

## BATTLE FOR IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S TAR BABY

### Article Particulars

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### Abstract

*Toni Morrison's novels explore the life of African Americans who struggle in the midst of conflicting nature of African and American culture. This article projects the life of a modern black woman, Jadine in the novel Tar Baby, who imbibes the materialistic aspirations of the Western culture instead of withholding the ancestral heritage of her own clan.*

*Jadine's education has opened doors to more avenues of life. She openly comments that she wants to be different kind of woman instead of bearing the traditional burdens of race. Her ambition to become a successful model is more important to her than listening to her aunt or recovering ancestral roots. She tries to run away from the responsibility of taking care of her aged aunt and uncle during their old age. In her struggle to attain an identity as a professional woman, she forsakes the feelings of motherhood and thereby becomes alienated among her own community.*

*Jadine's relationship with her lover, Son, re-questions her attachment towards African masses. Morrison projects his true love towards African people and his perpetual struggle to bring about some positive change in the life of the people by being one among them. Morrison reiterates that education is vital for the emancipation of black woman but at the same time she should nourish the cultural values of her community and be a part of it so as to gain an identity and fulfillment.*

**Keywords:** *Toni Morrison, Tar Baby, contemporary black woman, identity crisis, self-fulfillment, alienation*

### Battle for Identity in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby

Toni Morrison explores through her novels, the ways in which the African Americans battle in the midst of capitalist values, seducing American culture and the legacy of an African heritage. Her novel focuses on how some of her characters shun their black identities in favour of the values and norms of the whites.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison explores Jadine, the female protagonist's exposure to two cultures and illustrates the extent to which she is influenced by the Western culture. Being an educated ambitious woman, she takes effort to free herself from the strange

hold of her culture's conventions and restrictions. In spite of her occasional awareness of her blackness, she does not wish to be recognised as a member of her own clan. Instead, she identifies herself more with her white employer than with her own people and their culture.

Jadine believes that her self-fulfillment lay in going to Paris since it gave her more broad options: "marry a dope king or a doctor, model, or teach art at Jackson High. In Europe she thought there might be a fourth choice" (225). In her struggle for fulfillment, she ultimately loses her roots from the white as well as the African American world and becomes double alienated.

Morrison highlights the problems of alienation and identification that the contemporary black woman faces during her search for identity through Jadine. She has lost her father and mother at a very young age and has been adopted by her uncle Sydney and Ondine Child. As Sydney and Ondine work for a white family, the Streets, she is under the protection of Valerian and Margaret Streets. Jadine values the opinions of Valerian more than her uncle's and aunt's, "They were family...Nandaine and Sydney mattered a lot to her but what they thought did not" (49). She repeatedly expresses a deep sense of indebtedness to Valerians telling that "he put me through school" (263). She is torn between the world of her patrons, the Streets, whose patronage has enabled Jadine to become financially self-sufficient and her ancestry which includes the very people who were enslaved by imperialism and brought to the Caribbean islands from West Africa.

Jadine is accused of thinking and acting like a white girl. Her behavioural patterns, dress, language, associations and ideology are all those of the whites and demonstrate her disapproval of African ways of living and all that is associated with it. Morrison projects the view that Jadine's mother, aunt, sister and their sisters knew their true and ancestral heritage but Jadine is not one among them as she has sold out for a degree and a career.

Morrison through Jadine illustrates the consequences of rejecting one's ancestral heritage in the quest for identity, Amina Amin in the article entitled "'Daughterly Voices' in Morrison's *Tar Baby*" quotes Marilyn S. Mobley who says that "Jadine's quest for wholeness is unsuccessful because she accepts values and mores of white-middle-class culture without question and she rejects the very cultural constructions of race and mothering that could heal and transform her consciousness" (138).

Ondine and Sydney regarded their orphaned niece Jadine as their crown. Ondine wants Jadine to be the child, the daughter she never had. Ondine depends on Jadine for emotional support like hundred of black woman who depended on their children during their old age. She believed that education would 'civilize' Jadine, and give her a good life but it is to her late realization that Jadine's education teaches her to shun her blackness.

Ondine does not anticipate Jadine's rejection of her own culture and of being a daughter. Yamini K. Murthi in the article entitled "Gender Solidarity and Discovery of Self in Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *Jazz*" quotes the words of Alladi Uma to express Ondine's realisation that she hasn't been a black mother, one who "helps the daughter to define herself...[and] passes on the values of the community she considers worthwhile" (82).

Jadine on the other hand forsakes the ancient sacred properties and declares that she's not their daughter. Accused by her aunt of neglecting communal responsibilities, she openly opposes Ondine: "There are other ways to be a woman... I don't want to be... like you" (284). She wishes be identified as a successful model instead of standing up to the expectations of the community. She reinstates that she wants to "get out of [her] skin and be only the person inside – not American – not Black – just me" (48).

Ondine persuades Jadine to reconsider her decision to go to Paris for she feels it is fraught with danger for Jadine. She suspects that her aunt feels that it is Jadine's duty to support uncle and aunt for parenting her. Jadine harshly expresses her unfeeling attitude to her uncle and aunt by saying, "you want me to pay you back. You worked for me and put up with me. Now it's my turn to do it for you, that's all you're saying" (281) Jadine completely ignores the truth of the years of sacrifice her aunt and uncle made on her behalf.

Ondine insist in her parting conversation with Jadine that "a girl has got to be a daughter first .... And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't ever learn how to be a woman . . . good enough even 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 certain careful way about people older than you are" (281). Ondine's explanation emphasizes the emotional bonding which a mother expects from her daughter. But Jadine resists Ondine's expectation that she should protect her uncle and aunt during their old age.

Amina Amin in the article entitled "'Daughterly Voices' in Morrison's *Tar Baby*" approves Peter Erikson who rightly says that Jadine's "...success in articulating and holding to a new definition of black female identity is made to depend heavily on an unfeeling attitude toward the 'parents' who raised her" (138). Morrison suggests that Jadine is trying to affirm her identity outside her familial and historical connections.

Morrison illustratively brings out how Jadine experiences the strangle hold of the maternal figures through her experience in the swamp with her lover Son. "The young tree sighed and swayed . . . They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer, they saw differently. This girl was fighting to get away from them" (183) The women become aggressive when they see Jadine trying to get away from them instead of confronting the truth.

The tree to which she clutches is of no help because the other sides of the swamp do not allow her to do so. The tree becomes symbolic of the traditional women from whom Jadine strives to escape. She regards them as a threat who will annihilate her very self, either by choking her or drowning her in the swamp. She tries to move away from them as she wants freedom.

Jadine feels that, as an educated African-American woman, she has access to many of the material luxuries that in the Caribbean: wealth, estate ownership and high-fashion. 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. Jadine regards New York like home, a place where she can be free and happy, "if ever there was a black woman's town, New York was it" (222).

It is only when Jadine and Son come into contact with one another's world and life style, the differences between them emerges and reaches a breaking point. The conflict felt by two characters, Jadine Childs and Son Green, is complicated because of the tensions between different perceptions of identity.

To Jadine, Son's community in Eloë is conservative and could not adjust to its life and work ethic. She considers that Eloë offers few challenges or opportunities for fulfillment and intellectual growth of the African woman: "Eloë was rotten and more boring than ever. A burnt-out place There was no life there. Maybe a past but definitely no future and finally there was no interest" (259).

Jadine tries her level best to settle him in New York and encourage him to take an education, which will equip him for a job. He functions in opposition to the Western world. Son comes to an understanding that black man cannot live in New York without giving up some of their culture's cherished values. Jadine tries to argue that poverty is stressful and convince Son to change his life style for a better future and not to continue as a 'yardman' all his life.

Son considers Jadine as an 'educated nitwit' since it did not provide her any knowledge of her own culture and history. He argues that formal education corrupts and destroys black people; he is adamant saying that he does not need money. He rejects the materialistic world and is extremely critical of capitalism and its effects upon Africans. To Son if Africans are exploited, then he too is exploited and that if African people are not free then he too is not free.

Morrison projects Son as the symbol of home and black culture as his dreams are fixed in Eloë. Son is a torch bearer of traditional values and Jadine is his opposite. His experience in the black community had made him strong while Jadine's experience in the white community has weakened her. Son comes to an understanding that it is not the race that results in exploitation but it is African's land and labour. Through Son's attachment to the black community and his reclaiming of the island's colonial history, Morrison articulates the idea that one has to become a part of one's ancestral history, and also be a part of it, in order to construct communal identity.

Son attempts to kill Jadine's old capitalist ideology and helps her to become more conscious of herself as an African. In the eyes of both Morrison and Son, Africans must resist capitalism's oppression by being conscious of African history and remaining loyal to the African masses.

Morrison maintains that black woman should not apologize for being educated like Jadine but at the same time suggests that Jadine can attain her wholeness only by accepting the cultural values of her community and nurture feelings of motherhood to heal and give her an identity. Yogita Goyal in the article entitled "The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" recalls the words of Toni Morrison who redefines the term 'tar baby' as "the black woman who can hold things together" (406). Morrison's conscious message is that African people must neither isolate themselves, nor reject their culture.

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