. Black consciousness and black identity is irrevocably fragmented; and even though characters in the novel hold the desire for it to be united, it is a desire that is never likely to be fulfilled. Even the ancient properties alluded to in the novel hold different meanings for different characters. Are these ancient

properties innate or learned? There seems to suggest one, Ondine the other. Morrison's model of community itself then is not a cohesive whole. It is divided, disconnected and points to the simultaneous presence of multiple consciousnesses.

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