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## Exploring “New Properties” in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*

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*Tar Baby*, the fourth novel of Toni Morrison, is a story about Jadine and Son who are an anti thesis of each other. Jadine – an Art History graduate from Sorbonne and a successful model, moves on to affirm her own female identity and Son – whose mysterious presence initiates the novel, adopts multiple names in the novel and is rooted in his African notions but ironically on the run in the narrative. The novel marks a departure from its preceding list as the story is set on the Caribbean island, Isles de Chevaliers, in the White mansion, L’Arbe de la Croix which is resided by the White couple – Valerian Street and Margaret Street and their black servants – Sydney and Ondine. Thus it is Morrison’s first novel which includes the white characters as important as black characters in its story. The plot has racist overtones but simultaneously it brings to light the aftermath of colonization on the Blacks who idealize such White notions so much so that they fail to associate with other Blacks within their community. This is revealed through Sydney and Ondine, they “identify”, as Doreatha Mbalia remarks, “more with their employers and their employers’ culture than they do with their own people and their own culture” (71). This is witnessed in the way Ondine refers to Margaret’s kitchen as her own and the way they allow Margaret to call them “Kingfish” and “Bueleh” instead of their real names. Gideon and Therese are Yardman and Mary to Sydney and Ondine who in turn are “machete-hair” and bow-tie” to them. Sydney’s proclamation of his origin to Son is another evidence; “I am a Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other” (164).

Toni Morrison incorporates the myth of African folktale – tar baby in the story and hence the name – Tar Baby becomes the title of the novel. The tar baby story was initiated as a response to slavery by Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus plantation tales. However there are number of versions of the story yet the plot elements remain more or less the same. In the Uncle Remus version;

A farmer sets out a tar bay dressed in bonnet and skin to trap a troublesome rabbit. The rabbit hits the tar baby when it does not answer good morning. He gets stuck and when caught he begs the farmer, “boil me in oil, skin me alive but please don’t throw me in the briar patch”. The farmer falls for the trick. So he throws him in the briar patch and clever rabbit escapes. (Leclair 27)

On its surface level, Valerian Street is the farmer, Jadine Childs the tar baby and Son the rabbit. However, the associations become more and more complex as the plot unfolds. It is through this analogy that Toni Morrison delineates the intricacies of race, sex and class in the West. As regards Philip Page, the initial setting of the novel acts like “a kind of laboratory where racial, familial, class and gender expectations can be tested” (236). This myth of tar baby that becomes the recurrent motif in the novel has been read as adding to the plurality of meanings. Linden Peach argues that the concept of tar baby story demonstrates the contextual effect on the meaning which as a result is deferred endlessly. In this regard, Craig Werner also makes a

similar observation, “Assuming new meanings as its context shifts . . . each new version of the myth influences the consciousness of the individuals who, even though they accept the myths that they inherit, gradually assign them new meanings as signs that can be transformed into further myths” (154-5). Morrison herself articulates another meaning for tar baby, “I found that there is a tar baby in American mythology I started thinking about her. At one time a tar pit was a holy place, at last important because tar was used to build things . . . It held things together. For, the tar baby goes comes to mean the black woman who can hold things together” (Leclair 122). Moreover, the word “tar” has been employed few times in the narrative so as to add to multiple associations which in turn unlocks the signifying chains in language; “tar signifies blackness as it has been constituted in ideologies of race, as well as its possible meanings beyond those ideologies; thus tar is a trap of white dominant ideology and the way to become free of it” (Krumholz 272).

Toni Morrison portrays Jadine as an independent black woman for whom the conformities is a threat and Son as the one who values his African rootedness. The novel is replete with African mythologies right from the beginning. Jadine’s non conformity to the traditional images of the black womanhood is revealed to her through different forms in the novel. One such encounter is the woman in canary yellow dress with skin like tar in the Parisian supermarket, “. . . the woman turned her head sharply around the left and looked right at Jadine. Turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below” (42-43). This episode makes Jadine jittery for she senses her inauthenticity and hence leaves for Isles de Chevalier. The second encounter happens on her way back home with Son, she gets stuck in a swamp near the river. She fights for her way up a tree trunk to free herself as the “swamp women” try to claim her. The swamp women along with the woman in yellow reprimand Jadine for she opines for the different way, “they wondered at the girl’s desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were” (183). Jadine in this episode turns out to be a Rabbit as she gets entangled in the swamp in the similar manner as the rabbit gets stuck with the tar baby.

Toni Morrison juxtaposes the modernity of New York with the traditionalism of Eloë and it is in Eloë where Jadine faces the third encounter. In a waking nightmare, she witnesses the African American women including Jadine’s dead mother, Son’s dead wife, Aunt Rosa, Therese, Ondine, exposing their breasts and the woman in yellow with eggs in hands, all these women remind Jadine of the moral obligations and traditional symbol of womanhood associated with nurturance and fertility. “They seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it with their soft loose tits” (264). Eloë and the kind of femininity that these women enact, haunts Jadine for it would simply mean an adherence to the agrarian patriarchy that limit the woman’s role to motherhood. Jadine does not like her autonomy to be defined and limited by Son for she aims at reconstructing her own black female subjectivity. Morrison depicts the cosmopolitanism of New York and Paris in contrast to the egalitarianism and collectivism of Eloë. The traditional boundaries of identities are in continuous flux in the former while as the latter upholds the ideal of wholeness but as de Weever too considers, that is not possible, and “especially for black women” (173). Eloë demands a strict moral ethos; affirming patriarchal attitudes, traditional religion and a view of women as property. Jadine faces a gender-based segregation in Eloë. On being asked by Ondine about her idea of woman, she objects, “There are other ways to be a woman, Nandine”, Jadine went on. “Your way is one, I guess it is, but it’s not my way. I don’t want to be . . . like you. . . . I don’t want to be that kind of woman” (284). Jadine, like Sula,

rejects the normative formulations assigned to women and sets out for the reclamation of her own femininity. Jadine's journey to island, New York and Eloë is a metaphor for her inner journey towards spiritual maturation which ultimately permits her to be at home with herself and the world. It is her journey from a fragmented to integrated sense of identity which embodies the confrontation of her inner fears and powers. Jadine's retreat into future portrays her courage, resilience, she condemns her dreams of safety in the confidence that she herself "was the safety she longed for"(290).

Jadine in the beginning had returned to island for that inauthenticity that a woman in yellow kindled in her and in the end she is now ready to "tangle" with the same. The word tangle is suggestive of mixing, a kind of merging within herself she now believes is within her. She rejects the dreams of Son but in doing so, she has revised – "revisioned" – herself. Conversely, Son on one hand chastises Jadine for being indifferent towards her roots yet he praises Jadine to Gideon. He too seems to value Jadine as a woman with ideas of her own. The novel ends with Jadine on her flight to Paris and Son's merging with the blind horsemen. These Stops Son from following Jadine for according to her, she "has forgotten her ancient properties" but in the end Jadine does not emerge as a female aloof from her roots, rather she is able to integrate the ancient and new properties within her own Self. Morrison deliberately adopts the open-endedness to *Tar Baby* for, she says:

there is always something more interesting at stake than clear resolution in a novel. I'm interested in survival – who survives and who does not, and why – and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety might be. I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. (Interview 420)

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