A Cultural Perspective on Identity Reconstruction of Afro-Americans in *Tar Baby*

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**Abstract.** There are many difficulties for African Americans to define their identity. Culture is the main factor that puzzles them. This paper focuses on the cultural perspective to analyze the identity perplexity of African Americans. Living in the crevice of different cultures, in order to survive they should reshape their cultural identity to unify the black culture and white culture in one body. In Toni Morrison’s novel *Tar Baby*, two protagonists Jadine and Son’s opposite cultural views not only result in the failure of their love affair, but also cause their identity crisis. Actually, under the powerful impact of the mainstream discourse, many African Americans have lost themselves. In order to reconstruct their identity, African Americans should deconstruct the hegemony of dominant discourse and rebuild their confidence in their traditional culture.

**Introduction**

Toni Morrison the first black woman writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, wins great reputation not only for African Americans but also for all the blacks throughout the world, especially for the females of them. She breaks the double myths that blacks and female blacks are inferior in intellect to their white counterparts. Her achievements make her undoubtedly an outstanding representative of the modern American black writers. Her significance and her contribution to African American literature cannot be overestimated. She plays an important role in making African American literature better recognized among the American public as well as the literary circle of the world. *Tar Baby*, Morrison’s fourth novel focuses on the conflict of different cultures as well as the contradiction of tradition and modernity. In *Tar Baby*, by describing a young couples’ failed love affair, the embarrassment and perplexity that the modern African Americans face in the process of searching for self and self-fulfillment is fully represented. *Tar Baby* has inspired a large quantity of reviews after its publication; many positive essays appear in Newsweek, The New York Times, Philadelphia Bulletin, Washington Post, etc. In the words of Philadelphia Bulletin, “*Tar Baby* is the story of the love affair between a beautiful black model molded by white culture and a black man who represents everything she both fears and desires. It sweeps from a white millionaires luxurious Caribbean estate to the shimmering sophistication of Manhattan to the bedrock realities of the American Southland. This is not a novel of hypnotic, lyrical beauty, it is a revelation of all the shades of feeling and the full spectrum of choices facing women and man in a black-and-white world.”[1] A lot of attention of this novel has been drawn and many other essays on various subjects with different critical methodologies appear subsequently. This paper focuses on the identity perplexity of African Americans as well as how to reconstruct their African American identity.

**The Perplexity of Identity**

Identity issue is a complicated issue itself. African Americans’ identity is even more complex due to their special history and reality. Such kind of complexity is elaborated fully by W. E. B. Dubois in his The Souls of Black Folk: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, 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.”[2] There exists a double-consciousness in one black body for African Americans, they do not want to lose either of them, so the conflict of two consciousnesses is inevitable. The identity perplexity is a common phenomenon among ethnic minorities. For African Americans, they are displaced from their homeland and relocated in an unfamiliar environment for ages; as a consequence, their identity becomes more and more ambiguous and complicated. Most people of new generation are puzzled by their identity issue. As Kobena Mercer has claimed, “Identity gives us a sense of who we are and to some extent satisfies a demand for some degree of stability and of security. Crises occur when an identity position is challenged or becomes insecure…”[3] Under the oppression and cultural dispossession of the mainstream culture, African Americans’ identity is definitely in crisis.

African Americans are disturbed by how to define their identity. There are two conflicting and radical opinions needed to be mentioned. Some of them advocate that they should return to the past, regain their black tradition to keep their black and African identity. Some others especially those who have received western higher education are willing to identify with dominant cultural values in order to be recognized by mainstream. But it is hard for them to be recognized and accepted due to their black lineage. Moreover, forgetting their black tradition and losing their cultural roots will make them feel inauthentic and unstable. So, people having the opinion of either of the above instances are likely to suffer identity crisis. In Tar Baby, such kind of cultural conflict frequently occurs consciously or subconsciously in most of the main characters. Roughly speaking, the two opposite opinions mentioned above are represented by Jadine and Son, respectively. Jadine, who is brought up and educated in the environment of western civilization, assimilates and identifies the white culture rather than the traditional black culture; Son is the opposite one, who adheres to the traditional black culture and strongly refuses to accept any mainstream culture including the reasonable part of it. Each of them tries to force his/her cultural values on the other. They adhere to the culture they represent respectively with no intention to accept that of the other, that is the major reason for their broken love affair. The failure of their love affair can best reflect the conflict and irreconcilability of different cultures. Living in the white dominant society, in order to be recognized and accepted, African Americans can easily identify the powerful culture and ignore their weak black culture. It is problematic in doing so for they cannot change their black soul, they just get some white masks, and as a result their identity will be split. Actually no matter how they endeavor to transcend their selves, they cannot erase or ignore their blackness characterized by black tradition and black culture that are essential to discern their identities. How to survive in a white dominant society and not to lose ones root is a key issue for every black to consider. This is what Morrison tries to convey to the reader especially to her fellow blacks in Tar Baby. In the novel, Morrison shows both her concern and anxiety about the conflict of black culture and white culture as well as the hope of two cultures coexisting without depreciation and prejudice.

**Deconstruction of the Discourse Hegemony**

There is much puzzlement for African Americans to define and search for their identity. The reasons which cause the identity perplexity and identity crisis of Afro-Americans lie in many aspects, of which the white cultural hegemony and cultural dispossession are immediate reasons which facilitate African Americans’ estrangement from their African cultural tradition. The aftermath of the dominant cultural impact on their weak and marginalized ones results in their perplexity and self-contempt, which are the main obstacles to prevent them forming a coherent cultural identity. The consequence of the oppression results in the self-humiliation and lack of confidence of many African Americans. Therefore, in order to reconstruct their sense of self-esteem and self-pride, the first task of African Americans is to deconstruct the dominant discourse as well as the value systems it represents. Hegemony is defined by Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought as “Political and economic control exercised by a dominant class, and its success in projecting its own way of seeing the world, human
and social relationships as ‘common sense’ and part of the natural order by those who are, in fact, subordinated to it.”[4] Hegemony is defined as a predominant influence or leadership of a dominant class or institution over subordinate ones. It is a process by which the dominant community injects its views and values into the subaltern communities, creating a false consciousness that aligns them with their oppressors. Similarly, cultural hegemony is a kind of cultural oppression and cultural dispossession of dominant cultures on non-dominant ones. The hegemony of the dominant discourse maintains and strengthens the oppression of the dominant cultural values over the marginalized ones, such as controlling people’s everyday practices and their beliefs. In order to gain a coherent identity, first of all, African Americans must deconstruct the hegemony of the dominant value systems as well as foster their confidence simultaneously.

Deconstructing the hegemony of the dominant discourse is an effective way to build up the confidence of African Americans. Discourse is the immediate medium that is used to express or reveal the cultural power of the mainstream society over the marginalized groups, so a certain community must be able to speak for itself in order to have cultural power and cannot merely allow others to speak for it. As a literary master, Morrison’s understanding on this respect is especially profound. In her Nobel lecture, delivered on 7 December 1993 in Stockholm, she eloquently demonstrated that how language shapes human reality and reflects their worldviews. African Americans have been deprived of their discursive power since the day they landed at the North American Continent. Since then they gradually lost their own judgment standards; they look at themselves through the eyes of others or their oppressors. For those whose discursive power is suppressed or deprived by the mainstream discourse, their subjectivity is lost and as a consequence their identity is in crisis. So in order to save their cultural tradition and build up their national confidence many responsible ethnic writers and critics make great efforts to deconstruct the oppressive power systems of the dominant groups and criticize their cultural hegemony and cultural colonization over the oppressed. From a post-colonial cultural perspective, Morrison, as many other post-colonial writers, employs many textual strategies to question and subvert the dominant discourse. In her fiction, she uses many textual devices to challenge the existing mode of white perception and deconstruct the post-colonial discourse power. For instance, she employs the manner of presentation of the Magic Realism to challenge the established modes of perception and rationalism, to describe the unspeakable misery that the blacks have suffered as well as the mysterious force they possess. In Morrison’s novels, there are few white male characters; even if there are some, the texts often decenter the white characters and make them become faceless representatives of a dominating power. Take Valerian Street, a white character in Tar Baby, as an example, he is a representative of power, but at the end of the novel he becomes very weak and is arranged and manipulated by his servants Sydney, thus the shifting of the power relationships within the text is fully represented.

Reconstruction of Cultural Confidence

Deconstructing the dominant discourse and building up the confidence of ethnic minorities are inseparable. Deconstructing the dominant discourse is dismantling the dominant power systems and correcting the wrong perceptions and ideas lingering in people’s mind. From Morrison’s perspective, African Americans must adhere to their cultural roots and be full of confidence to avoid losing themselves under the impact of the dominant culture. Black skin is no inferior to white or whatever other skin. Black people have their own virtues and beauty. It is not advisable and acceptable to adopt the white esthetic standards to evaluate everything. In her early novels, Morrison strongly criticizes the white esthetic standards to evaluate everything. In her early novels, Morrison strongly criticizes the damage the white culture does to the souls of the black people as well as those blacks who identify with white aesthetics with no rejecting. Langston Hughes is another writer who contributes a lot in building up the self-confidence of American blacks. As a well-known black poet, he alleges proudly in his poem: “I am a Negro: /Black as the night is black, /Black like the depths of my Africa.”[5] He stresses more than once in his poems that “black is beauty” in order to arouse the self-consciousness
of blacks and correct the false opinions of most blacks who regard that only the white people are beautiful. But changing the self-abasement of African Americans is not an easy job. The effect of the dominant discourse is omnipresent and it has long permeated through all the aspects of African Americans’ everyday life. In order to build up their confidence, the first and foremost step is to overcome their sense of self-humiliation and self-hatred. In order to achieve this purpose, the virtues and values of their cultural tradition must be well publicized and reassessed impartially.

African people have long lived in African Continent, they have created brilliant African culture and civilization. African culture is rich and profound as many other cultures. For instance, the legends, folktales myths, rituals and blues of African culture are the priceless legacy of the world culture. African Americans should be proud of their ancestors’ wisdom and intelligence, and transform the old idea of self-hatred into a new positive one. Culture has no differentiation of good or bad, different cultures are intertwined each other to serve the spiritual life of the people in the world. Edward Said, a great post-colonial critic, has elaborated this issue in his well-known book *Culture and Imperialism*. He alleges that “all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.”[6] It is clear that different cultures can coexist other than dominant cultures must annihilate other marginalized ones.

Black culture is the soul and backbone of black people and black ethnic groups. Losing it will result in one’s rootless and uncertain identity. Morrison’s literary creation is deeply rooted in the rich soil of black tradition and black culture. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison attaches her great attention to the conflict between black culture and white culture, but she does not deny the write culture completely. She has a positive attitude toward Jadine’s women consciousness of independence, for it is an effective way to women’s emancipation and their realization of their personal value. At the same time, she praises Son’s blackness and approves of his adherence to the black tradition. But neither Son nor Jadine’s behavior is what Morrison approves of. As Morrison herself said, she regards writing as a way of thinking and feeling, in *Tar Baby* Morrison reveals her consideration of and worry about the conflict of the two cultures. She tries to guide her fellow blacks to consider their national future as well as how to make advisable and right choices without losing their blackness. Both Jadine’s and Sons’ behavior are not acceptable because it will hinder the survival and development of black people. In order to maintain their ancient properties as well as to catch up with the development of times simultaneously, African Americans should deal well with the relationships between tradition and modernity, history and reality. African tradition is the invaluable legacy of all blacks; it cannot be abandoned by any means. Even if there are some unreasonable parts or something outdated, it cannot be replaced. African Americans must have a positive attitude towards their black tradition.

**Conclusion**

The identity perplexity of modern African Americans is an outstanding issue. Being black and female, Morrison seems to understand better her mission and responsibility as a writer. In her novels, Morrison endeavors to translate the loss of history and culture to address the unspeakable past of her fellow blacks. She aims at reconstructing the black history and traditional black culture. The central themes her fiction focuses mostly on are how to maintain African cultural heritage in spite of all those deprivations and suppression. Struggling in different cultural frames and avoiding losing themselves, African Americans, on the one hand, must deconstruct the dominant discourse power, understand its damage to the souls of their fellow blacks and correct the distorted ideas and values the dominant discourse has imposed on them; on the other hand, they must steadily root in their cultural tradition. Only if the contemporary African Americans were liberated from the hegemony of the dominant culture and firmly grounded in their own cultural heritage, can they win the battle in search of their true selves and defining their identity.

African Americans are not merely Afro-blacks any longer; they got a new collective identity since they settled in North American Continent. Having not been able to return to the past and maintain their unified African identity, African Americans have to consider how to relocate their new identity.
Adhering to the past and their African identity, in the old sense, is outdated and without future. Living in the white dominant culture and out of the influence of it is impossible. No matter the white culture Jadine advocates or the black traditional culture Son cherishes in *Tar Baby* has its own advantages and disadvantages. African Americans can absorb the elite part of the white culture as well as other cultures to enrich their traditional African culture, to add the vitality and energy to it. No matter the dominant cultures or the marginalized ones, they are all the treasures of the world cultural legacy. They are all indispensable to the diversity and development of the world culture. African Americans should consider both the tradition and reality to deal well with their relationships in search of selves and identity.

**References**


