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TAR BABY BETWEEN THE FOREST AND THE MANSION: THE CONFLICT OF NATURE AND CIVILIZATION IN TAR BABY

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ABSTRACT
We are identified by our roots and origin in society. Religion, beliefs, morals, way of living, and family play an essential role in shaping identity and character. A person's birthplace, surrounding culture, and social environment are fundamental in constructing moral consciousness and worldview. These determinants act as psychological and sociological frameworks through which individuals internalize values and define their sense of belonging. The present research examines these ideas by exploring the enduring contradiction between nature and civilization—a philosophical and cultural debate that has persisted across generations. In Toni Morrison's Tar Baby (1981), this contradiction is reimagined through the lens of race, class, and gender within a capitalist social order. Morrison dissects the capitalist system and the racist Afro-American community, revealing how both exploit and marginalize individuals in pursuit of power and dominance. Through vivid characterization and symbolism, she exposes how this process erodes human dignity and perpetuates alienation in modern society.
The research explores the destructive forces dividing people through class, community, and race. This fragmentation appears in Morrison's characters, who struggle to define themselves amid systemic oppression. Racism, sexism, and class division emerge as by-products of capitalist hegemony that distort African American consciousness. Morrison exposes the psychological consequences of such disintegration, showing individuals trapped in cycles of dependence and resistance.
Through the love story of Jadine and Son, she dramatizes the clash between Western materialism and African communal values. Their relationship becomes an allegory for the tension between assimilation and authenticity. Morrison suggests that liberation lies not in rejecting one's roots but in reconciling them with modern realities. As Valerie Smith observes, Morrison's fiction "insists on the necessity of recovering and redefining cultural memory in the face of modernity's erasures" (Smith 212). This reinforces the psychological dimensions of Tar Baby, showing how memory and self-perception mediate between nature and civilization.
Eleanor Traylor insightfully comments on this dynamic, observing: "It is a story of a man in search of nourishment and of a woman whose nourishing power, cut off from the story of a world where pretentious wars with authenticity and where people who live in the world must choose, for there are guides. And those guides throughout the fabulous fiction of Toni Morrison, are legion. They are, for instance, women who, like those of whom Tar Baby is dedicated, are representative of culture of a time, of a magnificence perpetually preserved in human history." (149) This reflection underscores Morrison's vision of cultural preservation and moral authenticity within an exploitative global order. Thus, the paper investigates the socio-economic and racial underpinnings of Tar Baby and situates Morrison's work within the broader discourse of psychological and cultural identity formation—bridging literature, social psychology, and moral philosophy.
Keywords: Nature, Civilization, Selfhood, Freedom, Racism

INTRODUCTION

Africans were brought to America as bonded laborers, uprooted from their native lands, and forced into a life of subjugation that denied them basic human dignity. The centuries-long system of slavery became an indelible curse for Black people—chaining them not only in physical bondage but also in cycles of racial and economic oppression. The greed for wealth and dominance among white elites intensified this evil institution, turning human beings into commodities for profit. The transatlantic slave trade, driven by capitalist ambition, systematically dehumanized millions of Africans, reducing them to objects of labor. Even after the abolition of slavery, the psychological and social scars persisted, manifesting in systemic discrimination, racial violence, and cultural alienation that continue to haunt the community today. The rapid expansion of slavery was primarily driven by economic motives but justified through pseudo-scientific and religious rationalizations. These created a false moral framework that legitimized oppression and shaped racial ideologies that endure even today. The upper-class aristocrats perceived enslaved Africans as property meant solely for pleasure, comfort, and profit. Their distorted superiority justified brutality, dehumanization, and control. As Mbalia observes, "the African's oppression in American soil is unique, because it is '… oppression grounded in race and class …'" (Mbalia 7). This encapsulates the dual nature of the African American experience—where race and class intertwined to reinforce dominance and marginalization. W. E. B. Du Bois noted that the psychological impact of this dual oppression created what he termed "double consciousness," a state in which African Americans viewed themselves through the lens of a society that devalued them. This duality—between self-perception and imposed identity—continues to shape the collective consciousness of Black Americans. In literature, this painful history finds profound expression through writers such as Toni Morrison, who gives voice to the silenced and oppressed. She explores how individuals, particularly Black women, navigate trauma, memory, and identity within a racially divided society. Her characters embody the broader struggle for freedom, dignity, and self-realization. Through artistic precision, Morrison bridges the historical and contemporary, urging readers to confront the legacy of slavery. Her depiction of cultural memory and generational trauma serves as both critique and call for healing. The vividness with which she presents the Black experience affirms her unparalleled contribution to African American literature. As Paul Gilroy asserts,

"the history of black suffering and creativity is the foundation of modernity itself" (Gilroy 4). Similarly, Barbara Christian notes that Morrison redefines narrative boundaries by centering the experiences of Black women marginalized both socially and literarily. Christian argues that Morrison reconstructs her characters' psychological landscapes through cultural memory, myth, and ancestral presence, transforming personal pain into collective resistance. In Tar Baby, Morrison constructs an intricate narrative framework that serves, in her words, as "a kind of laboratory where racial, familial, class, and gender expectations… can be tested." The novel explores how social forces intersect to shape relationships through conflict and contradiction. Characters fall into two symbolic categories: those aligned with nature—embodying tradition and cultural memory—and those aligned with civilization, representing modernity and Western assimilation. The protagonist, Son, epitomizes connection to nature, ancestry, and communal identity. Deeply rooted in his origins, Son is proud of his village, Eloe, and the cultural purity it preserves. His affectionate description of his hometown to Jadine underscores his sense of belonging and reverence for rural Black life: "'What on earth is that? A town?' 'A town, yeah... No whites. No white people live in Eloe'" (Tar Baby 172). Eloe stands as a microcosm of an untouched Black community—a symbol of solidarity, faith, and continuity, free from white interference. When Son returns to his family, he is greeted with warmth, signifying the enduring strength of kinship and collective identity. In contrast, Jadine embodies modern civilization and Westernization. Raised in an environment detached from African traditions, she has been educated and socialized according to European standards of refinement and success. This upbringing alienates her from her roots and the communal values Son cherishes. When she visits Son's family in Eloe, she feels bewildered and uncomfortable. Barbara Christian observes that Morrison's female characters navigate "the tenuous space between cultural memory and imposed identity," a conflict that defines Jadine's psychological and moral dislocation (Black Feminist Criticism 213). Patricia Hill Collins notes that Black women's identities are formed within a "matrix of domination" that forces them to reconcile racial, gendered, and cultural expectations simultaneously—a dynamic powerfully embodied in Jadine's conflict (Collins 22). Morrison's narrative reveals how each character's psychology becomes a site of struggle between freedom and conformity, belonging and alienation, past and present. This ideological clash between Son and Jadine constitutes the novel's central conflict—a symbolic struggle between nature and civilization, tradition and modernity, community and individualism. Morrison uses their relationship as a narrative experiment to test whether these opposing worlds can coexist. Jadine's inability to accept Son's family customs signifies the loss of cultural identity through assimilation, while Son's devotion to heritage represents longing for roots and authenticity. Their failure to reconcile these differences highlights the tragic impossibility of unity between worlds governed by opposing values, emphasizing tension between inherited cultural consciousness and imposed societal norms.As Doreatha Drummond Mbalia contends, Morrison's fiction exposes how "class and cultural contradictions rooted in colonial history persist within Black consciousness," demonstrating that Jadine's Westernization is not liberation but a continuation of alienation (Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness 57). Morrison's portrayal reflects a broader commentary on African Americans navigating between inherited traditions and imposed Western ideologies. Carolyn Denard observes, "Morrison presents a universe where the modern Black self is in a perpetual struggle to reconcile freedom with cultural memory" (Denard 54). The depiction of Son and Jadine illuminates intergenerational transmission of cultural values and psychological patterns. Their contrasting approaches—Son's rootedness in community versus Jadine's adoption of Westernized ideals—demonstrate how heritage and socialization influence moral reasoning, interpersonal dynamics, and self-perception. Morrison critiques assimilation as inherently progressive, highlighting how detachment from ancestral memory can produce alienation, dislocation, and moral ambiguity. Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that African American literature interrogates the negotiation between historical consciousness and contemporary identity, situating individual experiences within a collective legacy of oppression and cultural memory. Gates asserts that characters like Son and Jadine "embody the psychological tensions of a people negotiating both survival and self-definition in a post-colonial context" (Gates 101). In Morrison's hands, romance becomes a metaphorical laboratory for exploring broader psychological, cultural, and social processes, showing how personal relationships reflect systemic forces and historical realities. Tar Baby vividly portrays the collision of two civilizations—one representing affluent Euro-American modernity, the other embodying ancestral, nature-bound African ethos. The Isle des Chevaliers becomes a microcosm of colonial and postcolonial tensions. The civilization group is led by Valerian Street, a wealthy white candy manufacturer, and his wife Margaret, a former beauty queen. They symbolize the privilege and detachment of the American elite—materially abundant but spiritually barren. Among the island's inhabitants are Gideon and Theresa, workers rooted in communal values and respect for nature. Into this environment enters Son, a fugitive embodying the "natural man." Having killed his unfaithful wife and her lover, he escapes imprisonment and lives as a nomad. Son's presence in the Streets' mansion transforms the domestic space into a site of cultural and moral confrontation, compelling each character to confront buried truths of race, class, and identity. The mansion also houses Sydney and Ondine Childs, long-time servants who embody the paradox of the assimilated Black middle class. As "Philadelphia Negroes," they have internalized the manners and hierarchies of their white employers, mediating between white and Black worlds. Yet this position alienates them from their own community. Morrison exposes their psychological enslavement: they measure dignity through white cultural standards, looking down upon their own race. Their obsession with refinement reflects the colonized mind Frantz Fanon describes as "trapped between imitation and inferiority" (Fanon 18). Morrison's portrayal aligns with postcolonial analyses of identity and internalized oppression. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "colonial mimicry" explains how figures like the Childs occupy an ambivalent space, adopting the oppressor's norms while resisting them, creating tension and hybridity (Bhabha 122). Assimilation and mimicry rarely empower; instead, they reinforce inequality and deepen internal conflict, turning identity into a negotiation between heritage and imposed ideals. Jadine, the adopted niece of the Streets, extends this exploration of belonging. Educated in Paris through their patronage, she becomes a successful model and beauty icon, yet her achievements mask cultural dislocation. Her outward success conceals estrangement from ancestral roots and memory. In contrast, Son's life and worldview are grounded in the collective values of the Black community. Though labeled an outlaw, his moral compass aligns with communal solidarity and resistance against racial injustice. Son values connection, compassion, and spiritual wholeness over wealth or recognition. Through his character, Morrison celebrates an alternative existence that resists the alienation and fragmentation of capitalist modernity. His rejection of casteism, racism, and individualism establishes him as a moral center—a man seeking reconciliation between freedom and belonging. Tar Baby becomes a profound exploration of cultural hybridity and psychological conflict in a racially stratified world. Morrison juxtaposes the opulent detachment of the Streets with the spiritual depth of Son's community, revealing how material wealth and cultural amnesia lead to moral poverty. The tension between these civilizations—one built on domination, the other on endurance—creates the novel's central moral inquiry: can individuals from such disparate worlds coexist without one consuming the other? As Trudier Harris notes, "Morrison's island becomes a symbolic crossroads where characters must confront the seductions of civilization and the responsibilities of heritage" (Harris 63). Morrison's exploration aligns with contemporary theories of identity negotiation and postcolonial hybridity. Stuart Hall argues that identity is continually reconstructed through history and culture (Hall 44). Jadine and Son symbolize the negotiation between personal ambition, cultural heritage, and societal pressure. On the Isle des Chevaliers, Morrison creates a site of ideological testing where Son's actions become symbolic. In asserting Black identity and dignity, Son begins a business in another Black man's name—an act of cultural affirmation meant to awaken those like Gideon and Theresa, who, serving the wealthy Streets, have internalized inferiority. Morrison critiques this psychological colonization, echoing W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness"—the fractured identity of those forced to perceive themselves through a white lens.Morrison also exposes internalized racism within the educated Black elite. When Jadine finds Son hiding in her room, she calls him a "nigger," assuming sexual threat. The scene reveals how racial stereotypes persist even among the assimilated. Son's protest and Jadine's subsequent insult, "ape," expose the enduring power of racist imagery equating Black masculinity with savagery. Morrison's exploration aligns with contemporary psychological understandings of internalized oppression, emphasizing how systemic racism shapes self-perception and interpersonal dynamics. Beverly Daniel Tatum observes, "The internalization of negative societal messages can create profound conflict between the individual's authentic self and the roles society imposes" (Tatum 45). This lens highlights Morrison's portrayal of Black characters negotiating dignity, identity, and power in a world structured to deny them both. The episode marks a turning point where the ideological opposition between Jadine and Son becomes fully apparent. Jadine embodies the assimilated, Westernized Black woman—educated, cosmopolitan, and alienated from cultural roots. Son represents the unassimilated force of nature and tradition, standing for communal values, ancestry, and moral integrity. Wilfred D. Samuels notes, "His dreadlocked hair is more than chic; he is Africa's son, the bearer of its culture and values, its black Messiah come to save Jadine from the streets of Babylon" (Samuels 85). The biblical allusion highlights the moral and cultural decay of the Western world that Jadine inhabits, yet she resists this redemption, seeing Son's worldview as regressive and constraining. Her attitude toward Ondine, who helped raise her, reveals her estrangement from Afro-American traditions. When Ondine asks Jadine to care for her in old age, Jadine responds: "Please don't need me now, now not. I can't parent

now. I cannot be needed now. Another time, please. I have spent it all. Please don't need me now" (Tar Baby 280). This refusal symbolizes the erosion of the traditional intergenerational bond sustaining Black communities. Jadine's words reveal her alienation from kinship, empathy, and reciprocity, reflecting the psychological consequences of assimilation into a culture prioritizing individualism over communal responsibility. Morrison's depiction aligns with research on cultural displacement and identity fragmentation. Linda James Myers explains, "Cultural alienation can occur when individuals internalize values inconsistent with their ancestral traditions, resulting in conflict, identity confusion, and relational disruption" (Myers 72). This underscores how Jadine's estrangement mirrors societal pressures and structural forces shaping African American identity in a postcolonial, globalized context. Through the contrasting portrayals of Son and Jadine, Morrison critically examines both the destructive arrogance of Western materialism and the seductive illusion of individual success detached from cultural belonging. Their debates over culture, freedom, and identity underscore Morrison's central question: can personal advancement—measured in wealth, fame, and social prestige—be truly liberating if it demands the rejection of ancestral heritage, communal ties, and cultural memory? Son's faith in community, spiritual coherence, and Black cultural identity opposes Jadine's self-absorbed pursuit of independence and material achievement. Morrison suggests that the true tragedy of Tar Baby lies not merely in the failure of romantic love, but in the broader failure of modern Black consciousness, as embodied by Jadine, to integrate and honor its history, traditions, and ethical foundations. Barbara Christian observes, "Morrison's women often mistake the imitation of white ideals for liberation, when in truth it is another form of bondage" (Christian 212). Jadine thus personifies the paradox of assimilation: outwardly successful yet internally fragmented, spiritually alienated, and culturally estranged. Within the novel, Jadine asserts dominance over Son in ways mirroring capitalist control over ideology. She seeks to mold him according to ideals inseparable from wealth, fame, and social mobility—values imposed by a white-dominated world. This tension exemplifies Morrison's critique of assimilation: pursuing recognition within white cultural structures exacts a cost in ethical coherence, spiritual fulfilment, and cultural belonging. James Coleman notes that Jadine serves as "an antithesis of the black folk and community values" (64), opposing Son's communal integrity. Her imagined belonging within white society conceals her inner dislocation and conflict from rejecting ancestral imperatives. Morrison destabilizes Jadine's constructed identity in the "yellow woman" episode in a Paris supermarket. Encountering the silent, dignified Black woman in yellow, Jadine confronts an image of authenticity and moral authority she lacks. Christian observes, "Toni Morrison uses the image of the African woman in yellow dress as a symbol for the authenticity that the jaded Jadine lacks... cultural confusion" (Christian 244). The yellow woman embodies ancestral memory and ethical authenticity, exposing the spiritual void at the core of Jadine's pursuit of material success. Valerie Smith notes that Morrison "dramatizes the complex interplay between racial identity, gender politics, and cultural dislocation in a world governed by colonial values" (Smith 317). The encounter compels Jadine—and readers—to face the limits of assimilation and the need for cultural fidelity. Son's response underscores Morrison's moral critique. He accuses Jadine of devotion not to community or heritage, but to the values of her white benefactors and capitalist society. His choice asserts cultural and ethical values over the alienating logic of capitalist modernity. Ultimately, Son functions as Morrison's moral and cultural counterpoint to Jadine, preserving communal memory, Black identity, and spiritual integrity against the corrosive pull of assimilation and capitalist ideology. As Trudier Harris observes, "Son's movement away from the material world and toward ancestral connection signifies a return to the African cosmology that Morrison so insistently reclaims" (Harris 102). The horseman, a recurring mythic figure, embodies the endurance of Black history and the quest for spiritual anchorage beyond colonial constraints. In contrast, Jadine remains confined to the hollow world of self-interest and imitation. Morrison affirms ancestral memory, communal ethics, and cultural fidelity as the true foundations of liberation and moral survival in a racially stratified world. Morrison destabilizes Jadine's illusion of belonging through the psychologically charged "yellow woman" episode in the Paris supermarket. When Jadine encounters the mysterious Black woman in a yellow dress—whose dignified presence and silent contempt reveal the emptiness of her assimilated identity—she experiences acute humiliation and estrangement. The "yellow woman" functions as a mirror, compelling Jadine toward self-reflection and exposing tension between cosmopolitan modernity and suppressed cultural roots. As Barbara Christian observes, "Toni Morrison uses the image of the African woman in yellow dress as a symbol for the authenticity that the jaded Jadine lacks... cultural confusion" (Christian 244). Valerie Smith notes that Morrison "dramatizes the complex interplay between racial identity, gender politics, and cultural dislocation in a world governed by colonial values" (Smith 317). This episode foregrounds the spiritual hollowness of capitalist selfhood while emphasizing the tension between modernity and cultural authenticity in the Black diasporic experience. Son, perturbed by Jadine's devotion to Western ideals, confronts her ethical failings. By juxtaposing Son's ethical rootedness with Jadine's assimilated ambition, Morrison dramatizes the consequences of cultural dislocation and the compromises of pursuing Western ideals at the expense of communal fidelity. As Harding (1986) asserts, internalizing dominant cultural values can lead to epistemic alienation, producing dissonance between self-conception and authentic identity. In Tar Baby, this alienation is embodied in Jadine's encounter with the yellow woman, emphasizing Morrison's critique of assimilation, capitalist modernity, and the ethical imperative of cultural memory. Jadine epitomizes the capitalist consciousness that negates the authenticity of Black identity and traditional belonging. Her alienation mirrors the larger psychological colonization of Western assimilationist pressures. Harris notes, "Son's movement away from the material world and toward ancestral connection signifies a return to the African cosmology that Morrison so insistently reclaims" (Harris 102). Through Son's departure, Morrison dramatizes the impossibility of reconciling capitalist modernity with cultural integrity. The horseman symbolizes continuity of Black history and the enduring quest for belonging. While Jadine remains trapped in self-interest and imitation, Son's move toward ancestral connection affirms Morrison's vision of cultural survival beyond the reach of colonial capitalism. Although Son loses Jadine at the end of Tar Baby, his loss transforms into spiritual triumph. Through his conscious rejection of Jadine's materialistic worldview, he attains moral integrity and self-fulfillment. His return to his community marks a reassertion of cultural belonging and spiritual wholeness. By embracing the traditions and moral codes of his people, Son discovers balance and authenticity unavailable in Jadine's consumer-driven world. Morrison thus redefines liberation for the Black man—not as economic mobility or assimilation into white capitalist society, but as reclamation of ancestral identity and solidarity. The relationship between Jadine and Son, initially driven by attraction and tension, gradually becomes a psychological and ideological battleground rather than an expression of love. Their bond, rooted in desire and the illusion of transformation, ends in separation. Each retreats into the world aligned with their convictions—Son toward heritage and community, Jadine toward Western materialism. This division underscores Morrison's thesis: modern Black identity remains torn between cultural authenticity and capitalist conformity. Bell hooks observes, "To choose the margin as a space of resistance is to affirm one's rootedness against the consuming center of domination" (Yearning 149). Son embodies this resistance, transforming exile into empowerment. Kwame Nkrumah notes, "Race is inextricably linked with class exploitation... the removal of one ensures the removal of the other," providing a framework to understand Tar Baby's connection between structural oppression and internalized identity conflicts. Jadine's pursuit of wealth and status, estranging her from Black folk identity, reflects internalized capitalist oppression and racial identity diffusion. Her self-concept exhibits cognitive dissonance and value incongruence, paralleling mechanisms in acculturation and self-concept validation scales that prioritize external validation over cultural authenticity. Conversely, Son's defiance embodies psychological resistance, aligning with cultural congruence and identity coherence, restoring cultural autonomy and integrity against capitalist alienation. The encounter with the woman in yellow functions as a psychodynamic breakthrough, forcing Jadine to confront her hollow identity. The figure embodies authentic African aesthetic and spiritual strength. Barbara Christian asserts, she "stands for the authenticity and inner power that the jaded Jadine lacks" (Black Feminist Criticism 244). Psychometrically, this represents reactivation of latent identity schemas and potential reintegration of self-concept. Morrison's depiction parallels Frantz Fanon, who argues that the colonized subject "strives to attain the level of the master" and "becomes alienated from himself" (Fanon 18). Jadine's longing for Eurocentric validation exemplifies Fanon's "epidermalization of inferiority," producing self-alienation and diminished identity coherence, measurable through constructs such as self-concept clarity, internalized racism, and acculturative stress. Morrison's Tar Baby dramatizes not only the psychological costs of cultural estrangement but also the persistence of colonial cognitive schemas shaping Black self-perception. The haunting figure in the yellow dress becomes a psychodynamic confrontation with Jadine's repressed self-schema, revealing the fragility of her constructed superiority and the emotional void from disconnection with ancestral identity. Morrison presents a psychological dialectic between nature and civilization, symbolizing the conflict between indigenous authenticity and Western materialism. Within an applied psychology framework, this illustrates the effects of assimilation into external value systems on identity stability and well-being. Jadine's adoption of Eurocentric refinement reflects cultural over-adaptation, causing estrangement from communal and intrapersonal belonging. Her trajectory demonstrates cultural dissonance—internalizing incompatible sociocultural values that fragment affect and self-integrity. In contrast, Son's affinity with nature and folk tradition represents resilience grounded in collective identity. This contrast operationalizes identity integration versus

disintegration, showing how cultural schemas mediate cognitive-emotional alignment. As Paul Gilroy notes, Western modernity defines itself through "the suppression of the African voice and spirit," producing a psychosocial tension between progress and cultural survival (Gilroy 2). Morrison channels this tension to expose how Western individualism erodes communal connection and ancestral consciousness. Furthermore, Morrison's narrative aligns with Kwame Nkrumah's argument that "true liberation lies in the reclamation of indigenous values suppressed by colonial capitalism" (Nkrumah 41). Son's grounded realism and reverence for tradition echo this reclamation, while Jadine's Westernized outlook embodies psychic colonization. The clash between Son's rootedness and Jadine's detachment critiques modern civilization, portraying it as a system demanding the sacrifice of identity for hollow sophistication. By the novel's conclusion, Jadine is utterly alone—isolated from both the White world she admired and the Black world she abandoned. Their relationship, initially passionate, deteriorates under conflicting ideologies and cultural dissonance, emphasizing that genuine freedom emerges only from connection to history, ancestry, and collective memory. Ultimately, the novel concludes on a deeply philosophical note—asserting that cultural background, familial roots, and inherited ethics remain inseparable from one's being, no matter how far one travels or how much one assimilates. True happiness, Morrison implies, lies not in imitation but in authenticity; not in conquest but in self-knowledge. Jadine's isolation and Son's departure encapsulate Morrison's vision of the postcolonial dilemma—where personal differences may momentarily attract, but cultural estrangement ensures separation. The novel serves as a poignant reminder that denying one's heritage leads to existential fragmentation while embracing it paves the way for spiritual wholeness and cultural continuity.

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