

Trauma, Escape, and Fall: A Study of Traumatic Narrative in *Tar Baby*

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Abstract

Tar Baby, a novel by African American writer Toni Morrison, centers on the identity crisis of African American individuals, presenting the deep trauma endured by the protagonists, Jadine and Son, within the context of racial discrimination and cultural conflict. Faced with the irreconcilable structural clash between African American culture and mainstream white culture, the two protagonists attempt to achieve self-repair and identity reconstruction through different paths, yet ultimately fall into a continuous cycle of trauma. This paper, employing Judith Herman's trauma theory, analyzes the causes, manifestations, and healing outcomes of the protagonists' trauma in the novel. In the book, racial discrimination is the root of Jadine and Son's psychological trauma: the former chooses "assimilation into white culture" as a strategy to escape trauma, while the latter resorts to "returning to the roots of black culture" for solace. However, neither truly completes the process of post-traumatic healing and recovery. Through the protagonists' tragic endings, the work reveals the complexity and difficulty of African American identity reconstruction, pointing out that neither one-dimensional cultural assimilation nor romanticized cultural return constitutes an effective path to trauma recovery. Furthermore, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of the ideological connotations of *Tar Baby* from the perspective of traumatic narrative and to enrich the discussion on collective trauma and identity politics in African American literary studies.

Keywords

Toni Morrison; *Tar Baby*; trauma theory; identity; racial discrimination.

1. Introduction:

Toni Morrison (1931–2019) is an immensely influential giant in contemporary American literature and even world literary history. In 1993, she became the first African American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, with the Nobel Committee praising her for "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality." Her literary works, such as *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *The Bluest Eye*, reconstruct the historical experience and spiritual world of African Americans with powerful and poetic narrative. *Beloved*, in particular, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988, becoming an enduring classic analyzing the lingering trauma of slavery. Beyond her writing, Morrison, as a senior editor at Random House, championed the publication of works by many African American writers. In academic institutions like Princeton University, she worked to deconstruct the white-centered literary tradition and broaden the boundaries of American literature. Using literature as a weapon, she placed the long-suppressed Black voice, memory, and human complexity at the center of narrative, not only reshaping the American literary canon but also profoundly influencing global understanding of race, history, and identity. In 2012, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, confirming her enduring achievements as a writer, thinker, and catalyst for cultural change [1-3].

Tar Baby, a crucial text from Morrison's mid-career, focuses more on the spiritual dilemmas of post-Civil Rights era African Americans within the context of global mobility and cultural colonialism, compared to works like *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* which directly address the history of slavery and violence. Through the emotional conflict and identity choices of Jadine and Son, the novel reveals the persistent psychological pressure and latent trauma endured by African American subjects caught between mainstream white culture and Black cultural traditions. This makes it a vital text for re-examining Morrison's literary work from the perspective of traumatic narrative.

Existing research on *Tar Baby*, both domestically and internationally, has largely approached it from dimensions such as colonial discourse, ethical dilemmas, cultural identity, modern experience, spatial writing, and narrative strategies, emphasizing the novel's critique of capitalist globalization, the logic of cultural assimilation, and the disintegration of traditional Black values. However, current scholarship often interprets Jadine and Son's spiritual crisis as a result of cultural choice or ethical stance, seldom analyzing it as a traumatic experience with persistent and structural characteristics. This, to some extent, overlooks the profound influence of trauma itself on the characters' behavioral logic and destiny. From this perspective, it is necessary to introduce trauma theory to reinterpret the characters' psychology and narrative in the novel.

Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, based on clinical studies of survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and political persecution, proposed the theory of "complex post-traumatic stress disorder," defining trauma as "an abnormal psychological reaction experienced by an individual when encountering extreme threats or sustained oppression." Herman further proposed a three-stage model of trauma recovery: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnecting with others. This theory breaks through traditional trauma research's reliance on single violent events, providing an effective framework for analyzing psychological trauma caused by structural violence such as long-term racial oppression and cultural exclusion.

Based on this, this paper will conduct a close reading of the traumatic experiences of Jadine and Son in *Tar Baby* using Herman's trauma theory. The analysis will unfold across three levels: "The Formation of Trauma," "The Escape from Trauma," and "The Failure of Redemption," revealing the traumatic avoidance and subject disintegration manifested in the protagonists' different choices, and further pointing out the novel's critique and reflection on both one-dimensional cultural assimilation and romanticized cultural return [4-5].

2. Trauma: Suffering and Its Causes

The two main characters in *Tar Baby* are the lovers Jadine and Son, both African Americans. Jadine is an orphan sponsored by Valerian, a graduate in art history from the Sorbonne, and a successful fashion model in Paris. Son, originally named William Green, comes from Eloe, Florida. Having fled for eight years after committing manslaughter, he has worked as a seaman and piano player. They meet and fall in love at Valerian's Caribbean villa. The novel reveals the deep-seated trauma of both Jadine and Son. One aspect of Jadine's trauma is her fundamental identity as belonging to the black community, with a root cause being her inferiority complex. "Let us continue with Monsieur Mannoni: 'In practice, therefore, an inferiority complex connected with the colour of the skin is found only among those who form a minority within a group of another colour.' (Frantz Fanon, 1967:58)." A minority living in a place dominated by people of another skin color is prone to developing inferiority feelings related to skin color. Jadine, a black woman, primarily operates in cities with larger white populations. Moreover, with colonialism prevalent and black people generally subjected to white discrimination, Jadine

develops a strong inferiority complex about her skin color, leading her to seek assimilation with whites and to dislike the fact that she is black.

Another root cause stems from the psychology of whites engaged in "one-dimensional cultural assimilation," who believe that white discrimination reduces her to a colonized subject, deprives her of value and originality, labels her parasitic, and that she must conform to their rules as quickly as possible. Feeling inferior and useless, suffering from not being white, she attempts to become white, to force them to acknowledge her humanity. But Mannoni suggests this is impossible – she harbors a deep-seated dependency complex. Some black people, no longer wanting white discrimination, yearn to assimilate and transform their identity to gain white recognition and respect, but find they can never truly become white, simply because of their skin color. Jadine is one such person hoping for assimilation. She fears and rejects the rural black traditions represented by Son, seeing them as "backward" and a "shackle." She tries to escape inner confusion and anxiety about her black identity by becoming the "perfect woman" as defined by whites. But she cannot accept the reality that she can never be fully assimilated, and this becomes her trauma.

Other causes include Jadine's aversion to black culture, its thought patterns, and language habits; her desire for what she sees as progressive white culture; and her escape from the marginalization brought by her black identity, which itself is caused by racial discrimination. In the novel, Jadine compares Eloë (the place for those "returning to the roots of black culture") to a medieval slave basket, a paleolithic relic, and its people to a bunch of Neanderthals, stupid people; while the people of Eloë see her as a slut, a competitive virgin. For instance, Jadine no longer wants to have conversations in Eloë where silence conveys more meaning than words; she wants to talk with people in a language she understands. These specific plot points reveal Jadine's maladaptation to and disgust with traditional black culture. Her view of Eloë as a place where primitive people live and her need for a taxi during her few days there show that she associates black culture with backwardness. Taxis are common in the predominantly white cities where Jadine lives, but Eloë lacks them, and the absence of convenient facilities is something she resents. Therefore, Jadine cannot accept this culture she deems "backward," and consequently cannot accept her fundamental identity as a black person. Additionally, another trauma for Jadine is the loneliness and lack of cultural belonging stemming from her own non-return to black traditions.

Son's trauma manifests as his inability to accept the phenomenon of "some black people are or have already assimilated into white culture" and his fear of being unable to return to the roots of black culture himself. The primary reason lies in Son's deep love for traditional black culture and his aversion to white people and their culture. His love for black culture stems from two aspects. First, black culture is Son's spiritual home. *Tar Baby* states: "He could not give up the last thing left to him---fraternity." "He'd better go where he could never be deprived of it---home (157)." "Home," in the context of the novel, means the "source of black culture," the place where he has the one thing he cannot give up, a place that draws him irresistibly. The second reason is that, for Son, black culture is the root of black people. In his emotional entanglement with Jadine, Son shouts at her, "Until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself (Toni Morrison, 2004:253)." Son sees himself as embodying traditional black culture, representing its source, and believes black people must return to their roots. Furthermore, Son considers Eloë and the people close to him living there (symbols of black tradition) as his spiritual support, coexisting with him. Therefore, black culture is profoundly important to him. He dislikes whites because he believes they enjoy having people of color obey them and work for them, while the whites themselves would do nothing significant for people of color in return. So Son is unwilling to be assimilated by whites and equally unwilling to see members of his own race assimilated. Having witnessed the oppression of black people by the white world, he

expects himself and his race to choose to steadfastly uphold the discriminated-against traditions of their homeland.

In summary, Jadine and Son each suffer trauma. Jadine's trauma is primarily her inability to accept her reality as a black person because, although she yearns to become white, she can never completely become one. Son's trauma is his inability to face the reality of black people not following their cultural roots and his fear of succumbing himself, mainly because he sees black tradition as the root of blackness and harbors resentment towards whites. The causes of their trauma are ultimately attributable to the irreconcilable conflicts between races resulting from colonialism.

3. Escape: Different Traumatic Reactions

Son and Jadine's reactions after experiencing trauma can be summarized by two words: "struggle" and "escape." "Struggle" is the external manifestation of their encounter with trauma, the outward expression of "escape," while "escape" is the essence of their "struggle." The struggle manifests as Jadine, knowing she can never fully assimilate into whiteness, still struggles to become the perfect woman defined by whites as much as possible, and wants her lover Son to do the same, to assimilate. Son's struggle is evident in that, even though he cannot prevent many African Americans, including his girlfriend Jadine, from yearning for and attempting to assimilate into white American culture, he still struggles to pull them back to the source of black culture, especially Jadine. Jadine knows her trauma is the contradiction between her inability to fundamentally become white and her perceived need for "assimilation into white culture"; Son also deeply knows his trauma stems from the contradiction between the increasing number of blacks yearning for white culture and his own hope that all blacks will "return to the black source." In terms of escape, both Jadine and Son avoid facing and resolving the contradiction, avoiding trauma redemption, and instead struggle desperately towards one side of the contradiction. Jadine tries to gain attention and recognition by imitating the female images of the white world, thereby alleviating the anxiety brought by her black identity; Son attempts to persuade Jadine to return with him to the cultural roots, and through his own romanticized cultural return, he masks his unease and confusion over blacks gradually leaving their cultural source. Both struggle desperately towards one side of the contradiction without confronting and resolving the contradiction itself. Therefore, in essence, both are escaping the contradiction and escaping trauma.

The reason for escaping trauma is primarily that thinking about one side of the contradiction—"her fundamental blackness" and "the inability of many blacks to return to tradition"—is deeply painful. Consequently, they cannot face the trauma, let alone resolve the contradiction and trauma.

Trauma becomes a curse in altered memory, constantly intruding into the consciousness of the traumatized Son and Jadine. "They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts (Judith Lewis Herman, 1992: 37)." "The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories (Judith Lewis Herman, 1992: 37)." The traumatized always think of the trauma in daily life and feel pain. Jadine and Son also have their traumas evoked by small, seemingly unrelated things, triggering their traumatic reactions. Alternatively, things strongly associated with the trauma suddenly flash into their minds, unsettling them. For example, when Jadine first meets Son, his prominent traditional black cultural characteristics remind her of her own cultural roots, making her strongly dislike him and want to stay away. Another example: Eloë, and Son's relatives and

friends living there—Aunt Rosa, Soldier, the yellow houses with white doors—were once lodged in Son's dreams.

Margaret, the wife of the wealthy white man Valerian and Jadine's employer, constantly hints at or directly mentions what Jadine assumes are racial characteristics, intentionally or unintentionally drawing Jadine in, making her uncomfortable. Actually, Margaret only indirectly refers to traditional black traits, but due to Jadine's sensitivity to them, these remarks evoke her trauma and cause her displeasure.

Jadine's patron, the villa owner Valerian Street, invites Son, who possesses strong traditional black characteristics, to dinner. Jadine believes Valerian dislikes traditional black people. This villa, this "white world," should have no trace of traditional blackness. Son carries heavy black tradition, yet Valerian keeps him. Therefore, Jadine is dissatisfied with Valerian's action, thinking, "Doesn't he know the difference between one Black and another or does he think we're all...Some mess this is (120)." She thinks Valerian kept Son because he believes all black people are the same. Jadine believes Valerian should know there are differences among black people: some, like herself, have assimilated with whites and are essentially white, while others are traditional blacks. She fears others might think there are no differences among black people. Valerian's act of keeping Son is not directly related to race or identity, but it reminds Jadine of her deep trauma: "there are no boundaries between blacks; her identity is rooted in blackness." This makes Jadine feel it's a mess.

A black woman in a yellow dress, seeing Jadine dressed not like a traditional black but like a white person, spits at her. From then on, this woman frequently flashes back into Jadine's memory, making her feel lonely because she hasn't returned to black roots, has no cultural foundation, and drifts without anchor.

When the woman in yellow, Jadine's deceased mother, Thérèse, Son's relatives, and others appear in Jadine's hallucinations, showing her their breasts and eggs, she is so scared she cries. These women symbolize the "black maternal roots" she is escaping. They confront her with breasts and eggs (symbols of nurturing and heritage), questioning her belonging, plunging her into cultural rift: unable to integrate into the white world, yet fearing return to the traditional black world. The trauma of having no cultural belonging flashes back into her memory, bringing endless torment.

Son, seeing the dark back of a black odd-job man kneeling to dig tree roots, while he himself is clean and fresh after a bath, feels tears spring to his eyes, sensing something is slipping away from him. Just seeing a dirty black man's back reminds him of the black homeland, then his own situation, and he laments that the "dirt" symbolizing black traits is leaving him. A single black back can evoke such deep sorrow in Son, making him worry he might never return to the black world. It's clear that the trauma of the "black maternal roots" slipping away severely impacts Son's life, leaving him in tears.

Besides traumatic flashbacks, reminders by small things, traumatized individuals naturally feel pain when seeing scenery directly related to the trauma. One day on the street, Son sees many black people who have almost "assimilated into the white world" and involuntarily shudders. Then, entering a suit store, he realizes a black receptionist highly values his identification badge, hoping to enter white ranks. Seeing these people, Son feels "it was less an error in judgment than it was being confronted with a whole new race of people he was once familiar with (209)." So many blacks having strayed from the "black maternal roots," the "source of black culture," makes him feel heartbroken.

Therefore, no matter how the traumatic memory is evoked, it provokes intense pain in the traumatized Jadine and Son. They are unwilling to face one side of the contradiction—to acknowledge their black identity and cultural homelessness, to accept the reality that some blacks betray their cultural roots and undergo identity reconstruction. So they struggle

desperately towards the other side of the contradiction, hoping to complete their own identity reconstruction or return, hoping to escape and heal the trauma. But essentially, they do not resolve the contradiction; they are escaping trauma.

4. Fall: Failed Breakthrough

Jadine and Son each attempt self-redemption through cultural assimilation and cultural return, respectively. In reality, due to structural societal contradictions, neither can truly face and successfully resolve the contradiction related to trauma. Consequently, they are bound to "fall," their redemption destined to fail.

"She would go back to Paris and begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow---with her and with all the night women who had looked at her (280)." These two sentences reveal Jadine's determination to fight to the end against the woman in yellow and those night women who watched her. The woman in yellow and the night women symbolize Jadine's "black maternal roots." Jadine's determination to fight them demonstrates her conviction to break away from her black roots.

However, Son uses various methods to persuade Jadine to return to her black essence. For example: he tries to make her understand that her behavior of assimilating into whiteness is essentially acting as a white slave, betraying her ancestors, and will bring divine retribution. He also tells Jadine the story of "Tar Baby," "Once upon a time there was a farmer---a white farmer...""And a rabbit. A rabbit came along and ate a couple of his...ow...cabbages." "Just a few cabbages, you know what I mean?" "So he got this great idea about how to get him. How to, to trap...this rabbit. And you know what he did? He made him a tar baby. He made it, you hear me? He made it!" (259-260) Son compares the white farmer to white people, the tar baby to black people like Jadine yearning for assimilation, and the rabbit to black people like himself. This reveals the whites' ambition to colonize blacks for their own benefit, hoping blacks will serve their race. To achieve this, whites use blacks already in the white world to attract more blacks, making more assimilate and serve them. Son wants Jadine to abandon one-dimensional cultural assimilation by showing her the selfishness of whites and revealing their purpose, hoping she will return with him to the "black maternal roots." But this conflicts with Jadine's dreams and is unacceptable to her. The two ultimately separate amidst quarrels over assimilation versus return.

In the end, Jadine flies alone to Paris, but she has no inner sense of security: "No more dreams of safety. No more (280)." Because she has completely severed ties with her roots, she has no cultural foundation. And in her loneliness, she will think of Son, of the other life she might have lived—staying within the black cultural roots Son represents, accepting the fate of a traditional woman responsible for nurturing and heritage.

Jadine's redemption ultimately fails. She does not achieve liberation from trauma through assimilation into white culture. On the contrary, she remains trapped in the cycle of trauma, without cultural roots, without a sense of security, still struggling between assimilation and return to the "black maternal roots." Thus, Jadine ultimately "falls," her breakthrough fails.

Son hopes black people, especially his lover Jadine, will join him in a "romanticized cultural return," living together in Eloë, returning to black tradition. But this is impossible because white culture has already profoundly impacted black life and strongly attracts them towards whiteness. Therefore, inevitably, more and more blacks will "assimilate" into whites. When Son realizes he cannot change Jadine's determination to assimilate and that she has left him, he cannot accept reality and must turn to myth for liberation.

Isle des Chevaliers, where the wealthy white man Valerian's vacation villa is located, is home to many blind horsemen. The blind horsemen refer to the legendary African slaves who escaped to the island after a shipwreck three hundred years ago—they "went blind the moment they

saw the island," and have since ridden blind through the island, becoming its soul. They symbolize the stubbornly surviving black cultural roots, deprived of living space but still present. Knowing he cannot find Jadine, Son chooses to integrate into this group of blind horsemen, returning to the fate of his ancestors, realizing his ideal in myth.

Ultimately, Son does not achieve redemption because he is still trapped and "fallen" in reality. He only achieves redemption and liberation in myth, but myth is illusory and non-real, so fundamentally, Son's redemption fails.

In summary, both Jadine and Son "fall"; both fail to break through. The reason is that, in reality, they remain affected by trauma, unable to escape the pain it brings.

5. Conclusion

This paper primarily employs Judith Herman's trauma theory to analyze the manifestations of trauma in the protagonists of *Tar Baby*, revealing the reasons behind Jadine and Son's avoidance of trauma. The discussion revolves around three aspects: trauma and its causes, post-traumatic reactions, and the effectiveness of healing, demonstrating the process from trauma to failed redemption for Jadine and Son. In the novel, racial discrimination and the irreconcilable structural conflict between African American culture and mainstream white culture are the root causes of Jadine and Son's psychological trauma. Escaping trauma essentially means resolving the contradiction related to trauma, as one side of the contradiction causes them pain. Consequently, Jadine chooses the strategy of "assimilation into white culture," while Son resorts to "returning to the roots of black culture," hoping to achieve successful trauma redemption. However, neither truly faces and resolves the contradiction, ultimately remaining trapped in trauma, failing to recover.

Through the protagonists' tragic endings, the work critiques the two extreme approaches represented by Jadine and Son, reveals the disaster brought to African Americans by the difficulty of cultural integration, presents the deep dilemma faced during African American identity reconstruction, and argues that neither one-dimensional cultural assimilation nor romanticized cultural return can truly heal historical trauma. Furthermore, this paper aims to deepen the interpretation of *Tar Baby's* cultural connotations from the perspective of traumatic narrative, particularly the impact of trauma on the traumatized, and to provide more critical reflection for discussions on collective trauma and identity politics in African American literature.

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