Alienation and Search for Self: A Feminist Interpretation of Jadine’s Identity Crisis in *Tar Baby*

Yong-mei LI*

Xi’an University of Technology, Xi’an Shaanxi 710054, China

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Identity crisis is very common among African Americans. This paper aims to analyze the reasons of Jadine’s alienation and identity crisis, and interpret her struggle for searching for her true self. Jadine’s disconnection with traditional black culture originated from her orphanage as well as the education she received. Under the great impact of the dominant culture, she got lost and identified with the mainstream culture, ignored her weak black tradition. Meanwhile, her black identity still remained in the racial collective unconsciousness and disturbed her now and then. From a feminist perspective, Jadine suffered an overall identity crisis in terms of gender, race and culture, which made her feel alienated, restless and inauthentic. Her identity was split, which was in accordance with what W. E. B. DuBois’ classic statement of two selves struggling in one black body.

Introduction

Jadine is one of the major characters of Toni Morrison’s novel *Tar Baby*. *Tar Baby* tells about a black woman Jadine, who disconnected from her origins, suffers the pain of unbelonging and rootlessness. Being a modern black woman, she has a glamorous life. Not only did she benefit from the best education in the United States, she also received a Master’s Degree in art history at the Sorbonne in Paris. Moreover, she has started a career as a fashion model, with her photo appearing on the title page of Elle as a fashion model. A rich Parisian man intends to marry her and offers her an expensive sealskin coat. In some sense, Jadine is a successful woman in white society, especially in terms of education and beauty. However, Jadine feels inauthentic and rootless, and her secret self is aroused from time to time, which makes her embarrassed. Her rootlessness and alienation mainly originate from her disconnectedness with her black origin, culture in particular. She has a split self in terms of culture, gender, race, etc.

The Crisis of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is the essential part of people’s integrated identity. About cultural identity, Stuart Hall pointed out: “There are at least two ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first position defines cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history, and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.”[1]

In the United States, most of African Americans have suffered identity crisis due to their special history and experience. No writer has more clearly described the forces frustrating African Americans in their stride toward self-awareness and wholeness than W. E. B. DuBois in his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*: “One even feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to
attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.” [2]

Cultural conflict is the central theme of *Tar Baby*. In an interview with Judith Wilson, Morrison said that for those who wish a happy ending for Jadine and Son, “the problem has been put in the wrong place, as though it’s a sexual battle, not a cultural one”[3]. Actually, Cultural conflict is very common among the people of ethnic minorities who live in a mainstream society. It exists not only between different persons who have different experience but in one person as well. Cultural identity is important for people to feel a sense of self, to have a sense of belonging to particular social or ethnic groups. Identifying with a particular culture gives people feelings of belonging and security. Without a coherent and stable cultural identity may result in a sense of rootlessness.

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine’s cultural identity is in crisis. Her attitude towards the black cultural tradition is ambivalent. On the one hand, she rejoices that she is liberated from it; but on the other hand, she is attracted unconsciously by the irresistible force of the black cultural heritage. She is disturbed or attracted by the black tradition from time to time both in dream and in reality. The black woman in yellow whom Jadine met in a supermarket in Paris makes her feel lonely and inauthentic. Jadine wonders why the black woman despires and spits at her. The pride and confidence of the African woman impresses Jadine so deeply that she quickly returns to her uncle and aunt to consider whether she should marry a white wealthy European. She comes to doubt the intention of her white pursuers. Jadine is troubled by her identity, she wants to be free from the category of American or black and just be herself. What she expects cannot be realized. Firstly, her education and the environment she lives in make her a “white girl”; what she thinks and acts is in accordance with white cultural values. She prefers European art to black art, as she once said to Valerian: “Picasso is better than an Itumba mask” [4]. When she met the African woman in yellow in a supermarket in Paris, Jadine intuitively judges that “there was too much hip, too much bust” (p. 41), according to the western standard of aesthetics. Furthermore, she cannot change her black identity. When she meets Son, she is unconsciously attracted by Son’s riverbed-like skin and his overpowering hair. She is conquered and defeated by Son’s blackness. Later she even falls in love with him despite Son’s low social status and lack of degree. On the surface, Jadine is confident and powerful, but inwardly she is fragile and disintegrated. She cannot shake off her black lineage, which frequently reminds her of her racial root, as the tar pit imagery suggests. When Jadine comes back from New York to L’arbe de la Croix, she feels her legs “burned with the memory of tar” (p. 238). Some critics argue that this imagery can trace back to the bitter history of black slaves. The black slaves were stuck with tar on their legs by their owners to hide the wounds when they were on sale at slave markets. As a descendant of blacks, Jadine wants to forget the black history and culture, which are regarded as unforgivable by her ancestors.

Jadine’s cultural identity is in crisis: as a black subject who has assimilated to western culture and values, she feels a suppressed attachment to black culture- as Son’s attraction to her, with his “tar-black skin” and “the smell of tar and its shiny consistency”. Being a black, she realizes that she and her white counterparts are quite different. But meanwhile, her potential resistance to black culture also exists simultaneously due to her alienation from black tradition and culture. As a result, She can neither merge into the white culture completely nor identify with her black identity, so she feels lonely and inauthentic. In fact, Jadine is not only an orphan literally, she is also a cultural orphan without knowing her cultural roots and her national past. She identifies with white culture but cannot merge into it, she alienates from black culture but cannot resist the attraction to it, so she restlessly trips between African-American world and the white world. Her identity is split, which is in accordance with what W. E. B. Dubois’ classic statement of two selves struggling in one black body.

**Unspeakable Puzzlement of Gender Identity**

“Gender identity is a complicated term, roughly corresponding to the core belief people have about what their gender is, and about what they are entitled by society to do based on societal concepts regarding gender.”[5] Black women have long been at the bottom of social status. Race, class and
gender are intersecting and interlocking systems to ensure the oppression to the black women. They are not only suppressed by the whites but also by the black patriarchal oppression as well. Having been deprived of the rights to do noble and decent jobs, they are confined to do domestic chores as well as take care of children. Their subjectivity is suppressed and they have to endure the unbearable treatment both from home and society. Jadine, as a modern girl who has received higher western education, does not want to live a life similar to her mother, her aunt and other traditional black women. She prefers to live a free new life that is different from her ancestress. She admires self-reliance and individual success as many white women do. As a modern black woman, she has a clear consciousness of self-fulfillment and tries to be her self that is free of the boundary of whites or blacks. Just as she herself considers: “sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not America—not black—just me” (p. 40).

Jadine intends to become a professional woman. Having received a degree of arts and being a successful model, what she considers is how to develop her career rather than how to be a real and good woman according to the African tradition and standards. She digresses her way far from the traditional black women’s path. She wants to be independent, her self-reliance is indeed good for a modern woman, but she fears to fulfill her role as a black woman, which is considered to be unforgivable. As a daughter, she is reluctant to take care of her surrogate parents Sydney and Ondine as she said to her aunt Ondine when she is told how to be a woman: “You are asking me to parent you. Please don’t. I can’t do that now” (p. 242). Jadine has not considered her uncle and aunt when she decides to return to Paris. She comes back to the island not for her uncle and aunt’s sake but for her luxurious fur coat. When Ondine told her that a girl should learn how to be a daughter first, and then a real woman, Jadine answers: “There are other ways to be a woman, Nanadine. Your way is one, I guess it is, but it’s not my way. I don’t want to be like you. I don’t want to learn how to be the kind of woman you’re talking about because I don’t want to be that kind of woman” (p 243). Jadine has lost many traditional virtues of her ancestors including helping each other and caring for the elders. She determines to leave her surrogate parents when they are threatened to be fired. In this respect, she is more like Sula (a protagonist in Morrison’s novel Sula) who refuses to take care of her grandmother Eva. Jadine does not cherish the virtues of traditional black women; she has her own way to be a woman. In this sense she is among those what Morrison claims who lost their “ancient properties”.

In short, Jadine is in a dilemma in locating her gender identity in the process of searching for self. As a black woman, She has no way to change her black lineage, but she is unwilling to live a traditional black women’s life. When Jadine is struck in a pit, the women in the trees at first think that she is one of their lost children. This image implies that Jadine’s ancestress identifies with Jadine’s black identity and they are eager to embrace her and attract her to their side. Nearly at the end of the novel, Ondine instructs Jadine how to be a real woman, which is also based on the traditional African standards of defining a good woman. Moreover, the night women who disturb Jadine at Eloe also remind her of the role of traditional African women. This frightens Jadine who quickly escapes from the black town Eloe for New York, where she thinks that she can shake off the shackles confined to black women. She thinks she can be free from the confinement of the traditional role of African women. But as a black female, she can neither change her race nor her gender. Escape can not solve the puzzlement of her gender.

The Unbelonging Racial Identity

Many African Americans have been Americanized since they have long lived in the white dominated society. Due to cultural hegemony and cultural enslavement of the mainstream, most African Americans gradually accept the white dominant cultural values and neglect their own marginalized black tradition. For instance, they identify the aesthetic standards of the mainstream and think that it is beautiful to possess white skin, blue eyes and golden hair. Some of them even hate themselves because of their black skin. The little girl Pecola Breedlove, who crazily wants to possess a pair of blue eyes, in Toni Morrison’s fiction The Bluest Eye, is an extreme example of them. Due to the
subjugation and depreciation of the dominant culture over the black culture, as well as the propaganda of the white standards and values by powerful mass media, many blacks lose the confidence of their blackness. They themselves begin to believe that they are really ugly and regret being blacks. Especially for some successful black people who are in higher social and financial status, they are more eager to shake off their inferior race confinement.

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine and her uncle & aunt live out of the black community; they lack the connection and communication with their fellow blacks. Living in the magnificent house of Valerian Street, they almost forget their racial identity. But the reality disappoints them. They are blacks, quite different from their white counterparts. Jadine suffers the embarrassment of her racial identity consciously or unconsciously from time to time. Sometimes she doubts that the wealthy European man who proposes her maybe not for her sake but for her exotic and erotic beauty. She is not confident of her attraction as a black girl. Her racial consciousness is aroused. She contemplates: “I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn’t me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops, that I don’t have to straighten my hair sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not American—not black—just me?” (p. 40). Though she is proud of her success and accustomed to living in the West, she is often disturbed by her black identity. On the one hand, she digresses from the traditional black way of life and identifies with the values of the mainstream; on the other hand, she is attracted by the blackness of her fellow blacks, which is also irresistible. Jadine’s attitude toward her racial identity is ambivalent. The African woman whom she met in the supermarket puzzles her. She wonders why the woman despises and spits at her other than respects her since she has already been a successful black girl. She is fascinated by the extraordinary confidence and pride of the African woman. But at the same time she feels ashamed of the ignorance of the African woman who does not abide by the regulations of the supermarket. She feels ashamed because she realizes that she and the woman have the same lineage and race. Jadine feels embarrassed by her racial identity. Her being attracted by Son and her journey to Eloe can further prove her racial embarrassment. She is attracted by Son’s blackness and his description of his beautiful southern black hometown Eloe. But later frightened at what she sees and feels there, she escapes from the black town Eloe as soon as possible.

As a black girl with little chances contacting with her black fellows and black tradition, fascinated by Son’s blackness, Jadine has an inclination to approach them from the bottom of her heart, but she finds that the black tradition contrasts sharply with what she thinks and wants to do. This makes her feel uneasy and embarrassed of her racial identity. In a word, the racial embarrassment of Jadine is not a single case; it is very common among African Americans as well as other marginalized ethnic minorities.

**Conclusion**

The special history and complex reality make it complicated for African Americans to define their identity. Under the powerful impact of the mainstream, many of them have lost because of their unstable and unfixed identity. Without coherent and certain identities, their true selves are hard to define. That is why many African Americans are puzzled in search of their true selves. Jadine’s disconnection with traditional black culture originates from her orphanage as well as the education she receives. The lack of the connection with traditional African culture will easily lead to the assimilation of mainstream culture. Though she accepts and identifies with the white cultural values and behaves more like a white girl, her being as a black can not be erased or changed. The black cultural tradition still remains in her racial collective unconsciousness, which makes her uneasy and restless. She suffers identity crisis in terms of gender, race and culture. As a successful black model, Jadine cherishes self-reliance, which is good for her development, but she ignores the virtues of “their true and ancient properties”, which should be criticized. She is among those what Morrison criticizes who lost “their ancient properties”. Indeed, without a stable and coherent identity, without the
connection with her ancestors and black culture, Jadine is a rootless woman, who feels restless and inauthentic, belongs nowhere.

References


