Tar Baby: Search for Identity in Commodity Culture

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▌ABSTRACT▐

Tar Baby, Toni Morrison's fourth novel re examines the problem that black characters face in negotiatiating a place for themselves within a dominant culture, with respect to their own history and culture. The novel critiques the dominant socio economic and commodifying cultural space from which the black woman seems to have no escape. Jadine is a colonized subject, for as a fashion model she has surrendered to an aesthetics of commodification, and as a student of art history, she has internalized the capitalist ethic of the white culture industry. Though she has ensured her freedom, Morrison's critique of her separation from her family and culture is unmistakable. Interwoven with her narrative is Son's predicament, the stereotype of a black racist and her 'lover'. The novel ends with him at the crossroads of culture, yet signaling his passage to freedom through resistance. The paper arguments how Toni Morrison has envisioned the welfare of African American community by reconstructing the role of new black generation, as represented by Jadine and Son, whose new journey towards their self fulfillment just not only bring their personal freedom but also regenerates African American community by resisting dominant commodifying cultural.

Key Words
culture industry, commodification, internalization, resistance, identity, crossroads of culture

One of the worst impacts of capitalism is its principle of commodity consumption that has almost blurred the vision of people, who, being dazzled by the glow of economic prosperity, as offered with magnetism of dollars, material wealth and luxury, can hardly make a distinction between a commodity and human being The expansionist motto of Euro-American capitalism has effectively used mass media for spreading the image of superiority of the leading white power among the less privileged, including the racially marginalized. In order to uphold the superstructure of the society as supremely beautiful and permanently intact a submission to the dominant ideology is intended by the legislators of the society, and that submissive role is taken by African Americans. Within an unacknowledged apartheid social structure of American society almost every aspect of black life is practically determined and controlled by white supremacy, and, even the 'blackness' of African Americans is represented according to the prefabricated notion of black identity. What follows are the popular racist stereotypes--a black male is dangerous and threatening, whereas a black female is a strong figure, “black mammy,” the gender inspired image. The commodification of 'blackness' in the mass media and the re-production of black art and culture by a white artist have its direct effect on the formation of a group’s social identity. In order to deconstruct those representations which are mainly designed to promulgate domination, an original cultural space is urgently required within an alien but hegemonic cultural space. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally have said, "In contemporary culture the media have become central to the constitution of social identity . . . . We also identify and construct ourselves as social beings through the mediation of images" (qtd. in hooks 5). Toni Morrison’s fourth novel *Tar Baby* shows an African American crisis of identity as its characters are placed within such a cultural space from which they seem to have no escape. The present paper approaches the novel as a critique of the dominant socio-economic ideology of commodification of 'blackness,' and shows how Morrison invests in

exploring the survival strategy for blacks by way of creating a cultural resistance that will decolonize their colonized minds and actions.

Morrison's setting of the central plot of the novel in the small island of Isle de le Chevalier that is located between two metropolitan capitals of New York and Paris in the French Caribbean, is suggestive of the contemporary dilemmas, African Americans face: how they will negotiate a place for themselves within a dominant culture with respect to their own history and culture? L'Arbe de la Croix--Valerian Street's mansion/ the master's mansion becomes the symbol of dominant socio economic and cultural space in which Jadine and Son are struggling for their self fulfilment: one is through cultural assimilation and another by his strong adherence to past. The master's house with juxtaposition of both black and white characters seems to be a prototype of an 'idealized' American society, but the epitome of this 'naturalized' society is shattered with Son's intrusion, that exposes repressed antagonism within the household and all hostilities and secrets, that had been suppressed under the guise of what looks "like a family" (*Tar Baby* 49) come into surface. It is its explosive text of race that ensured Morrison the cover of the *Newsweek*. Jean Strouse wrote: “In the new novel, *Tar Baby*, Morrison takes on a much larger world than she has before, drawing a composite picture of America in black and white” (“Toni Morrison’s Black Magic” 52).

Essentially *Tar Baby* is the story of Jadine Childs, a fair complexioned Negro woman of twenty-five, who lives a life of comfort and luxury, which is easily accessible to her. She was in Baltimore and was later taken to the Caribbean island of Dominique by her uncle and aunt, Sydney and Ondine Childs, who worked as butler and maid for Valerian and Margaret Streets**.** She has been educated with Valerian's financial support and has become an art history graduate of the Sorbonne in Paris, an expert on Cloisonné, and a cover model for *Elle*. Growing up in Valerian's household with limitless opportunities, and later getting an education in the cosmopolitan city of Paris, Jadine has little knowledge of the colonial

history of the island or the predicament of the contemporary black community. She does not have any interest in the history and culture of her people. She likes Ave Maria better than gospel music, and in her view "'Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of his genius, not the mask-makers' " (*Tar Baby* 74). These remarks should not be taken as Morrison's race-inflected aesthetic judgement. Rather they should be taken as tremendous force of dominant culture that shapes and reshapes the choice for people belonging to minorities. The novel draws our attention to the identity crisis of a black woman whose Euro-centric education, initially lays many choices open to her. She is not definite about her plans. Sometimes she thinks of "opening a business of her own," either a "gallery" or a "boutique" but she is not certain about it (*Tar Baby* 49). She is not even certain of why her boyfriend wants to marry her; is it because she is a black girl, or it is she, a person, whom actually he wants to marry. She reflects:"I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl?"(48). She thinks she is assured of her assumptions and choices of things that have led to her success. But she is not quite confident about it. Once in Paris, while she was shopping for a party to celebrate the occasion of her selection as a fashion model for the cover picture of the *Elle*, her self-confidence however seemed to have been wounded by a woman in yellow dress. The narrative voice describes the occasion as well as the stupefying effect of the woman on Jadine:

> . . . a woman much too tall. . . . She had no arm basket or cart. . . . The woman leaned into the dairy section and opened a carton from which she selected three eggs. Then she put her right elbow into the palm of her left hand and held the eggs aloft between elbow and shoulder. She looked up then and they saw something in her eyes so powerful it had burnt away the eyelashes. (45)

Jadine was overwhelmed by that "woman's woman—that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty." She followed her, but before the woman disappeared, she "turned her head sharply around to the left and looked right at 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" (46). The woman's insulting gesture derailed Jadine; all her achievements seemed to have been washed away. Her sense of self-pride was wounded and somehow she felt troubled as if her sense of self-assurance and dignity got shattered by the woman in yellow robe, who seemed to be an emblem of womanliness, elegance, beauty, nurturance and authenticity that Jadine had never known before and certainly has not achieved. She moves from Paris and visits Nanadine and Uncle Sydney for Christmas. But there too, she is unable to free herself from the impression the woman created on her. The author says, "the woman had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic" (48). Jadine's condition as a privileged black girl invites several problems for constructing her own authentic identity. In her access to cultural and economic advantages and in her preference for whiteness Jadine has to struggle not only with Whiteness as dominant culture but also with her occasional awareness of Blackness that haunts her and makes her feel "lonely and inauthentic." Throughout the novel the gaze of the traditional blackness, as embodied by African woman in 'yellow', Son and also his all-black home town Eloe, makes Jadine's disposition of individualism stand out as "cultural disturbance" (Yuh-chuan Shao 563).

This is the predicament of an educated and privileged black woman, who in order to avail herself of all the conveniences of the Capitalist economy abandons her blackness and commodifies it in the fashionable market of New York and Paris. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981, Morrison commented on the creation of a character like Jadine:

> This civilization of black people, which was underneath the white civilization, was there with its own everything. Everything of that civilization was not worth hanging on to, but some of it was, and nothing has taken its place black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration. To produce Jadine, that's what it was for. I think there is some danger in the result of that production. It cannot replace certain essentials from the past. (105)

She becomes a colonized subject. As a fashion model she has surrendered to an aesthetic of commodification and as a student of art history, she has internalized the capitalist ethic of the white culture. By negating her blackness, her own culture she has no doubt ensured her freedom but she has also lost many valuable things. Once Morrison said, "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" ("Rootedness" 344). *Tar Baby* comes closest to *The Bluest Eye* by critiquing the dominant socioeconomic and cultural space from which the black women seem to have no escape. Pecola's failure to achieve selfhood in 1941 takes four decades more for Jadine to reach the goalpost. Pecola is convinced of her ugliness because evidence is everywhere, within and outside the home, whereas the evidence of Jadine's beauty is displayed on the cover page of fashion magazines, a smart marketing strategy of the dominating culture industry. While Pecola, in her struggle with the white notions of beauty, ultimately becomes a victim of internalization, Jadine is thoroughly happy with the definition of beauty, guaranteed by white standards because she "fits" into it. She struggles not against a white standard of female beauty, but against a black-defined standard of female beauty. Though it may appear that Jadine is more self-defined than Pecola, the two women, on deeper analysis, are merely the two sides of the same coin. As Jadine defines herself in terms of white social and cultural values, she seems to embody Alice Walker's construction of the black

women who is a bit educated and who is "pushed and pulled by the larger world outside of her, urged to assimilate (to be "raceless") in order to overcome her background" (Washington 143). She has to pay for her conscious assimilation that borders on imitation. Trying to live the bourgeois way of life, Jadine seems to lose her sense of self-image or fails to create a solid identity for herself.

In the creation of Jadine Morrison has not simply warned us against the cultural assimilation that tends one to disconnect one from his/ her historical, and communal heritage/ cultural roots, but also she has made us critical of the assumption that embracing race-based model of identity is just the solution for the dilemma, a new black generation faces in a post/modern consumer culture. We must consider the notion of "essential blackness," the relationship between an individual and community, and the tension between one's racial past and future in our exploration of the cultural significance of Jadine's ambiguous identity. In her attraction for white identity Jadine comes far away from the conventional idea of blackness, and attempts to define herself by conforming to the dominant cultural identity. Her insistence on freedom and individualism are most clearly seen in her confrontation with Son, Florida-born black man. The first meeting between Jadine and Son takes place in the former's bedroom. Wrapping herself from head to toe by the paper of "whiteness," she fails to recognize that the man reflected in the mirror, belongs to her community. The narrative voice says, "She struggled to pull herself away from his image in the mirror and to yank her tongue from the roof of her mouth" (115). However, after a while she recovers herself from the shock and becomes eloquent about her popularity and success in the world of fashion. Her self pride and achievement come into question when Son and Jadine confront each other directly:

> "How much?" he asked her. "Was it a lot?" His voice was quiet.
> "What are you talking about? How much what?"

> "Dick. That you had to suck, I mean to get all that gold and be in the movies. Or was it pussy? I guess for models it's more pussy than cock."

Jadine, infuriated by such an insulting remark, calls Son "an ignorant motherfucker" (121) and hits him in his face and on his heads. Thus Jadine desperately attempts to turn away from her cultural self, which is now in the risk of being exposed by Son's challenge. She vents out her hatred for Son by calling him names, "ape," "nigger," "baboon," "animal" and such behaviour of Jadine shows that she feels self-threatened by Son's presence in the Streets' house. She is unable to accept her own image as long as Son is in her room. When he leaves, Jadine feels an urgent desire to "clean him off her" (122). It is through Jadine that Morrison wants to focus on the dilemma of a contemporary African American female who happens to be a "cultural orphan," whose sense of self is based on a denial of her own cultural heritage and identification with an alien one. The central conflict that Jadine faces in the search for her authenticity is no more so clearly articulated than in the passage where the Caribbean island swamp literally entraps her in the black, sticky substance:

> The women looked down from the rafters of the trees hanging in the trees looked down and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when they first saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. . . .This girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant--mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties. . . (183).

For Morrison, the women in trees symbolise the women, who with their "ancient properties," "exceptional femaleness" hold the community together

like tar, and they are those women to whom the novel is dedicated. In her interview with Thomas Le Clair Morrison said, "For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That's what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal. . . .(122) Choosing to escape from her cultural bondage, Jadine decides to cut herself off the past and move on to a better life in her parting remarks 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's nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better. . . (*Tar Baby* 271). Through the disparity between the past and the future and conflict between the individual and the community, Morrison seems to ask whether black people should turn their back on their past or stick to it in order to form their self authentic identity.

Morrison consciously uses folklores, archetypes, and mythic forms which are directly and indirectly related to communal properties and richness of black culture. She also notes in her interview with Claudia Tate,

> The black community is a pariah community. Black people are pariahs. The civilization of black people that lives apart from but in juxtaposition to other civilization is a pariah relationship. In fact, the concept of the black in this country is almost always one of the pariah. But a community contains pariahs within it that are very useful for the conscience of that community. (129)

Through the paradox of the pariah Morrison wants to evoke what is inadequate in the community, what it has lost and what is causing its decadence. The sustaining values of black woman-hood, its tar-like qualities to hold things together and its nurturing qualities for the survival of the whole community--are evoked by the paradox of the pariah. Jadine, the twentieth century African American heroine, takes those "tar-like qualities"

as impediments to her search for individualism because she does not want, as she says, to settle herself for "wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building" (*Tar Baby* 269). The novel levels Jadine's feminist point of view from Son's perspective. Son does not understand what Jadine means by sexual equality. The narrative voice says, "She kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior." It is from Son's point of view that Morrison tells about the history of black women's struggle that the politics of feminism never includes. The rural black women do not need the support of liberal feminism, which Jadine defends. She will never realize the history of these black women who have to go through unending physical strife to overcome poverty. In her blind assimilation of Euro-American culture Jadine loses her "ancient properties." Almost at the end of the novel Therese alerts Son to forget her: "There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties" (305). In reconstructing the image of black womanhood Jadine is deliberately used as the conscience of the community to alert the new world community how it is coming far away from the healing zone of its "ancient properties."

According to Gurleen Grewal, "Son and Jadine are implicated in double roles as both snarer and ensnared" (87). Son is a snarer whose blackness Jadine confronts. Finding herself in the predicament of the Brer rabbit, she struggles with tar, her blackness, as evidenced in the scene mentioned earlier. Both are engaged to trap each other by their own tricks: Jadine by her Euro-centric idealism while Son by his romanticization of Eloe. What is interesting in the narrative is that Son is sharing folk tales with her. These folk tales are part of African American cultural heritage, and by telling her the stories of "The Fox and the Stork", "The Monkey and the Lion", "The Spider Goes to Market" he insists her to reshape her identity, based on African American cultural heritage. By inserting the folk aesthetic into the narrative as a counter-myth to the values that

Jadine has adopted, Morrison makes Son play the role of the Brer rabbit: " He saw it all as a rescue: first tearing her mind away from that blinding awe. Then the physical escape from the plantation" (219). Jadine also in her role of "entrapper" perceives the changing scenario of their relationship as if providing Son rescue from his provincial and nostalgic outlook. But despite her efforts, "he insisted on Eloe" (223). Son hopes that he will be able to reorient Jadine by making her familiar with the riches of black cultural heritage when he takes her to Eloe. In Eloe, however, her experience seems to be intolerable for her. She ultimately finds Eloe as 'rotten' and 'a burnt-out place'. For Jadine and Son, the inability of each to adjust with the other results in bitter confrontation, which unmasks their pretension and reveals the stark reality. Jadine thinks that she is indebted to Valerian for being educated by her, but Son reminds her that it is her aunt and uncle who, with their lifetime's labour, have secured all privileges for her. Their attempt of rescuing each other is criticized by the author thus:" Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (269) Their relationship breaks down. None was certain of his/her responsibilities, what work they should do, when and where, and thus they got separated from each other. Grewal opines, "This impasse between them is symptomatic of a larger crisis of the third world locked in the arms of the first" (89).

Neither Son nor Jadine realises that it is possible for them to be economically successful as well as faithful to their rich cultural heritage. In the introductory essay to *Racing Justice, En-gendering Power*, Morrison noted, "the problem of internalizing the master's tongue is the problem of the rescued. Unlike the problems of survivors, who may be lucky, fated, etc., the rescued have the problem of debt. If the rescuer gives you back your life, he shares in that life" (xxv). Jadine is the typical representative of that "rescued" who reminds Son "a million times" (*Tar Baby* 269) that Valerian had put her to school. Her Euro-centric education

has taught her to adopt a self- alienating cultural view which she also wants to impose on Son in the name of “rescuing” him. Though Son does not want to succumb to white hegemonic ideals of commodity consumption, he cannot avoid the authorial criticism for his outmoded and unrealistic attitude as evident in his idealization of the black woman in her maternal role. Son’s sentiments for his past, for his all-black town Eloe, cannot offer a solution at a time when it is difficult for one to know better his/her own self. The problem is that not only does the “benevolent” white erode the black’s self-identity in the pretension of rescuing him/her from the brutality of slavery but also succeeds in making the “rescued” his active agent for trapping those who are left “unrescued.”

Tar Baby focuses on a variety of relationships within Valerian’s house: between Valerian and his wife Margaret, between Sydney and Ondine, between the Childs and their jet-setter niece Jadine, between the indoor and outdoor servants, i.e. between Sydney/Ondine and Gideon/Therese. Philip Page in his essay “Everyone was out of Place: Contention and Dissolution in *Tar Baby*” says, “The Street household resembles a stereotypical antebellum plantation, with its aristocratic and bigoted patriarch, its neurotic white lady, its house servants caught between class superiority. . ." (112). Valerian, the king of this “structured family” has accumulated his wealth out of the candy business. He is a typical capitalist who has made his fortune by exploiting the labour of the African people. The novel calls into question the idea of equality that has been made naturalized by white hegemony. Harold. M. Hodges opines, “Most (Americans) are at least vaguely conscious of the truth that however loudly we proclaim the ideal of equality, we are a stratified people: that ours is in fact a multi-layered society, a hierarchical society. . . "(x). Within this “superstructure” of the Streets home Margaret, “the Principal Beauty of Maine,” is one of the many subordinates. She relies upon her physical beauty to accomplish everything. Below the rank of Margaret, are Valerian’s servants, Sydney and Ondine, who have developed a sense of superiority

over Gideon and Therese, the outdoor servants. Instead of identifying them with their own people, they internalize their master's racist outlook. Sydney betrays his sense of superior class consciousness, one of the germs inflicted by the scythe of Capitalism, when he says to Son, "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" (*Tar Baby* 163). He calls Gideon and Therese "Yardman" and "Mary" respectively as his master does and in this way he tries to maintain a distinction between him and his people. Although they identify themselves with their master and share his racist attitude, they can never be on equal terms with their master. While Sydney and Ondine fill up the hierarchical class structure of indoor house-servants, Gideon and Therese fill up that of outdoor field servants.

The pernicious effect of racism on one's cultural self and identity has been accurately measured by. E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*: ". . .the Negro is . . . 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. . ."(45). Some eighty years after Du Bois first coined the term, the Kenyan writer/critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o detailed the features and lingering consequences of this outcome, placing it in a global context: "The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (3). Morrison's depiction of relationships in the plantation household of Valerian Streets significantly exposes the ways Imperialism wields its weapon "cultural bomb" to construct a self-alienating materialist world view that takes one far from his/her 'roots,' and entraps one into its design. Jadine's apparent success may appear to be laudable and appropriate in avoiding the sufferings and struggle that the black women have ever

faced, but Morrison's critique of this black daughter is unmistakable. Her education, instead of being used for the uplift of her people, is used rather as a means of "integrating" herself into an alien culture that betrays an ignorance of black history. Her education represents an investment that produces a bourgeois educated class, distinguished from working class. She disowns responsibility to Sydney and Ondine: "You are asking me to parent you. Please don't. I can't do that now" (281).

In reconstructing a solid identity for black woman through Jadine Morrison has both celebrated her quality of independence and individuality, and the uniqueness of authentic black womanhood, as represented by the woman in 'yellow,' women in trees and night women at Eloe. Mobley has pointed out that on the one hand Morrison wants to "affirm the self-reliance and freedom of a black woman who makes choices for her own life on her own terms"; on the other "she also seeks to 'point out dangers. . . that can happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no historical connection' " (284). Jadine's search for self fulfilment must be carried alongside the construction of black heritage. In Morrison's prophetic vision Jadine's search for freedom and happiness signifies a communal dream and a cultural reorientation, rather than a personal goal of self realization. In the commencement address, delivered at Bernard College in 1979, Morrison said,

> I am suggesting that we pay as much attention to our nurturing sensibilities as to our ambition. You are moving in the direction of freedom and the function of freedom is to free somebody else. You are moving toward self-fulfillment and the consequences of that fulfillment should be to discover that there is something that is just as important as you are. (qtd. in Mobley 286)

In her resistance to commodity culture Morrison, in *Tar Baby* has envisioned the betterment for her people by juxtaposing Son and Jadine who try

to fulfil their goals in their own manner. Both are unique in their characteristics and both can contribute to the regeneration of their community: "one had a past, the other a future and each bore the culture to save the race in his hands," the narrative voice asserts (269). In the quest for her individuality Jadine flies back to Paris where she will begin at "Go." With her growing maturity she has come to realize what Ondine once had told her: "A grown woman did not need safety or its dream. She was the safety she longed for" (209). In the quest for her new life she would be able, as it is hoped, to face the odds with her growing awareness of a solid identity, forged with the "sacred qualities" of "ancestral tar babies/ tar mothers," because, as Morrison says in her interview with Ruas, "She now knows enough--she hasn't opened the door, but she knows where the door is" (108). The novel ends with Son running "Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-spilt" (306), which may be read as a metaphor of his emergent self-consciousness that encourages him to proceed further instead of locking himself in a suspended past. Thus the novel ends signalling new passage for both Jadine and Son, new black generation, who, ultimately by gaining their personal freedom will activate the idealism of American dream that celebrates the spirit of individualism by embracing the black racial, cultural, and communal values.

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