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AFRICAN AMERICAN AND AFRO-CARIBBEAN CHARACTERS IN TONI MORRISON'S TAR BABY: SELF-AWARENESS, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND ENHANCED FORMS OF RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) explores the complicated relationships between African American and Afro-Caribbean communities through the encounters of characters belonging to different cultural, national, and social backgrounds. Although these characters share African ancestry and a history of racial oppression, their interactions reveal divisions created by colonialism, capitalism, class consciousness, and cultural assimilation. This paper examines how the presence of African American and Afro-Caribbean characters creates opportunities for self-awareness and develops enhanced forms of resistance against oppressive structures. Morrison presents diasporic solidarity as a gradual process involving cultural recognition, mutual understanding, and the rejection of internalized colonial attitudes. Through the experiences of these characters, Morrison demonstrates that resistance becomes meaningful when individuals recognize both external oppression and their own participation in systems of domination.

KEYWORDS: African American Literature, Afro-Caribbean Identity, African Diaspora, Self-Awareness, Cultural Identity, Colonialism, Resistance, Cultural Solidarity

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's Tar Baby shows the relationship between African American and Afro-Caribbean communities. Set primarily on the fictional Caribbean Island of Dominique, the novel brings together characters whose shared African ancestry is complicated by differences in nationality, culture, class, and historical experience. Through their interactions, Morrison examines the possibilities and limitations of creating solidarity among people of African descent. Although these characters belong to the same broad diasporic community, they do not automatically recognize one another as members of a common cultural and historical group. Their relationships are often characterized by suspicion, prejudice, misunderstanding, and conflicting ideas about identity.

The Caribbean setting provides an important background for examining these tensions. It brings African American characters into direct contact with Afro-Caribbean characters and exposes the influence of Western colonialism and capitalism on their attitudes. Sydney and Ondine Childs, who work for the wealthy American Valerian Street, have adopted many of the social values associated with their white employer. In contrast, Gideon and Thérèse represent the local black population whose experiences are shaped by the island's cultural traditions and economic conditions. Their interactions reveal that racial identity alone cannot guarantee unity or mutual understanding.

Morrison's representation of these characters also challenges the assumption that African diasporic identity is a fixed and unified condition. Their encounters demonstrate that identity develops through historical experience, cultural exchange, and the recognition of differences. The novel therefore presents the Caribbean as a space in which African Americans must reconsider their relationship with African heritage, American nationality, and other black communities.

This paper tries to show that Morrison uses the presence of African American and Afro-Caribbean characters to create opportunities for self-awareness and resistance. Through their conflicts and developing relationships, the characters gradually recognize the oppressive structures governing their lives. Their experiences suggest that genuine solidarity requires an understanding of shared histories as well as an honest confrontation with internal divisions.

Cultural Differences and the Absence of Diasporic Solidarity

One of the most significant features of Tar Baby is Morrison's portrayal of the cultural distance between African American and Afro-Caribbean characters. Although Sydney and Ondine belong to a historically oppressed racial community, they frequently demonstrate an attitude of superiority toward the local black inhabitants. Their behaviour reflects the influence of the white ruling class whose values they have gradually internalized.

the desire to pit these cultural systems against each other arises from present conditions. In particular, it is formed by the need to indict those forms of rationality which have been rendered implausible by their racially exclusive character and further to explore the history of their complicity with terror systematically and rationally practised as a form of political and economic administration. (Gilroy:1993; 223)

This contradiction becomes evident when Sydney suspects the local people of stealing chocolate and bottled water. He immediately blames the island's black inhabitants, referring to them as "Yardman" and "Marys." Such language demonstrates his willingness to judge people through racial stereotypes rather

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than recognize their individuality. The irony is that Sydney, despite his own experience of racial discrimination, reproduces the same attitudes historically used to dehumanize black people.

The naming practices in the novel further expose the absence of solidarity. Therese and Gideon also use insulting names for Sydney and Ondine. Ondine is called "machete-hair," while Sydney becomes "bow-tie." These names ridicule the American couple's appearance and their attempts to maintain a socially superior identity. The exchange of derogatory names demonstrates that both communities participate in a system of mutual judgment.

Sydney and Ondine represent this tendency because their employment within Valerian's household has encouraged them to identify with the interests of the white master rather than with the local black community. Morrison therefore demonstrates that racial oppression can produce complicated relationships in which oppressed individuals reproduce the prejudices and hierarchies of the dominant society.

However, these conflicts also serve an important narrative purpose. By placing the characters in one another's presence, Morrison forces them to confront perspectives that challenge their established beliefs. Their differences become opportunities for recognizing the limitations of their own attitudes.

Self-Awareness and the Transformation of Sydney and Ondine

The development of Sydney and Ondine represents an important movement from false security toward self-awareness. Initially, they believe that their loyalty and long service to Valerian Street have given them a special position within his household. Their relationship with the white family creates an illusion of belonging that prevents them from recognizing the unequal structure governing their lives.

The dismissal of Gideon and Therese becomes a turning point in their understanding of this relationship. Their removal from the household exposes the fact that the white master has the authority to dismiss black workers regardless of their loyalty or personal attachment. Sydney and Ondine gradually realize that their position depends upon economic necessity rather than genuine acceptance.

Ondine's question, "Do we have a choice?" reveals her growing awareness of their limited freedom (280). She begins to understand that her identification with Valerian's household cannot protect her from exploitation. Her realization also affects her relationship with Jadine, whose closeness to Valerian had previously appeared to promise security for the entire family.

Ondine's transformation is particularly important in relation to Margaret's abuse of her son, Michael. For years, Ondine has remained silent about Margaret's behaviour because she feels emotionally responsible for the child. Her silence, however, also allows Margaret to avoid confronting her responsibility.

The events surrounding the Christmas dinner encourage Ondine to challenge this arrangement. She finally recognizes that she has been protecting Margaret at the cost of her own moral independence. Her willingness to speak openly demonstrates that self-awareness involves recognizing one's participation in the continuation of oppressive relationships.

Morrison therefore presents Ondine's development as a movement toward personal freedom. Her recognition of exploitation does not immediately remove her economic dependence, but it changes her understanding of herself and her relationship with the white household.

The experience of Sydney and Ondine also demonstrates that resistance begins with the rejection of false consciousness. They must first recognize the inequality governing their lives before they can develop a more independent sense of identity.

Gideon and Therese: Cultural Knowledge and Resistance to Colonial Ideology

Gideon and Therese play an equally important role in challenging the assumptions of the African American characters. Their experiences reveal different ways of understanding American society, colonial power, and cultural identity.

Therese initially refuses to acknowledge the American black characters. Her hostility demonstrates that shared racial ancestry does not necessarily create cultural identification. However, Gideon recognizes the limitations of her position. He reminds her that the conflicts among the black characters cannot be understood without considering the influence of the white inhabitants.

Gideon's observation, that they must consider "the white ones and what they thinking about it all" is particularly significant (111). Gideon understands that the disagreements between Sydney, Ondine, and Therese take place within a larger system of white economic and social authority. His statement encourages Thérèse to look beyond her personal resentment and recognize the wider structure of power.

Gideon's experience in the United States also challenges Son's idealized understanding of his country. Having migrated to America for economic reasons, Gideon knows that American citizenship does not necessarily provide equality or security. His experiences reveal the difficulties faced by immigrants and the limitations of national belonging.

Therese offers another form of resistance through her unconventional interpretation of American culture. When Gideon explains institutions such as blood banks and eye banks, she imagines America as a society in which the bodies of poor people are stored and sold to wealthy individuals. Her interpretation appears humorous, but it also exposes the inequalities underlying capitalist society.

Her description challenges the assumption that technological advancement necessarily represents moral progress. Instead, she suggests that scientific development can become another instrument through which wealthy individuals exercise power

over economically disadvantaged populations.

Yogita Goyal's discussion of diaspora in Tar Baby is useful in understanding these cultural tensions. She argues:
Morrison's novel presents complicated relationships among nationalism, gender, tradition, and diasporic identity rather than offering a simple celebration of racial unity (Goyal:2006; 393–94).

Therese's observations are significant because they challenge the traditional opposition between Western civilization and Caribbean primitiveness. Her unconventional perspective reverses the colonial assumption that Western society possesses unquestionable cultural and moral superiority.

Through Gideon and Therese, Morrison demonstrates that cultural knowledge can become a form of resistance. Their perspectives encourage the African American characters to reconsider the values they have adopted and recognize the contradictions within American society.

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's Tar Baby provides a complex representation of the relationships between African American and Afro-Caribbean characters. Through their encounters, Morrison exposes the divisions created by colonialism, capitalism, class hierarchy, and cultural assimilation. Although the characters share African ancestry, their relationships reveal that common racial identity does not automatically produce solidarity.

The development of Sydney, Ondine, Gideon, Therese, and Son demonstrates the importance of self-awareness in challenging oppressive structures. Sydney and Ondine gradually recognize the limitations of their position within Valerian's household, while Gideon and Therese offer alternative perspectives through which American identity and Western modernity can be questioned. Son's experiences further demonstrate that African American identity involves a continuing negotiation between African heritage and American nationality.

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