



LIGHTED TO LIGHTEN: DECODING THE MYTHICAL CHARACTERS OF WOMEN IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY* AND *PARADISE*

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ABSTRACT



Light is the brightness that adds magnanimity in life. It can empower the weakened, downtrodden classes of the society. The place of women in society differs from culture to culture and from age to age. African Americans, in particular, depend exclusively on the oral tradition and folklore to preserve their thought because access to literacy was forbidden during slavery. The muted voice of the tale telling women, therefore need to be articulated for the sake of female survival and rewriting a history written by mainstream historians is an important enterprise to undertake for marginalized women in order to legitimize their discredited past and present. The present-day authors raise serious questions about African-American identity. Their works re-examine racism and slavery. This literature is within the framework of a larger American literature, but is also independent. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique voices are created, which help to revitalize the larger literary world. This article portrays how the female characters in both the novels capture the darkness in the society and lighten them through their lives. As an African born American writer, Toni Morrison generates characters that resemble normal African-American people and are as prone to mistakes as the next person. Her heroine's work for visibility in a society in which blackness signifies invisibility. She speaks of her writing as 'archaeological explorations', one of her most important concerns being the rewriting of African-American history from an African-American female perspective.

Keywords: *Magnanimity, Revitalize, Prone, Enfranchisement, Empower.*



Woman is always the one who has to bear the stigma of responsibility embedded in her capacity as wife, mother or housekeeper. From times immemorial the burden of responsibility has been tethered to woman. Such a practice had its beginning from Eve and Pandora; while Eve, the biblical character has been held responsible for the fall of Man, Pandora is a mythical character whose curiosity led her to open the sealed box as a result of which all the evil spirits are said to have been released, thus sowing chaos everywhere in the world. Thus all the sufferings of humanity have been traced back to the momentary negligence of archetypal women. Today women are part of almost all spheres of activity and there is an overall sense of empowerment among them. The reality of the situation is however complex and dichotomous as women on the one hand are empowered through education and financial independence but on the other hand they have to constantly battle with the deep - rooted traditional beliefs and practices that are harmful to their ability to attain their true potential as individuals on their own right. Amidst all the socio-political, religious and cultural scenario of the world, women are trying to light the society in darkness. The character and feminine quality of the women is fitted with the metaphor of life. Postmodern writers like Toni Morrison revises the mythical figures through her female characters in the novel and tries to mould them to equip with the society.

Myth is a historical, and carries with it reversible time, but as history, as parole, it expresses non-reversible time. Barthes gives a new twist to this idea when he interprets myth as "depoliticized speech" that acts in close collaboration with ideology. For him, it is a system of communication and a mode of signification that functions within given historical limits and specific social conditions. It is useful to quote at some length Barthes' articulation of the scenario:

What the world supplies to myth is a historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined as the abandonment of the name

"bourgeois", myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things. In it, things lose the memory that they once made. (117)

In the use of folklore, Morrison is fascinated by the magic of fairytales and intrigue with the horrors to be found in monsters, or at least in monstrous behavior. All narratives move in two directions at once like towards recovering the past and towards being heard or told. They grow out of the roots of history, memory and culture and they take flight on the wings of desire. This interplay reminds us that storytelling is the act of repeating stories. So both the writers work as cultural workers and their works validate individual journey outside and the return to home and community. Focusing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to culturally overthrown, both the women writers affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision that once articulated, can be shared though its heritage, roots, survival and intimate possession belong to women alone. Morrison seeks to use the novel in a black way. She continues to incorporate the oral tradition of the Black literary tradition in her fiction. She uses a form of semantic trickery to constitute a discourse of resistance. The memories of the South in the novels are interchangeable with African American ancestral home. She recalls that, "a short street of yellow houses with white doors which women open wide and called out, 'Come on in here, you honey you,' their laughter sprawling like a quilt over the command. But nothing sprawled in this woman's voice" (*Tar Baby* 6). This novel draws on myth and oral narrative to articulate complex issues of identity. She creates an intricate web in which the main characters assume the identity of both TB and Briar Rabbit. Morrison's TB myth matches with that of white farmer's story. Troubled by Briar Rabbit's stealing, farmer makes a baby from sticky tar to tap him. Once stuck fast to the TB, Briar Rabbit relies on his trickster cunning to escape, begging not to throw him into the deathly briar patch. Farmer unaware that the briar patch is where the rabbit is most at home decides to throw him to his doom from which Rabbit makes his escape. Morrison transfers this myth to a contemporary setting in which the figure of the farmer becomes Valerian Street, a white



confectionary magnate in retirement on the French Caribbean island of Isle des Chevaliers, he pursues his horticultural interests.

Jadine, who has secured European education, financed by Valerian and who thus contributes to her construction as the TB ensnaring the trickster Son, a lawless fugitive from American justice. She understands black art and politics but consciously aligns herself with the western aesthetic: "Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of his genius, not the mask-makers" (74). The orphaned Jadine is without a past to which she can return for sustenance, without Son's roots, allowing her to make herself as she feels she should be made but also leaving her vulnerable to exploitation as exotic copper Venus on the cover of French Elle. The woman has "skin like tar", Morrison reclaiming the TB myth, transposing a racial insult into which tar is invested with sacred racial properties. She struggles to resist contact with her racial past, fearful of sticking to it and losing, 'the person she had worked hard to become' (262).

In addition to the farmer's story, Morrison suggests another meaning for TB. She explains that: "I found that there is a TB in American mythology I started thinking about her. At one time a tar pit was a holy place, at last important because tar was a holy place, at last important because tar was used to build things... It held things together. For, the TB goes comes to mean the black woman who can hold things together" (Leclair 122). This quality of tar, to hold things together, is missing in Jadine as a result she acts as a TB created by farmer Valerian to catch a rabbit, Son, the bearer of African- American culture and values. In the legend of the soldier ants, ant is used as a synecdoche for nature reveals the central crisis in Son's life. Morrison makes this clear by stating that: "The soldier ants were not out in the night wind, neither were the bees. But heavy clouds grouped themselves behind the hills as though for a parade" (165). Valerian Street is a key focus of the novel's revisionism. The embodiment of the sustaining myth of the American character, he is the prototype of the individualist who improves upon his American inheritance, candy manufacturing in the

West Indies and creates another fortune for himself by inventive maneuvers in real estate. The American apocalyptic vision of creating the heavenly city on earth is repeated metaphorically in Valerian's re-creating of Isle des Chevaliers. His new rapings on the land represent the continuation of an exploitation which runs through time. Valerian obtains "an an island in the Caribbean for almost nothing; built a house on a hill away from the mosquitoes and vacationed there when he could ... Over the years he sold off parts of it" (53). This new voyage to the Caribbean is identically forged in economics and pragmatism. Morrison is deeply concerned with re-viewing black culture.

Gideon implores Son to forget Jadine and Son insists that one cannot forget a "woman whose eyebrows were a study, whose face was enough to engage your attention all your life ... sound, all the music he had ever wanted to play?" (299). He isolates her beauty and the romantic satisfaction that finds its root in the Platonic idea of the 'other half'. Alma Estee in her "dried-blood red" wig is a parody of these Westernized conceptions of beauty and its superimposition on Black femininity. When Son removes her wig to reveal her "midnight skin and antelope eyes", she is "howled and resecured it on her head with clenched fingers" if he retains any illusory ambitions to reveal Jadine's African beauty to her, this highly stylized joke that Morrison plays on him shakes them from his mind in about of "dizziness" (299). Therese offers to carry Son to the port to hunt down Jadine but, instead of introducing Son to modern reality as the immigrant narrative would suggest, births him back into the realm of myth. She urges him to "get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too" (306). The final paragraph mimetically portrays his re-birth and transformation into a mythic type:

First he *crawled* the rocks one by one, one by one, till his hands touched shore and the *nursing* sound of the sea was behind him. He ... *crawled off* then *stood* up... then took a few tentative steps... He threw out his hands to guide and steady his going. By and by he



walked steadier, now steadier. The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. (306)

Deep-rooted in the American tradition of typological rhetoric, the story of *Paradise* works inevitably like a mirror to American history, as the "American". The novel attests to the centrality of religious symbolism, especially that taken from Puritan theology and American civil religion, in the formation of ethnic identities. As with other ethnic groups, the adoption of the Puritan typological rhetoric on the part of the African American inhabitants of Ruby is an index to their Americanization. But, at the same time, it serves to define a "new ethnic people hood in contradistinction to a general American identity" (Sollors 49). The very structure of the novel can be read as a result of the jeremiad tradition. Characterized by a complex mixture of voices and memories, past and present, dreams, myths and reality, religion, superstition and magic, objectivity and subjectivity, the whole narrative is triggered by a murder, a moment of simultaneous triumph and damnation that opens the novel and causes an unprecedented confusion among the Ruby inhabitants, which is perceived as "the total collapse of a town" (304) by Anna and Misner.

Oklahoma was the land of heartbreak for the free black citizens who voyaged there, post- Reconstruction, to set up 26 all-black towns. Founded by descendants of southern blacks who were effectively re enslaved during the post-Reconstruction era through the share-cropping system and adamant white determination to block them from economic and political enfranchisement by means legal and illegal, Ruby is a paradise for its inhabitants that are also established on the principle of exclusivity. The founding families of Ruby are distinguished by their impeccable dark skin, evidence that they have not been corrupted by "racial tampering" (197). The grandfathers of Ruby's citizens always referred to by the community as the "Old Fathers" fled the white terrorism of the South, only to be rejected by a prosperous settlement of light-skinned blacks, appropriately called "Fairly"

(195). This rebuff, known as the "Disallowing" by the townspeople, is the historical moment that provides the impetus for migrating westward to found the township of Haven, and later, for moving "farther westward" to found Ruby (194).

The black skin of Ruby's citizens, Morrison calls as 8-rocks, referring to the eight original families, inverts the historical landmark of Plymouth Rock; Ruby's Old Fathers are avatars of none other than the founding fathers of the United States. Pat Best, a mixed-race woman with light skin, supposes that what bonds the 8- rock families is the fact that they all have dark skin and work to maintain that purity. Pat's father, Roger Best, married and bore children with a light-skinned woman, Delia Best. Morrison reverses the traditional belief of many black communities that the closer the skin is to whiteness, the more valuable a person becomes. Like the early English immigrants, the 8-rocks create a harbour from persecution that is maintained by geographic and cultural isolation, violence committed by men who "bowed to no one knelt only to their Maker" (99) "Unique and isolated", "free and protected" (7). The 8-rocks seek to build a haven that will allow them to pursue their ideals in freedom, it is a freedom maintained by enforcing their own disallowing. All of the characters in the novel are haunted by past events, from the disallowings that result in Ruby's stagnant existence to the violent episodes each of the Convent women endures before their separate arrivals. The residents of Ruby and the Convent inhabit a locale that is in varying ways an attempted utopia, a refuge, a home, a version of an earthly paradise, but also an experiment whose success has become highly problematic and therefore subject to widely diverse interpretations.

For Rubyites, the Convent is an open sign, freely available for interpretation but not sufficiently known to allow any single interpretation to achieve full credibility. For some, such as Soane Morgan, it is a place for quiet talks with a long-term friend. For others, such as Arnette Fleetwood and Wisdom Poole, it is a place for temporary refuge. The most significant of these interpretations is the growing sense among some Rubyites that the Convent is not a sanctuary but a "coven" (276), a place where abortions and lesbianism and other supposedly



unspeakable horrors are committed, a place that is responsible for the tensions and disharmonies within Ruby. The building itself has a terrible past superficially exhibited in the nuns' attempts to demolish all traces of its spotty and racy former owner. The embezzler who built the house and lost it when he was arrested by Northern law men had created a gentlemen's club complete with "female torso candleholders", "nursing cherubim" suggestive doorknobs and water spigots, and "nude statuary"(72). Gigi finds that the remains of convent represent items the nuns did not remove or simply coated with thick paint. Connie notes that her first tasks upon entering the Convent were to "smash offending marble figures and tend bonfires of books, crossing herself when naked lovers blew out of the fire and had to be chased back to the flame. After entering the Convent, Gigi, "immediately recognized the conversion of the dining room into a schoolroom; the living room into a chapel; and the game room alteration to an office" (72).

From the original settlers of Haven through the next generation in Ruby, the families have shared a communal Oven, and Stewart and Deacon's grandfather added a statement which the old generation believes that the sentence was a warning: "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (86), the younger generation with Misner's support wants to change it to "Be the Furrow of His Brow" (87). The older generation believes that the statement is a sacred command, while the younger generation aware of the civil rights movement outside of Ruby's limits, and wishes to change it to reflect a more cooperative stance with God. In Misner's observation the people have no stories of their own and have only the town's history, Deacon tells the young people: "So understand me when I tell you nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who went through hell to learn knew" (86). Stewart's response is that "If you, anyone of you ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake" (87).

Women are invariably viewed by the male elite as either outsider temptresses or potential loose insiders. Eventually, the outsiders will also be turned into witches. Whereas the outside temptresses, like

Eve in the Old Testament, can destroy the man's virtue or get pregnant and produce a miscegenated race, in both cases the control over race is linked to the control over woman as the ultimate producers of generations. Like Consolata, the rest of the women who over the years had come to live in the convent as an escape from the male control. They are viewed as the permanent threat that can put an end to their life as American Adams in their mythic paradise; the disturbing element that, by making a single man fails endangers the whole community. Woman's power over life as mother or as midwife causes fear among the Ruby men, as Fairy DuPres, their first midwife, notes. Because men feel excluded from this power over life, they are suspicious and ready to link it to the devil, rather than to God. The novel claims the supernatural role of women by linking all the magic elements it contains two female characters and by endowing some of them with special powers over life. The women who own these powers are not the mothers, but the midwives, over whose work hangs a shadow of doubt and fear.

The recent generation who preserves and mythologies the past is by the twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan, who inherit the role of the grandfather, Zechariah Morgan. The role of the Morgan brothers in the construction of the myth of origins is decisive. They create a flattering image of the community and of themselves that promotes social pride and complacency through symbols such as the Oven, which "both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done" (7). The legendary, mythical communal roots of Ruby are institutionalized through its ritualization in a play featuring the nativity. Held every year two week before Christmas, it retells the foundational myth of the Exodus of what they call the Bethlehem and the subsequent birth of baby Jesus. The performance invests not only the Old fathers but Ruby itself with sacred meaning. The play reveals Stewart and Deacon as the warrantors of Winthrop's hierarchical community. As God's steward and deacon, His mediators on earth, they are invested with divine power to erase families from the play as a way of public admonishment and disapproval towards those who fallen in disfavor. Similarly Nathan Du Press in the role of the Biblical prophet articulates his



particular Jeremiad in his introductory speech to the nativity play. After referring to the goodness of the land they inhabit, he refers to an unprecedented sadness that invades him at the present moment. He can only explain it through an allegorical dream which is taken as one more "of old Nathan's incoherent dreams" (205). In his dream, Ruby symbolized by the virginal white flowers of cotton that speak of a people's slavery past and of their purification through suffering, becomes red "Like blood drops" (205) is significantly the color of the precious stone whose name the town bears. Nathan links the meaning of his dream to that of the myth of origins represented in the play and admonishes his fellow citizens against misinterpreting their mission: it shows the strength of our crop if we understand it. But it can break us if we don't. And bloody us too. He finishes with hopeful words "May God blesses the pure and holy and may nothing keep us apart from each other or from the One who does the blessing. Amen" (205).

Morrison's treatment of the relationship between history and myth reveals both oral and written histories to be to be subsumed as part of American mythic history. The war interrupts the twins experience of Haven and their return to the town does not satiate the longing that their pre-war memories of it breeds: "The twins started at their dwindling post war future and it was not hard to persuade other home boys to repeat what the Old fathers had done in 1890. So to escape the "sheer destructive power" of "snakes, the depression, the taxman and the railroad ..." (17) "... fifteen miles moved out of Haven ... deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could climb from the grovel contaminating the town their grandfathers had made"(16). Morrison's implicit analogy between Ruby and early America is the fact that Ruby's stories, flush with both Old and New Testament allusions, make a knowledge of the Bible as essential for the fictional generations as they share the tale. This aspect of the Ruby community inevitably recalls the function of the Bible in Puritan American culture..

The novel is replete with biblical allusions. Leaving fairly, the families wander westward for three days, after which Zechariah leads his son Rector to a spot deep within "the piney wood" where

both kneel and wait all night. He said "My father", "Zechariah here" (96). Zechariah echoes Old Testament figures Abraham, Moses, Samuel and Isaiah each of who respond to the Lord calling their names with the declaration 'Here I am'. Zechariah's leading his son to the Garden of Gethsemane at night, where he kneels and desperately prays, calling out, "My father..." And, like Jesus' disciples, his son sleep during the night. Rector wakes in time to witness God's reply: "footsteps-loud like a giant's tread ... They saw him at the same time. A small man, seem like, too small for the sound of his steps". Rector at his father's command returns with the whole of the families whom he has gathered, "They found him right there, standing straighter than the pines, his sticks tossed away..." Thus begins the families "purposeful" (97) journey. This has a great resemblance with God's first revealing Himself to Moses alone, and then leading Moses and the Israelites by a cloud that moved across the wilderness and settled on the Promised Land. So instead of a materialistic, acquisitive pursuit of a worldly home, it offers the transcendent vision of a spiritual home, a home virtually in God's presence, within God's unadulterated love.

Through the matrix of myth and folklore, the stories we have not heard, the ones we need to hear again. On their individual literary journeys, both writers sought to create this reciprocal relationship between their fiction and their readers. Through the portrayals of women characters in both the novels Toni Morrison demonstrate that women lighted the society in the midst of all the darkness and she itself was a light. The femininity from traditional to postmodernism depicts how to lead, empower the family and society through the character. The light to the society tries to reveal the truth, wisdom and the true knowledge to lead the society in a better harmony. Through the light it tries to transform the negatives into positives.

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