

Discovery of “Self” and “Identity” of Afro – Americans in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and *Tar Baby*

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Abstract: *The dawn of the new millennium witnessed a lot of changes in human kind in the context of technology based global world. Yet the discrimination between men and women, economically and socially upgraded and oppressed exists. Women continued to suffer as the most disadvantaged group all over the world. Second-wave feminism was largely concerned with the end to discrimination and oppression. Black Feminism is the process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women. The black women’s marginalization and oppression forced them to search for self-awareness and self-empowerment. Toni Morrison stresses that black women can never become fully empowered in a context of social injustice. In her works, Morrison has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society and longings for the search for cultural identity. The inability of male and female characters to form a sense of identity in her novels Sula and Tar Baby is knotted to the cultural trauma they experience which makes it impossible to shape a sense of self. This paper focuses on the dilemma of female figures in constructing their identities in a racist and sexist society. How the protagonists of the novels Tar Baby and Sula project their identities in the midst of racial and patriarchal society is discussed in detail.*

Keywords: *Black Feminism, gender, patriarchy, oppression, self-awareness, self-identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early decades of the 20th century, there were continuing racial injustice and widespread lynching and other types of violence against the Afro-Americans. The civil war ended and officially, slavery was terminated after all the abolitionist movements. The now ‘free’ Afro-Americans had to achieve a societal standard of whiteness in order to gain acceptance. After 1920, the Afro-American literature thrived in Harlem. It was not only a literary movement. The Harlem Renaissance was the name given to the cultural, social, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem between the end of World War I and the middle of the 1930s. The 1980s and 1990s saw a major growth in black feminist writers. They let their voices be heard in published works and in academia. They critiqued gender, white male supremacist patriarchy and other structures of domination. The growth of the woman’s movement, and its impact on the consciousness of Afro-American women in particular, helped fuel a “black women’s literary renaissance” of the 1970s, beginning in earnest with the publication of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), by Toni Morrison. Morrison went on to publish *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977); her fifth novel, the slave narrative *Beloved* (1987) became arguably the most influential work of Afro-American literature of the late 20th century. The success of writers like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou (poet and author of the 1970 memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) and Alice Walker (winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for *The Color Purple*) helped inspire a generation of younger black female novelists. Black Feminists has rightly understood the problems of a Black Woman. The double oppression against them is highlighted in their writings. Because of their double identity, black women are the victims of both sexual discrimination and racial discrimination.

2. QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Toni Morrison very well describes how different women characters react and respond differently to the injustice and the inhumanity imposed on them. She further questions black-women’s self-identity, self-concept, and struggles to achieve freedom as a living being if not a human being. In *Language Must Not Sweat*, Toni Morrison focuses upon how Africans lost their names through the institution of

slavery, which in turn created a loss of connection with their ancestry” (Beaulieu. 171). Toni Morrison stresses that black women can never become fully empowered in a context of social injustice. Her novels give us deep insight into black women’s minds and souls. Morrison makes us listen to the voice of the suppressed group who are left out of literature. Though the movement of Black Feminism and theory came much later, authors like Toni Morrison are finite elements of this movement. The legacy of struggle, the search for voice, the interdependence of thought and action and the significance of empowerment in everyday life are core themes in Black Feminism. As the author’s thought and works are against the sufferings of Blacks and especially the black women, it can be said that the ideology of Black Feminism is blatantly evident in her novels.

First-wave Black feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage. Second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end to discrimination and oppression. Issues of race, class and sexuality are central to third-wave feminism. Black women have experienced great hardships and misery in the process of searching for identity and struggling for freedom and equality. In the majority of her novels, Morrison highlights the importance of identity, the formation of the ‘self’, and the influence of the environment and society on that development. According to Ron Eyerman in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, “cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (Eyerman 2). African slaves were unified by their environment and society’s racial oppression. In the case of Toni Morrison’s characters, ‘the trauma in question is slavery, not [only] as an institution or even an experience, but as a collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people’ (Eyerman 1).

The main problem the Afro-Americans face in trying to carve out an identity for them is that white people have defined their existence. According to Neal, it is annoying for any African American to derive contentment or pride from their name because Americans “designate people of African descent as Negro—the name that marked them as slaves—or black, which describes them physically but deprives them of cultural identity” (Neal 52). This label serves as a reminder of the sting of slavery and diaspora. The main character of the novel, *Sula* is from Black community in Bottom. Sula knew that the lives of Blacks are considered inferior. During her adolescence, Sula realizes that she would be more satisfied if she had more opportunity to live a worthwhile life according to her own will. Sula finds her power not within her community, but in her rebellion against it. Once she insists while talking to her grandmother Eva, “I want to make myself” (*Sula* 92). Sula wants to resist the system of segregation. Sula desires to go away and try something different from the way she has lived until then in the town: “She escapes to college, submerges herself in the city life” (*Sula* Cover). Sula imposes a difficult task on herself. She tries to be both an African and an American and she attempts to move from one world into another. However, Sula does not find any place remarkable to quench her actual desires. Eventually, she comes back to the Bottom ten years later. It looks as if that she has found out that she is not received by white world and so she returns to her hometown. However, she comes back changed: “When she returns to her roots, it is as a rebel, a mocker, a wanton sexual seductress” (*Sula* Cover).

Jadine is a young black woman and works as a model in Europe. She is motherless and was brought up by her black aunt and uncle. She goes to meet them in Isle des Chevaliers in the Caribbean to spend two months. She comes to the island in order to get some rest, have a good time there as well as to think about herself. Her current job implies the fact that she is not the kind of a black woman who would like to care for a household at a white family’s as her aunt actually does. Housekeeping has been the kind of work typical for many black women to occupy. Jadine is well aware of this ill-treatment of black women. But she also knows that her aunt Ondine likes to work as a housekeeper at a white couple’s. The fact that Valerian, the employer and a friend of Ondine’s, has financed Jadine’s studies and hence let her have access to a big city might have helped Jadine to realize that opportunities for women in general can be better than her black family is used to. It gives the impression that this financial help made Jadine longing to live in another world.

Valerian has made it possible for Jadine to meet the white world. Since Jadine has had the chance to see quite a lot of capitals in the world and try a way of living new to her, she has developed a liking for the white culture, which may be seen as a beginning for her hunger for a change. She knows that there are different chances for blacks and whites. However, as a black woman, Jadine has managed to get ahead. She is thought to be a pretty woman. Jadine is conscious of the fortune that she has had but

she wonders why everybody is transfixed by her: “The height? The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress?” (*Tar Baby* 42). The fact that she has had the opportunity to work as a model has left her in doubt about herself. But she is sure that she would like to make it in the larger society.

2.1. Pseudo Identity

Herbert Kelman was a professor of Social Ethics in Harvard University. According to him, identity refers to “the enduring aspects of a person’s definition of her- or him’s self, the conception of who one is and what one is over time and across situations” (Kelman 3). And he also says that personal identity is “a cumulative product built up over a person’s lifetime experiences” (Kelman 3). According to Erikson, “individuals who reached early adulthood without having established a sense of identity would be incapable of intimacy” (qtd in Bee 372). Hence, such individuals find it difficult to get along with fellow-people and lack comradeship. Identity is a sense of personal continuity and uniqueness based not only on personal need, but also on membership in various groups, such as familial, ethnic and occupational (Bee 372).

Women’s identity is not shaped individually, but in relation to others around them. But the protagonists of *Sula* and *Tar Baby* are against this old norm. The revolt against their identity is a fight which many Afro-American women made in the 1960s. Neal says that, “What happened to Black identity under the American impact were twin processes: its dis-Africanization, on one side, and its racialization on the other” (Neal 52-53). Hence, African Americans are a minority within minorities. The memory of dislocation is augmented when one compares African Americans to Americans. The Afro-Americans realize that they find it extremely difficult to identify with a true homeland. Sula and Jadine chose not to conform to the traditional roles as daughters, mothers, and wives. They hated their existing identity. The problem of search for identity is very well connected with the theme of self-hatred and with the desire to be someone else in life. They were successful in getting a pseudo-identity which just resulted in discontentment in their lives. Morrison delineates her women protagonists as the representatives of the emerging emancipated New Women, who breaks the age-old traditions and conventions set up by patriarchy, racism and prejudice. The ways and means to attain their real identity do not align with the identity that really benefits the Black women. Freedom, emancipation and empowerment seem to be a mirage. Yet the Black women’s self-assertiveness confidently reinvents how under-classed black women perceived their own cultural identity.

2.2. Social Reality

The reality of the situation is that unless the Black women understand and accept their age-old traditions and African heritage they would not be able to withstand the hazards of patriarchy, racism and prejudice. Frances M. Beal is a Black feminist and a peace and justice political activist. She co-founded the Black Women’s Liberation Committee of SNCC. She wrote “*Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*” in 1969. In that she says,

Her (Black Woman) physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer... she... has been forced to serve as the white woman’s maid and wet nurse for white children while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected – (Beal, 1)

They were blacks and that is why they suffer. They are females and thus they were prone for victimization. Women have always been marginalized in the western society. The patriarchal creed has always subordinated them and has suppressed their individual self. Subjugation, social discrimination and torments have been the providence of women since ages. After a few decades the aftermath of Slavery were racism, classism and broken families with formless individuals that still threatened the existence of healthy black life. The blacks accept the self-imposed feeling of ugliness and lack of self-worth without questioning its source. Morrison shows the origin of the roots from where these issues of black inferiority in the mind of African Americans stems from. She also delineates how frustration with being unable to live up to white standards, leads on to hatred which is then cycled on.

Both the black heroines Sula and Jadine face the problem of doubt about their identity. The problem results from their experience with the world around them. Sula and Jadine have their own reasons for changing their blackness into whiteness. The society’s treatment and the impact of the environment along with the ideals of the society are the principal factors that governed the behavior and attitude of

these two protagonists in the novel. Both Sula and Jadine take the question of identity seriously and are concerned with their dissatisfactions, sadness, doubts and desires. According to Erik Erikson the psychosocial development of an individual 'encompasses changes in people's understanding of themselves, one another, and the world around them during the course of development' (qtd. in Feldman 392). According to Erikson, identity formation, while beginning in childhood, gains prominence during adolescence. Faced with physical growth and sexual maturation, adolescents must accomplish the task of integrating their prior experiences and characteristics into a personal identity (qtd. in Feldman 392). However, the experience Sula and Jadine draw upon is not capable of fulfilling their need for an identity because their experiences and relationships are limited due to the social and racial groups to which they belong. Both men and women are classified by their relation to each other; men's masculinity and women's femininity is based on who defines it. In the case of the *Sula* and *Tar Baby*, it is defined by the white society in which they live.

Sula is a black woman who desires to become somebody else and to make herself visible. Jadine is a black woman who is mad about New York as well as about the elements of white culture: New York made her feel like giggling (*Tar Baby* 223). Moreover, Jadine thinks that if there is "a black woman's town in the world," it is New York. As she claims: "This is home" (*Tar Baby* 223). Jadine seems to be able to say where she is happy. However she may not be really happy and it may be just her delusion.

Both the female protagonists made an attempt to assimilate into the mainstream society that is very much different from their traditional one. These were Morrison's emancipated women. They were free and unrestricted. The one thing that they failed to attain is 'Empowerment'. Both the heroines forgot and neglected their black heritage and were not ready to be empowered. These black women living in the United States try to adopt white patterns in their own ways. They all have similar experiences and they all want to survive in the world according to their own ideas about a worthwhile life. Sula has changed her appearance as well as her manners so as to become more satisfied with herself. Jadine, because of her chance to live in cities, to meet all the pleasing experiences they offer and because of the freedom that she has got, do not need to identify with her own heritage.

Both Sula and Jadine struggle to lead a comfortable life which would make them happier. Sula and Jadine try to break some barriers in their life. According to them these barriers do not let them become an accepted part of the wider society. However, they were not able to keep their situations well in hand. To achieve complete satisfaction with the quality of their lives can be very difficult.

Sula's change affects negatively her own personality. Since Sula was not satisfied even during her life in the places outside her hometown, the negative reaction of the Bottom to her new manners resulted in only increasing her doubt about herself. Sula is one of many young women of color who have worked to make a better life but they are not successful. Though Sula does not admit her defeat, she is soon aware of her failure in life. Sula's grandmother blames Sula for throwing her life away. But Sula gets annoyed and replies in irritation: "It's mine to throw" (*Sula* 93). Sula knows that she has not succeeded in her life. Consequently, she prefers seclusion to other people and she refuses to do anything.

Sula begins to spend her time in bed: "It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow" (*Sula* 122). Sula's reaction to the rejection in life is just an expression of self-hatred, because "there is no use in trying anything, joining anything, because you are just no damned good" (*Sula* 120).

For Jadine, she seems to prefer the patterns of white culture to the patterns of the black one. Initially, she is self-confident, she likes her way of life and she argues with Son about many issues. But after she falls in love with him, there is more pressure on her to encounter black standards. Son is an example of a black person who had a strong identification with other blacks. Son's pride in being black is a threat to Jadine's identification with white culture. Son is a threat to her freedom. So Jadine starts to face the problem of her identity. She ends up in an internal conflict and she must fight with herself so that she could feel happy with her lover. Jadine wants to feel at least that she is a part of the larger society. That feeling gives her an inner sense of balance and equality. But the feeling may be just a delusion of her.

Hence Sula and Jadine have become caught up in their attempt at assimilation into the larger society. They dwell on their status in the society and on their living. For Sula, her insight into the failures in

her life has brought self-hatred into herself and she starts to live in solitude. As far as Jadine is concerned she is threatened by her lover and his values. The mere thought of her being involved in a traditional black life terrifies Jadine.

Sula and Jadine face these particular problems due to their discontent with the quality of their lives. Both these women have adopted an attitude for themselves towards the issue of assimilation into the larger American society. Sula’s attempt to participate in the larger society went in vain. She has not managed to find her own self. Her self-destruction follows and she dies early and alone: “As though for the first time she was completely alone-where she had always wanted to be” (*Sula* 148). As far as Jadine is concerned she does everything for accomplishing her dream, and she creates the boundaries of her own self by her fixation on white culture. Morrison has vividly described the possible results of racial prejudice of a black woman who has identified herself as a white woman and, therefore, adopted the prejudice of whites against her race.

3. CONCLUSION

The efforts of the female protagonists to get assimilated into American society just resulted in major problems of their personalities. Finally, the lives of these characters are shaped and molded in an unpleasant way. It can be said that none of the characters are able to live under unfavorable conditions without any distress. Sula and Jadine’s experience with trying to be someone else badly affects their lives. The results of the characters’ own choices are just the patterns of the consequences of discontent with a black woman’s status in a society. The quest is largely manifested in the characters’ attempts to survive their victimization. Sula and Jadine attempt to survive the psychic victimization by searching an identity for them. Both Sula and Jadine were emancipated. But they had only a partially fulfilled quest for identity. They were not fully content in their lives. The identity search was disturbed by absorption of the values of the dominant culture. Toni Morrison stresses the fact that the survival of black women in a white society depends upon their emphasis on loving their own race, their own culture and loving themselves and not to get trapped in white superiority or white standards of beauty.

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