Social and Cultural Alienation in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*

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I. Introduction

As one of the most important contemporary American writers, Toni Morrison has published nine novels. *Tar Baby*, her fourth novel, has received the least attention among her early novels. It is “the least admired, least researched, and least taught” (Pereira 72). The reason may be two-folded: First, the novel does not focus exclusively on African-American people’s experience. Unlike other works by Morrison, *Tar Baby* contains much description of a white family. Although the black young man and woman, Son and Jadine, are recognized as the major characters of the book, Morrison explores the experience of the retired white man, Valerian, his wife, and his son with the same deliberation. For critics seeking the purely “black style” to prove Morrison’s originality, a novel with much attention on white people’s life does not seem to be a likely choice.

Secondly, *Tar Baby* has received little critical attention because it is called the “most problematic and unresolved novel” among Morrison’s works (Peterson 471). Morrison’s writing does not merely disclose African-American people’s suffering and struggle. Most importantly, it points out the significance of cultural identification as a way to achieve self-identity. *The Bluest Eyes* embodies the devastating effect of denying one’s ethnic features. *Sula* applauds an African-American girl’s pursuit of the self. *Son of Solomon* celebrates a black male’s quest of his own culture. *Beloved*, the most widely discussed novel, indicates the way to healing from the traumatic past in the form of traditional culture. Unlike these novels, *Tar Baby* does not make a definite statement. Jadine rejected the black culture by flying back to Paris. Son hesitated between returning to traditional culture and following his lover’s capitalist way of life in the city. Although he moved at full speed to join the legendary horsemen in the
forest at the end, whether such identification is positive remains uncertain.

Without suggesting a solution to African-American people’s predicament, Tar Baby has disturbed critics. Mbalia viewed the open ending as “the thematic weakness” because the writer rejected both capitalism and the return to a glorified past without providing “a viable alternative existence for African people” (1998: 91). Despite the controversy, some critics noticed the uniqueness of the novel. Pereira argued for its importance, saying that the novel "functions as a transitional text in Morrison oeuvre" from exploring the effect of colonization to decolonization (72). While the central concern of Tar Baby is colonization, the three novels following it form a trilogy that “focuses on black history and written primarily within an African American cultural perspective” (74). In those works, Morrison “finally breaks free from the need to focus primarily on white ideas. . .” (74).

Pereira has a good reason to regard Tar Baby as Morrison’s transition from colonization to decolonization. Looking closely, however, one sees that the process of decolonization has begun in her first novel. While describing African-American people's suffering, Morrison also seeks ways to transcend it. In The Bluest Eyes, Claudia shows the possibility of not being affected by the value of the dominant culture in contrast to Pecola’s victimization by it. In Sula, the protagonist’s self-assertiveness both as a black and a woman represents a double decolonization. In Son of Solomon, Milkman rejects the influence of the white culture and achieves self-recognition by connecting himself with his culture. These earlier novels do not just focus on colonization. Beloved, the novel following Tar Baby, does not merely deal with decolonization, either. Sethe’s suffering after killing her baby and her experience of being haunted by the traumatic past best exemplify colonization. Therefore, using Tar Baby to draw a line between Morrison’s exploration of colonization and decolonization might not be so convincing.

To justify the ambiguity and uncertainty of Tar Baby, Yogita Goyal suggested reading the novel in the light of the theory of diaspora. According to her, the refusal to settle on a solution is the characteristic of diaspora: “Diaspora identities prize fracture, discontinuity, and ambiguous encounters” (396). That’s why when Son embraced tradition as the most important thing, Jadine considered it a sign of backwardness. “Even as Morrison provides us with an injunction to revere tradition, she simultaneously deconstructs the basis for articulating a stable vision of what such tradition might look like,” said Goyal (395).

Tar Baby is important not because it brings Morrison’s exploration of colonization to an end but because it manifests the complication and ambiguity of decolonization. Goyal is right to contend that ambiguity and uncertainty is the nature of the novel. To be specific, the ambiguity is derived from Morrison’s questioning the transcendence she suggested in her earlier novels. Jadine has transcended Pecola’s suffering through assimilation. She represents Pecola’s dream coming true. In spite of the lack of blond hair and blue eyes, Jadine, with an advanced degree on art and a job as a model, is successfully accepted by the white world. But, Morrison deals with this character in such an ambiguous way as to disrupt critical evaluation. Some critics
condemned her rejection of her culture while others expressed sympathy for her struggle to achieve a true self. In a similar way, Son fulfills Milkman’s wish to identify himself securely with African culture. “Son is most like Milkman at the end of his journey to self-knowledge” (Furman 59). Nonetheless, whether the identification is worthwhile seems dubious. The community he allies with is impoverished and backward. The people are illiterate and exploited by capitalists. In short, *Tar Baby* represents Morrison’s reflection and modification of her idea of African-American subjectivity. The subjectivity is usually ambiguous and uncertain because many factors—class, race, and gender—are involved and interwoven. This study, therefore, argues for reading *Tar Baby* as Morrison’s recognition of the complication and ambiguity in the pursuit of African-American subjectivity.

The complication and ambiguity that Morrison disclosed in *Tar Baby* are reflected in the issue of identification. What to identify oneself with? The dominant white culture or the traditional African culture? The affluent but ruthless capitalist society or the nurturing but backward black community? The main characters had made their choices. With the choices, however, they did not achieve transcendence. Instead, they were disturbed by the feeling and the state of alienation. Son chose his culture only to suffer from estrangement with the urban society; Jadine identified herself with the dominant white culture only to be troubled by her detachment from the black culture. By portraying the characters’ alienation, Morrison discloses the difficulty and complication involved in seeking identification on the way to decolonization. Next section of this study will discuss the main characters’ alienation, which made their lives miserable and prevented them from ultimate union.

Speaking of alienation, one may think of modernism. Given Morrison’s academic background, it is not surprising that alienation can be a theme in her novel. At Cornell University, Morrison explored William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf as the topics of her master thesis. The writers’ influence on her is definite, even though she is reluctant to admit it. As Conner pointed out, “the overwhelming tendency in Morrison scholarship— a tendency fostered by Morrison herself— has been to ignore or even to deny diverse influences” (xi). Despite her denial of indebtedness, some critics, such as Kolmerton, have placed her side by side with Faulkner. Lisa Williams also wrote a book to discuss Morrison’s and Virginia Wolf’s novels. Recent discussions of Morison and Wolf were made by Lilienfeld and Fulton.

Thanks to the critics’ efforts, Morrison’s affinity with the Euro-American literary tradition is proved. With this affinity, one should set out to investigate how she pursues the possibilities that have not been previously developed in the Euro-American literary conventions (Peach 139). She pursues the possibilities by challenging, deconstructing, or redefining the tradition with the Afro-American “cultural specificity” (1989: 217) presented in her novels. In fact, Morrison has expanded the scope of American literature by encompassing African-American experience. Reading Morrison into American literature can rewrite a “more just and complete American history, which would rescue the memories of the forgotten, the women, the blacks, other nonwhites, and the poor” (Coser 19). This study, therefore,
seeks to demonstrate how Morrison responded to the issue of alienation in western culture and how she added a new perspective for the discussion of the issue through African-American people’s experience.

II. Alienation, Capitalism, City

The concept of alienation in Western thought was most frequently used in social sciences and philosophy in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. In social sciences, according to *Encyclopedia of Britannica*, it refers to “the state of feeling estranged or separated from one’s milieu, work, products of work, or self.” The most common variants include:

1. Powerlessness, the feeling that one’s destiny is not under one’s own control but is determined by external agents, fate, luck, or institutional arrangement,
2. Meaninglessness, referring either to the lack of comprehensibility or consistent meaning in any domain of action (such as world affairs or interpersonal relations) or to a generalized sense of purposelessness in life,
3. Normlessness, the lack of commitment to shared social conventions of behavior (hence widespread deviance, distrust, unrestrained individual competition, and the like),
4. Cultural estrangement, the sense of removal from established values in society (as, for example, in intellectual or student rebellions against conventional institutions),
5. Social isolation, the sense of loneliness or exclusion in social relations (as, for example, among minority group members), and
6. Self-estrangement, perhaps the most difficult to define and in a sense the master theme, the understanding that in one way or another individual is out of touch with himself.

Among the theories of social sciences, Karl Marx’s theory of alienation is most famous. Marx used the term to describe the workers’ loss of control over labor as class society arose under capitalism. He identified four specific ways in which alienation pervades capitalist society:

1. The worker is alienated from the object he produces because it is owned and disposed of by another, the capitalist.
2. The worker is alienated because of the lack of control over the process of production, which is in the control of forces hostile to him.
3. The worker is alienated from fellow human beings due to the rise of the class structure of society. People do not see each other as fellow-men having equal rights, but as superiors or subordinates.
4. The worker is alienated from his own human nature because
Marx and his followers treated alienation as a normative concept, “as an instrument for criticizing the established state of affairs” (“Alienation” a). The term refers to an “objective condition” rather than individual consciousness.

Another theory of alienation was a response to the industrialization in the 19th and early 20th century. Durkheim, Tonnies, Weber, and Simmel adopted the term to describe the tension between subjective individual and the objective “mass society.” “Modern man was isolated, becoming anonymous and impersonal in an urbanizing mass, uprooted from old values, yet without faith in the new rational and bureaucratic order” (“Alienation” a). In short, alienation refers to fewer relations between the individual and organization and among people.

While some social theoreticians used alienation to describe the condition of human being, others emphasized alienation on a social-psychological basis; rather than a condition, alienation is the experience of powerlessness, the sense of estrangement. Moreover, the concept of alienation also appeared in philosophical context, particularly phenomenology and existentialism. It describes how the human mind is distanced from the world. The term can be found in work of modern philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus, Theodor Adorno, etc (“Alienation” b).

Although critics have seen the value of reading Morrison from the perspective of modernism, very few have explored the concept of alienation in her work. The only exceptions are Lorie W. Fulton and Jennifer Terry. Fulton analyzed the texts of Morrison’s early work, Sula, and Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway to compare their plots and key themes. She examined the manifestations of alienation and isolation in the works of both writers as well as female friendship and romantic love. According to her, “Morrison challenges the concept of alienation by appraising the value of female friendship” (71). As for Terry, she investigated how Morrison depicts black people’s estrangement, as well as displacement and dispossession, from the North American landscape in Son of Solomon to excavate buried perspectives and shape her own potent narrative act.

Living in the modern society, the main characters of Tar Baby experienced alienation. The cause of their alienation is capitalism. Since her first novel, Morrison has suggested the connection between capitalism and black people’s suffering. Pecola was obsessed with the objects produced by the economic system of capitalism. Milkman’s father lost his humanity as he achieved materialistic success in the capitalist society. Discussing Morrison’s novels, most critics occasionally mentioned capitalism but did not explore it further. Mbalia is the only exception. The critic wrote a book to examine the class consciousness developed in Morrison’s work. She analyzed Son of Solomon and found that “Morrison has become more aware of the dialectical relationship between capitalism, racism, and sexism.” . . . she is more

As the novel following Son of Solomon, Tar Baby further investigates the devastating effect of capitalism and class consciousness on African-Americans. Mbalia analyzed the novel and said, “Morrison has sufficiently matured to understand that the fundamental cause of the African’s oppression is the exploitive economic system of capitalism and its overseas extension, imperialism” (1998: 89). The two protagonists “symbolize the class conflict that African people must resolve in order to form an effective, unified force against their primary enemy, capitalism/imperialism” (1998: 90). Campbell also pointed out that the economic infrastructure of capitalism provides the basis for Tar Baby. “By creating characters who represent classes and defy classes, Morrison criticizes the system of capitalism and its horrible effects upon Africans” (2). For this reason, it would be suitable to examine Son’s experience in the city with Marx’s theory of alienation. In the following discussion, the term alienation will signify both as a condition and an emotional experience.

Son and Jadine met and fell in love on a Caribbean island but broke up after returning to New York City. City plays a significant role in black people’s experience. Although Tar Baby has revealed Morrison’s concern about the effect of city life, it is not until her later novel, Jazz, was published that critics started to discuss the issue. In Jazz, Morrison describes city as “The Promised Land” for southern black people: “there were significant new-found freedoms and excitements” (Peach 113). Paquet-Deyris, on the other hand, interpreted Morrison’s city as a space, where “the status of the self is constantly called into questions” (229). According to Furman, city is a place that both seduces and repulses Morrison’s characters (92): “The city offers them with possibility, the chance to remake themselves in the images of their dreams . . . but in giving themselves over to their dream selves, they become people neither recognized—a childless couple, alienated from community in big city” (93, 94-95). Although the critical remarks are for Jazz, they can shed great light on Son’s and Jadine’s experience with the city in Tar Baby.

III. Social Alienation

Tar Baby, according to Morrison, is a “very contemporary love story” (Russell 44). It’s about how a black young man, Son, jumped off ship, landed on a Caribbean island, and sneaked into a mansion, Isle des Chaveliers, built by a retired candy tycoon, Valerian. The old man lived there with his wife, Margaret, and a couple of black servants, Sydney and Ondine. Son was found out but treated as a guest by Valerian. He fell in love with Jadine, the black servants’ niece. Jadine, with a degree in art and a career as a fashion model, was an orphan and Valerian had paid for her education.

Reading Morrison’s novels, one tends to look for a certain character that carries African-American heritage. Most critics have identified Son as such a figure in Tar Baby. He demonstrates black people’s identification with their original culture by
solution is to come in Morrison’s later novels, Tar Baby represents an important phase in which the writer gains an insight into the complication and ambiguity revolving around African-American people’s pursuit of self-knowledge. Moreover, with Son and Jadine’s story, Morrison broadened the concept of alienation to encompass not only social and philosophical but also racial and gender issues. In this way, she has definitely contributed a lot to American literature.

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is one of the most important contemporary American writers. By describing African-American people's suffering, struggling, and transcending, she has successfully recreated the history and culture of black people and enriched the content
of American literature. *Tar Baby*, Morrison’s fourth novel, did not receive so much attention as other novels. The main reason is that the novel did not provide a definite answer about whether black people should adopt the values of the dominant culture or identify with traditional African culture. This study argues that *Tar Baby* represents a transitional phase in Morrison’s pursuit of African-American people’s better way of life. By examining individual’s predicament of choosing to be assimilated or to return to tradition, Morrison shows the complexity and ambiguity involved in the process. The predicament is best manifested in the major characters’ alienation from the society and the culture. The black young man Son upheld traditional culture with all his effort. But, he was alienated from and marginalized in the capitalist society; the traditional community he identified with was backward and underdeveloped economically. In contrast, Jadine adopted the values of white culture and enjoyed her middle-class life in the city. But, she felt unsafe for having being estranged from her culture. Viewed from feminist perspective, her estrangement seems sympathetic as it was women’s revolt against the male nationalism in the black community. The two characters represent two different kinds of alienation, which eventually separate the pair of lovers. As the title of the novel suggests, Morrison believes there should be some kind of element to “hold” things or people “together.” But, who is the tar baby? Morrison just posed the problem and left it to the reader to figure out the answer.

**Keywords:** alienation, capitalism, class, deconolization

提要

湯妮.莫里森是美國當代最重要的作家之一。她的作品描述非裔美國人受苦受難、奮鬥與尋求超越的過程，成功地再現美國黑人的歷史與文化，並且豐富了美國文學的內涵。〈瀝青孩兒〉是湯妮.莫里森的第四本小說，不如其他作品那樣受到重視與討論。原因在於作者在這本小說中，對於黑人應該採取強勢文化的價值觀，或是認同傳統非洲文化，沒有表達較為明確的看法。本研究主張〈瀝青孩兒〉代表莫里森追求非裔美國人美好生活的一個過渡時期，藉由檢視個人在選擇同化或回歸傳統之間所遭遇的困境，顯示過程當中的複雜性與模糊性。作品裡的男主角全力捍衛傳統文化，卻因而與資本主義社會疏離，甚至被邊緣化。但是，他所認同的傳統社會卻是既貧窮又落後。女主角的情況則剛好相反，她接受的是白人的教育，採取其價值觀，樂於過著都市裡中產階級的生活，但由於和自身的文化疏離，時而感到不安與孤獨。但從女性主義的觀點來看，女主角背離自身的根源似乎又情有可原，因為她在抗拒非洲民族主義加上女性的傳統角色。小說中兩個主角互相吸引，卻因各自代表一種形式的疏離，終究無法結合。如同書
名所暗示，莫里森認為需要有某種像瀝青一樣的東西來凝聚人與事物，但誰才是這個〈瀝青孩兒〉？莫里森把問題彰顯出來，留給讀者去思索答案。

關鍵詞：疏離、資本主義、階級、去殖民化

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