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AFRICAN ETHOS AND WESTERN CHAOS IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*

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Avec *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison atteint un degré sans doute inégalé de l'exploration de ses thèmes favoris que sont la destinée de la femme noire, l'identité noire, la liberté et la servitude, etc. Dans ce roman, elle aborde ces questions à travers une perspective africaine américaine.

Ainsi construit-elle son intrigue autour des expériences respectives de son héroïne et de son héros sur une île des Caraïbes où la nature, de par la symbolique d'une interaction constante, semble tenir le rôle d'un personnage : expériences où s'imbriquent respect des valeurs africaines et images de la nature ; une interpénétration des relations humaines et des éléments naturels, caractéristique d'une vision africaine de l'univers.

Ces images d'une mythologie africaine, particulièrement celle du rapport entre terre nourricière et enfant, tiennent une place importante dans la compréhension de l'intrigue du roman. Le texte invoque mythologie africaine et identité raciale et consolide le lien entre un esprit africain américain et la mère patrie africaine.

Cependant, cet esprit si cher à la romancière, se trouve menacé dans ce roman où elle nous apprend les conséquences de l'abandon d'une éthique africaine que sont vacuité spirituelle et aliénation culturelle, comme dans le cas de Jadine. *Tar Baby* suggère une perspective sur la situation d'hommes et de femmes noirs que la civilisation occidentale vide de toute leur substance et menace de réclusion dans un sous-monde où l'identité n'est qu'illusion. Aux uns et aux autres, Toni Morrison prodigue que le salut, comme pour *Son*, se trouve dans la croyance en leurs valeurs primordiales.

Toni Morrison has been easing her way to the climatic *Tar Baby*, working with themes familiar to her, such as black womanhood, black identity, freedom and bondage. She brings these issues to sharp focus in *Tar Baby*. This novel touches all these issues as it works to tie together African-American and African perspectives of life. In the novel we witness what may happen to black girls whose familial ties are broken, to black men and women who live their lives

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in the shadow of someone else's. We learn where to place our loyalties, which bonds and allegiances last, and which ones are vain and dangerous.

More central in this novel is Morrison's attention to nature. She constructs her story by tightly meshing a respect for African values and images of nature with the experiences of a black man and woman brought together on a tropical island. A personified nature actively intervenes on this island. Nature's reactions to the changes wrought by civilization are human-like: the river becomes a "poor, insulted, broken-hearted" stream, the daisy trees are "serene" but clouds break apart in a state of "confusion". Invested as it is with all the emotive passion of a human, nature becomes a character in the story, much more an integral part of its structure and pattern.

Tar Baby develops a thematic interpenetration of natural elements - an explicit thematic interplay basic to an African view of the universe. This interplay functions to surround the narrative with some standards of truth rooted in nature. Morrison makes it clear in this novel that truth is a constant value of nature, regardless of the deceit practiced by lost souls. The reader is immersed in truth by the overshadowing presence of the basic elements of earth and water. They flow through the pages and in the midst of dialogue as to remind us of consistency and truth.

The novel grounds its human relationships on an island in the Caribbean where any diversions are removed from Morrison's thematic intent. On this island, a microcosmic universe emerges where the reader can come to an understanding of the implication of an African view of the world as noted by Wilfred Cartey:

The Spirit world is alive and gives life to the living. The essential ontology of Africa linking and curving through ancestor and offspring, man and nature, beast and tree, sea and fires... nothing is dead, no voice is still...An essential continuity is preserved between earth-mother and child, earth-mother whose breast provides sustenance to son, son who is son of all Africa, son through whom dead father lives and is reborn...¹

These images of African mythology, especially the Earth-Mother and Son, are important in understanding the pattern of Morrison's novel. Her prose involves African mythology and racial identity, and invigorates the links between an African-American spirit and the mother continent.

¹ Cartey, Wilfred, "Africa of My Grand-mother's Singing: Curving Rhythm" in *Black African Voices*, David Miller et al, eds, Glenview, III, Scott Foresman, 1970, p. 11.

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But this spirit that so intrigues and motivates Morrison, is in jeopardy in *Tar Baby* where we learn the consequences of abandoning an African ethics and understand, through the predicament of Jadine, that abandonment results in spiritual and cultural vacuity. The island, Isle des Chevaliers, is named after the mythic horsemen who are believed to inhabit the hills and who reflect the essential ontology of Africa that Cartey notes. Without an African sense of the universe, man and nature are in conflict, juxtaposed in a battle that must inevitably be won by the latter because of the two, only the trees are "Scheduled for eternity".

Jadine is called by the Goddess Earth who embodies the cosmic life principle. In Morrison, the alignment of trees and feminine psyche makes women closer to god. They maintain their grounding and are in touch with the Earth-Mother. Rejecting the call of the trees, Jadine is cut off from good consciousness. First, the mythic women, hanging from their branches, are delighted with the appearance of Jadine, then they become hostile because they see that:

This girl was fighting to get away from them... The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant, mindful of their value, their exceptional femaleness, knowing as they did that the first word of the world has been built on their sacred properties, that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses' crib; knowing their steady consistency... they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something else than they were.²

Son is as much a part of this femininity ("earth-mother whose breast provides sustenance to son") as he is masculine. We can sense in him some primal link between his soul and the tree women who cover and caress the island. His name marks him as a product of these women in the sense that Jadine Child is bereft of any relationship by her ambiguous name. Whose "child" is she? The women in the trees first thought that a "runaway child has been restored to them", but her eagerness to escape them shows that this feeling is untrue. Paradoxically, Jadine accuses Son of having no name. But it is she who lacks the identifying bond. Toni Morrison further suggests the coherence, the bond between earth-mother and Son as in his dreams the women populate the pie tables in the basement of churches, suggesting physical and spiritual nourishment. They beckon him with

² Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, p. 193. The title is abbreviated *TB* in subsequent references.

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“come in you honey you”. Jadine cannot be one of these women, and Marie Therese warns Son that “there is nothing in her parts for you”. She has forgotten her ancient properties. In her dreams, Jadine sees their womanhood as phallic thrusts and the forms of their breasts as eggs. They taunt her with their femininity, and Jadine vaguely retorts that she has breasts too.

Morrison tells us she “said it” or “thought it”, but not that she felt or believed it (*TB*, p. 258). Her womanhood is seriously in question in the face of these ancient females who understand their primal connection with the archetype. Jadine, as she tries to pull herself up out of the tar by clinging to a tree, barely manages to save herself by kneeling on “the hard thing that seemed to be growing out of her partner, the tree” (*TB*, p. 183). She kneels on masculinity and uses it to pull herself out of the earth’s “tar baby” clutch rather than to identify and complete her being. This pull towards individual freedom that scorns and treads masculinity becomes the basis of her loss. She sacrifices feminine and racial self as she attempts to exist without a discovery of whose “child” she is.

As Jadine loses her continuity with things past, Son is endangered, then sustained and ultimately saved as a result of his accepting his primal African connection. But each of them, along with the supporting characters of the novel, creates a universe which, in many ways, echoes the history and sociology of black America. Jadine epitomizes the opportunity of being black in white America. She is free and nearly white. She reminds us of the sacrifice this role demands of black women.

Racial identity is not something to be chosen. Toni Morrison already has examined the overwhelming consistency of race consciousness in *Song of Solomon*. In that novel the characters evolve from their blackness. Their histories connect strongly to their present. There is no denial. The Dead family, striving for middle class status, understand quite clearly that it will be a black middle class status. Whatever traumas happen in that story come from an understanding and an attempt to deal with being black in a society that makes survival for black people a constant struggle.

However, in *Tar Baby*, the issue is about absolute denial of race lineage. Instead of Jadine having an inherent sense of self as a black woman, she has chosen to dispossess herself of this identity. The result is that she is without spiritual ground. As an orphan, Jadine had warmth and protection offered by her extended family, her aunt and uncle. As Philadelphia Negroes, they attained a class membership in the black society of Philadelphia and maintained a racial and social status within this identity. Jadine’s aunt and uncle had, while in Philadelphia, nourished themselves as black folks, and this identity could only take roots and flourish on a primal ground. On the island, their social situation becomes a backward glance into American

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households where slaves were the foundation of many pre-civil war white families.

As for Jadine's "family", Toni Morrison shows us what happens when the arm of the extended family is crushed. Jadine can go neither backward nor forward. She is caught on the island, the only place she can return to when she is in need of spiritual solitude. But searching for cover on Caribbean ground means accepting her primal relationship to this ground. This she cannot do. We find her isolated in the Street mansion, being served by her aunt and uncle as if she too were a member of the family rather than a niece of their servants. Her venture outside of the home is a frightening episode with tar. She fails to confront the basic dilemma of her life in a white world that has sacrificed her black and female self. Hers is a dilemma of identity. She can neither claim relationship to the tree women nor to her aunt Ondine. Through Son, Morrison gives Jadine the ultimate opportunity to confront her past as well as her femininity. But because she has not been nourished she can do better than ignore one and squelch the other.

For pages, we witness hints of hope for Jadine and clues that she is hopeless. She agrees to go to Son's home, a black town in Florida named Eloë. Son takes her South, back to his family and his people, where Jadine has an opportunity to realize that this is her journey home as well. But her first reaction to the town folks which is to take pictures of them as if they were post-card material, is crass. She steps down from the car and moves through the visit like the lens of a discerning but objective camera which is there only to observe rather than recall and reconnect. Her pictures capture the surface images, but do nothing to probe what lies beneath. Regardless of her attempt to separate herself from the town and its people, something in Jadine is disturbed. The visit stirs up race memory. The appearance of Nanadine and her mother among the taunting women in her dream suggests that something in her claims kinship to the women of Eloë. However during her waking hours, Jadine's attitude is silently derisive. She is unable to use their language as she makes a superficial and unsuccessful attempt at talking "down home" like Nanadine. By all indication she has been permanently uprooted. In losing the language, she has lost the structure and sense of her race memory. She is no black woman, and ultimately, no woman at all.

Although there is no necessary racial connection between sexuality and identity, black writers have often confronted the issues raised when identity is a racial consideration and sexuality has been abused. Richard Wright's anthology of short stories, *Eight Men*, features portraits of men who cannot be men, and who are forced into a confrontation that happens because they are black³. The result of

³ Richard Wright, *Eight Men*, New York, Pyramids Books, 1969.

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these confrontations is abuse of their manhood. They are forced into fight or denial. The pathos of Wright's portraits is held within the urge for characters to assert themselves and to embrace their race, and their inability to do so in the face of a racist oppression. The difference in *Tar Baby* is that Jadine is offered every opportunity to assert both her gender and her race. Her option for not doing either jeopardizes her stature as a black woman. "Black womanhood", notes Karla F.C. Holloway, "is a historical phenomenon, linked not only to the American past, but to an African past as well. Interlocked, these traditions have created experiences that respected bonds with earth and nature and nourished each other..."⁴. Thus Jadine's abandonment of one results in her loss of the other. Her sterility, as a consequence, appears as self-imposed, and if we lose sympathy for her, it is because her sterility threatens Son's maleness. Her option is a foolish one because we know the white world maintains its boundaries well. Despite Jadine's seeming embrace of this world, she still is no one's child.

It is not surprising then, although it is disappointing, to see her confront her aunt furiously. As Ondine tries to confront Jadine with her matrilineal connection, she cannot see the link, and therefore thinks her aunt's motives are for retribution. This shows her confusion: "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". Ondine cryptically retorts: "Turn? Turn? This ain't no game a bit whist..." Ondine then tells her that a "girl has to be a daughter first in order to be a woman", in order to learn how to feel a "certain careful way about people older than you are". (*TB*, p. 261). Jadine is unaware of such a value because she doesn't know that feeling "careful" about older people happens because your lineage is connected to these people. Women like Ondine are mothers and daughters, and are connected in this way to things past and future. As for Jadine, she has not yet learnt how to be a daughter. Karla F.C. Holloway further writes that:

*Black women carry the voice of the mother - they are the progenitors, the assurance of the line. This is not only a biological factor that ties the survival of Black women to Black men. Women, as carriers of the voice, carry wisdom - mother wit. They teach the children to survive and remember.*⁵

⁴ Karla F.C. Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, *New Dimensions of Spirituality : A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1987, p. 122.

⁵ *New Dimensions of Spirituality*, op. cit., p. 123.

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In *Tar Baby*, Marie Therese embodies this primal woman role. She has “ancient properties” and instructs Son to claim his own. Her voice comes “out of the darkness” to him, like an ancient memory, then he “could smell” the land as his “senses” return to him. Without women like her, the pie-ladies, the mothers, the feminine trees, who sustain the voice and teach, black children - “Sons” and daughters would have no roots, no memory of their past. The threat black women carry, Morrison implies, is that if they withhold or deny these truths, they can emasculate, because they take away the power to survive from manhood; they can erase because they do not deepen the memory. Jadine's efforts to strip Son of his identity, to bring him into her superficial world, are emasculating. He is aware of this and becomes less and less able to fight it.

Though Jadine may be a “helpless victim of a dream”, her own dream of the black woman, her mother and Nanadine among them, was outlining a participatory role. But she chooses to reject this role, and Morrison reminds her that black women who learn to be daughters first in order to become mothers, manage their lives so that it never comes to a choice of identity - racial or sexual. Jadine is not solidly grounded in her culture and identity, so she is tortured by her dreams.

Why then does Son come so close to this woman, close enough to endanger his masculinity and blackness that frighten her so? Morrison makes out how black women can be threatening to black men in that when they have no security within their own identity, they disrupt the legacy of the lineage. Son is aware of Jadine's attempt to force him into a mind set that will relinquish his racial lineage and African continuity. Unfortunately, Son's weakness is that he is susceptible. He marvels at her industry, and observes her curiously as if he cannot quite believe that all this rational energy of hers is directed towards him. However, Son knows her emptiness, and yet, because of her power to disrupt his consciousness, he is vulnerable. His anger is as much directed towards his sense that she is sapping his integrity as it is that she knows little and understands little about her race and gender responsibilities:

The truth is that whatever you learned in these colleges that doesn't include me ain't shit. What did they teach you about me? What tests did they give? Did they tell you what I was like? Did they tell you what was on my mind... What was in my heart? If they didn't teach you that, then they didn't teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don't know nothing at all about yourself... your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa. (TB pp. 264-65).

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Here, it is clear enough that Son understands his maleness as irrevocably linked to femininity. His bond to her is primal. Jadine avoids facing his offensive assault on her blackness and femininity, and attempts to teach him to be white-thinking like her, and available to her.

We understand his frustration in New York with Jadine when he looks “in vain” for the children who are the promise of the race and for the old people who are its progenitors. Rather than being surrounded by nourishing women, he is trapped by a woman who sucks him dry. He cannot even remember the old church ladies minding the pie tables. He loses hold of race memory. At this point, Jadine's destruction of Son seems complete. We know she is empty, and can go on to exist in emptiness. But Son's very existence is endangered by his capitulation to her. New York finally makes Son “shiver” and wonder how long he had been gone. “If those were the black folks he was carrying around in his heart all these years... who on earth was he? (*TB*, p. 25). Son, then, becomes a displaced man. He was a man with a past, a history; and to rescue himself, he would have to return to this past.

The past that he carries with him is the same past that is reinforced by a strong natural imagery and the mythical allusion to Isle des Chevaliers. Even though there is potential for Son's destruction, the stronger myth and heart-link with the past will ultimately save him. Although we see him surrounded by disenchantment, disillusionment and destruction, the key to understanding his survival is that he is too aware of his sense of things past to be altered by Jadine.

It is because of Son's continuity that Morrison has him interact with the important figures and symbols of the novel. The interaction indicates how continuity is threatened, then eventually salvaged. The island, the Street mansion, the Valerian/Margaret and Sydney/Ondine couples, even Jadine, are all altered by Son's symbolic link to things past. We first meet Son as he is borne by the water to the boat where Jadine and Margaret are talking. As they reach Isle des Chevaliers, the Earth/Son connection - the African connection Cartey illustrates - is immediately suggested. The first images we have of Son are of a man drifting harmoniously with his environment, managing to strike a balance with water, with the boat, and ultimately with the island.

The island, “three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it” reveals Morrison. Immediately there is a sense of danger in this revelation because Morrison further writes that it was “just as well” that Son could “see very little of the land as he and the moon exchanged stares”. The implication is that Son is a slave, or will be enslaved - as Jadine strives to do - and that he will be confronted with his blindness by the island. That son is symbolically

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blind to Jadine's destructive potential is fulfillment of this myth. It is an ancient place. The trees clutch earth "like lost boys found", and although civilization seems to have won - the houses grew on the hills now instead of trees - we feel that this is a temporary state of affairs between civilization and nature.

The Street mansion, l'Arbe de la Croix, also has the transient feel of a hotel where only the kitchen had a look of permanence. This is important because it is the kitchen that Ondine and Sydney inhabit. As black people, they are part of the origin and their link with nature makes them closer to the mythology of the island. Valerian Street directs much of his energy towards a greenhouse where he is inexplicably trying to force into growth some Northern plants inspired by Western music. Both Margaret and Ondine feel threatened by Son's presence. Somehow, after all the years of deceit, it is during his visit that Margaret's horrid tale of child abuse comes to light. Instead of the son she expects to visit her on Christmas day, Son is borne to the island. Ondine worries that he threatens Jadine's life-style that she and Sydney had sacrificed their Philadelphia Negro status to preserve. If their niece felt attracted to this "common" Negro, then their sacrifices would be in vain. The continuity they had established and maintained was in jeopardy.

The basic problem of the Street household is that it has families out of their element. It is no wonder that Son's intrusion threatens its tenuous existence. Son, representing natural truth, serves to remind inhabitants of what is permanent and continuous and what is transient. With the entry of the earthy Son, things fall apart fairly rapidly: "The whole island was vomiting up color like a drunk". Valerian initially feels that the "black man had brought luck to the greenhouse." (*TB*, p. 211). But what actually happens is that social structures deteriorate. Not only do old and terrible secrets get revealed, but servants become masters; and Jadine who has vowed "never" is enveloped by an animal passion that brings her close to "well, sometimes". Juxtaposed against this social deterioration is the sudden flourishing of the natural world.

The survivors of the story are the island, its myth, Sydney, Ondine, and Son. In their survival, their ability to maintain a sense of continuity, we witness a case of survival of the fittest. We learn what sacrifice black salvation demands when threatened by the intervention of white western society. From the beginning of the novel, the island is woman / nature, a place suspended in time, and powerful. It compels us with its myth - the horsemen, the tree women. Son, who is first driven from his being by Jadine, is brought back to sense and self, then to the island by Marie Therese. She, too, is a link to the past because she bears knowledge of the island's myth. She and that myth become his salvation. Sydney and Ondine survive by recapturing an ancient image of black servants and white masters. These two black

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folks are saved because, though they lost social identity, their racial one is intact. They embody the continuity of race memory.

The strongest directing line of the theme of things continuing comes from Son when he is on the island. His relationship to whatever is ancient and primal is clearly established at the end of the novel. We sense that he is indeed involved in the “tar baby” myth that is recurrent throughout the text. What we are not sure of, until the end of the story, is Son’s relationship to the myth. Who is the tar baby? At one point we think it is Jadine, because Son accuses her of being a trap white people set out to catch unwitting black men. However, earlier in the story, as Son watches Jadine sleep, before she is even aware of his presence, he breathes “into her the smell of tar and its shining consistency”... (*TB*, p. 120). At this point he is the “tar baby”. How has he come by this tar? Who is he out to trap? The shifting of this image is confusing. But an explanation lies in the last pages of the novel.

As the novel ends, we see Son running across the rocks. We sense the danger of his position. His rescuer, Marie Therese, has left him ten miles from where he wanted to be. The natural impediments of rocks and hills and water stand threateningly in the way of his reaching l’Arbe de la Croix. Marie Therese tells him to say away from Jadine because she has “forgotten her ancient properties” and offers him salvation through the mythic men in the hills - the blind horsemen who were struck as Son must have been, when they first reached the island. Her warning to him is to “choose them”.

The rabbit in the “tar baby” story escaped the trap, to a briar patch which poses no danger to it. As Son escapes to the hills, he runs, unimpeded by the rocks or hills or the water. In this way, the island saves his ancient properties and unfolds for him an avenue of salvation. He comes full circle, becoming son once again to Earth - Mother. It is an ending that we can easily accept for Son as we come to grips with his link to the past and understand his sense of being dislocated from his present, his inability to cope with his environment in New York or in Eloe. Son has been alienated, and being restored in the myth is an appropriate position for him.

Tar Baby addresses the questions and situations raised by women in Morrison’s novels. It speaks to cultural relocation, black values and survival in a white world; the legacy of black women and their primal connection to the natural world, the cultural price of distance that western civilization has evoked between black men and women, and the cost of reconciliation. *Tar Baby* suggests a perspective on the situation of black men who are sucked dry by a civilization out to destroy them. For both black women and men, Morrison suggests that strength comes from assuming their old traditions. Women who deny these traditions are lost in a netherworld that is neither black nor white, and where identity is constantly elusive. Men are saved who claim these traditions and who accept the

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symbol implicit in the early pages of the novel where feminine trees have hard (masculine) roots. Here, Toni Morrison unambiguously reveals these attitudes towards the life and responsibility of Blacks. Her understanding of the implications of the past has pushed her towards the creation of a black male who is neither the ineffectual humbling stereotype found in early black literature, nor the radically nihilist character in black protest literature. Instead, she presents us with a hero who returns to his past and suggests the message that salvation belongs to those who understand that the briar patch is no dangerous thing when they carry through it the respect and clothing of their past.

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