

## Chapter V

### Critiquing the Aesthetics of Commodification: *Tar Baby*

One of the worst impacts of capitalism is that with its principle of commodity consumption it has almost blurred the vision of a nation, which, being dazzled by the economic prosperity that the capitalism offers with its allure of dollars, material wealth and luxury, can hardly make a distinction between a commodity and human being. Scan Campbell in his article "Struggling with a History of Capitalism in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" states, "The United States of America wears a veil. It is a veil that clouds our vision like a fog. The veil that hangs over our faces is not opaque but rather translucent, impairing our vision of the society we live in. . . . Our senses are numb because the veil of capitalism enshrouds America" (par 1).

The expansionist motto of Euro-American capitalism requires for its flourish an effective use of mass media, which, being very apt for the purpose, is also cleverly used for spreading the image of superiority of the dominant white power among the others, including the racially marginalized. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*: "Civil society . . . develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the

basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure, has, however, always been designated by the same name" (57). In order to uphold the superstructure of the society as supremely beautiful and permanently intact a submission to the dominant ideology is intended by the legislators of the society. When considered in the context of American society, the African Americans are best suited for the most submissive role. Within an unacknowledged apartheid social structure of American society where almost every aspect of black life is practically determined and controlled by white supremacy, there must be the representation of blackness according to the prefabricated notion of black identity. What follows are the popular racist stereotypes--a black male is dangerous and threatening whereas a black female is a strong figure, "black mammy," the gender inspired image. The commodification of black issues in the mass media and the re-production of black art and culture by a white artist have its direct effect on the formation of a group's social identity. In order to deconstruct those representations which are mainly designed to promulgate domination an original cultural space is urgently required within an alien but hegemonic cultural space. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally have offered powerful reasons for creating a

resisting cultural space in the introduction to *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*:

In contemporary culture the media have become central to the constitution of social identity. It is not just that media messages have become important forms of influence on individuals. We also identify and construct ourselves as social beings through the mediation of images. This is not simply a case of people being dominated by images, but of people seeking and obtaining pleasure through the experience of the consumption of these images. (qtd. in hooks 5)

Toni Morrison's fourth novel *Tar Baby* (1988) shows an African American crisis of identity as its characters are placed within such a cultural space from which they seem to have no escape. The novel is a critique of the dominant socio-economic ideology of commodification of "blackness" and at the same time an exploration of survival strategy for blacks by way of creating a cultural resistance that will decolonize their colonized minds and actions.

Setting the central plot within an insular environment of the small island of Isle de le Chevalier, between two metropolitan capitals of New York and Paris, and juxtaposing the black and white characters under the roof of the mansion of Valerian Street, the corporate tycoon,

Morrison in *Tar Baby* has dismantled the fabricated set up in a naturalized/nationalized society. By highlighting racial complexities and class hierarchies that further create dilemmas in determining the identity of an individual as well as that of a group, Morrison is no less successful in this novel. It is its explosive text of race that ensured its author the cover of the *Newsweek*. In that *Newsweek* cover story Jean Strouse wrote: "In the new novel, *Tar Baby*, Morrison takes on a much larger world than she has before, drawing a composite picture of America in black and white" ("Toni Morrison's Black Magic" 52).

Essentially *Tar Baby* is the story of Jadine Childs, a fair complexioned Negro woman of twenty-five, who has adopted the most fashionable way of living a life of comfort and luxury, which is easily accessible to her as she is a fashion model. She was in Baltimore and was later taken to the Caribbean island of Dominique by her uncle and aunt, Sydney and Ondine Childs, who worked as butler and maid for Valerian and Margaret Streets. The textual description goes thus:

After her mother died they were her people--but she never lived with them except summers at Valerian's house when she was very young. Less and then never, after college. They were family; they had gotten Valerian to pay her tuition while

they sent her the rest, having no one else to spend it on.

The novel draws our attention to the identity crisis of a black woman whose Euro-centric education initially lays many choices open to her. She is not definite about her plans. Sometimes she thinks of "opening a business of her own," either a "gallery" or a "boutique" but she is not certain about it. (49) Jadine is also uncertain about whom her white boy friend actually wants to marry; she is in a dilemma about her identity as his boyfriend's beloved. She reflects:

I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn't me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops, that I don't have to straighten my hair, that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside--not American--not black--just me? (48)

She has been taught in her schools and colleges what is "real" culture and as an obedient student she has subjugated herself to assimilating the cultural icons attesting to the superiority of one's art to another and

thus she is very confident of the nature of things:

"Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. . . . I wish it weren't so, but. . ." (74). She is assured of her assumptions and choices of things that have led to her success. Once, in Paris, while she was shopping for a party to celebrate the occasion of her selection as a fashion model for the cover picture of the Elle magazine, her self-confidence however seemed to have been wounded by a woman in yellow dress. The narrative voice describes the occasion as well as the stupefying effect of the woman on Jadine:

a woman much too tall. Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust. . . . The people in the aisles watched her without embarrassment, with full glances instead of sly ones. She had no arm basket or cart. Just her many-colored sandals and her yellow robe. The woman leaned into the dairy section and opened a carton from which she selected three eggs. Then she put her right elbow into the palm of her left hand and held the eggs aloft between elbow and shoulder. She looked up then and they saw something in her eyes so powerful it had burnt away the eyelashes.

(45)

Jadine was overwhelmed by that "woman's woman—that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty." She followed her with her eyes, but before the woman disappeared, she "turned her head sharply around to the left and looked right at Jadine. Turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below" (46). The woman's insulting gesture derailed Jadine; all her achievements seemed to have been washed away. Her sense of self-pride was wounded and somehow she felt troubled as if her self-assurance and dignity got shattered by the woman in yellow robe, who seemed to be an emblem of womanliness, elegance, beauty, nurturance and authenticity that Jadine had never known before and certainly has not achieved. She moves from Paris and visits Nanadine and Uncle Sydney for Christmas. But there too, she is unable to free herself from the impression the woman created on her. The author says, "the woman had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic." (48)

This is the predicament of an educated and privileged black woman, who in order to avail herself of all the conveniences of the Capitalist economy abandons her blackness and commodifies it in the fashionable market of New York and Paris. In an interview with Charles Ruas in

1981, Morrison commented on the creation of a character like Jadine:

This civilization of black people, which was underneath the white civilization, was there with its own everything. Everything of that civilization was not worth hanging on to, but some of it was, and nothing has taken its place while it is being dismantled. There is a new, capitalistic, modern American black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration. To produce Jadine, that's what it was for. I think there is some danger in the result of that production. It cannot replace certain essentials from the past. (105)

She is a colonized subject. As a fashion model she has surrendered to an aesthetic of commodification and as a student of art history, she has internalized the capitalist ethic of the white culture. By negating her blackness, her own culture she has no doubt ensured her freedom but she has also lost many valuable things. Once Morrison said, "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" ("Rootedness" 344). *Tar Baby* comes closest to *The Bluest Eye* by critiquing the

dominant socioeconomic and cultural space from which the black women seem to have no escape. Pecola's failure to achieve selfhood in 1941 takes four decades more for Jadine to reach the goalpost. Pecola is convinced of her ugliness because evidence is everywhere, within and outside the home, whereas the evidence of Jadine's beauty is displayed on the cover page of fashion magazines, a clever marketing strategy of the dominating culture industry. While Pecola, in her struggle with the white notions of beauty, ultimately becomes a victim of internalization, Jadine is thoroughly happy with the definition of beauty, guaranteed by white standards because she "fits" into it. She struggles not against a white standard of female beauty, but against a black-defined standard of female beauty. Though it may appear that Jadine is more self-defined than Pecola, the two women, on deeper analysis, are merely the two sides of the same coin. As Jadine defines herself in terms of white social and cultural values, she seems to embody Alice Walker's construction of the black woman who is a bit educated and who is "pushed and pulled by the larger world outside of her, urged to assimilate (to be "raceless") in order to overcome her background" (Washington 143). She has to pay for her conscious assimilation that borders on imitation. Trying to live the

bourgeois way of life, Jadine seems to lose her sense of self-image or fails to create a solid identity for herself.

*Tar Baby* focuses on a variety of relationships within Valerian's house: between Valerian and his wife Margaret, between Sydney and Ondine, between the Childs and their jet-setter niece Jadine, between the indoor and outdoor servants, i.e. between Sydney/Ondine and Gideon/Therese. However, the central focus is on the relationship between the European educated African American woman Jadine and a Florida-born black man Son who intrudes into the house and whose presence peels off little by little the gaudy coverings of the Street's family and exposes the lies, secrets, hostilities, hypocrisies and untold narratives that had been concealed under the guise of the structure that looks "like a family" (49). Philip Page in his essay "Everyone was out of Place: Contention and Dissolution in *Tar Baby*" says, "The Street household resembles a stereotypical antebellum plantation, with its aristocratic and bigoted patriarch, its neurotic white lady, its house servants caught between class superiority over the field hands and their subservience to the whites, and its field hands who surreptitiously fight their ineffectual battles against the prevailing system" (112). Valerian, the king of this "structured family" has accumulated his wealth out of the candy business. As Doreatha Mbalia says, "Indeed,

he is a typical capitalist who has made his fortune by exploiting the labor of the African masses and by stealing their land" (69). The house that Valerian has constructed symbolizes, as Philip Page observes, ". . .Valerian's hegemony over nature, blacks, and females, and its ill effects suggest the damage inflicted by the system" (110-11). The novel calls into question the idea of equality that has been made naturalized by white hegemony. Harold M. Hodges opines, "Most (Americans) are at least vaguely conscious of the truth that however loudly we proclaim the ideal of equality, we are a stratified people: that ours is in fact a multi-layered society, a hierarchical society in which whole classes of people are quite commonly accorded low, middling, or high social esteem, power, and material wealth" (x).

Within this "superstructure" of the Streets home Margaret, "the Principal Beauty of Maine," is one of the many subordinates. She relies upon her physical beauty to accomplish everything. Below the rank of Margaret, are Valerian's servants, Sydney and Ondine, who have developed a sense of superiority over Gideon and Therese, the outdoor servants. Instead of identifying them with their own people, they internalize their master's racist outlook. Sydney betrays his sense of superior class consciousness, one of the germs inflicted by the scythe of Capitalism,

when he says to Son, "I am a Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other" (163). He calls Gideon and Therese "Yardman" and "Mary" respectively as his master does and in this way he tries to maintain a distinction between him and his people. Although they identify themselves with their master and share his racist attitude, they can never be on equal terms with their master. Their "second-hand life" has been described in the text thus: "Here were second-hand furniture, table scarves, tiny pillows, scatter rugs and the smell of human beings. It had a tacky permanence to it, but closed. Closed to outsiders. No visitors ever came in here" (160). While Sydney and Ondine fill up the hierarchical class structure of indoor house-servants, Gideon and Therese fill up that of outdoor field servants. For Gideon, "The U.S. is a bad place to die in . . . ." (154). Therese is aware of the disparity that exists between the rich and the poor in this country. She views America as a country "where doctors took the stomachs, eyes, umbilical cords, the backs of the neck where the hair grew, blood, sperm, hearts and fingers of the poor and froze them in plastic packages to be sold later to the rich" (151).

The pernicious effect of racism on one's cultural self and identity has been accurately measured by E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

. . . the Negro is . . . born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. . . . One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (45)

Some eighty years after Du Bois first coined the term, the Kenyan writer/critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o detailed the features and lingering consequences of this outcome, placing it in a global context:

The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It

makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own. . . . The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish. (3)

He concludes, "Imperialism is total: it has economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences to the people of the world today. . . . But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance [of the oppressed] is the cultural bomb" (2-3). Morrison's depiction of relationships in the plantation household of Valerian Streets significantly exposes the ways Imperialism wields its weapon "cultural bomb" to construct a self-alienating materialist world view, which in turn creates class and gender conflicts between black man and black woman.

The central project of the novel is to demonstrate how "cultural illness" contaminates man-woman relationship. Morrison has noted this point in her interview with Nellie McKay:

I think there is a serious question about black male and black female relationships in the twentieth century. I just think that the argument has always turned on something it should

not turn on: gender. I think that the conflict of genders is a cultural illness. Many of the problems modern couples have are caused not so much by conflicting gender roles as by other "differences" the culture offers. That is what the conflicts in *Tar Baby* are all about. (147)

The first meeting between Jadine and Son takes place in the former's bedroom. When she, preening in a fur coat, made by the "hides of ninety baby seals" (*Tar Baby* 87), judges in the full mirror its effect along with her hair style, bound "into a knot at the top of her head," then a smell strikes her and she is really stunned by what the mirror reflects behind her: "There he stood in mauve silk pajamas, his skin is as dark as a river-bed, his eyes as steady and clear as a thief's" (113). The scene reflects Jadine's denial to acknowledge the identity of her people. Wrapping herself from head to toe by the paper of "whiteness," she fails to recognize that the man reflected in the mirror, belongs to her community. The narrative voice says, "She struggled to pull herself away from his image in the mirror and to yank her tongue from the roof of her mouth" (115). However, after a while she recovers herself from the shock and becomes eloquent about her popularity and success in the world of fashion. For Son she goes on reading from the magazine, what it has written about her: "Mademoiselle

Childs . . . graduate of the Sorbonne . . . an accomplished student of art history . . . a degree in . . . is an expert on cloisonné, having visited and worked with the Master Nape. . . . An American now living in Paris and Rome, where she had a small but brilliantly executed role in a film by. . ." (116). In her exuberance of joy she figures out easily the price of the jewelleries that she, as a fashion model is displaying on the cover of the magazine--"thirty-thousand dollars" (117). Her self pride and achievement come into question when Son and Jadine confront each other directly:

"How much?" he asked her. "Was it a lot?" His voice was quiet.

"What are you talking about? How much what?"

"Dick. That you had to suck, I mean to get all that gold and be in the movies. Or was it pussy?"

I guess for models it's more pussy than cock."

Jadine, infuriated by such an insulting remark, calls Son "an ignorant motherfucker" and hits him in his face and on his heads. She wanted to tear "the whites from his eyes" but "he caught both her wrists and crossed them in front of her face. She spit full in his face. . . . Her gold-thread slippers were no good for kicking but she kicked anyhow" (120-21). Thus Jadine desperately attempts to turn away

from her cultural self, which is now in the risk of being exposed by Son's challenge.

"You rape me and they'll feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger. You good as dead right now."

"Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?"

"White?" She was startled out of fury.

"I'm not . . . you know I'm not white!"

(121)

In the last utterance, Jadine halts in the middle and changes "I'm not" to "you know". This shift significantly shows that she is unable to admit that she is white and at the same time wants to stress her superiority over Son. She vents out her hatred for Son by calling him names, "ape," "nigger," "baboon," "animal" and such behaviour of Jadine shows that she feels self-threatened by Son's presence in the Streets' house. She is unable to accept her own image as long as Son is in her room. When he leaves, Jadine feels an urgent desire to "clean him off her" (122), because "he had jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful, and he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her. That was why she was ashamed" (123).

But Jadine's resentment and hostility went away just the next day. His "good looks" made her feel perplexed for "she was more frightened of his good looks than she had been by his ugliness the day before." Perhaps the absence of the man for two months has even made a "river rat" look good. She needed a sort of concentration to flee her mind away from the man: "spaces, mountains, savannas--all those were in his forehead and eyes. . . . Like the vision in yellow--she should have known that bitch would be the kind to spit at somebody, and now this man with savannas in his eyes was distracting her from the original insult" (158). She agrees to his request to go with him to the beach where she wants to sketch something. The difference between Son and Jadine becomes more obvious than before in the course of their conversation that takes place here, which can be summed up by saying that Son is from Eloë, where all people are black, as Son affirms by saying, "No whites. No white people live in Eloë" (172), whereas Jadine is from "Baltimore. Philadelphia. Paris" (173). In saying that she is from three places she actually confirms Son's accusation that she is "not from anywhere" (266). It is through Jadine that Morrison wants to focus on the dilemma of a contemporary African American female who happens to be a "cultural orphan," whose sense of self is based on a denial of her own cultural heritage and identification with

an alien one. The central conflict that Jadine faces in the search for her authenticity is no more so clearly articulated than in the passage where the Caribbean island swamp literally entraps her in the black, sticky substance:

The women looked down from the rafters of the trees hanging in the trees looked down and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when they first 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. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant--mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world 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, their pace of glaciers, their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (183)

For Morrison, the women in trees symbolise the women, who with their "ancient properties," "exceptional femaleness" hold the community together like tar, and they are those

women to whom the novel is dedicated. In her interview with Thomas Le Clair Morrison said,

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. . . . For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That's what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal . . . (122).

Morrison consciously uses folklores, archetypes, and mythic forms which are directly and indirectly related to communal properties and richness of black culture. According to Angelita Reyes, "Like the Greek gods and goddess, Morrison's archetypes symbolize construction and destruction. We have death and rebirth: order and chaos, heroes and antiheroes in continuous juxtaposition" ("Ancient Properties" 21). Morrison notes in her interview with Claudia Tate,

There are several levels of the pariah figure working in my writing. The black community is a pariah community. Black people are pariahs. The

civilization of black people that lives apart from but in juxtaposition to other civilization is a pariah relationship. In fact, the concept of the black in this country is almost always one of the pariah. But a community contains pariahs within it that are very useful for the conscience of that community. (129)

Through the paradox of the pariah Morrison wants to evoke what is inadequate in the community, what it has lost and what is causing its decadence. The sustaining values of black woman-hood, its tar-like qualities to hold things together and its nurturing qualities for the survival of the whole community--are evoked by the paradox of the pariah. Jadine, the twentieth century African American heroine, takes those "tar-like qualities" as impediments to her search for individualism because she does not want, as she says, to settle herself for "wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building" (*Tar Baby* 269). The novel levels Jadine's feminist point of view from Son's perspective. Son does not understand what Jadine means by sexual equality. The narrative voice says, "She kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior." It is from Son's point of

view that Morrison tells about the history of black women's struggle that the politics of feminism never includes:

[Son's ex-wife] Cheyenne was driving a beat-up old truck at age nine, four years before he could even shift gears. . . . His mother's memory was kept alive by those who remembered how she roped horses when she was a girl. His grandmother built a whole cowshed with only Rosa to help. . . . Anybody who thought women were inferior didn't come out of north Florida. (268)

These rural black women do not need the support of liberal feminism, which Jadine defends. She will never realize the history of these black women who have to go through unending physical strife to overcome poverty. In her blind assimilation of Euro-American culture Jadine loses her "ancient properties." Almost at the end of the novel Therese alerts Son to forget her: "There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties" (305). In reconstructing the image of black womanhood Jadine is deliberately used as "the conscience of the community" to tell the new world community how it is coming far away from the healing zone of its "ancient properties."

According to Gurleen Grewal, "Son and Jadine are implicated in double roles as both snarer and ensnared.

Although the narrative perspective shifts from Son as Brer Rabbit--Jadine as entrapper to Jadine as Brer Rabbit--Son as entrapper, the narrative viewpoint is less sympathetic to Jadine's entrapment" (87). Son is a snarer whose blackness Jadine confronts. Finding herself in the predicament of the Brer rabbit, she struggles with tar, her blackness, as evidenced in the scene mentioned earlier. Both are engaged to trap each other by their own tricks: Jadine by her Euro-centric idealism while Son by his romanticization of Eloë. In the novel the author has described Jadine's struggle thus: "She walked toward it and sank up to her knees. . . . She struggled to lift her feet and sank an inch or two farther down into the moss-covered jelly" (182). Son, in his attempt to rescue Jadine from all her assimilations into the hegemonic idealization, functions as a tar baby in order to "insert his own dreams into her. . . the dreams he wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors which woman opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you!" (119). Jadine's fall into the swamp is an artful device to hint at her trip with Son to Florida, where she, in her direct encounter with black people, especially with black women, feels suffocated. Before going to Eloë both of them spend some time in New York where both are frank and open minded to each other. Jadine "poured her heart out to him and he to her"; "They

told each other everything" (224, 225). The narrative voice describes the life they enjoyed there in each other's company:

She was completely happy. . . . Regarding her whole self as an ear, he whispered in every part of her stories of icecaps and singing fish, The fox and the Stork, The monkey and the Lion, The Spider Goes to Market, and so mingled was their sex with adventure and fantasy that to the end of her life she never heard a reference to Little Red Riding Hood without a tremor. (225)

What is interesting in the narrative is that Son is sharing folk tales with her. These folk tales are part of African American cultural heritage, and by telling her the stories of "The Fox and the Stork," "The Monkey and the Lion," "The Spider Goes to Market" he insists her to reshape her identity, based on her own cultural heritage. Thus Jadine gradually feels "unorphaned". The author says, "Gradually she came to feel unorphaned. He cherished and safeguarded her. When she woke in the night from an uneasy dream she had only to turn and there was the stability of his shoulder and his limitless, eternal chest. . . . He unorphaned her completely. Gave her a brand-new childhood" (229).

By inserting the folk aesthetic into the narrative as a counter-myth to the values that Jadine has adopted, Morrison makes Son play the role of the Brer rabbit: "He saw it all as a rescue: first tearing her mind away from that blinding awe. Then the physical escape from the plantation" (219). Jadine also in her role of "entrapper" perceives the changing scenario of their relationship as if providing Son rescue from his provincial and nostalgic outlook. "This is home, she thought with an orphan's delight; not Paris, not Baltimore, not Philadelphia. This is home. . . . And now she would take it; take it and give it to Son. They would make it theirs. She would show it, reveal it to him, live it with him" (222). Both have different kinds of narrative and different ideas of home as well. But despite her efforts, "he insisted on Eloë" (223). Son hopes that he will be able to reorient Jadine by making her familiar with the riches of her own culture when he takes her to Eloë. In Eloë, however, her experience seems to be intolerable for her. The little bedroom without windows had a door to the living room and another to the backyard. She slept for three hours and after getting up opened the backyard door and then "looked out into the blackest nothing she had ever seen. Blacker and bleaker than Isle des Chevaliers, and loud. Loud with the presence of plants and field life" (251). Morrison

reflects on Jadine's unfamiliar experience of the night she spent at Rosa's: "The loudness of the plants was not audible, but it was strong nonetheless. She might as well have been in a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth, suffocating with the sound of plant life moving, but deprived of its sight" (252). She ultimately finds Eloë as "rotten," "a burnt-out place," without any life there: "Maybe a past but definitely no future no and finally there was no interest. All that Southern small-town country romanticism was a lie, a joke, kept secret by people who could not function elsewhere" (259). So she returns to New York without Son and feels "orphaned again" (260).

For Jadine and Son, the inability of each to adjust with the other results in bitter confrontation, which unmask their pretension and reveals the stark reality. Jadine thinks that she is indebted to Valerian for being educated by her, but Son reminds her that it is her aunt and uncle who, with their lifetime's labour, have secured the privileges for her. They argue about school. She says that while he (Son) was busy playing piano in the night club or driving his car into his wife's bed, she was busy in educating herself. In haughty conversation Jadine says, "I was being educated, I was working, I was making something out of my life. I was learning how to make it in

this world. The one we live in, not the one in your head. Not that dump Eloë; this world." Son retorts,

The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit. What did they teach you about me? What tests did they give? . . . . 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 about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mamma and your papa. You find out about me, you educated nitwit!" (264-65).

She realised that "This rescue was not going well. She thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him . . ." Their attempt of rescuing each other is criticized by the author thus:

Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (269)

Their relationship breaks down. "I think that the conflict of genders is a cultural illness"--says Morrison in her 1983 interview. "Many of the problems," she continues, "modern couples have are caused not so much by conflicting gender roles as by the other 'differences' the culture offers" (Interview with Nellie McKay 147). Jadine and Son's relationship could not last. None was certain of his/her responsibilities, what work they should do, when and where, and thus they got separated from each other. Grewal says, "This impasse between them is symptomatic of a larger crisis of the third world locked in the arms of the first" (89).

Neither Son nor Jadine realises that it is possible for them to be economically successful as well as faithful to their rich cultural heritage. In the introductory essay to *Racing Justice, En-gendering Power*, Morrison noted, "the problem of internalizing the master's tongue is the problem of the rescued. Unlike the problems of survivors, who may be lucky, fated, etc., the rescued have the problem of debt. If the rescuer gives you back your life, he shares in that life" (xxv). Jadine is the typical representative of that "rescued" who reminds Son "a million times" (*Tar Baby* 269) that Valerian had put her to school. Jadine's Euro-centric education has taught her to adopt a self-alienating cultural view which she also wants to impose on

Son in the name of "rescuing" him. Though Son does not want to succumb to white hegemonic ideals of commodity consumption, he cannot avoid the authorial criticism for his outmoded and unrealistic attitude as evident in his idealization of the black woman in her maternal role. He loves those pie ladies from his hometown, ". . . the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line. . . ." (119). Son's sentiments for his past, for his all-black town Eloë can not offer a solution at a time when it becomes difficult for one to know who s/he is, as for him/her the most unrecognisable part is his/her own self. Jadine exposes Son's assumptions of tradition and the wholesomeness of his agrarian past as false consciousness: "You stay in the medieval slave basket if you want to. . . . There is nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better, that's all I've been trying to help you do. . . you don't know how to forget the past and do better" (271).

The problem is that not only does the "benevolent" white erode the black's self-identity under the guise of rescuing him/her from the brutality of slavery but also succeed in making the "rescued" his active agent for those who are left "unrescued." In *Tar Baby* Jadine is Valerian's active agent for trapping Son, the "unrescued". Instead of

sticking to his own idealism, Son is considerably influenced by Jadine's self-alienating, materialistic attitude until Therese comes and offers an alternative route to his rescue/survival. In her interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison said about Son: ". . . his sensibilities are distorted; he can't make judgements any more. When he looked at the photos that she took of his people, he saw what she saw and it could not revive what he had, that's testimony to his frailty" (107). Jadine's apparent success may appear to be laudable and appropriate in avoiding the sufferings and struggle that the black women have ever faced, but Morrison's critique of this black daughter is unmistakable. Her education, instead of being used for the uplift of her people, is used rather as a means of "integrating" herself into an alien culture. But this betrays an ignorance of black history, an alienated and alienating sense of individualism, and the breakdown of any notion of responsibility. Jadine's education represents an investment that produces a bourgeois educated class, distinguished from working class. Alone in a restaurant, she feels "proud of having been so decisive, so expert at leaving. Of having refused to be broken in the big ugly hands of any man" (275). Jadine's insensitiveness to her aunt's condition becomes prominent when she buys for Ondine "a stunning black chiffon dress,"

and "black suede shoes with zircons studding the heels" as Christmas gifts (90). She does not have any idea that her aunt's feet have swollen with pain due to the hardships of life. It is very ironic that Sydney does not claim any kinship when he serves his niece along with his master at the table; the laws of class decorum appear to be stronger than the ties of kinship. Also we are told that Jadine never looks at her uncle when she and Valerian talk about Sydney. Very soon the pretension becomes the reality when Jadine disowns any responsibility to Sydney and Ondine: "You are asking me to parent you. Please don't. I can't do that now." She says with her steady voice to Ondine when the latter offers an exact definition of "womanhood" to the former: "Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man--good enough even for the respect of other women" (281). Morrison's stinging criticism of Jadine's vision of emancipation informs the following sentences: "[but] underneath her efficiency and know-it-all sass were wind chimes. Nine rectangles of crystal, rainbowed in the light. Fragile pieces of glass tinkling as long as the breeze was gentle" (220); her room looks "fragile--like a dollhouse for an absent doll" (131).

Her so-called "sexual equality" has liberated her from her responsibility to her aged aunt and uncle, her culture, her history, all of which is burdensome and restrictive to her. About the contemporary sexual conflict Morrison said to Ruas,

The contemporary woman is eager; her femininity becomes sexuality rather than femininity, because that is perceived as weak. The characteristics they encourage in themselves are more male characteristics, not because she has a fundamental identity crisis, but because she wants to be totally free. . . . Ondine is a tough lady in older sense of that word, like pioneers, but she is keenly aware of her nurturing characteristics, whereas someone in Jadine's generation would find that a burden and not at all what her body was for. She does not intend to have children. In that sense it's not an identity crisis in terms of male/female sexuality and personality. The impetus of the culture is to be feminized, and what one substitutes for femininity is sexuality. (105)

Jadine's attempt to escape her female self is the most significant aspect of the novel. From the woman in yellow, to the women in trees, to the night women at Eloë--all the

women question some aspects of Jadine's womanhood. The woman in "yellow" represents African American woman with her authentic beauty and fertility, symbolized in the three eggs she carries. The narrative of women in trees combines myth and folk legend in that they are "Swamp women [who] mate with horsemen in the hills" (184) as the mythic legend goes on the island. Because the horsemen in the myth are blind, runaway slaves, they are history as well as legend. When Jadine falls into the swamp, the women in trees see her as a 'runaway' child, but later they realize that she has forgotten her "sacred properties," values of womanhood (183). Finally, the night women in Eloë represent all women in general and the women of her familial past in particular:

All there crowding into the room. Some of them she did not know recognize, but they were all there spoiling her lovemaking, . . . . All of them revealing both their breasts except the woman in yellow. She did something more shocking--she stretched out a long arm and showed Jadine her three big eggs. (258-59)

Clearly all these women symbolise motherhood and its nurturing and sustaining abilities that black women seldom reject in the name of gender parity. In one of her interviews Morrison says that a black woman is both "the

'ship' and 'the safe harbour'." Education cannot keep her away from her nurturing abilities because she knows "how to be complete human beings." "One does not have to make a choice between whether to dance or to cook—do both. And if we can't do it, then it can't be done!" ("A Conversation" 135).

In *Tar Baby* Morrison re-envisioned the African origin of Southern folk tale of Brer rabbit. In rewriting the history of black women Morrison has examined and reconstructed the "Tar Baby" story of the South. The novel contributes to highlight the positive values of black women, their "ancient properties" to hold things together; for Morrison the tar lady is a black woman who is a builder, holds things together and she also symbolizes cohesive force. As a fictional writer Morrison uses her counter myth to reshape African American experience. Marilyn Sanders Mobley says that Morrison is "a redemptive scribe, for she too takes on a mission to correct a cultural misimpression" (10). In her attempt to make narrative a dynamic vehicle for preserving, transmitting and reshaping culture in affirmative ways that celebrate the past, make the valuable past useful in present and also offer faith in human potential, she consciously goes on reclaiming the folklore and myths that bear the richness of the cultural heritage of the blacks. Thus she "dusts off

myths" to uncover the deeper meaning for adding to the richness of black culture. In her fictional reconstruction of the story of black women Morrison has used the "tar baby" myth as a metaphor for black womanhood, the spiritual power and moral wisdom of black women to hold things together, i.e. relationship, family, neighbourhood and community. Although the meaning of tar baby" has been distorted by white culture, it can be redefined by black women. Jadine is constructed by the white master like the "tar baby" in the Western version of the plantation story. She cannot fully embody tar qualities, not because she is privileged with white education but for being careless to her "ancient properties." Tar has some funky qualities, which refer to unpretentious feelings and physicality; "funk" is a term taken from the non-bourgeois African American culture. Tar originates from the earth and is ancient. For Morrison, examining the tar baby myth reveals history and prophecy, which shows black women's cohesive power in relation to family and community in history. The woman in yellow dress, the "swamp women" and the night women at Eloee--all are the mythological tar babies, who warn Jadine, the "white tar baby," about what might befall her if she cut herself off her "roots." They want to make Jadine aware of her tar like qualities, which, she in her blind imitation of the hegemonic culture is losing fast.

As a tar baby she must combine "the quality of adventure and a quality of nest" (Morrison, Interview with Charles Ruas 104).

Morrison, while rewriting the history of black women, demythologizes the Western version of the plantation story of the "Tar Baby" and exposes a vital truth that blind imitation is to create a false, fragmented self-image. To be a true culture-bearer and community builder, the black woman must remember the moral wisdom of her ancestors and one such ancestor is the mythological tar woman. Thus Morrison's redeployment of the tar baby myth reveals black women's strength and power to resist internalized patterns of violence, commodification and bondage. In the name of "sexual equality" they should never become the tool of the ruling class. However, this does not dislodge the positive aspect of Jadine's flight for the discovery of her own self. In the quest for her individuality she flies back to Paris where she will begin at "Go." With her growing maturity she has come to realize what Ondine once had told her: "A grown woman did not need safety or its dream. She was the safety she longed for" (209). In the quest for her new life she would be able, as it is hoped, to face the odds with her growing awareness of a solid identity, forged with the "sacred qualities" of "ancestral tar babies/ tar mothers," because, as Morrison says in her interview with

Ruas, "She now knows enough--she hasn't opened the door, but she knows where the door is" (108). The novel ends with Son running "Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-spilt" (306), which may be read as a metaphor of his emergent self-consciousness that encourages him to proceed further instead of locking himself in a "suspended past."