

**Journey of Going Back to Roots in Toni Morrison's
Novel *Tar Baby***

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining the theme of journey of going back to roots in Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby*. Afro-American literature reflects the use of historical memory in forming a distinct genre of literature dealing with migration and its impact on the society and individual. Morrison is one of the most prominent novelists who profoundly dealt with such a theme of quest. This quest was for the ideal place to be settled in. Morrison, in her migration narrative, shows that ancestors, elders of the family pass on the qualities and assumptions that are necessary for survival. The main characters namely Valerian, Jadine and Son, who, via intensive experiences, came to realize the true meaning of living happily once they could achieve the reconciliation between the past and the present so that they can live happy lives in the twentieth century.

Introduction

American literature reflects the use of the historical memory in forming a distinct genre of literature, dealing specifically with migration, and its movement influenced the literature by providing images and patterns associated with movement. This migration narrative of journey towards the west had a theme of quest. This quest was for the ideal place to be settled in. it was usually a breaking free from the old value system which was the locus of hopelessness and confinement. Ironically, the new value system also didn't provide any positive values, as the hopes of the migrants were usually unrealistic. The theme of quest for an ideal place, a promised land, ended with disillusionment and hopelessness. However, there were many other motives available for the questioning hero-like the quest for spiritual enlightenment, for a father or a son, for the holy grail, for gold or for self-identity.

Janis P. Stout defines the formal patterns of American journey narrative in the journey narrative in American Literature : Patterns and Departures. The primary and the most basic pattern according to him is the journey of "venturing-out" which include voyages of exploration, escape and home founding".¹it is the home-founding journey which takes into consideration the historical memory of the community. The focus is here on the new home and the advantages that it will bring. The home-founding journeys show collective groups migrating and the hardships they encounter. Ultimately, as the journey ends, it may also prove disappointing to the extent that in some narratives the migrated group retreats towards the East. The retreat toward the old home or world emphasized the importance of community ancestors and the role they play in shaping the identity of an individual.

Literature review

Among the previous studies that had dealt with Morrison's *Tar Baby* is Social and Cultural Alienation by Lina Hsu in which she examined how Morrison expanded the concept of alienation to encompass not only social and philosophical but also racial and gender issues.

The second study was carried out by L.Du in which she argues that it is very significant for Morrison to set her story of *Tar baby* in different places and their impact on the main characters in the novel.

The third prominent study was done by Izumi Koizumi focused on its controversial complexities, it will be the novel which will confirm Morrison's technical and textual use of magical realism, which presents her enchanted cosmology, as well as consider her position in the post-colonial context.

Discussion

Tar Baby is has extensively focused on migration as a narrative formation. Though here, the characters move out of America in search of their promised Eden. The north was always conceived to be a metaphorical Eden when it was contrasted with the south, but in *Tar Baby* even the north couldn't fulfill the demands and aspirations of the rich Euro-american, Mr. Street. This prompts him to look for other destinations out of the United States of America. Another respect in which this novel is important is the fact that it is the first novel by Toni Morrison which has the members of dominant white society as central characters.

The novel opens in a Caribbean island, where Valerian street had migrated for a meaningful and peaceful life., though this migration is different from the one about which Morrison talks. It is different in the sense that there are no women and children who are left behind crying. The fact that he belongs to the rich capitalist society, enables him to take his wife and even his servants with him. He doesn't migrate to an unknown destination, but to an island he owns. As an owner of a Philadelphia Candy Company, he always wanted to retire at sixty-five and leave everything for his son and he genuinely, "prepared for it. Bought an island in the Caribbean for almost nothing; built a house on a hill away from the mosquitoes and vacationed there where he could and when his wife did not throw a fit to go elsewhere."² As a privileged member of the dominant society, he had the 'advantage of deciding his destination in advance, and prepare for his comfortable stay. The greenhouse built by him to grow hydrangeas, shows his unnatural invasion into the

island. He wanted everything according to his whims and fancies, which also brings into focus his inability to embrace the culture and values of the island to which he had migrated. He brought his own traditions, culture and values to this island, which according to him was nothing but wilderness. Ondine his servant perhaps understands this invasion, and says "if he wants hydrangeas he should go back home. He becomes for Valerian Street a promised land, where like an emperor he wanted to change everything according to his convenience. Lauren Lepow suggests the use of the Eden myth by Morrison. Lepow elaborates, on this point by adding : "Tar Baby echoes Milton's subject at every turning. The novel's setting is fully a character , and it is a character, like the others, that shimmers with its abilities to be both A and not A" (365). Though, Valerian had migrated to this island with his wife and servants, it was not the place where they wanted to live. For them, it was a journey away from their promised land-America. They always look forward to and wait eagerly for their journey back home:

Except for the kitchen, which had a look of permanence, the rest of the house had a hotel feel about it a kind of a sooner or later leaving appearance.... . No crystal available (it too was closed in Philadelphia) so a

few silver trays had to do for everything from fruit to petits fours every now and then (TB 11).

Everybody, who lived in L'Arbe de la Croix lived with uncertainty and illusion as they were dependent on Valerian for their movement. It is the uncertainty about their lives which makes them uncomfortable there. According to Lepow, Valerian, like God directs his creatures' lives and more than anything symbolize the image of the white man's God, "that is, the white man as God" (368). His insistence on spending his life on this island, makes the life of Margaret a dual existence. Her life which exists somewhere between America and the island, doesn't allow her to feel any sense of belonging. She feels that she lives airplanes and not 'anywhere'. Her anguish becomes clear when she says "I want to live in one- just one. In October you said after New Year's you will come back. Then when new years' comes you'll say after carnival. If I want to live with you I have to do it your way there. I can't keep flying back and forth across wondering where I felt the Kotex" (TB 26). Margaret discomfort reflects her inability to live in an alien environment and culture.

The other inhabitants at L'Arbe de la Croix Sydney and Ondine are equally disinterested in anything dealing with the island. Though the local people of the island were blacks like them, they never tried to even communicate with them. They felt themselves to be superior to the others, as they were "Philadelphian Negroes", and this shows their class snobbery.

Valerian cannot be called a wanderer as such, but his desire and intention for travelling and migrating, makes him comparable with a wanderer. Unlike the wanderer, who eventually, looks out for new places and destinations, Valerian, always looked for safe and peaceful places, where he could lead his life on his own terms. The wanderers always changed themselves according to the environment and culture of the new place, but Valerian changed everything for his own convenience. Missy Dehn Kubitschek develops this point by suggesting:

The power structures of national domination, race, capitalism and patriarchy that operate in the surrounding world. These systems generate conflicting hierarchies, and thus the relationship between individuals shift radically, depending on which system takes priority.(133)

Denise Hienze calls *Tar Baby* an immersion narrative. Hienze suggests that this novel contains rituals of immersion, which concentrates on the communities that have retained ethnicity.³ This novel is also a quest narrative where Son and Jadine undertake the journey of immersion for gaining knowledge, but it is not a journey from ignorance to knowledge as in the end the true historical knowledge is not gained. In the first chapter Son is not formally introduced, but is told that he is a man standing on the deck of the ship and escapes the ship by jumping into the sea. He formally emerges when Margaret finds him sitting in her closet and screams. For Margaret, Sydney, Ondine and even Jadine , Son is just a dirty black Negro. Jan Furman believes Son to be a "Specimen of Morrison's travelling man," (59) who had been travelling for the last eight years, his migration from place to place was an escape, for which he had to think of a new name and identity everytime he landed on a new place. He enters L'Arbe de la Croix without getting noticed and contemplated his situation:

He didn't like to think too far in advance anyway, but he supposed he would have to think up a story to tell them about who he was and what his name was. Oh he had been alone so long hiding and running so long.(TB 139)

Though he had many names and had acquired many documented and undocumented identities, he was still rooted firmly in the culture of his own community. The name given to him by his people was the only

authentic identity to which he felt bonded. All other identities were fabricated for him by the outside world-which helped him to save his true 'self'. This shows that though he was living in an alien world for the last eight years, he was still attached to his name and his 'self' which according to view was his true self. He is the only person at La'Arbe de la Croix who realizes the unnaturalness of the place, and believes that Valerian's presence in the island was an invasion into the world of the local people. Valerian is a modern capitalist and imperialist, who migrates to other countries, islands or colonies to dominate over them and control them. Son, mixes well with Gideon and Therese the local inhabitants of the island and ironically he is the only person at the La'Arbe de la Croix who know their names. Though Gideon and Therese worked for Valerian, Sydney and Ondine never tried to even know their names and used to call them 'Yardman, and 'Mary'.

Jadine, the protagonist of the novel is also a globe trotter who is a fashion model in Paris. She is a woman who is struck between two cultures, and is unable to decide whether the past is as important as the future. James Coleman clearly suggests that Jadine "is the antithesis of the black folk and community values. She is the successful, educated young black woman whose beauty and panache have been a smash among whites in the high fashion circles of Paris, she seems the opposite of Son " (64). She is as far away from her roots as anybody could be. Her reaction to Son's presence in her room bring forward her class and race snobbery-as she thinks she belongs to the dominant white culture. Her belief in the concept of black as beast, comes to the fore when she thinks about Son's hair in these terms: "wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform-school hair. Mau, mau, Africa, chain-gang hair" (TB 113).

Jadine had come to the island from Paris, as she was running away from the image of the woman in yellow dress. Jadine can be contrasted with Pecola and Hagar, as she achieves the beauty and recognition for which they crave. She is an outstandingly successful model, who believes in the concept of white as beautiful. Jadine receives a setback when she sees the woman yellow dress:

The vision itself was a woman much too tall. Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby, so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed? The height? The skin like a tar against the canary yellow dress? (TB 42)

She realized that she is lacking something that the tar coloured woman has, and this realization becomes more acute when the woman in yellow, "turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting pf her lips, shot an arrow os saliva between her teeth down to the pavement... " (TB 43). This insulting gesture makes her aware of her in authentic existence but instead of trying to achieve that beauty or existence like that of the 'woman's woman,' she escapes to the Isle des Chevaliers, where she knew everybody would admire her beauty and looks. Peter B. Erickson elucidates it thus : "Jadine is struck by the maternal appeal of the African woman whose 'too much hip, too much bust and three carefully held eggs' suggest fertility and abundance next to which her own superficially successful life seems suddenly empty, inauthentic" (297).

The second journey by Son and Jadine is also an escape from the island to New York. The love affair between them, which develops in the island, compels them to run away. Sydney and Ondine remain ignorant of their relationship and believe that she would not have any relationship with him. Sydney with great conviction tells Ondine , "she's not goin' off with him. Just because you foolish, don't think she is. She is worked hard to make something out of herself and nothing would make her throw it all away on a swamp nigger" (TB 129). But, Jadine had other plans in her mind. She takes Son, the representative of the primitive black culture to New York the centre of the White capitalist society.

The immersion narrative is again restated in the novel when Son and Jadine visit Son's all black town, Eloe. This symbolic journey back to roots, becomes a fulfilling endeavor for Son who as Jan Furman believes Son to be a "specimen of Morrison's travelling man" (59), but Jadine, feels lost there. This was her first encounter with the rural landscape of the South and with the people of the South. It will not be wrong to say that she felt like a person thrown out of any civilization. When she opened the door of the room at night, she "looked out into the blackest nothing she had ever seen blacker and bleaker than Isle des Chevaliers and loud. Loud with presence of plants and field life. If she was wanting air, there wasn't any. It's not possible she thought, for anything to be this black" (TB 253). The person, who always felt at home amid huge buildings and thin trees, finds its impossible to endure it any longer. Leaving Son there, she returns to her own paradise- New York. The conflict between the two is not only a conflict at the personal level, rather on a higher level it symbolizes the conflict between two different cultures, which they represent.

The journeys undertaken by them, are passages which take them away, or towards their culture. Through their endeavour Son and Jadine try to become articulate kinsman and articulate survivor respectively. Though

Son's perception is shown to be very clear about history, culture and traditions, Jadine wants a mixed culture where she could have the best of both the worlds. Son, however refutes her aspirations by saying "there are no mixed marriages. It just looks that way. People don't mix races, they abandon them or pick them" (TB 271). He is of the view that it is most important to belong to any one culture. Jadine misunderstands his notion of bearing just one culture and that too of Afro-America, which according to her was too primitive because of its over emphasis on roots, history and past experience. She represents the migrants, who are always looking towards ascent, and are always trying to survive by embracing the alien culture. Her mode of survival becomes clear when she says : "you stay in the medieval slave basket if you want to. You will stay there by yourself. Don't ask me to do it with you. You don't know how to forget the past and do better" (TB 274).

Forgetting the past seems to be the only solution available to Jadine, and she rightly does so and again goes back to Paris from where she had come. She feels that her future lies in marrying one of the rich European, who would change her life. She becomes so self-centred and individualistic that she didn't even once think of her old aunt and uncle, who worked all their lives that she could be well educated. Son, who seems to be aware of his duties towards his people, his family and culture also disappoints in the end, when he goes back to Isle des Chevaliers in search of Jadine. He couldn't find her there, and Therese promising him that she will leave him near L'Arbe de la Croix, instead leaves him near the island of the blind horseman. She believes that Son belongs to the race of blind horseman and should join them. He joins the riders and goes back to his primitive past.

By using these journeys, Morrison demonstrates the importance of these journeys which are undertaken to reclaim the past. In *Tar Baby*, she shows the development of her style. Here in this novel, it is not only the man who has the privilege to travel. Jadine, the protagonist of the novel is a twentieth century woman, who has a much right to travel as any other person. Unlike other black women she doesn't want to stick to her historical identity. She is rich, beautiful and educated, and wants to forget the past so that her future could be designed. She is a modern woman who believes in ascent. Jill Matus in the book titled *Toni Morrison* writes " the focus in this novel is not only on Jadine, equally important is Son, who values primitivism and community building. Here, Son seems to have to dispossess himself of American history or rather, to go further back to ordinary movement of trauma for the slaves and the land to which they were brought in order to find a sustaining cultural memory of resistance. (102)

The immersion narrative of the history of America and the history of slaves, therefore makes Son regain his tribal literacy and in the process makes him articulate kinsmen

Conclusion

To conclude, *Tar Baby* is a narrative in which Morrison tries to achieve a reconciliation between the past and the present. This reconciliation is achieved when her characters without forgetting their ancient ancestors' heritage, live successful and happy lives in the twentieth century. In such this approach in which both the past and the present are skillfully blended is what Morrison advocates for her characters. She doesn't pass any value judgement on ascent or immersion as both have positive and negative impact on society. After examining this novel, it is clear that Morrison lays emphasis on the impact of migration on identity that is concluded in the fact that people travel in journeys to start living a new lives in new communities, they need to keep alive inside their memories the history and places left behind.

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