

THE SEARCH FOR SELF AND CULTURAL ENCOUNTER IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the cultural encounter between intra and inter cultural forces. Cultural encounter is a recurring motif in most of Afro-American writings. Tony Morrison's *Tar Baby* is exemplified with inter and intra cultural discourses. Besides Cultural encounter, this novel also focuses on the gender issue. It tells us a bifurcated view of the role of women in the society, Morrison explores stereotypical representation of women in this novel along with the themes of cultural encounter.

Keywords: Culture, encounter, gender, society, stereotype

The novel *Tar Baby* portrays the politics of gender, intra, and inter cultural clashes among different characters in the novel. This novel also scrutinizes the impact of acculturation on Afro-American community. Acculturation and hybridization are some of the important areas for postcolonial critics to explore the ethnic and racial aspects. Another underlined discourse in the novel is that of self-autonomy and gender stereotypes. Toni Morrison has created a narrative encounter between the traditional role of women and modernity in the novel. This novel depicts a complicated love affair between Jadine and Son, two Black American with diverse perspectives. Jadin's education was sponsored by a white family, where her aunt and uncle work as a domestic servant. On other hand Son is an impoverished strong minded man, who acts as Jadine's counterpart, representing a traditional black background. Names in the novel also play a pivotal role in the construction of self-identity.

The outlined exploration of cultural encounter is already combined with the content of the novel. The encircling of this theme in the novel is exemplified in Toni Morrison's remark: "Now people choose to be Black. They used to be born Black. That's not true anymore. You can be Black genetically and choose not to be. You can change your mind . . . It's just a mind-set"¹. The typical example of intra cultural conflict in the novel circles around Son and Jadin and she no more wants to be identified in her black identity and Son though being labelled as an 'outlaw' is in fact a saviour of his identity and does not want to succumb his black identity. The inter cultural encounter sets between two major communities, white and black. The white group is represented by Valerian Street and his wife Margaret Street. Valerian Street is a rich candy manufacture from Philadelphia, who has been spending his retirement on the Isle des Chevaliers and his wife Margret was a former Beauty queen of Maine. The bridge between black and white is covered by the remaining house hold members. They are Sydney and Ondine Childs, and it is

clear from their conversation that they have created bifurcation within the community and underestimate the identity of other black people in the novel, like Gideon and Therese.

Michael, the son of Valerian and Margaret, is a street grown up son. He appears in flash backs and in the discussion of other characters. He occupies his own position in the spectrum between the cultures, and unlike Jadine Michael is concerned about the survival of the traditions of different cultures. Since he is interested in exploring the values of other culture and concepts, certainly he is closer to Son, Gideon and Therese than Jadine or even Sydney and Ondine. At the beginning of the story the tension between two dominant cultures, is seemingly fine but the discovery of Son in Margaret street's closet erupts tensions in the novel. Adding fuel to the fire the unstable system of the household turns to disorder. Margret, Sydney and Ondine do not trust Son and want to fire him from their house. Valerian, the magnet of house invites the stranger to stay in the house. His action was a retaliation to his wife's hysterical behaviour during Son's discover. The subordination of women is exemplified in the relation between Valerian and his wife Margret. His responses to her deeds and demands justify this claim in the novel. The real racial and intra cultural conflict starts when Son tries to start a relationship with Jadine. Morrison comments

What is the problem between a pair of lovers who really love one another but are culturally different? What is the battle about? Culture? Class? . . . How can you manage to love another person under these circumstances if your culture, your class, your education are that different?²

Son is an embodiment of traditional black identity, while Jadine represents the modern American though she is inherently part of black community. As he gets in to her room for the first time, she considers his hair as 'wild ,aggressive, uncivilized ...chain gang hair' ,hair that needed to be put in jail (Morrison 113).She goes on treating him as uneducated illiterate "nigger". When she was provoked by his behaviour, she calls him äpe'(121), and above all, she accused him for attempted rape (121).In retaliation, he asks ironically "Why you little White girls always thinks somebody 's trying to rape you(121).Their first meeting ends with racial comments.

You ugly barefoot baboon! . . . A white man thought you were a human being and should be treated like one. He's civilized and made the mistake of thinking you might be too. That's because he didn't smell you. But I did and I know you're an animal because I smell you. (Morrison 121)

The dialogues between Jadine and Son show the difference between two classes, White and Black. She has acculturated to American life and feels proud of that culture. She creates 'otherness 'within community and treats other people inferior to her. She has given higher priorities to her individuality and separateness. She commits to Anglo American culture and immersed in it. Bryce Bjork notes

American discourse, past and present, public and private, revels in individual spirit and assertion, many Americans have learned to appreciate and accept the romantic appeal of being self-reliant, of transcending society, and ultimately defining a single, private self.³

Afro American community itself creates bifurcation within community. They often underestimate their identity either by rejecting their identity or by acculturating to American culture. Her responses also point to the quest of Jindine for a self-identity. Son holds firm on the values of the community than individuality even though he has been labelled as an outcast or outlaw.

Gender stereotypes and women's search for self-identity are inextricably linked with the theme of cultural encounter. As both Son and Jadine show up to meet the first members of the community, Jadine is surprised to find out that she enters a space with a strong separation between sexes. Thus, she runs out of conversation "ten minutes after it started" (Morrison 246). Moreover, she feels hurt by the behaviour of the men who grouped on the porch and, after a greeting, ignored her (246). Son on other hand expects that she might be able to adapt to the changing condition. Her tension with community further intensifies when Jindine is visited by a group of African women in dream, among them Therese and Ondine who

each pulled out a breast and showed it to her. . . . They stood around in the room . . . revealing one breast and then two and Jadine was shocked. . . . "I have breasts too," she said or thought or willed, . . . But they didn't believe her. They just held their own higher and pushed their own farther out and looked at her (Morrison 258)

Jindine being threatened by the demonstration of their sex, the Symbolic meaning of their conversation suggests that the range of womanhood is literarily higher than Jadine's. In fact, she is transfixed by the appearance of these women that is completely different from her own. On eve of her departure to Paris Ondine advises her.

a girl has got to be a daughter first. She has to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can'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. . . . You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain way, a careful way about people older than you. . . . A daughter is a woman that cares about where she comes from and takes care of them that took care of her. . . . I don't want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours. (Morrison 281)

She rules out this concept and remarks "There are other ways to be a women . . . I don't want to learn how to be a the kind of women" (281-282). She utters her position clearly and goes back to Paris by reassuring herself that "grown women did not need safety or is dream. She was the safety she longed for" (291). She does not want others to conform her identity. She is self-reliant and capable of doing thing. It shows a sense of cultural and financial empowerment of women in the new cultural context. They have absorbed the concept of liberation and freedom through acculturation. Morrison points out "one of the characteristics of Black women's experience was that they did not have to choose between a career and a home. They did both."⁴

Critics sometime regard Jadine as the novel's ultimate heroine who cops up with temporary crisis and manages to stay true to herself. She personifies the modern liberated woman who rejects traditional gender roles and adhere to the norms of feminist movement. In some literary works, heroin sacrifices her ideology and personal interest for her male counterpart to appease him and the norms of male oriented society. She is a non-conformist in the novel. She does not want to sacrifice her individual identity for a romantic relationship with Son. On other hand stubborn resistance of Jadine to the values of Black community is viewed by critics as by-product of a cultural clash between two binary forces. Son's action in the novel is viewed as a mission to liberate Jidine from the yoke of destructive aspects of the white culture.

Works cited

Primary source citation

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Secondary source

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