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Research Article

Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*: Deconstructing the African Myths and Subversion of White Values

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Abstract

*Myths, legends, and folk tales form an inseparable and indispensable ingredient of the repertoire of any culture or community with an identity of its own and hence extremely important for an oppressed race or community of people to reclaim their identity, retrieve the lost glories of their ravaged culture and relate and connect them once again to the world. The African American women in general and Toni Morrison in particular despite being triply prejudiced against class, race and sexism strived very hard to preserve their culture and act as the pioneers in enriching, updating its relevance to the succeeding generations of their people in different times and corners of the world even as they condemn some of the deterrents the younger people tend to fall for from time to time. One of the chief concerns of *Tar Baby* is to make the reader see the way in which the 'meaning' eludes, slips through without allowing the reader to pin down as a result of which it becomes plural and contested rather than singular and uncontested. This research paper also makes use of Derrida's concept of 'difference,' to foreground that the exact meaning of words and myths being is always elusive due to different reasons. Meaning is seen arising from the interplay of a number of signifiers and also from what a signifier is not as to what it is. *Tar Baby* examines the relationships between power structures on the one hand and myths and folk tales on the other, the power structures being gender, class, race, nationality, and geographical setting. The world that is rife with these arrangements is constructed rather differently as against the expectations of the readers - with the personification of natural forces.*

Keywords: Inconclusivity of Meanings, Power Structures, Difference, Caribbean, spiritual repository, Bakhtinian outlook, black woman, carcinogenic disease, race and sexism, Myths, legends, and folk tales

Myths, Legends and Folk tales:

Myths, legends, and folk tales form an inseparable and indispensable ingredient of the repertoire of any culture or community with an identity of its own and hence extremely important for an oppressed race or community of people to reclaim their identity, retrieve the lost glories of their ravaged culture and relate and connect them once again to the world. In a way myths with their everlasting ability to undergo multiple metamorphoses to suit the needs of the times, stay relevant, help the oppressed races, the many “others” from disappearing or going extinct altogether. As Mark Morford and Lenardon opine, “myth provides us with absolutes in the place of ephemeral values and a comforting perception of the world that is necessary to make the insecurity and terror of existence bearable.” (4) And it is Paul Rodin who perceived the fluidic nature of myth to opine that the form and content of myths are subjected to change as a result of new influences and by the passage of time (370). The African American women despite being triply prejudiced against class, race and sexism strived very hard to preserve their culture and act as the pioneers in enriching, updating its relevance to the succeeding generations of their people in different times and corners of the world even as they condemn some of the deterrents the younger people tend to fall for from time to time. Fighting against all odds their keenness to preserve the legacy of their rich tradition and take it forward has been evidently seen in their literary output.

Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* is concerned with the “carcinogenic disease eating away at the ancestral spirit of the race,” those African Americans who turn their backs upon their ancient properties and start living invisible or clone-like replicated lives deprived of their original identity, sporting the garbs of “somebody-something else” (Zizek 29) embracing the values and norms of white America. The representatives of this replicant culture in the world of *Tar Baby* sleepwalk as the family of a retired factory owner, Valerian Street in a Caribbean Island- who tend to identify themselves more with their white American employers and their culture than their own people and the black culture. They enjoy being called as ‘Kingfish’ and ‘Beulch’ rather than by their real names.

Most of the characters in Toni Morrison’s novels including *Tar Baby* come with a history, often stunning and complete. Valerian Street, an eccentric but a fairly sane man retired to Isle de Chevaliers in the Caribbean is with the childhood of a rich orphan who inherits a candy company and with it a sweet coating of nostalgia and a business founded on enlightened liberalism. He leaves this happy empire behind only to live in a house structured and designed by him with his wife, Margaret, the beauty of Maine with a beautiful history of her own. They choose as their house guest, Jadine, an exquisite model with a PhD, movie star and the niece of a black couple, the “Philadelphia Negroes”, Ondine and Sydney Childs who attend to every need of the Streets. And then, there is, Son, a fugitive, a country boy from Eloë, Florida who has a deep impact on Jadine and with whom he enjoys a passionate affair.

Apart from the way in which the white values had seduced the African Americans, the novel is also concerned with the ideological nature of their language. “The novel thus explores not only the extent to which African Americans are caught up in an alien ideology but also in an alienating language. Their ability to negotiate with this language effectively has all along been the litmus test of civilization and their capability for assimilation into an alien cultural, social and racial setting. The African Americans had had to establish themselves within the European post-Enlightenment civilization through the language of their oppressors by seeking inspiration from the spiritual

repository of their cultural legacy which is largely mythopoeic and organized around their folk culture. Mythmaking turns out to be more than just an identity marking device for the oppressed race but go much beyond as creative resources from which are derived their larger cultural values (OKpewho 25) and often make them adopt the trappings of legends or magical stories with a Bakhtinian outlook, and borrow from fable a potentially subversive ... form as can be seen in the use of the fables of the astute Brer Rabbit, Uncle Abrahams ... the figure of the human trickster, who can outsmart his master again and again, make him look foolish, and thus expose the myth of white omniscience (Francois Clary 155-171). The rewriting of these myths of the blacks seem to correspond to “a necessary ‘step back’ from actuality into possibility” (Zizek 2).

Tar Baby also shows how the ‘reclamation of myth’ by African American women writers as part of their return to the past becomes a means of communicating experience and ascertaining its meaning:

The experiences of the black people in the New World, into which they have been forcibly thrust against their will, cannot be told or treated in a realistic or naturalistic traditions in which African American literature has been cast - the pain of the results of three centuries of oppression is too great to be faced or confronted in a realistic mode. (de Weever, Jacqueline 4)

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison makes her plot reveal the characters to themselves in order to make them more self-aware rather than forcing the characters to acquire new traits. The novel, in the end, does not ask if the male and female protagonists, Son and Jadine, can change each other so that their relationship endures. Instead, it asks if they can agree on a way of life that respects both their identities. It lets the reader see the way the characters interact and present their histories.

On the one hand the novel traces the metaphorical journey of a black woman, Jadine, who struggles hard to come to terms with her aspirations as a modern black woman as the adjective, ‘tar’ suggests. On the other hand, it tells the love story of the same black woman conditioned by the white culture and a black man, Son, who represents everything Jadine fears and desires. While Jadine is a fashion model representing and endorsing the products of the white world, Son, a fugitive who, like a trickster, has always lived on the edges of the society assuming different identities and names among different peoples. The novel derives its complexity from the way in which Son and Jadine are attracted to and repelled by each other at one and the same time. Each undergoes a transformation initiated by the other but which is fated to be inconclusive. And it is the inconclusiveness of their transformation that makes the novel achieve the ‘plurality’ Morrison aims at through an artistic manipulation of open-ended myths. In this creative endeavour of hers Morrison inverts and deconstructs certain myths including the West African myth of Ananui and the American vernacular tale of Brer Rabbit and the ‘tar baby’ story is expected to reveal certain values but it is ironical that the values, which are revealed, are more complicated and intriguing than those hinted at by the original fable. Toni Morrison incorporates a variety of perspectives to furnish the changes of meaning the myth has undergone in different periods and cultural contexts.

Slippage of Meaning

One of the chief concerns of *Tar Baby* is to make the reader see the way in which the ‘meaning’ eludes, slips through without allowing the reader to pin down as a result of which it becomes plural and contested rather than singular and uncontested. The reader is subtly counselled to “pay attention not to what it says, but what it means” (*Tar Baby* 71) as one of the characters in the

novel. Valerian tells the protagonist, Jadine, “pay attention not to what it says, but what it means.” (71) As Mikhail Bakhtin illustrates language is not a unified, fixed or stable system, but a social and historical process which is always in a state of flux. (Bakhtin 1981) Valerian in the novel is found reading “only mail these days, having given up books because the language in them had changed so much-stained with rivulets of disorder and meaninglessness.” (*Tar Baby* 12)

Derrida’s concept of ‘difference,’ meaning both a difference and an act of deferring, comes into play in the novel with the exact meaning of words and myths being always elusive due to different reasons. Meaning is seen arising from the interplay of a number of signifiers and also from what a signifier is not as to what it is. For instance, Gideon, one of the black servants in the Valerian household finds it hard to explain the words, ‘blood bank’ and ‘eye bank’ to his wife, Therese, as she is confused by the word, ‘bank’, which suggests that American doctors take out organs to sell them to rich people and she is not able to understand the rational nature of language. Derrida uses the term, ‘difference’ (to connote both differ and defer) to suggest that not only is meaning available only through difference, a finality of meaning can never be attained, because each ‘signified’ simply refers to other signifiers. Hence meaning is both differing and deferring endlessly. Further this method of “deconstructive reading” which enables one to be inventive and responsible in responding to a literary text, especially one which speaks for a community of a people, a race altogether, under oppression for ages. The method is designed “to bring out literature’s capacity to enter realms barred to philosophy ...” (Altridge 109)

And the literary work (which includes a myth) in this context is a manifestation of “the other” the reading of which for Derrida includes an added obligation - to be responsible in one’s reading and to respond to its uniqueness and singularity which is inseparable from “iterability,” the capacity of the text to be repeated and recognised differently in different contexts. (Derrida. “An Interview” 66-67)

Myths and Power Structures:

Tar Baby examines the relationships between power structures on the one hand and myths and folk tales on the other, the power structures being gender, class, race, nationality, and geographical setting. The world that is rife with these arrangements is constructed rather differently as against the expectations of the readers - with the personification of natural forces. For instance, when Jadine, the female protagonist of the novel falls into a swamp, the mire is described as a live entity and also as a space inhabited by female spirits.

The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant- their value, their exceptional femaleness, knowing as they did that the first of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses’s crib. Knowing their steady consistency, ... they wondered at the girl’s desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (*Tar Baby*, 84)

The black American characters are alerted and admonished not only to recognize and respect their spiritual heritage and the immediate natural world around them but also to adjust to and BE there, where they were born and where identity is always a complex issue to deal with. *Tar Baby* examines the connections of social position and interpretation through the folk tale of ‘tar baby.’ The novel very subtly depicts the varied readings and implied meanings of the tar baby story by different characters within the novel.

The ways in which the characters interpret the myth are in fact in direct relation to the way in which they make sense of their own experiences too. So what one sees in the myth corresponds to what one sees in their actual experience. And these interpretations are not only different but contradictory as well and the clash ensues from the character/interpreter's position in the society. The Myth, in Kubitchek's words, "issues a triple invitation to the readers: i. to become aware of their own interpretation of the tar baby story ii. to redefine this interpretation by comparing it with those of the characters, and iii. to see what understanding emerges if the values implied in one's interpretation are applied to the novel's own version of the myth" (106)

Many Faces of the Trickster Figure and the 'slippery' Meanings:

Craig Werner traces the development of the tar baby myth and says that the basic plot has remained fairly consistent across four hundred years and a move from Africa to the United States. The story begins as the Brer Rabbit or another trickster figure sees the tar baby. The Brer rabbit greets it and when gets no reply feels insulted, hits the tar baby, gets its paw stuck tight. Then the farmer, the maker of the tar baby reveals himself to torment the Brer Rabbit further with his cleverness and the rabbit's own helplessness. The Brer Rabbit is to torture it in any way but not throw it into the briar patch. Wanting to hurt it as much as possible its captor throws it into the briar patch where any rabbit would but be safe home from where it taunts the farmer who himself had been used as the means of escape. In the West African societies, the trickster figure is always an individualist who harmed the society of the US, the tar baby becomes a racial allegory with each character representing an abstract trait. As a result the white farmer the white power to enslave the blacks, the Brer Rabbit, the African Americans. Direct confrontation with the sticky tar baby leads to disaster. Masked trickery and pretension to play the assigned roles (to be humble and submissive) guarantees emancipation. Using what they know of the master- that he wants to be as cruel as possible- to their own advantage they liberate themselves. Quite in line with this the selfish individualist of the West African tale (the Brer Rabbit) rose to the level of a much more positive figure of survival and resistance to white power in the oral folklore of the African Americans.

White America happened to have come across the story of tar baby through Joel Chandler Harris's uncle Remus Tales which are told by a frame narrator, an old man to a white child thus promoting the idea of plantation myth for the first time. Werner feels that the 1948 Walt Disney version of the tar baby story is an extreme version of Harris's as it makes Uncle Remus and the white child 'real' and the Brer Rabbit a cartoon figure hinting at the imaginary and hence, the 'unreal' nature of the figure of black resistance. One can also perceive the suggestions to the effect that Uncle Remus represents enslavement and exploitation as well as a contented black happy with nurturing and entertaining the white children. Toni Morrison's novel happens to be the next major version of the myth after the Disney version and she takes full advantage of the tale's many possibilities by showing that the actions of the novel's characters imply their different readings of the text. In one of her interviews with Tom LeClair, Toni Morrison says,

Tar baby is also a name, like 'nigger,' that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses' little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. (Morrison 1983)

The white Valerian and Margaret agree on the need for safety and define the myth in terms of controlling black people. To them Brer Rabbit cannot be a black trickster and the ugly, dangerous tar baby is just black. Valerian controls by forbidding Margaret from befriending Ondine, and by firing Therese and Gideon and finally by firing Sydney and Ondine also. They live on a recreated plantation and expect the black servants to be responsible for their wellbeing and also Margaret's abuse of her child. To them the Brer Rabbit's return to his briar patch is just a preference for an uncivilized wilderness. Obsessed by a need for safety, the Streets ignore the reality around the, especially, as to how Sydney and Ondine regard them. Sydney and Ondine, due to their long association with the Streets learn much about them and naturally their interpretation of the tar baby myth, betrays too much of white influence-that is quite in agreement with that of the Streets. To Sydney and Ondine, Valerian the farmer has foolishly imported the tar baby, Son who threatens their niece, Jadine. To them Son is a personification of ignorance, poverty, and violence. But of course, every Blackman is not a tar baby to them.

Therese's interpretation of the tar baby is equally simple. To her the tar baby is the only course of contact with the white world or a black person who mimics the white values- who gets stuck to it. She tells Son that Jadine is a tar baby who had forgotten black values. The alternative she suggests to this kind of a marginalized existence is joining the phantom warriors or living on the island next to the Island de Chevaliers. Gideon objects to Therese's vision because it obscures reality: "While you making up your story about what this one thinks and what this one feels, you have left out the white bosses. What do they feel about this? It's not important who this one love and who this one hate... if you don't figure on the white ones and what they thinking about it all" (*Tar Baby* 111).

Therese seems to forget that the Brer Rabbit manages to escape by knowing the farmer's weakness (his cruelty) - and that only by knowing the whites and not ignoring them can lead them to liberation.

Jadine's reading of the tar baby text is more complicated. At first, she accepts Son as the Brer Rabbit without being aware that she is cast as the tar baby. For her, the tar baby is Eloë, Son's briar patch and the limited, traditional roles it offers black women, the "blackest nothing she had ever seen" (25) which threatens her deeply. Given Jadine's own desire to achieve different roles for herself, for a modern black woman Eloë offers few challenges or opportunities for fulfilment, intellectual or sexual. It was "a burnt-out place. There was no life ere." (262) And when it gets populated by the despising spirits of traditional black women, it becomes worser still. She had hoped that New York would be their briar patch. And when it fails she leaves for Europe, in effect giving up the effort of reading the tar baby text in the American context just because she had embraced capitalism it cannot be concluded that Jadine is a negative character. "The same sixteen answers to the question what went wrong? kicked like a chorus line. Having sixteen answers meant having none. So none it was" (*Tar Baby* 290) suggests that she is likely to change her interpretation. It is still an open-ended text for her.

To Son, Jardine is the tar baby, though a black, created by and serving the interests of the whites. Son sees himself as the Brer Rabbit, the heroic individualist. But at the end he confronts the limitation of his reading -i.e., Eloë had been his briar patch, his safe home and his love for Jadine makes him aware of its thorns. At the end Son is still searching for Jadine. By seeking out the tar

baby a second time, Son has changed his reading of the tar baby text. He is found running into the rainforest where, as one version of the myth says, naked, blind men slaves who escaped when the ship carrying them to the island floundered on the rocks-race horses over the hills while Jadine is left literally in mid-air on an aeroplane to Paris.

From Invention of the “Other” to the Inconclusivity of Meanings:

Of all the above readings the interpretation of Jadine as the tar baby seems to be somewhat appropriate given the literarily obvious image of Jadine emerging with tar all over her after her fall into the swamp. Jadine may also be the Brer Rabbit because after its escape it sits in the briar patch and licks tar from its fur. But Son in all certainty appears to be the Briar Rabbit because in the last scene he is described as moving with the same sound, “lickety split” as the Brer Rabbit of the myth. Margaret might be the third Brer Rabbit- “stuck all those years to the tar baby of her secret- not the secret of her child abuse, but the secret of her cause, her real social position.” (*Toni Morrison* 112) her briar patch seems to be a home in which Valerian comes to know who she is and was forced to relinquish his control. But no conclusive interpretation seems to evolve at the end as suggested by the slippery nature of the setting as well as the evasive concluding words, “Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-lickety-split.” (*Tar Baby* 306) and the “inconclusive” conclusion serves to make the reader increasingly aware of how much in the text is left for deferral and further contestation.

Invention is always the invention of “the other,” who invariably is taken for an inferior, less important and not central and for Derrida, hence involves an ethical responsibility of responding to such narratives, including the myths. And what is singular and inventive about Derrida’s Deconstructive reading is to be inventive and responsible in responding to a literary text, especially one which speaks for a community of a people, a race altogether, under oppression for ages. The method is designed “to bring out literature’s capacity to enter realms barred to philosophy ...” (Attridge 109).

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