

Tar Baby's Bildungsroman

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Abstract: Morrison's *Tar Baby* explores the identity of African Americans in contemporary pluralistic cultural society through the love story of Yadan and Son. It is evident that the binary opposition of black or white" is invalid. The open ending does not give a solution. This paper intends to deconstruct and construct the identity of African Americans in *Tar Baby* from the perspective of Bildungsroman.

Key Words: Tar Baby; African American; Bildungsroman; Identity

As a transitional work of Morrison's serial novels, "Tar Baby" mainly focuses on the love story of Yadan and Son, and launches the issue of the identity of contemporary African-Americans who coexist with multiple cultures. Who am I? is not unusual in British and American Bildungsroman novels. Basically, the study of "self cognition" and "identity problem" discussed in the novel can be said to be homogenous. This paper intends to apply the term " Bildungsroman " to explore the deconstruction and construction of African-American identity in "Tar Baby" so as to provide an acceptable direction for the future Bildungsroman of African Americans.

1. Connotation of Bildungsroman

The bildungsroman novel was initiated in Germany in the late 18th century. Goethe's "William Meister's Wandering Age" is considered to be the original model of the bildungsroman novel. Western bildungsroman novels mainly describe the development of the protagonist's ideology and personality, narrate their various experiences, and tell stories of growing up through a huge spiritual crisis. In the case of bildungsroman novels, the word "process" is very important. During this process, the subject's "thinking" and "behavior" will produce conflicts and contradictions. Through direct contact with society, the purpose of "self cognition" is achieved, and the realization of the subject's "growth" is obtained. "Self cognition" is one of the main ideas in bildungsroman novels. Only under the premise of self-understanding, the subject of "bildungsroman" will clearly determine the "identity" issue, and many puzzles will be easily settled. Just like Yadan and Son in *Tar Baby*, through "bildungsroman", they understand the importance of identity as an African-American and will grow up steadily in the future.

2. The Confusion of African American Identity

2.1 The difficulty of African American Female Identity

Many critics believe that Yadan's "growth" process has led to her identity as a "cultural orphan". In the growth process of Yadan, action is more important than thought. As a model who had received higher education and lived in Paris, Yadan did not realize what the identity of African-American women was and what responsibilities are in the cultural heritage of African Americans? These "self-recognition" problems never appeared in Yadan's life and thoughts until the advent of love. Coupled with the lack of parents, Yadan is even more inaccessible to the African Americans' traditional cultural essence. The mainstream white culture has assimilated Yadan's identity of African-American woman. With the exception of skin color, there are no other features that are the same as those of African-American women. Yadan vaguely perceives that she is different from other white models, which is what makes her a model for Elle Magazine. She has gained fame in Paris. But she knows nothing about the distinctive feature. The loss of Yadan's African-American identity is passive and traceless. Obviously, Yadan is different from other African-American women: She is highly educated, earns a living as a model, and has no financial concerns. In this regard, Morrison takes a positive attitude. Before Yam encountered Son, little is known about her African-American identity and tradition, which should be mainly attributed to her growing environment. As a modern woman, Yadan's independence is commendable. Morrison's dissatisfaction with Yadan is: as an African-American woman, regardless of the level of education, it is her obligation to understand the culture of her own group, of her ancestors.

Compared to Yadan, Therese, an uneducated African-American servant in "Tar Baby", can be said to be a "wise" of African-American women. "Self-cognition" does not seem to have any doubts for her. As a descendant of African black slaves, Therese sticks to African American traditions. What she does is in full conformity with the female identity of African-American traditional culture. Therese deliberately left food for an inexplicable visitor and told her husband Gideon not to lock the kitchen. This is due to the good nature of African-American women. She insists on using the "Voodoo" ritual in the African-American tradition. "Voodoo" is an ancient African religious ritual. Almost all African descents believe that the curse is: putting the enemy's hair or nails on the doll and torturing the doll to hurt the enemy. Therefore, in order to avoid such incidents, African Americans usually burn hair and nails carefully. The "nurture" function of African-American women is reflected in Therese's body although she is nursing French children. Though her husband Gideon always said that Therese is "blind", in fact she is a wise: she was clear about the difference between Yadan and African-American women, persuaded Son to give up Yadan and forget her because Yadan is not a woman of their fellows, who have completely forgotten their ancient nature of African-American traditions. Although Therese's self cognition is incomparably determined, she is indeed "deaf" to the society: She despises her compatriots Sydney and Ondine, refuses to speak with African-American black slaves, does not recognize the existence of whites, and ignores the development of society, does not understand "free abortion" and does not know what the "blood bank" is. The disregard for society makes Therese unable to witness the future "African American's "bildungsroman" in the era of life. She prefers to live forever in the imagined traditional African-American era.

Yadan's aunt Ondine completely lost the identity of African-American women. In addition to her loyalty to white employers, Ondine stubbornly believes that she is nobler than her fellow citizen-Therese. The concept of the class of white culture is deeply rooted in Ondine's mind. In the process of nurturing Yadan, Ondine did not inherit the essence of any African-American culture: the responsibility of African-American women, the ability of African-American women to nurture the next generation, and so on. So from the beginning of Ondine's generation,

African-American women have been assimilated by dominant white culture. Ondine's "bildungsroman" road has failed. However in the end,, Ondine seems to be conscious of that in the process of Yadan's growth, she forgot to teach the true responsibility of women of African descent for Yadan. From this perspective, it seems that Ondine began to "grow" as well.

2.2 The difficulty of African American male Identity

Most of the ancestors of African Americans who first came to the American continent were slaves. In the American society dominated by white culture, the fate of African Americans has not always been optimistic. If African-American women shoulder the responsibility of inheriting African-American culture and nurturing the next generation, African-American men should be the backbone of the entire African-American community. Son initially came to Cavalier Island because he had killed his wife by mistake. Strictly speaking, he was a fugitive. In "Tar Baby" Son is a strong advocate of African-American culture. Before encountering Yadan, Son never doubted his African-American identity, never questioned how to make a living and how to integrate into society in the modern United States. In fact, as a supporter of African American traditions, Son's narrow black-and-white dualistic opposition makes him unable to integrate into modern society and can only withdraw to Elo (African community). Being clinging to the value of the traditional African-American spiritual heritage, Son rejects everything in modern society, thoroughly rejects the mainstream white culture, and is hostile to everything that does not belong to the African-American culture, which is destined not to integrate into a multi-cultural contemporary society. From this point of view, it is imperative for not only the "culture orphan" Yadan, the maidservant Ondine, and the chef Therese who need to "bildung" but also the sticker Son on the condition that he really wants to shoulder the backbone of African-American culture.

The gardener of Cavalier Island Gideon is faithful to his African-American identity and is typical of African-American men. In order to meet his wife's wishes, Gideon risked stealing Valerian's apple. As a result, he angered his employer-Valerian and lost his job. Another example is when Yadan's aunt told Gideon to change his wife, he put Therese in front of Aunt and said "This is a new wife." It can be seen that Gideon's identity best fulfills traditional African-American men: challenging authority, loyal to his wife, working hard, not being humble, objectively treating his African-American identity and white employer. However, it can be seen from the incident of stealing Apple, Gideon also needs to "bildung."

As a loyal servant of Valerian, Uncle Sydney of Yadan identified with Valerian, who was extremely admired and longed for the white mainstream culture Valerian represented. In the face of his fellow compatriots, he held guns to protect the safety of his employer without any hesitation. For Son, Sydney declared in a very contemptuous manner that "I am the African-America mentioned in the book "African American in Philadelphia." My family opened a grocery store, a bookshop and your family was still repairing their faces so that others can tell from who is who. Sydney's attitude towards Son is not only disdainful but also frivolous. The way in which Son is seen is the white colonist's thought, value standards, and lifestyle. Sydney completely forgot his African American identity. What is even more ridiculous is that the value of the white man has led him to a hierarchical division of the African American by himself. Sydney thought he was higher than other African Americans and called the black servant Gideon-a "gardener" outside his employer's house. Until the end of the novel, Sydney did not seem to be as enlightened as Ondine. There is no possibilities that Sydney will grow with the solidification of values.

2.3 The fuse of Yadan and Son's Bildungsroman

For the "knight" Son who accidentally came to Cavalier Island, this exile earned him love. Only people with ancestral values such as Son can save Yadan who has sacrificed her racial

spirit for the sake of white sophistication and knowledge." Love became the fuse of Yadan's "bildungsroman". Yadan was both apprehensive and unappealing to all the features that Son revealed related to the African-American culture. She began to question more profound problems such as the current life and the education she has received and her issue of identity. As a result, Yadan began to think seriously about what she meant as an African-American identity. Yadan began her "growth journey" though the process of "self-awareness" is both exciting and a little fearful. Before Son arrived, Yadan never questioned her identity, never wanted to trace her own ancestral culture. It can be said that before the appearance of Son, Yadan was a complete cultural orphan, with no thoughts, no self, no wisdom, but occasionally Yadan's mind will be subtly aware of the difference between her and other cover models. Actually falling in love with Son was just a start. On the one hand, Son awakened Yadan, made her aware of her identity, and begin to think about the contradiction between African American culture and white culture. No matter what her final choice, Yadan became truly intelligent and has begun to comprehend the true self and began to "bildung". On the other hand, the hardships of urban life made Son begin to reflect: what should be the path of his future? The open ending of the novel does not solve this problem. However, it is almost certain that Son also start to think about the future of him and Yadan, which inevitably requires social contact and social integration. From this view, Son also began his "road to bildungsroman."

The tour of Elo in *The Tar Baby* played a crucial role in the growth of Yadan and Sen. Morrison pointed out in her preface to the novel that the emergence of the African-American community is justified. In Elo (African community), Yadan meets real African-American women and her incompatibility makes her doubt what she sees. Elo's African-American women are reminding Yadan all the time: the responsibility and obligation of African-American women, the nurturing of future generation, the cultural heritage, the obedience of the wife, the identity of the mother etc. The repulsion on the surface of Yadan resulted in the inner storm: Who am I? Am I an African-American woman? Should I also follow their lifestyle? Should I also assume the same responsibilities and obligations? If Son is the trigger for the awakening of the African-American identity, then Elo's visit completely overturns Yadan's all previous perceptions of herself.

4. The Bildungsroman path of African Americans

As an African-American female writer, Morrison spares no effort to seek answers for her African compatriots on identity issues. Morrison ponders over the current situation of her compatriots from the perspective of African-Americans and hopes that contemporary African-Americans could jump out of the cage of identity confusion and shoulder the crucial responsibility of passing the essence of African-American cultural traditions to the next generation so that the African American cultural tradition can be carried forward in present pluralistic society.

4.1 Inheriting African American cultural tradition

Morrison actively promotes the inheritance of African American traditions in almost every one of her novels. For African-Americans, African American culture is the soul and backbone of their cultural identity, supporting the entire African-American community. That African American culture is forgotten or lost means that cultural identity is shaken, which makes the race a culture orphan, such as Yadan. Morrison pointed out that only by inheriting traditional African-American culture can one truly understand the meaning of African-American cultural identity and can African Americans shoulder their responsibilities. However, Morrison also opposes blindly sticking to traditional African-American culture and dual opposition to the society, such as Son and Therese. In "Tar Baby", Morrison's focus is on the differences between African American culture and white culture. But she did not completely deny any party. On the

one hand, Morrison takes a positive attitude towards Yadan's self-reliance as a modern African-American woman; to a certain extent she praises the succession of Therese's traditional African-American culture. On the other hand, Morrison also held a critical attitude towards Son's adherence to the African-American tradition, his withdrawal to Elo, his evasion of the society, and Therese's refusal to accept social development. The open ending suggests that Son intends to face society and face Yadan. In Morrison's opinion, the cultural essence of each nation should be handed down from generation to generation no matter what society it is. Multiculturalism is an undeniable existence today, so harmonious coexistence has become a core theme. For African Americans, Morrison believes that it is the irrefutable responsibility of African Americans to persist in inheriting the essence of African American culture.

4.2 Absorbing the elite of White culture

Morrison thinks highly of Yadan's self-reliance as a modern African-American woman. However, Morrison strongly opposes Yadan's whitening. For Therese, a successor to African American cultural heritage, Morrison is largely in favor, but Morrison also disapproves Therese's "non-black and white" binary opposition view. In a multicultural society, Therese is destined to be abandoned by society. The open ending of the novel makes readers question Morrison's inquiry: what exactly does Yadan go for? How does Therese adapt to the pluralistic contemporary society? The author believes that when Morrison shifts the subject of this novel to explore the future path, only assimilation and combination can solve the problem. Morrison expects that African-American female groups can be as independent as Yadan and at the same time hopes that they can inherit the essence of African-American cultural traditions like Therese. In fact, Morrison hopes to find a relative balance between the two: African-American women who are not alienated, who have not been eliminated by the society, but modern self-supporting individuals who inherit the essence of African American culture.

V. Conclusion

As an African-American writer, Morrison's novels are always related to the fate of African Americans. In *Tar Baby*, through the interpretation of Yadan, Therese, and Ondine, it can be understood Morrison's intention to locate the identity of modern African-American women; through the comparison of Son, Sydney and Gideon, it is of necessity that African-American males are requested to grow up. Facing the society of multicultural coexistence, only combining the advantages of multi-cultures, and meanwhile adhering to the essence of African American traditional culture, African Americans can bildung.

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