

The Experience of Culture Clash in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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ABSTRACT: Compared to all the other novels by Toni Morrison *Tar Baby* certainly is her most unusual one. It is not set exclusively inside of the United States but – among other places and as the focus point – on a remote island in the Caribbean Sea. Instead of featuring chiefly members of the black community as main characters, white Americans play an important role not only as a cultural background against which the black community is set, but also as actual personnel of the novel. In fact, entire scenes consist solely of the interaction between white characters. It is obvious that culture clash plays an important role for the reading of Toni Morrison's novels. It certainly accounts for the production of differing interpretations which cannot be brushed aside just because the reader is or is not African-American. The initial setting of *Tar Baby* reads like "a kind of laboratory where racial, familial, class, and gender expectations [the latter points are here seen as subordinated to the issue of race] can be tested." It is important to note, however, that the opposition Anglo-American society perceives between individuality and community, is also subject to this specific cultural background. The analysis attempts to show how capitalism plays an important role in giving birth to some of the devastating prejudices in a racial capitalistic American society, and how people constantly fall into its trap to fit themselves into its skillfully structured system, just to make their life more miserable. It is ultimately the narrative representation of this complexity through – among other means – the depiction of interfaces as exemplified above, thereby creating the experience of culture clash, which accounts for the appreciation of Toni Morrison as a novelist.

Within *Tar Baby*¹, Morrison uncovers the layers of America's racial social classes, which are the consequences of a capitalistic social system. Exploitative economic system of capitalism and its overseas extension, imperialism, divides society according to race and class. Thus racism, class divisions and sexism are considered to be the by-products of capitalism, which overpower mainstream American society. Africans crossed the Atlantic as indentured servants. The opportunity for freedom after a period of indentured years later on disappeared into an eternal slavery. The allure of wealth was exasperating slavery and its evil consequences swept across the so called land of the fire with awful speed. People who possessed slaves represented the higher rank of society. 'Comfort,' at the expense of the lives of innocent people, who happened to be black, was the ultimate goal of life for them. Mbalia says that the African's oppression in American soil is unique, because it is "[...] oppression grounded in race and class [...]"² In America, a slave was not only treated as a commodity to be traded in the capitalistic market, he/she was also regarded as a form of capital, and a dividend of the ever-growing investment in the owner's flourishing wealth. African political leader Kwame Nkrumah notes, "Race is inextricably linked with class exploitation; in a racist-capitalistic power structure, capitalist exploitation and race oppression are complementary, the removal of one ensures the removal of the other"³.

Capitalistic agriculture changed the social structure of the colony. It created a small class of rich and powerful white planters, and victimized the mass of African slaves. The growth of individualism increased the burden of slavery for the Africans. The slave in America was not only at the lowest rung of the social ladder; he/she was an inferior even among the equals. White individualism was synonyms with white privilege leaving no room for the black individualism. Consequently, the existence of slavery in the midst of a society believing in individualism calcified its dehumanizing apparatuses.

In America, with only few negligible exceptions, all slaves were Africans, and almost all Africans were slaves. This put the badge of inferiority of black skin and on African culture. In America, however, when slaves became free, they were still Africans, with the stain of inferiority glued to them. White America systematically made the Africans to internalize the projected notion of supposed white superiority and black inferiority, and the white people's belief in white superiority paralleled African self-hate. Finally, as their slavery was racially defined, their sufferings were at the same time physical, psychological and economic. Having this power structure in mind, we can proceed with the analysis of *Tar Baby* to understand the society in which the characters evolve, take their individual places, and continue with life, fighting odds for a better tomorrow.

Tar Baby examines the conflict between one's past and present, and the destruction that abuse of power can bring to life and society as well. Morrison catches the predicaments of her characters, demonstrates the dilemmas of human beings and shows how her characters deal with critical situations. *Tar Baby* explores the

intricate condition of the society such as abuse of power, the relations between blacks and whites, rich and poor, women and men, civilization and nature. It is a novel about disputation and conflicts based on conventional biases and prejudices, which exist on race, class and gender levels in a capitalistic society.

Tar Baby questions the idea of equality, which is a virtual truth in American society, and behind the mask of equality is the desolate face of capitalism. Vital elements of rich African culture: custom, tradition, history have been discarded, and their identity has been limited to their color marked as black, they are asked to forget the vicious history of slavery and the oppressive nature of capitalism, and to fit into the enslaver's culture. Morrison's characters reveal the brutal nature of African oppression and the source of the oppression, which has led them back for so long.

Tar Baby is full of wealth, money, high society, jet set, and luxury, while Morrison's usual social setting is the working and middle class. The wealthy white society is always present in the background, surrounding and creating a space in which the main characters struggle, but in *Tar Baby* it is more than that: it is the foreground, the ground of action. Two thirds of the novel is located in and around L'Arbe de la Croix, a property built and owned by a former candy manufacturer, Valerian Street, as a summer house and residence for his retirement. Besides him and his wife, their servants Sydney and Ondine are living there, joined by Jadine, the servants' niece. Her life is the most glamorous one: not only did she benefit from the best education in the United States; she also received a Master's Degree in art history at the Sorbonne in Paris. In addition to this, she has started a career as a fashion model, with her photo appearing on the title page of *Elle* as the current climax. A rich Parisian man is interested in marrying her, emphasizing his offer with an expensive sealskin coat. In short, her situation seems to fit the description: she made it in the white man's world.

It is obvious that culture clash plays an important role for the reading of Toni Morrison's novels. Culture clash does not only describe an important characteristic of the environment *Tar Baby* is written in, but also the novel's main subject which circles around Toni Morrison's remark:

Now people choose to be Black. They used to be born Black. That's not true anymore. You can be Black genetically and choose not to be. You can change your mind . . . It's just a mind-set.⁴

The initial setting of *Tar Baby* reads like "a kind of laboratory where racial, familial, class, and gender expectations [the latter points are here seen as subordinated to the issue of race] can be tested." The main characters who represent the two cultural concepts under examination can be divided into the following groups: Valerian Street, the rich candy manufacturer from Philadelphia, who is spending his retirement on the Isle des Chevaliers, and Margaret Street, his wife and former Beauty Queen of Maine, are members of the white American society, whereas Gideon and Therese, natives from the island who are working as gardener and washer woman for the Streets, belong to the black community, including Son, one of Morrison's "outlaws", who lives everywhere and nowhere, because he killed his wife and her lover, and who escapes from a ship he was working on to the Isle des Chevaliers, where he starts living in the Street household, first in a hiding place, and after his discovery as a guest. Between these two poles, the spectrum from white to black is covered by the remaining household members: closest to the black community are Sydney and Ondine Childs, both proud "Philadelphia Negroes," who work for the Streets as servant and cook, thereby virtually running their household. Since they separate themselves from the island's native population, especially from Gideon and Therese whom they regard as inferior, and since they share a lot of their employers' values, they cannot be considered as "pure" members of the black community, but as mixed with the white culture represented by their employers. Even more, in fact almost completely immersed in the white – not only American but also European – culture is Jadine, the Childs' niece, who has lived with them since her parents had died in her childhood. As a consequence of being brought up in the Streets' household, her education was paid for by Valerian Street, eventually leading to her Master's Degree at the Sorbonne. Jadine is a success in white society, in particular in terms of beauty, which is confirmed by her appearance on the title page of *Elle* as a fashion model. Her eyes may not be blue, but she satisfies the white concept of female beauty to such degree that she becomes one of its icons, simply the *Elle*.

This fact is further proven by a Parisian man's intention to marry her. It is certainly no accident that Jadine achieves all this in the world's beauty and fashion capital, where the men are famous for their expertise in women, or to be more precise: in women's exterior appearance. The Streets' grown-up son Michael although absent in person is another important character in the novel who occupies his own position in the spectrum between the cultures. He disappointed his father by choosing not to take over his candy business and has been working in several areas Valerian doesn't value very much. His latest plan is to become an environmental lawyer. Contrasting Jadine, Michael is concerned about the survival of the traditions of different cultures and criticizes his parents' protégé for leaving behind her cultural background. Since Michael keeps some distance to the white society and is interested in exploring and valuing different cultural concepts, he is certainly closer to Son, Gideon and Therese than Jadine or even Sydney and Ondine. Margaret, Sydney and Ondine mistrust Son and want to force him to leave the house. In the heat of the moment Sydney even proposes to shoot him.

The Childs experience particular difficulties to adjust to Son's presence and to his position as a guest, since this allows him to sleep close to his hosts in the "white" part of the house while they – despite the fact that they are contrary to Son respectable "Philadelphia Negroes" – have to stay in the servants' quarters. Valerian, on the other hand and mainly as a counteraction to his wife's hysterical behavior during Son's discovery, invites the stranger to stay in his house until he can make arrangements for his return to the United States. He feels contempt for the Childs' hostile and Jadine's contradictory response to Son since, in his opinion, he belongs to their own people. Valerian's behavior, however, is not informed by a general contempt for racism but by contempt for – in his eyes – illegitimate racism, which is in a way an even more racist response than the one of his employees. Almost as soon as he is discovered, Son starts a relationship with Jadine which will be characterized by mutual alternating states of attraction and repulsion. The "main experiment" in the "laboratory Isle des Chevaliers" begins: What is the problem between a pair of lovers who really love one another but are culturally different? What is the battle about? culture? class? . . . How can you manage to love another person under these circumstances if your culture, your class, your education are that different?⁵

Son acts as Jadine's counterpart, representing a traditional black background, whereas Jadine is the modern Anglo-American, i.e. "white", woman. When provoked by his behavior, she calls him "ape," (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 121) corresponding to his – in her eyes – uncivilized looks, and accuses him of attempted rape (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 121). His reaction in turn is, "Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 121) hereby putting her explicitly in the category of the white woman. Jadine's astonishing and disturbing white, racist viewpoint is summarized in her final insult which ends their first meeting: you ugly barefoot baboon! . . . A white man thought you were a human being and should be treated like one. He's civilized and made the mistake of thinking you might be too. That's because he didn't smell you. But I did and I know you're an animal because I smell you. (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 121) One topic Son and Jadine dispute about is the relation between the individual and the community s/he belongs to. First of all she is herself, thereby considering her individuality and separateness as the highest value. By doing so, she conforms to the Anglo-American culture she is so immersed in. It is important to note, however, that the opposition Anglo-American society perceives between individuality and community, is also subject to this specific cultural background.

Son, of course, is the character who values community more than individuality, although he is defined as an outlaw. Thus, although Son leads his life in exile he still has a place he belongs to. Son's preference for an environment that is organized as a community becomes obvious during his stay in New York, where he starts living with Jadine after the dramatic eruption of tension in L'Arbe de la Croix during the household's Christmas dinner.

Son experiences the so far strongest clash with Jadine's cultural background which consists exactly of the mixture he finds so hard to comprehend. Son is as determined to bring Jadine to this place as she is to share New York with him and "make it theirs" (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 222). When Jadine finally gives in to his plans it's her turn to go through a culture clash. This time, the emphasis is put on society's concept of the role of the woman. The issue, however, is closely related to the corresponding understanding of the relation between the individual and the community.

When Son and Jadine arrive in Eloë and meet the first members of the community, Jadine is surprised to find out that she enters a space with a strong separation between the sexes. Son, on the other hand, hopes that Jadine might be able to understand and to adjust her behavior according to the new requirements. Obviously, Son's understanding of the role of women is – at least from a white European viewpoint – a very traditional one: he dreams of women caring lovingly for their children, of women organizing church life and of women doing housework. Also in this house, however, Jadine is finally confronted with the African-American concept of the role of the woman. Only hours before she leaves to go back to Paris, Ondine advises her: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man – good enough for the respect of other women. . . . You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 281).

But Jadine cannot accept this concept. With the remark "There are other ways to be a woman . . . I don't want to learn how to be the kind of woman you're talking about because I don't want to be that kind of woman." (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 281-282) She states her position and goes back to her life in Paris, which leads us back to the high value of the self-reliant individual in Anglo-American culture. This individual does not need others to confirm her/his worth. S/he does not need to remember where s/he comes from. It might even be better to transcend this origin. To take care for those who once cared for the individual, is often considered and experienced as an obstacle on her/his way to individual fulfillment. In *Tar Baby*, however, the "binary oppositions" set up between the "mind-sets" of Jadine and Son do not resolve. Each of the characters insists on her/his world view. While Jadine moves back to Paris to take up the life she left in confusion, Son stays just as close to the African-American culture as Jadine does to her Anglo-American one. Morrison herself acknowledges the "interface-character" of the discussed concepts and the culture clash that takes place when the

differing concepts meet. Anglo-American feminist critics often share the evaluation, since Jadine personifies the modern woman, rejects the traditional gender roles and acts according to the values of the feminist movement. Both Jadine and Son are depicted with merits as well as flaws, and it is up to the reader to find her/his way through the complexity of Toni Morrison's world. The freedom of the individual lies in her/his possibility to choose, not in the possibility not to choose. It is ultimately the narrative representation of this complexity through – among other means – the depiction of interfaces as exemplified above, thereby creating the experience of culture clash, which in my opinion accounts for the appreciation of Toni Morrison as a novelist.

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