CHAPTER 3
TONI MORRISON AND THE MYTH OF THE TAR BABY
This chapter focuses on Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (first published in 1981) to explore how the novel demythifies the ancient tar baby myth in the context of twentieth century United States. Through this de-mythification Morrison depicts the role that gender, migration, race, class, and cultural imperialism play in the apparently spontaneous process of mythification.

It is important to clarify here that unlike the Murieta and the Sati myth, the myth of the tar baby is not based on any real incident. It is a “traditional myth”, that is, what Lévi-Strauss considers as stories where “animals are endowed with human attributes” (Leach, 2004: ix). It is generally known as an African myth, but it has nearly three-hundred versions from all over the world. And in order to understand Morrison’s demythification it is necessary to study some versions of this myth.

The present chapter is divided into two major sections. The first section focuses on some African and African-American versions of the ancient tar baby story to analyse the effect of race/migration on mythification. The second section studies Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* to understand how she demythifies the myth from her own perspectives.
Aurelio M. Espinosa (1930a, 1930b, 1943) has traced the origin and history of the tar baby story.¹ He has studied 267 versions of the tar baby myth from all over the world, although in many of the versions, like most of the versions from India, the ‘tar baby’ does not exist at all. Espinosa has concentrated on the motif of getting stuck in something sticky, a motif that actually exists in all these 267 versions.² However, as I have already stated, I shall concentrate only on the African and African-American versions of the myth, as these are the versions directly related to Toni Morrison’s novel. But before moving on to these versions I shall give a structural synopsis of the tar baby story.

Someone (human or animal) steals something from a farm, or water from a well. The owner of the farm or well (again, human or animal) sets a trap, generally a doll made of tar or a bucket of tar, or tar stump; to catch the thief. The thief is caught, and then either he is beaten hard or he hoodwinks the farm owner and escapes. Almost all the versions of the tar baby myths are built upon this gross structure.

However, a wide variety is found regarding the treatment of each of the steps and characters. While in the African versions the thief is generally regarded as a villain, in the African American versions he becomes the celebrated ‘trickster hero’. Espinosa (1930a) has pointed out that in most of the African versions the thief is caught and given a sound

¹ Espinosa believes that the myth originated in India, and that the earliest example of the myth was found in two Buddhist texts, Samyutta Nikaya and in Jataka, 55.
² Further studies on the tar baby myth have been made by Johnson (1940) and Cline (1930).
beating, and sometimes the ashamed thief metamorphosizes into a spider\textsuperscript{3}. However, the African American versions illustrate how the thief hoodwinks the farm owner with his mock plea and escapes by sheer presence of mind and trick. The mock plea, according to Espinosa, is present in the 56\% of the African American versions (20 out of 36 versions) while in Africa the rate is 31\% (8 out of 26 versions).\textsuperscript{4}

This significant change of the ashamed thief of the African versions into the famous trickster of the African American literatures shows the impact of migration on myths. The African versions, irrespective of their diversities, like any other folktale, uphold certain values of African society. And therefore, it is necessary to show that a thief is always punished. However, African American society is different from ‘traditional’ African societies. The ‘black’ people of Africa who were brought to North America as slaves had to struggle every minute to survive, to retain their identity, their rights. As part of this struggle they had to learn a lot of things, a lot of ‘tricks’ which would defend their life and identity from the ‘whites’. And gradually the act of defending oneself from the ‘whites’ by hook or by crook became a heroic act. Thus the African villain became the celebrated African American trickster, and the capacity to hoodwink the ‘other’ became a popular quality of a hero:

The American Negro slave, adopting Brer Rabbit as hero, represented him as the most frightened and helpless of creatures. No hero-animals in Africa or elsewhere were so completely lacking in strength. But the slaves took pains to give Brer Rabbit other significant qualities. He became in their stories by turn a practical joker, a braggart, a wit, a

\textsuperscript{3} This is the typical version of the story of Anansi, the spider.
\textsuperscript{4} Since the timings of these versions are still unknown, it is difficult to ascertain which of the African versions are older, the ones with mock plea or the ones without, a fact that could have given a very interesting insight into the process of mythification and migration.
glutton, a lady’s man, and a trickster. But his essential characteristic was his ability to get the better of bigger and stronger animals. To the slave in this condition the theme of weakness overcoming strength through cunning proved endlessly fascinating. (Hughes & Bontemps, 1966: ix)

Thus in the mythic system of signification ‘tar baby’ came to signify a trap which the ‘powerful white’ set up to ensnare the ‘powerless blacks’. And the ‘trickster’ is the one who, even though caught in this trap, has enough cunning and presence of mind to set himself free. Clearly, this change is related to the import of ‘black’ slaves from Africa to North America, and the story depicts how the ‘blacks’ reacted to the racial discrimination in North America.5

However, there is yet another aspect of the tar baby myth. The story of the tar bay became well known even in ‘white’ America; and the ‘whites’ could not accept being hoodwinked for ever by the ‘blacks’. The ‘white’ people could not change the popular story of the trickster hero, but they did find a way to vent their hatred and anger. Gradually ‘tar baby’ became a racial name, a derogatory word to refer to the ‘blacks’. As the ‘traditional’ African society regards tar as sacred, the nomenclature ‘tar baby’ also served to belittle the African traditions and beliefs. Thus the myth actually becomes a site of racial struggle. And Morrison, in her novel, highlights this aspect of the myth. In an interview she discusses this transition of the tar baby from something sacred to a racial tag:

Tar Baby is also a name, like 'nigger,' that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall…. At one time, a tar

5 To this extent, the trickster can be regarded as a social hero. Like Joaquin Murieta, the trickster is also created by the society in order to defend their own identity and rights from the ‘whites’.
pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things.... It held together things like Moses' little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. (Jokinen, 1997)

In order to understand Morrison’s reworking of the tar baby myth, it is important to remember two things. Firstly, irrespective of the treatment the thief received, ‘tar baby’, as a trap, never fails. That is, the thief is always successfully caught by setting the trap of tar baby. And secondly, unlike most of the other versions, in the African and African American versions, the tar bay is mostly female. According to Espinosa (1930a) 35% (9 out of 26 versions) of all African versions portray tar baby as a female, while among all the versions from all over the world the percentage is only 18 (27 out of 152 versions). And generally there is a courtship episode between the animal caught, usually a rabbit in these versions, and the female tar baby.¹⁶

II

*Tar Baby* centres on Jadine, a ‘black’ American woman of the twentieth century, a graduate of Sorbonne, an art-historian, a model working and living in Paris; and Son, another ‘black’ American, a criminal on the run, a person devoid of any formal education

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¹⁶ For details, see Espinosa (1930a, 1943).
and proud of his ‘black’ identity. The omniscient narrator of the novel narrates through eleven chapters—which are again divided into several sections—how these two very unlike persons fall in love with each other and how their cultural and intellectual differences stand between them finally breaking them apart. Interwoven with this pair, there are three other pairs: a ‘pure white’ couple, Valerian and Margaret Streets; their servants: a ‘pure black’ couple Sydney and Ondine; and an indigenous couple Gideon and Thérèse, also referred to as Yardman and Mary.

A brief outline of the story is as follows. Valerian, a rich American businessman, shifted to Caribbean to spend his retired life there. He was living in a Caribbean island with his American wife Margaret, cook Ondine, and her husband, Valerian’s butler Sydney. Jadine, the orphan niece of Sydney and Ondine joined them to spend the Christmas there. On Christmas Eve they ‘discovered’ a ‘black’ man who had been hiding in Margaret’s closet. To the horror of every person in the house, Valerian invited this man to stay with them instead of handing him over to the police. Gradually Jadine and the ‘black’ man Son, fell in love with each other, and together, went to New York. However, after spending almost a year happily together, their cultural difference became so pronounced that Jadine left Son and returned to Paris. The intricate structure of the plot has been depicted through the complex design of the novel. The plot moves more or less lineally with occasional flash-backs to the past.

The unique narrative strategy of the book is also reflected right from the beginning. Actually the novel begins before the first chapter. Morrison commences the
story with a prologue, although she never uses the word prologue. In this section, before
the formal beginning of the story, Morrison narrates the flight of Son from a ship and his
arrival on an unknown island. Gradually, it is revealed that it is an imaginary island in the
Caribbean, which actually symbolises a confluence of the cultures of Europe, North
America, Latin America and Africa. And the first ominous hint of the cultural conflict is
given at the end of the prologue, when Son found himself “gazing at the shore of an
island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it.”
(Morrison, 1997: 6) Besides creating a mythical atmosphere, through this sentence the
narrator also hints on the backdrop of the story, that it is situated on an island which has a
history of slave trading. The dwellers are mainly ‘whites’ whose attitude towards the
‘black’ slaves have not been particularly tolerant.

Unlike Allende and Mahasweta, Morrison has not spelled out the temporal
backdrop of her story. However, several hints are scattered throughout the text to infer
the time. For instance, while describing a dream of Jadine, Morrison mentions several
famous actresses of 1930s, 1940s – like Norma Shearer, Mae West, Jeannette MacDonald
– and then comments in the voice of the third person narrator, “the dreamer is too young
to have seen their movies or remembered them if she had” (41). Thus, it can be deduced
that Morrison is portraying her contemporary world, that is, a world during 1960s, 1970s.

The third person narrator of the novel is truly an omniscient and omnipresent
narrator who narrates facts, the present as well as the past, provides insight into the
character’s minds, and sometimes detaches itself from the events and becomes a
commentator on the events. To perform all these functions the narrator assumes various
voices, which are at times conflicting, to depict the conflict of cultures/thoughts. For instance, the first line of the first chapter is, “The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle de Chevaliers.” (7) This sentence, apparently narrated by a third person omniscient narrator, actually contains two distinct voices. One voice claims that the space in question is “the end of the world”; signifying that it is not a part of, what the voice considers to be “the world”. Thus this voice alludes to a centrist viewpoint. The other voice confirms that this supposed “end of the world” is actually a habitable land, inhabited by the ‘civilised’ people who have built “magnificent houses” on the island. So the space is not the “end of the world”, on the contrary an imitation of the ‘West’. The presence of such conflicting voices is evident throughout the text which brings into play the conflicting worldviews.

Gradually, the readers are introduced to the “most impressive” (8) house on the Isle de Chevaliers, called L’Arbe de la Croix, which is like a microcosm of Isle de Chevaliers. While the latter is a natural place, the former is artificial. This house was designed by a Mexican architect and built by Haitian labourers, which draws attention to how the ‘west’ has achieved magnificence through the toil of the ‘others’. The house symbolises a modern space that holds together several different, and sometimes conflicting, cultures. The owners of the house, the Streets, are a ‘pure white’ couple, the husband, Valerian, from Philadelphia and the wife, Margaret, from Maine. In contrast, their servants, Sydney and Ondine, are a ‘pure black’ couple. Jadine – the major protagonist of the novel, “the copper Venus” (115) – stands in between these two extremes. She is related to Sydney and Ondine, and thus has a ‘pure black’ heritage. Yet,
her skin is not black, but “honey-coloured”. The Streets have sponsored her education in New York and Paris. Therefore she is familiar with, and to a certain extent influenced, by ‘white’ culture. Thus Jadine also becomes a site of cultural/racial struggle, like the tar baby myth.

Very significantly, all the direct references to tar or the tar baby myth have been made in this novel in connection to Jadine. Tar here becomes a symbol of ‘blackness’ or ‘African-ness’. Tar signifies the consistency that has been a characteristic attribute of the ‘blacks’ as opposed to the ‘whites’. Therefore Son tried to breathe into Jadine the consistency of tar. Later, when Jadine fell into a swamp in a jungle, “the women hanging in the trees” (183) accused her of being inconsistent. In fact, the women were hurt to see her severe struggle to get out of the swamp, to “get away from them”:

They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. This girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant – mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids...knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers, their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl’s desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (184)

This is, in fact, the chief problem of Jadine; that she wants to be different from her ancestors. In fact, as a ‘black’ model and film star in Paris, she is different form her
ancestors to a large extent. Jadine’s difference from her ancestor women has been reiterated in this novel. And the novel seeks to address the problems of such differences. However, it is also important to note that since her childhood Jadine was initiated into a different world by her ancestors themselves. It was Sydney and Ondine who insisted that she study in Europe. Jadine, however, got out of the swamp all by herself with the help of the tree “that had danced with her” (184), which was an indication of her strength. Later in New York, Jadine would compare Son with this tree “that wanted to dance with her” (232). Son pulled her into another swamp, from which she again got out all by herself:

Son is an extremist who hates everything associated with the ‘white’ culture, and eulogises the ‘black’ culture, and he is the one to make the only explicit reference to the tar baby myth in this entire novel. He told the story of tar baby to Jadine with an explicit hint that Jadine is the tar baby. Interestingly, the story that he told Jadine differs considerably from any of the versions Espinosa has collected. Son refers to the farm owner as a “white man”, and tar baby to Son, is a trap that the “white farmer” made to catch the “black thief”:

Once upon a time there was a farmer — a white farmer… and he had this bullshit bullshit bullshit farm. And a rabbit. A rabbit came along and ate a couple of his… ow… cabbages… just a few cabbages, you know what I mean?… so he got this great idea about how to get him. How to, to trap… this rabbit. And you know what he did? He made him a tar baby. He made it, you hear me? He made it! (273)
Clearly the emphasis of this story is on the fact that the ‘white’ farmer “made” the tar baby to entrap the rabbit. During the Christmas dinner at L’Arbe de la Croix, Son was disturbed by Jadine’s proximity to Valerian. Son expected Jadine to act like Sydney and Ondine, and did not appreciate in the least, her attempts to reconcile the quarrel that broke out over dinner regarding the dismissal of Yardman and Mary. He thought Jadine’s familiarity with the “white” culture should repel her even more, “Jadine who should know better…because she had been made by them, coached by them and should know by heart the smell of their huge civilized latrines.” (205). Instead, her attempts at reconciliation coupled with her proximity to Valerian made Son feel as if she was “escaping out of his hands” and “doing the bidding of his boss and “patron”.” (206). The “white farmer” in the tar baby story clearly refers to Valerian who made Jadine what she is, for he is the one who sponsored her education. And Jadine, according to Son, is a tar baby, a trap set up by ‘white’ Valerian to entrap the ‘black’. This reminds us of the African and African American versions of the tar baby myth, where the tar baby is generally a female. And the analogy becomes stronger by the presence of a ‘courtship’ between Son and Jadine. However, while equating Jadine with the ‘tar baby’ Son overlooked a crucial difference – Jadine was not a doll, she was a living being. Like tar baby, Jadine also becomes a site of racial struggle. Nevertheless, she plays a far more assertive role in that struggle than Son could have expected. The exact nature of this struggle is revealed through this discussion.

Morrison’s attempt to create a mythical atmosphere is prominent right from the beginning. The first chapter opens on an imaginary island, Isle de Chevaliers, and from the very beginning Morrison highlights the mythical aspect of the book. In the first
chapter she narrates the history of the Isle de Chevaliers in a fabulous way. Instead of narrating the facts, she chose nature – clouds, fish, birds, flowers, trees and rivers – as active agents to depict the changes that have been imposed on the island:

When the labourers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over… Wild parrots that had escaped the stones of hungry children in Queen of France agreed and raised havoc as they flew away to look for yet another refuge. …The clouds looked at each other, then broke apart in confusion. Fish heard their hooves as they raced off to carry the news of the scatterbrained river to the peaks of hills and the tops of the champion daisy trees. But it was too late. The men had gnawed through the daisy trees until, wild-eyed and yelling, they broke in two and hit the ground. In the huge silence that followed their fall, orchids spiralled down to join them. (7-8)

This picture of a massive destruction signifies how men, interfering with the nature, obliterated the “true and ancient” world order:

The men had already folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed her where there had been no hollow, which explains what happens to the river. It crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way. …until exhausted, ill and grieving, it slowed to a stop just twenty leagues short of the sea. (7)
Thus personifying nature, Morrison simultaneously portrays a poignant picture of the destruction of the old world, and creates a mythical atmosphere.

The concept of “true and ancient” world order becomes particularly important as we recall that the book is dedicated to a set of women “all of whom knew their true and ancient properties”, and Duvall (1997) has pointed out that they are all women of Morrison’s family. In the last chapter, partially blind Thérèse brought Son back to the mythical world of blind horsemen, where one cannot see the way, but must feel it. And finally she advised Son to forget Jadine because, “There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties.” (308). Although Morrison does not define these “true and ancient properties”; the entire novel can be read as a clash between these “true and ancient” properties on the one hand, and ‘artificial and modern’ properties on the other. Son and Jadine, apparently, represent these two world orders, respectively.

The notion of displacement that Morrison creates through clouds and fish and trees, becomes an important motif in the novel. The Streets are displaced from their ‘home’. Valerian Street chose to spend his retired life away from the madding crowd of Philadelphia, in the calm and beautiful Isle de Chevaliers. But he nurtured his wife’s illusion that “they still lived in the States but were wintering near Dominique.” (11). Although Valerian satisfied his nostalgia for the Philadelphia ambience by growing northern flowers in his greenhouse where he even installed an air conditioner. Valerian’s unwillingness to give up his connection with States is manifested through his anxious waiting for post. His wife Margaret wants to celebrate Christmas in Caribbean with roasted turkey and apple pie. Valerian’s disability to cope up with changes becomes

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7 Paquet (1990) has discussed in detail the role of ancestors in this novel.
evident when the narrator tells us that he has given up reading because “the language in
them had changed so much” (12). He would not change his “Philadelphia shoes” even
though they cause him corny feet.

In fact, Morrison further complicates the notion of displacement by introducing the
motif of exile. Valerian’s exile is a self-imposed exile. He exiled himself because he
could not bear the feeling of alienation, the feeling of being left out, in his well-known
city:

The fact was he’d become a stranger in his own city and chose not to spend his retirement there at exactly sixty-five (or close to) in order to avoid watching it grow away from him. (143)

However, he cannot cope up with the tropical atmosphere either, which makes his
displacement even more prominent. Paradoxically, due to their rigidness and want for
adjustability, the Streets lack a sense of belonging which is reflected in their life and
house as well, “Except for the kitchen, which had a look of permanence, the rest of the
house had a hotel feel about it – a kind of sooner or later leaving appearance…” (10).

Significantly, it is only the kitchen that has a look of permanence in the house,
and the kitchen is the zone of Ondine and Sydney, the ‘pure black’ couple who serves the
Streets. This ‘pure black’ couple provides Morrison the opportunity to contrast it with a
‘pure white’ couple to depict that both these ‘pure’ races have their own flaws, which are,
to a large extent, similar. While the ‘whites’ consider themselves the masters, the
‘blacks’, consciously or unconsciously, fall into the trap of cultural imperialism. Since Ondien and Sydney are serving the Streets household for a long time, they are also familiar with, and also quite influenced, by that ‘white’ culture. Ondine had not wanted Jadine to marry either her ‘white’ boyfriend, or the ‘black’ Son. Although she liked Son as a person, he could not be a suitable husband for Jadine because “He ain’t got a dime and no prospect of one.” (192). However, the financial prospect (or lack of it) was clearly not her main concern, for she did not chose the ‘white’ boyfriend either, who was rich enough to gift Jadine a coat made of the skin of ninety baby seals. Ironically, it was Ondine and Sydney who insisted on giving Jadine a ‘white’ education. They considered themselves better than other “coloured people”. Since Margaret prefers mangoes for breakfast, Ondine expresses her reticent anger against the “Principal Beauty” by confirming that “even the coloured people down here don’t eat mangoes.” (31). This depicts how the ‘blacks’ assimilates the ‘whites’ logic and gradually make it ‘universal’. Paulo Freire has explained in his *Pedagogy of Oppressed* how the oppressed people internalise the image of the oppressors as ‘model’ human being, and in their struggle to become “humanised” they finally end up becoming like the oppressor:

…during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors”. ... Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of “adhesion” to the oppressor. ...This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression. …the one pole
aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole. (1973: 30)

Incidentally, the acts of cooking and eating become very significant in this novel. Most of the actions and conversations of this novel, especially in L’Arbe de la Croix, take place either in the kitchen or on the dining table. Generally it is the ‘pure blacks’ who cook and the ‘pure whites’ who eat; once again signifying that the ‘whites’ survive on the toil of the ‘blacks’. Ondine and the ‘black’ women in Eloé normally cook. Ondine was pretty conscious about the power that she acquired by cooking for her masters. She even proclaimed herself to be the mistress of ‘her’ kitchen, because she is the one who uses it, “Yes my kitchen and yes my help. If not mine, whose?” (208). However, ‘white’ women also cook occasionally, signifying a commonality of ‘black’ and ‘white’ women. Only once Margaret went to cook, and then Valerian felt “everything was in its place as it should be” (188). Although he knew very well Margaret was not an expert cook, he insisted to increase the number of dishes, and when Margaret asked for his help he knew how to dodge, “I’ll be entertaining the guests. I can’t to both. And that’s not what you said. You said you’d do the whole dinner for everybody.” (189). Margaret, nevertheless, abandoned the cooking midway and Ondine had to finish it. Apart from this, once more in the entire novel Margaret is seen in the kitchen, and that was to chat with Ondine. Thus kitchen becomes the only space that a ‘black’ and a ‘white’ woman can share. Son’s image of ‘pure black’ women are also associated with the kitchen. It is interesting to note
that Jadine never cooks, which is one of the various instances of how she differs from the women with “true and ancient” properties.

The ‘universal’ nature of motherhood is put into question through ‘black’ as well as ‘white’ women. Margaret and Ondine represent biological and emotional motherhood respectively, and their failure to mother their children properly challenges both these two types of motherhood. The failures of these two mothers are depicted through Michael’s attempts at keeping a safe distance from Margaret and Jadine’s feeling of being an orphan. An interesting similarity between Margaret and Ondine is their unsatisfied longing for a child. By revealing Margaret’s “secret” – that she used to torture her baby – Morrison also uncovers this secret similarity between Ondine and Margaret, a ‘pure black’ and a ‘pure white’, and the tension between them. To Ondine, Margaret was “the Principal Beauty” and nothing more. Her hatred for Margaret had been reiterated all through the book, and only in the sixth chapter it was revealed that she actually witnessed Margaret mistreating her son, Michael. However, it is also important to note that she never revealed it to anyone all through these years, not even for the sake of protecting the helpless baby. She chose the Christmas night to publicise the secret of her ‘white’ mistress – “she [Margaret] stuck pins in his behind. Burned him with cigarettes.” (209) – when this revelation would only exacerbate the situation, and would not help anybody. The third person narrator reveals that on the Christmas night, Ondine was particularly unhappy due to her displacement from her kitchen, and also because she had to act following Margaret’s wishes. Margaret did not care what Ondine wanted. She sent

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8 An interesting analysis of food imageries in Tar Baby has been made by House (1984).
Ondine out of the kitchen in order to cook the dinner herself, and then dumped her with the incomplete cooking for none of her preferred guests would come:

…she (Ondine) was deeply unhappy about being thrown out of her kitchen in the first place and then pushed back in when Margaret abandoned the whole thing halfway through because the guests were different. (196)

 Revealing Margaret’s “secret” on the dinner table was Ondine’s own way of refusing to act in accordance with the ‘whites’ demand. Son blamed Ondine for “keeping her white lady’s secret “lak it wuz hern” and loving her white lady’s baby “lak it wuz hern, too”.” (227). In fact, Ondine confessed it to Margaret that “once I started keeping it – then it was like my secret too.” (243). She ascribed it to her love for the baby. However, she did not rear Jadine. Of course she urged her master to give the orphan child a proper education, but she had not tried to supplement the love.

Michael, Margaret’s son, though never appears in the novel in person, plays a very significant role. On the one hand he represents the ‘white’ fantasy which wants “a race of exotics skipping around being picturesque for him” (71), on the other hand, he is an absent cause, a catalyst who determines the route of the plot. He represents the romanticisation of ‘pure black’ in USA. Michael told Jadine that by exposing herself to ‘western’ education system she was abandoning her history and her people. Significantly, Valerian referred to Michael as the “cultural orphan who sought other cultures he could love without risk or pain” (145).
Like Ondine and Margaret, there is a striking resemblance between Jadine and Michael. Neither Jadine nor Michael had a childhood as such. Michael was tortured by her partly sadist mother, who used her poor son to vent her frustration with her husband, her life. Jadine lost her own parents early in her childhood and was then sent out to the ‘white’ world for her education. At the beginning of the novel Margaret pined for her son. When she stopped pining for him, Ondine started to hold on to Jadine. Both Michael and Jadine, however, preferred to live away from their parents and foster parents, respectively.

The ‘discovery’ of Son in L’Arbe de la Croix is a crucial turning point of the text. Morrison spends the first three and half chapters portraying the ‘pure black’ and ‘pure white’ couples, and Jadine. These chapters reveal the pent-up tension in the apparently peaceful L’Arbe de la Croix. This strained peace is shattered in the evening when a ‘black’ man was ‘discovered’ hiding in Margaret’s closet. Valerian invited this unknown man to a drink, not out of respect for this poor man who had been hiding in the closet like a thief without stealing anything or harming anybody. Valerian wanted to show off his generosity, and most importantly, this seemed to him the best way to irritate his wife. He particularly enjoyed acting against the others’ will, because that satisfied his ego. The fact that his orders are always carried out even if they are contradictory to the majority’s will, gives him immense satisfaction and enhances his feeling of being the master of the world. By inviting Son to dinner, Valerian refused to accept his lapses:

…to acknowledge his mistake in not taking Margaret seriously…to admit that he was not capable of judgement
in a crisis, that he was wrong, that she was right, that his house had been violated and he neither knew it or believed it when it was discovered and it had been Sydney who had the foresight to have a gun and the legs to ferret out the intruder… (145)

Son’s presence adds a different dimension to the problems of racism which Morrison has been hinting right from the beginning. The ‘pure black’ element was already present in the Streets’ household through Sydney and Ondine. However, they represent the ‘pure black’ element that is accepted by the ‘pure whites’. But Son was running away from the ‘whites’ law, ‘whites’ society. He represents that ‘black’ element which clashes with the ‘whites’ system. Thus Morrison highlights the heterogeneity of the so called pure black culture.

The question of racial identity looms large throughout the novel. Son conceived of ‘white’ identity as opposed to ‘black’ identity. Apart from his favourite dream of “yellow houses with white doors”, he also had another dream – a dream regarding the life of the ‘whites’:

…the wide lawn places where little boys in Easter white shorts played tennis under their very own sun. A sun whose sole purpose was to light their way, golden their hair and reflect the perfection of their Easter white shorts. (140)

The dream clearly reflects the age-old exploitations of the ‘blacks’ by the ‘whites’ – a subtle but prolonged process of cultural hegemony which claims even the sun as their personal property. However, in the Streets’ house, while watching Yardman working on
the garden, this imagery of “the wide lawn” brought tears to Son’s eyes, although “He had fingered that image hundreds of times before and it had never produced tears” (140). Because, then it was just a distant image of the life of the ‘whites’. But standing in the house of the Streets’, after bathing clean and with a clean towel wrapped around, Son imagined himself as privileged as the ‘whites’ and in contrast, the black, bent down, working figure of Yardman made him more conscious about the difference between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’. Son felt as if “something was leaving him and all he could see was its back” (140). Son feared that by taking refuge in a ‘white’ house, and by wrapping an “Easter white towel” around, he was losing his ‘blackness’, becoming different from the ‘blacks’. It is important to note that Son here does not feel sorry for Yardman, but for himself, because, he feels his present position has made him different from Yardman, and from ‘blacks’ in general.

Racism becomes even more evident in Ondine and Sydney’s reaction when Valerian takes in Son, the ‘pure black’ man who hates ‘white’ culture. Significantly, Margaret as well as Sydney and Ondine, all regarded the ‘black’ man hidden in Margaret’s closet as a thief. Margaret’s initial reaction clearly shows that she was not afraid of an unknown person hiding in her closet, but the fact that it was a ‘black’ man, frightened her most. She regards him as some sort of an infection that was “In her things. Actually in her things.” (85). Sydney, on the other hand, were shocked by Valerian’s act of inviting a “stinking ignorant swamp nigger” (100) to drink and then to stay with them. He was also hurt by the fact that Valerian invited this “nigger” to sleep in the guest room while they, Valerian’s most loyal servants, sleep “up over the downstairs kitchen” (100). Although Ondine reminded Sydney that they must be careful to keep up their job in that
house, the third person narrator revealed her real feelings, “The man was black. If he’s been a white bum in Mrs. Street’s closet, well, she would have felt different.” (101). What they found disturbing is the fact, that they had to serve a “Negro”, if Mr Street orders so.

The intensified dislocation revealed the naked faces of racism when Valerian invited all the residents of the house to have dinner together. Just before Christmas, Sydney assured Ondine that “Nothing’s going to change. Everything’s going to be all right.” (194). Ironically, the displacement that Morrison had been invoking right from the beginning, became ever so pronounced on the day of Christmas:

…nobody was in his proper place. Ondine was in the bathtub. Margaret was in the kitchen. Sydney was in the greenhouse cutting flowers for the table. Jadine was in the washhouse waiting for a dryer load to conclude. And Valerian was by the telephone placing incomplete calls. (195)

In fact, the ‘blacks’ were invited to dinner only to substitute the ‘white’ guests who, for different reasons, did not turn up.

Even when Valerian invited Sydney and Ondine to dine with him on the Christmas night, he was pretty conscious that they actually belonged to different social strata. When the discussion between Valerian and Ondine grew hot, and Margaret reminded him that Sydney and Ondine were guests for that night and should be treated like that; Valerian continued to behave not like a host, but a master, “I am discussing a domestic problem with my help.” (203). Valerian was also disappointed on seeing “the
outrage Jade and Sydney and Ondine exhibited in defending property and personnel that did not belong to them from a black man who was one of their own” (145-46). On the one hand Valerian is pretty conscious that the “property” does not belong to Jade or Ondine or Sydney. They are merely the servants of the owner of the property. On the other hand he believed they should side with the intruder simply because he shared their skin colour, as opposed to Valerian’s skin colour. Thus for Michael, Son and Valerian, all their beliefs are drawn upon the ‘difference’ between the ‘blacks’ and the ‘whites’. The similarity between the apparently distinct viewpoints of Michael, Son and Valerian is that they all assume that there is an absolute, pre-given ‘difference’ between the ‘blacks’ and the ‘whites’ – their skin colour.

As a contrast to Michael, Son and Valerian’s attempts to equate race with skin colour; Morrison highlights other facets of racism by emphasising the relativity of one’s social position. Son, in the house of the Streets, was considered as a ‘black’ intruder, a man without papers who “jumped off ship”. In fact, initially he was regarded as a thief. However, to Thérèse and Gideon he was “a visitor from the States” (150). ‘Black’ Thérèse was actually proud to have a “Black American” among them, and her ‘black’ neighbours could not miss a chance to greet this “visitor from the States”:

Her pride and her message ran all over the streets and up the hillside, and at various times during the evening, heads poked in her doorway, and neighbours dropped by on some pretence or other. (150)
Thérèse was a wet nurse who “made her living from white babies. Then formula came and she almost starve [sic, starved] to death.” (154). She was a ‘black’ woman familiar with the ‘white’ culture, and also had been adversely affected by that culture, because after losing her job as a wet nurse she had to take resort to fishing in order to survive.

Racism, for Morrison is not just a discrimination based on skin colour. She has actually explored the link between racism and capitalism. When Valerian fired Yardman and Mary for stealing apples, Son compared their act of stealing and that of the ‘whites’:

…although he [Valerian] had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort; although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value … he turned it into candy, … and sold it to other children and made a fortune in order to move near, but not in the midst of, the jungle where the sugar came from and built a palace with more of their labour and then hire them to do more of the work he was not capable of and pay them again according to some scale of value that outrage Satan himself and when these people wanted a little of what he wanted, some apples for their Christmas, and took some he dismissed them… (203-204)

According to Son this is the vilest act of thievery. And when Son pointed out to Valerian that he got the apples at the cost of Gideon and Thérèse’s labour, Valerian suddenly seemed to remember that this ‘black’ man had caused his wife “enough mischief.” (204). However, he invited the ‘black’ man ‘discovered’ from his wife’s closet to dine with him. And later the third person narrator revealed that he did it only to contradict Margaret, to
prove that she was wrong. Now he called on that incident to prove himself right regarding firing Yardman and Mary. Valerian considered himself almost like the God who could never be questioned. And when he found all the ‘black’ members of his house were questioning him he became outraged, “I am being questioned by these people, as if, as if I could be called into question!” (207).

Morrison, in this text, also highlights various facets of patriarchies. Despite all the differences between the ‘whites’ and the ‘blacks’, they have at least one similarity – men determine the route of women’s lives. From the very beginning, even before Jadine knew him, Son had tried to “manipulate her dreams”:

…to insert his own dreams into her so she would not wake or stir or turn on her stomach but would lie still and dream steadily the dreams he wanted her to have …(119)

Son confessed during their first meeting that it was easier for him to look at the pictures of Jadine instead of the real person, for “they [the pictures] don’t move.” (119). He wanted Jadine to be still to be able to look at her, the real Jadine was much more than he could handle. The sets of dreams that Son wanted Jadine to dream were also very significant. The first one was a dream about his familiar ‘black’ world:

…yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church… (119)
The third person narrator already familiarises the readers with this dream, even before the formal beginning of the story and introduction of Son. In the prologue, the unknown captive, who flew from a ship to take secret refuge in another, also had a similar dream:

He woke thinking of a short street of yellow houses with white doors which women opened wide and called out, “Come on in here, you honey you,” their laughter sprawling like a quilt over the command. (4)

In this case the dream was immediately followed by a sharp contrast. Son remembered this happy memory only to find out that his present situation was nothing alike, that the voice he heard did not resemble the voices he longed to hear: “But nothing sprawled in this woman’s voice” (4). Much later, after getting familiar with the rest of the characters of the story, the readers can infer that “this woman’s voice” which claimed “I’m never lonely…Never.” (4), was the voice of Jadine. The independence and confidence that reflected in that voice disturbed Son. Later, when he had a better opportunity, Son had tried his best to impose his dreams on her, not only the dream of “yellow houses with white doors”, but also the dream of “men in magenta slacks who stood on corners under the sky-blue skies and sang “If I Didn’t care””; and to breathe into Jaidne “the smell of tar and its shiny consistency” (120). But on facing the real, wide awake Jadine, Son was actually afraid that he might not be able to manipulate Jadine; on the contrary, Jadine might began to manipulate him:

…at any moment she might talk back or, worse, press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-coloured silk into
him and then who would mind the pie table in the basement of the church? (120)

It is this fear of being manipulated that prompted Son to control Jadine and persuade her to “mind the pie table”, like the ‘traditional black’ women, the women of Eloë.

It is interesting to note here that all the dreams of Son are related to his hometown Eloë, an imaginary black town in Florida, and to his ‘blackness’ or ‘African-ness’, which becomes explicit through the reference of tar. In the African American culture tar is also a symbol of ‘blackness’ or ‘African-ness’, which is regarded as sacred, and to breathe into Jaidne “the smell of tar and its shiny consistency” signifies to make her conscious about her ‘blackness’. In Son’s ‘black’ world carefree men sing in the open air, while women “mind the pie table in the basement of the church”. Yet these women are supposed to be gay and inviting. It is true that Jadine’s dream of “gold and cloisonné” can be interpreted as the materialistic worldview that the ‘whites’ have imposed on the ‘blacks’, but it is also important to note that Son does not perceive this materialistic dream as a threat to ‘black’ spirituality. On the contrary, he perceives it as a threat to the structure of his ‘black’ world. If the women, lured by the dream of “gold and cloisonné”, give up minding the pie table in the basement of the church, and other household chores, then the structure of his ‘black’ world would collapse. It is important to remember here that Son killed his first wife because she ‘betrayed’ him.

Therefore, Son could worship a sleeping Jadine, but feared an awake-Jadine who could “talk back”. Neither Valerian nor Son bothered to think of what Jadine might have wanted. In New York, Son thought he loved the “bird-like defencelessness” of Jadine and wanted to protect Jadine:
As a sharp contrast, right after thinking how he would protect Jadine and their future child, Son realised how ‘civilization’ had tamed ‘wildness’, “Wilderness wasn’t wild anymore or threatening; wildlife needed human protection to exist at all.” (222), like Son needed Jadine to be able to survive in New York. Also, this comparison reminds us the vivid picture of taming wilderness with which Morrison began her story.

Like Isle de Chevaliers, Eloe is also an imaginary space – an all-‘Black’ town with ninety houses, which “runs itself” (173). According to Son, the town is devoid of any ‘white’ contacts. However, on being questioned by Jadine he admits that there are ‘white’ folks who run the general administrative works. Here again Morrison presents to her readers an interesting parallel. As the ‘whites’ deny the presence of the ‘blacks’ in their life, similarly the ‘blacks’ also deny the presence of the ‘whites’. However, both the groups actually live out of the help from the other. To Jadine, Eloe was a foreign space where she felt completely alienated. She found the town “Blacker and bleaker than Isle de Chevaliers” (253). Jadine considered Eloe as “A burnt-out place” where there was no life, “Maybe a past but definitely no future and finally there was no interest.” (262). Since Jadine had no interest in past, Eloe bored her.

Jadine thought Eloe refused to accept women as human beings. It was a men-centric society where women were valued only for their reproductive and culinary gifts.
Jadine’s approach here represents typical ‘white’ western feminist viewpoint, which prioritises financial and sexual freedom of women, rather than reproduction and nurturing. Son adored Jadine’s intellect and managerial skills, but hated the power that these skills gave her. Yet the third person narrator provides us with glimpses of Son’s thoughts, how he admires the women of Eloes who can do several things that he cannot. For instance, how Cheyenne used to drive an old truck when she was only nine “four years before he [Son] could even shift gears” (271) or how Rosa or Son’s grandmother could build rooms and cowsheds all alone. Son, in the voice of the third person narrator confirms that, “Anybody who thought women were inferior didn’t come out of North Florida.” (271). However, it is crucial that Son is eulogising the physical strength of women and his notion of equality is centred on physical prowess. Jadine’s strength lies not on physical prowess, but on ‘soft’ skills. And Son was reluctant to acknowledge that skill. When Jadine left New York and went back to Isle, she felt “lean and male”. (277), finally breaking free from Son. However, this concept of freedom is associated with maleness. The notion presupposes that to be a man means to be free, and to be a woman means to ‘care’ for others. On prioritising her freedom over caring Jadine feels de-sexed. Thus Morrison emphasises the popular construction of caring as a ‘feminine virtue’ by reinforcing it.

It must be noted here that this feeling of being de-sexed has nothing to do with physique. Physically, Jadine is the ‘ideal’ feminine – the “copper Venus” – who conforms exactly to the standards of ‘marketable femininity’. In fact, being a model, she is required to sell her ‘femininity’; and she never challenges that. On the contrary, she

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9 An interesting parallel can be found in Dorfman and Mattelart’s (1983) analysis of the Disney comics, where they have pointed out how the ‘third world savages’ are portrayed as huge and physically strong, but brainless idiots, signifying that they are ‘ideal’ for laborious jobs, but good for nothing else.
benefits financially by conforming to this structure. Nevertheless, she challenges that concept of ‘femininity’ which dictates each and every act of women. And not only acts, it also manipulates a woman’s thought process, as Son wanted to manipulate Jadine’s dreams. Thus Morrison uses this model ‘feminine’ figure to challenge certain concepts of ‘femininity’.

The advantage of ‘market’ is that it, apparently, does not distinguish between skin colour. Jadine and Margaret both are models of ‘marketable femininity’: Jadine, the ‘black’ model in Paris, and Margaret, the “Principal Beauty of Maine”. In fact, Ondine used to taunt Margaret with this epithet, for she won a beauty contest in Maine, and was indeed famous for her beauty. However, Ondine did not find the idea of ‘marketable femininity’ bad. She was proud of Jadine for having been photographed in Elle, “Prettiest thing I ever saw. Made those white girls disappear. Just disappear right off the page.” (37). This shows that, firstly, Ondine was not against the concept of ‘marketable beauty’, but against ‘white’ beauty; and secondly, Ondine has two different ‘standards’ to measure ‘black’ and ‘white’ beauty.  

There is a striking resemblance between Son’s ‘blackness’ and Valerian’s ‘whiteness’, both of which are men-centric. Men rule over both these worlds and women only serve men. Valerian’s relationship with his wife Margaret has always been a strenuous one, which eventually leads us to the question of dominance of a man over his wife. Valerian is the king, or rather, the God of his ‘white’ world, and Margaret is just one of his valued possessions, the “Principal Beauty”. It is up to Valerian to decide where and how Margaret would live. Valerian married Margaret who was twenty years younger to him. And he married her simply because he was stuck by her beauty, and gradually

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10 For a detail analysis of beauty in Tar Baby and other novels of Morrison, see Walther (1990).
“the Principal Beauty of Maine” had become one of his treasured possessions that he brought from Philadelphia along with “some records, garden shears, a sixty-four-bulb chandelier, [and] a light blue tennis shirt” (9). Like his records, shears and shirt, his wife was another beautiful and favourite object that Valerian possessed, and therefore brought her along with him. But whether she wanted to come to Caribbean was not an important question for him. He never bothered to find out what Margaret wanted, but always treated her as an object that did not need any attention. Valerian is a typical romantic who always quests for something unattainable. He never loved his first wife. In fact, he married Margaret only to prove that he was capable of loving a wife. However, after the death of his first wife he began to miss her and therefore he mistreated Margaret. Sydney revealed to Son that Valerian invited him only to entertain himself and, “If it entertained him, he’d hand her [Margaret] to you!” (163). To Valerian, his wife and servants are all equal. It does not matter to him what they want as long as they do what he wants them to do.

In relation to the question of male dominance, Morrison introduces the motif of amnesia – a motif that has widely been used to describe the colonial/imperial dominance. As in the interest of effective functioning of cultural hegemonisation, the colonial/imperial power seeks to distort the ‘Other’s cultures, similarly patriarchy seeks to distort women’s consciousness in order to facilitate male dominance. Margaret suffered from occasional amnesia. She did not remember the usage of certain things, especially in proximity to Valerian. It shows how Valerian’s domination has destroyed her self confidence. Thus Morrison links up the common structure and function of gender and colonial/imperial power. Significantly, once her “secret” was revealed to Valerian,
Margaret’s movements became “directed and sure” (278). Also her obsession about her son vanished. By mistreating her son, Margaret was actually trying to avenge Valerian for mistreating her. As Ondine explained, “She didn’t stick pins in her baby. She stuck em [sic, them] in his baby. Her baby she loved.” (281). Since Margaret could not avenge Valerian directly, torturing his baby was her own method of avenging him. And once Valerian came to knew it, Margaret herself related him the entire history with its minute details. By making Valerian hear the story of this torture she completed her revenge, and the successful revenge helped her to regain her lost memory and confidence. She became a “confident curator who knew the names of everything in his museum” (280), and started to do household chores.

Morrison uncovers a very important aspect of patriarchies by linking up racism with female sexuality. Initially, Jadine and Margaret shared a jovial relationship, but once Son stood between them, Jadine began to feel jealous. She even defended Son to Margaret, and consciously or not, she was simultaneously defending a ‘black’ man from a ‘white’ woman; and also her own identity of a ‘black’ woman as opposed to a ‘white’ woman. She felt humiliated because “A white woman no matter how old, how flabby, how totally sexless” (187) could believe that a ‘black’ man could hide in her closet to rape her. By thinking that Son wanted to rape her (i.e., Jadine) and not Margaret, Jadine actually constructed and eulogised her own ‘self’ of a ‘black’, young, ‘sexy’ model as opposed to a ‘white’, “old, flabby, sexless” woman. In fact, Jadine herself realised how she was falling prey to the patriarchal system, which regards woman as a sex-object, by prioritising her sexuality over her personality – “I am competing with her [Margaret] for
rape!” (187). Despite this realisation, Jadine cannot avoid prioritising sexuality. In Eloë, Soldier, Son’s friend, told Jadine about Cheyenne, Son’s first wife, who had “the best pussy in Florida.” (256). In the little, dark room in Eloë, while making love to Son, Jadine remembered this story and felt that it “made her compete, made her struggle to outdo Cheyenne and surpass her legendary gifts.” (260). These two incidents clearly depict how patriarchy exerts control over female sexuality. It not only uses directly persuasive or coercive methods, but also schools the women to think like a man. And a major means of this schooling is media.

Media, almost all over the world, helps in establishing the image of the ‘ideal’ woman, and it defines the ‘ideal’ woman as one who can satisfy male desire. Be it ‘black’ or ‘white’, a woman must be sexually ‘attractive’ and ‘able’. Jadine, being a model, has been shaped by this discourse, and the power of the discourse is clearly manifested when she, in spite of recognising her difference with the ‘pure black’ women, could not ignore them completely, and consciously or unconsciously, she began to measure herself with Soldier’s concept of “best pussy”. Actually she was not measuring herself with the ‘standards’ of the ‘blacks’, but with the ‘standards’ set by dominant group(s) of men.

An interesting example of how women are schooled by patriarchies is given in the ninth chapter, where Morrison shows the linkages between female sexuality and culture by pointing out the relativity of the gaze. It is in Eloë, “with a pack of Neanderthals” (259) that Jadine realised the importance of the gaze for the first time. Son’s aunt Rosa’s gaze suddenly made Jadine aware of her nakedness, so much so, that even after covering her body she could not get away from that nakedness, “No man had made her feel that
naked, that unclothed. Leerers, lovers, doctors, artists – none of them had made her feel exposed. More than exposed. Obscene.” (255). The question that Jadine overlooked was that it was not the sex of the viewer, but her/his culture that was important. All the persons Jadine mentioned, her “leerers, lovers, doctors and artists”, belong to a culture where nakedness is not “obscene”. On the contrary, it has a high market price as well as artistic value. In Eloe, however, the chief function of female body rests in its reproductive ability. Whenever it is not used as a reproductive machine, it is used as a sex object that satisfies male desire. Jadine’s well-trimmed body evidently caters to male desire and ignores reproductive functions. Therefore, Rosa considered it ‘obscene’. Later in New York, Son felt embarrassed by Jadine’s nakedness. Initially he was attracted by this ‘young’ and ‘sexy’ ‘black’ model who for him, was “a world and a way of being in it” (301). Nevertheless, even when he wanted Jadine to transform herself into a reproductive machine, Jadine continued to prioritise the saleability of her body. It was the realisation, that despite everything – even raping her (Duvall, 1997) – he had not been able to manipulate Jadine, that embarrassed Son, “He had produced that nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him.” (275).

It is in the ninth chapter itself that female sexuality has been posed as a naked and central problem, through the episode of Jadine’s awakened-dream in Eloe. She visualised of a set of ‘pure black’ women, some of them completely unknown to her, who “pulled out a breast and showed it to her” (260). And when Jadine shouted “I have breasts too…they didn’t believe her.” (261). The breasts here are a symbol of the night women’s “exceptional femaleness”. Jadine, although possesses a pair of breasts, according to those
women, had lost her “exceptional femaleness”, those “true and ancient properties”. Later, in New York, Jadine realised the difference, “she had breasts…but she couldn’t shake…[her breasts]” (263). The episode actually signifies Jadine’s stark contrast to the ‘pure black’ women. Significantly, although all the women in that stuffy, little room showed her their breasts, the “woman in yellow” did not. She showed her three white eggs, which symbolise fertility. Jadine thought the night women “wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building.” (271). This thought of Jadine draws attention to the difference between these ‘pure black’ women and Jadine. Although Jadine belonged to the same sex as these women, for her, being a woman meant something completely different from her precursor ‘black’ women. In her retrospection in New York, Jadine realised this difference, and also comprehended that it was this difference that had made the “night women” angry, that she did not prioritise reproductive ability over sexual and financial independence:

The night women were not merely against her (and her alone – not him), not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits. (264)

Jadine’s concept of being a woman was different from the ‘traditional’ concepts of women. When she returned to Isle after breaking up with Son, Ondine told her “a girl
has got to be a daughter first” (283) and she defined a “daughter” as “a woman that cares about where she came from and takes care of them that took care of her” (283). Jadine, however, believed “there are other ways to be a woman” (284), and confirmed that she did not want to be a woman like Ondine. Although Ondine told Jadine that there was only one kind of woman, finally she seemed to be able to locate the centre of the problem by accepting the fact that time had changed, “It’s more different for them than it was for us. There’s a whole bunch of stuff they can do that we never knew nothing about.” (285). By pointing out this change Ondine actually accepts that there cannot be a pre-given definition of ‘woman’, that one has to cope up with the changing time and space.

Further, Jadine links up the question of ‘femaleness’ with the question of immigration. She challenged the very ‘African-ness’ of the ancestor women like Ondine, by calling them “diaspora mothers”, “No matter what you did, the diaspora mothers with pumping breasts would impugn your character.” (290). It draws attention to the concept of ‘African-ness’ that has been constructed in a foreign land far from Africa, and which finally resulted in the fabrication of a myth of ‘traditional black femaleness’. By holding Jadine responsible for not preserving their culture/’tradition’ – the omniscient narrator points out within parenthesis that the “night women” were not against Son – they were actually confirming the belief that it was up to women to preserve the ‘tradition’; and simultaneously they were denying Jadine’s existential struggle to ‘become’ what she had become. It is important to remember here that Son is also pretty ‘Americanised’. In Isle de Chevaliers he used brand American suits and perfumes – “Hickey Freeman and a little Paco Rabanne” (156) – and also carried the Hickey Freeman suit to New York. As pragmatic Jadine pointed it out to Son that he could not afford to be rich, “you’re not
above it, you’re just without it.” (172). In fact, Son was the one who spelled out in the fourth chapter that “Nothing’s priceless. Everything has a price.” (117).

In the last chapter Thérèse who was “as blind as justice” (306), but who knew “those waters [the bay surrounding the island] just like the fishermen.” (154), saw that Son was drifting away from his ‘original’ ‘black’ world towards the mixed and artificial world of Jadine. This woman with “exceptional femaleness”, that is, with exceptional reproductive and nurturing abilities – it is important to remember here that she too was proud of her breasts which had “got milk to this day” (154) – therefore, deliberately brought Son back to, what she said, was the other side of Isle. Nevertheless, the description of this other side clearly evokes a mythical world that Morrison has alluded to several times in the novel. On that lap of Mother Nature, Son could chose between his ‘original’ ‘black’ world, which men had not yet moulded; or Jadine, the world which is a mixture of ‘black’ and ‘white’.

Towards the end of the novel the third person narrator strives to identify the exact problem that drives Son and Jadine apart. The fact that they did not have a specific problem is confirmed by several attempts on the part of the narrator to locate the problem, “Sometimes they argued about school. Maybe that was the problem…other times they fought about work; surely that was the problem.” (266-268). Jadine had no less than sixteen answers to the question “What went wrong?” (292). But she also knew “having sixteen answers meant having none.” (292). The actual problem is that Jadine refuses to bury her own identity and transform herself into the woman Son desires.
The novel draws attention to the conflict between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ as the centre of all problems. Each person’s self-identity is formed with respect to the ‘other’, and a very important – but not the only – aspect of the ‘other’ is one’s immediate surroundings. Jadine’s immediate surroundings have been completely different from that of Son or the “night women”. Therefore, her self-identity is also different from them. The problem is, everybody – Son, Ondine, the “night women” – wanted her to be like them, without recognising that her concept of ‘self’ is radically different from theirs. Similarly Jadine wanted Son to share her concept of ‘self’ without recognising that his surroundings had been very different from hers. This is, in fact, the centre of their problem.

The attempt to define the ‘self’ as a binary opposite to the ‘other’ has its own problem, as is revealed through Son. Son’s craving for his “original dime” (170), his first, and also real earning, shows that he restricted himself within his world and never longed for the other world. When Jadine left him “as in “never coming back”” (300), Son realised that she was not just a woman for him, “but a sound, all the music he had ever wanted to play, a world and a way of being in it” (301). And since she herself was a world for him, he was oblivious about the rest. Therefore he forgot everything about Alma Estée, another indigenous ‘black’ woman of the Isle, and her wig. Here Son fell into the same trap of not recognising her – an indigenous ‘black’ woman’s – contribution in his life, that “she was good enough to run to the store for him, and good enough to clean the toilet for American black girls to pee in” (302), but Jadine did not remember her name and Son ignored her little wish of having a wig, although he promised her to send one. She therefore took her revenge by informing Son that Jadine had departed with “a
young man with yellow hair and blue eyes and white skin and they had laughed and kissed and laughed…” (302). Although uneducated and considered as a stupid, still Alma Estée rightly inferred that the information about Jadine rejecting Son in favour of a ‘white’ man would hurt him most. And by inferring this, she is actually playing on Son’s attempt to define his ‘black self’ as a binary opposite to the ‘white other’.

Morrison actually depicts how racial identity is inextricably linked with sexual identity. Related to Jadine’s consciousness of being ‘black’ is the consciousness of being a ‘woman’. After being molested by Son, Jadine felt she was the one responsible for it:

He has jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful, and he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her. That was why she was ashamed. (123)

In this section of the novel, Jadine (and Morrison) explicitly challenges the very concept of ‘female sexuality’ by linking a woman to a bitch, both of whom are blamed for being “in heat” (124). In the worlds of both ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ the males are never blamed for mounting a bitch/woman, but it is always “she who was beaten and cracked over the head and spine with the mop handle and made to run away…” (124). Such socialisation of women, by ensuring that males will never be blamed for being “in heat”, also serves to guarantee male dominance. Jadine realised early in her childhood that it was a woman’s duty to keep her desires under control and therefore she was always “holding tight to the reins of dark dogs with silver feet.” (158). The dogs here clearly signify desire. Like
dogs, desire too, can be wild or restrained. As it is a master’s duty to tie up a wild dog, similarly it is a woman’s duty to control her desire.

Therefore, despite being molested by Son, Jadine could not complain to Valerian, for, as Son pointed out to her, that would be giving away her own vulnerability as a woman, and would make Valerian conscious of her sexual body:

…don’t tell him I smelled you because then he would understand that there was something in you to smell and that I smelled it and if Valerian understands that then he will understand everything and even if he makes me go away he will still know that there is something in you to be smelled which I have discovered and smelled myself. (125)

Further, her racial identity is also equally important. Although Jadine claimed proudly that she did not believe in “black-woman-white-woman shit” (121), finally she could not overcome her racial identity:

She felt a curious embarrassment in the picture of herself telling on a black man to a white man and then watching those red-necked gendarmes zoom him away in a boat. (126)

Her foreign schooling had made Jadine aware of her mixed identity, so much so that she could no longer draw the line between ontological and racial identity, irrespective of her intellect and pragmatism. Therefore when Margaret compared Jadine’s unruly hair with that of a ‘black’ actress’, Jadine felt “Margaret stirred her into blackening up or universalling out, always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed
were racial characteristics” (62). It is due to this reason that Jadine was unsure about her relationship with Ryk, her ‘white’ boy friend, “I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl” (45). Paradoxically, however, Jadine was a very good and impartial judge of her ‘self’. She knew very well that she did not have “genuine talent” (182) to be a painter. Besides, she was wise enough to admit her own talents and lack of it, and steer her life accordingly:

She loved to paint and draw so it was unfair not to be good at it. Still she was lucky to know it, to know the difference between the fine and the mediocre, so she’d put that instinct to work and studied art history – there she was never wrong. (183)

Yet, in Isle, standing in the jungle, she compared it to “an elegant comic book illustration” (183), and specifically comics written by the ‘whites’ – a fact which again depicts Jadine’s unfamiliarity with her own world, and familiarity with the world of the ‘whites’, which was imposed on her.

Morrison has also highlighted the problems of imposed identity. In Eloé Soldier, Son’s friend, informed Jadine that Son did not like to be controlled, and Jadine asserted that, “I don’t like to be controlled either.” (258). But right after returning from Eloé, they began to control each other, to shape each other’s life in his/her own way. Jadine thought she was rescuing Son from the “night women who wanted him for themselves” (271), and Son thought he was rescuing Jadine from Valerian, “meaning them, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old.” (271). Thus they were defining each as opposed to the ‘other’, and also tried to make the
‘other’ like the ‘self’. And while trying to define their ‘self’, Son emphasised on his colonial/racial identity and Jadine prioritised her sexual identity. While fighting with Son, Jadine knew that she was actually fighting against a ‘tradition’ – a ‘tradition’ that wanted to belittle and deny her entire process of ‘becoming’, challenge her existentialist self, “…she knew she was fighting the night woman. The mamas who had seduced him and were trying to lay claim to her.” (265). The chief problem was neither Son nor Jadine thought about the present, “One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands.” (272).

Son, however, did not share Jadine’s existentialist struggles. He was born and brought up in an “all black town” and could think of himself as a ‘black’ man, who, occasionally, could do with an “Easter white towel” or a “Hickey Freeman suit”; but did not want to give up his ‘black’ identity. However, it is important to remember that Son’s ‘black’ identity was completely different from that of Jadine. Son’s ‘black’ identity never clashed with his male identity, but Jadine’s ‘black’ identity clashed with her female identity. Son did not want to know “their laws” (265), he wanted to know his own laws. Nevertheless, Jadine assimilated the ‘other’s culture due to her exposure to that culture right from her childhood. This exposure made her conscious of her sexual identity and the process of gendering, so much so, that to deny that culture would be denying a part of her own identity. And their cultural difference actually became the principal cause of all their quarrels.

In relation to racism and imperialism, the process of construction and denial of identity becomes a very important question in this novel. Son’s concept of ‘original
identity’ throws interesting insight into the process of fabrication of ‘reality’. Son had various “documented” and “undocumented” identities, although he believes that his true identity, his “real original name” (139) is Son. He believed that his other identities were “…fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least” (139). The function of the false identities is to protect the ‘original’ identity, although it is the false identities that are “documented”, and the ‘original’ identity is the “undocumented” one. Son, although was born in a ‘black’ town in States wants to disown his citizenship, and return to his country with a visa. Even though he has practical reasons for disowning the citizenship, it can also be read as a symbolic refusal of the United States and thereby of the ‘Americanness’. His Mexican colleague on the ship told Son that he was a true American – “Americano. Ciento Americano. Es verdad” (168) – because he was “punching [a] dying fish in anger” (168). He was angry with the fish because it had resisted Son’s effort to kill it. It is this ‘Americanness’, the attitude to avenge and curb genuine protest – which, consciously or unconsciously, had got the better of him – that Son was trying to refuse. In fact, the striking difference between Son and Jadine became ever more prominent in the seventh chapter with their reactions to New York. While Son felt suffocated in that city Jadine felt refreshed.11

Morrison, while building up a highly tense, racist atmosphere which pervades the entire text, has carefully depicted that there are various facets of racism. In this novel Morrison actually reveals that there are hierarchies among the ‘blacks’ themselves.

11 While analysing how the ‘blacks’ view America, Hawthorne (1988) calls Tar Baby a “diasporean novel”. However, she has not focused on the myths.
Sydney, Valerian’s butler, thought “White folks play with Negroes”. (163). Nevertheless, he also knew that ‘white’ folks play with ‘white’ folks themselves, like Valerian played with his wife. The way Sydney differentiated between himself and Son adds an important aspect to racism. While Son felt empathy with Sydney and his family because of their similar skin colour, Sydney explicitly pointed out they were not similar because of their socio-cultural backgrounds:

I am a Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other. (164)

The heterogeneity of the ‘black’ identity is also reflected through another couple, Gideon and Thérèse, an indigenous couple of the island. Since they served the Streets family they had limited access to the house but unlike Sydney and Ondine, they did not dwell there. Therefore their position in the house was the lowest, so much so that nobody in the house even bothered to find out their names. They called Gideon ‘Yardman’ and Thérèse ‘Mary’.

Naming, in fact, turns out to be a very important aspect of the novel,12 which is also related to the question of identity. Yardman had an identity without a name. Mary, on the other hand, had a name without an identity. As Gideon explained to Son “When they say to let Thérèse go, I say okay. But I bring her right back and tell them it’s a brand-new woman.” (154). And “they” could not recognise Thérèse because “They don’t

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12 For a detail analysis of politics of naming in the context of African America, see Spillers (1997).
pay her any attention.” (154). Thus she had a name but not an identity. Gideon was a native of the place but had stayed in USA for quite a few years. That exposure to the ‘whites’ culture had made his manners “less haughty than that of the local Blacks”. (110). Hence he could work in a ‘whites’ house even though his name was not recognised there. Thérèse, on the other hand, is a much more complex character who returned the ‘whites’ ignorance with equally haughty avoidance:

…[Her] hatreds were complex and passionate as exemplified by her refusal to speak to the American Negroes, and never even to acknowledge the presence of the white Americans in her world. (110)

Thérèse’s refusal to look at Ondine was a way to deny Ondine’s presence, just as Ondine denied Thérèse’s presence. Thus she defended her own space and identity. In fact, Thérèse “reinvented” the “given world” by constructing a nameless ‘white’ identity, just as the ‘whites’ construct nameless ‘black’ identities. To Thérèse, Ondine was therefore, “the machete-hair” (104), Sydney “the bowtie” and Jadine “the fast ass” (111). Unlike, Gideon or Thérèse, Son had a lot of names, but his identity was mono-dimensional. He believed himself a ‘pure’ black and that was his only identity.

Morrison has also used naming as a means to foreground the use of myths. It is the title of the novel that draws attention to the tar baby myth. Further, the name of the island, Isle de Chevalier, is related to the myth of the blind horsemen – the only myth that has been narrated in detail within the structure of the novel. The story, as Gideon narrated to Son, is a mixture of facts and fantasy. An allusion to the myth and its racial character has been made right from the beginning of the novel, and in the fifth chapter Gideon
narrates the story in detail. Significantly, in the fifth chapter itself Son was ‘discovered’ in the Streets’ house and Thérèse thought he was one of those horsemen. The story was “about a race of blind people descended from some slaves who went blind the minute they saw Dominique.” (153). The slaves were drowned in the sea along with horses and some ‘white’ people, when a ship was wrecked, but somehow they managed to find shore:

They floated and trod water and ended up on that island along with the horses that had swum ashore. Some of them were only partially blinded and were rescued later by the French, and returned to Queen of France and indenture. The others, totally blind, hid. (153)

Thus were generated two distinct, yet inter-related myths – the myth of the blind race, of which Thérèse was considered to be one; and the myth of the blind horsemen, of which Son was considered to be one. Interestingly, those who were “partially blind”, who could have found their way, were rescued; and those who were “totally blind”, for whom it was impossible to find out their way, hid in the forest. This contradiction shows that the story does not refer to physical blindness. This blindness can be read as a refusal to acknowledge the ‘other’. The “partially blinds” are those who partially acknowledge the ‘other’, like Thérèse. The “totally blind” are those who completely ignore the ‘other’, like Son. Thérèse hated Sydney, Ondine and Jadine, but liked Son. Son hated the Streets, disliked Sydney and Ondine for serving the Streets, and did not care about Gideon and Thérèse either. Neither did his love for Jadine stop him moulding her in his own way. According to the story, the blind horsemen lived on the hills, “they race each other, and
for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Vieilles.” (153). This can be read as a hint of how Son sported with Jadine, who fell in the swamp of Sein de Vieilles. But as it has already been discussed, she is different from those women with “exceptional femaleness”.

In the last chapter it was this “exceptional female” and partially blind Thérèse – significantly, Thérèse was also one of the “night women” who threatened Jadine – who failed to perceive Jadine’s “true and ancient properties” and brought Son to a rocky jungle, where she said the blind horsemen were waiting for him. Thus Thérèse, descendant of the “blind race” guided Son, one of the “blind horsemen”.

The name of Valerian’s house, L’Arbe de la Croix, calls forth the Christian myth of paradise. As Lepow ((1987) points out, “Arbe” is actually a play on the French word ‘arbre’ which means tree. Valerian’s house is a kind of paradise, and his greenhouse is the Garden of Eden. Valerian is the God of that Paradise who rules over everybody else, a dictator who prefers to have everything in his own way. He believes since he has always taken care of his servants – like giving them his ‘used and new’ shoes etc. – they should also take care of him till his death. Valerian’s attitude, at least in the first six chapters of the novel, is very much like the God of the Old Testament, which is highlighted by Morrison’s constant Biblical allusions, right from the beginning of the book. The book begins with an epigraph which is actually a quotation from The Corinthians:

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13 For a detailed analysis of Biblical myths in Tar Baby, see Lepow (1987).
For it hath been declared
unto me of you, my brethren, by them
which are of the house of
Chloe,¹⁴ that there are
contentions among you.

Besides the name of his house which alludes to the ‘Sacred Cross’, Valerian’s green	house evokes the Paradise, out of reach of common people. Only a select few had access
to that Paradise, and trespassers were always prosecuted. Gideon and Thérèse were
banished from that Paradise for stealing apple, which was also another implicit reference
to the Biblical myth. Valerian considered Thérèse as “a pet who would listen agreeably to
him and not judge or give orders” (141). He did not like to be judged or ordered, but
loved to be obeyed, and reserved the sole right to reward or punish anybody at any time.
Since he believed himself to be omniscient he had never bothered to find out why
sometimes he found his little son humming under a sink, just as God had never bothered
to find out about Satan’s temptations.

Ondine, however, actually called into question Valerian’s omniscience by
revealing to him Margaret’s “secret”. She actually questioned and shattered Valerian’s
God-like attitude. She proved to everybody and to Valerian himself, that he was neither
omniscient nor omnipotent, even within his own kingdom. And ironically, this realisation
dawned on him right after banishing Gideon and Thérèse from the paradise of L’Arbe de
la Croix for stealing his apples.

¹⁴ A significant detail must be remembered here. Morrison’s original name was Chloe which she herself
changed into Toni, because, she explained later, that her friends in Howard University found ‘Chloe’ very
difficult to pronounce. (Duvall, 1997: 328) A number of scholars have drawn attention to this point and
have regarded Jadine as a reflection of Morrison’s own self. To this extent Jadine has some similarity with
Eliza, Eliza being regarded as a reflection of Allende herself. While the word ‘Chloe’ reminds us the
famous mythical lovers Daphnis and Chloe; significantly, it is also the name of an international fashion
house, which Jadine mentioned to Margaret once in the novel, “Chloë has four new perfumes.” (83).
After the revelation – which incidentally, took place on a Christmas night – Valerian’s God-like attitude changed abruptly, and the question of displacement comes to a full circle. He then realised that he was not the omniscient and omnipotent Master, but as vulnerable as his fellow creatures. Once the tables were turned on him, he recognised that far from being omniscient, like Adam and Eve, he was guilty of innocence, “something in the crime of innocence so revolting it paralysed him.” (245). He avoided knowledge deliberately because “knowing more was inconvenient and frightening” (245). Before the ‘revelation’, everyday Valerian waited in his paradise for the post to get news of the outer world, but he never bothered to find out anything about his own kingdom, “[Valerian] had chosen not to know the real message that his son had mailed to him from underneath the sink.” (245). Then he realises that the ‘original sin’ is not disobedience, but innocence, “An innocent man is a sin before God. Inhuman and therefore unworthy.” (245).

Most importantly, after the revelation Valerian became completely dependent on Margaret. She had to help him with his cloths, shaving, hair cutting and almost all his basic needs. In fact, not only Margaret, but he became ever more dependent on Sydney and Ondine too, that is to say on all his subjects. In the tenth chapter we find a last view of L’Arbe de la Croix, which resembles a lot the first scenario of the house in the first chapter, except that Valerian is no longer the God, but a complete dependent almost living through Sydney. Thus, reversing the Biblical myth, Morrison actually challenges the God-like attitude of human beings. By revealing human pretensions she exposes the vulnerability of human beings.
Jadine wanted to transcend racism through her socio-cultural achievements. She was from a ‘black’ family, but brought up in a ‘white’, ‘western’ culture. She believed that her identity was not confined to her race, “I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside – not American – not black – just me” (45). However, the novel also problematizes her mixed identity claiming it to be inauthentic. On the one hand, Jadine never looked back to her family or patrons to lend her an identity – “I belong to me.” (118). On the other hand, despite such confidence and independence, she craved for respect from the ‘pure’ communities, especially from the ‘blacks’. The African woman in the supermarket made Jadine feel “lonely and inauthentic” (45). This woman appeared to Jadine as a ‘pure black’ who still upheld her “true and ancient” properties, and this vision posed a threat to Jadine’s own mixed identity which did not cater to the “true and ancient” properties. This woman’s respect could have given Jadine a certain amount of ‘authenticity’, but the woman, instead, rejected her brutally by spitting at her, which took “the zing out of the magazine cover as well as her degree.” (44) Interestingly, this incident is narrated right after Jadine’s dream of hats. One night in L’Arbe de la Croix Jadine dreamt of a variety of hats, all worn by famous ‘white’ American film stars. To her surprise, Jadine felt “shamed and repelled” (41) by this dream, and it reminded her of the vision of the African woman. This plump, ‘black’ woman, the “unphotographable beauty” (43), was a sharp contrast to well-trimmed Jadine, who had been chosen to model for the famous fashion magazine Elle. But this woman’s rejection disturbed Jadine’s poise and confidence that her Sorbonne degree and her carrier gave her. This woman made Jadine question her deeds and identity. And to deal with this powerful question Jadine had to fly from Paris to her only surviving relatives.
It is her craving for acknowledgement from the ‘pure’ race that drew Jadine towards Son, and made her feel completely “unorphaned” in his arms. Son, with his pronounced ‘African-ness’ lent Jadine an ‘authenticity’ that she otherwise lacked. To Jadine, this relationship was like a return to her origin, an origin that she had been deprived of by Sydney and Ondine, who sent her off to foreign schools instead of rearing her within the family. Son’s love, to a large extent, satisfied Jadine’s hunger for a childhood that she had never had, but had always longed for.

Interestingly, the picture of this longed-for childhood is inextricably linked with story-telling, which is also an elementary part of African, or as a matter of fact, any oral culture:

Regarding her whole self as an ear, he [Son] whispered into every part of her stories of icecaps and singing fish, The Fox and the Stork, the Monkey and the Lion, The Spider Goes to Market, and so mingled with their sex with adventure and fantasy that to the end of her life she never heard a reference to Little Red Riding Hood without a tremor. (227)

That is why Jadine thought, “He [Son] unorphaned her completely. Gave her a brand new childhood.” (231). Thus together Jadine and Son “reinvented” the “given world”. (232).

Morrison, in this text, projects story-telling as an important means to reinvent the “given world”, a means that the ‘blacks’ have utilised to justify their exploitation and also to satisfy their desires. In the fourth chapter the “nearly blind” Thérèse, who sometimes
“sees better than others” (107), composes a story about her “horseman hero”, that is, Son. Partly due to her instinct and partly through certain subtle evidences like chocolate foils etc., she knew that someone was hiding in L’Arbe de la Croix. Inspired by the ancient myth of the horsemen, she imagined that “he’s a horseman come down here to get her [Jadine]” (107), and she spun a story of her own based on her wild imagination, and incidentally, she excluded the ‘white’ couple from her story.

Through Thérèse’s story Morrison gives us two important hints. Firstly, as Thérèse’s imagination got more and more wild, she could no longer speak English, but returned to her native tongue French. The spontaneity of this story-telling is demonstrated through its oral nature and native language. Secondly, Gideon interrupted her with the reminder that aside from the characters she was using in her story, there were two more people, two ‘whites’, who lived in that house and therefore, she must take into account those characters as well to built up her story. Nevertheless, as Thérèse did not acknowledge the presence of the “white Americans” in her world therefore, they had no space in her imaginary world either. Thérèse could not help interacting with the ‘whites’ in the real world, even though she tried her best to deny their presence. Nevertheless, incorporating the ‘whites’ in her imaginary world would not only destroy that world, but would also loosen her defence. Moreover, she realised that she was unequipped to portray those characters, for, although she was familiar with the actions of the ‘whites’, she had never bothered to find out how these people think. As the ‘whites’ regarded the ‘blacks’ as instruments to serve the ‘whites’, similarly the ‘blacks’ regarded the ‘whites’ as de-humanised and devoid of any feelings:
She realised then that all her life she thought they felt nothing at all. ...she knew they talked and laughed and died and had babies. But she never attached any feeling to any of it. (111)

So finally Thérèse decided that it was not important to incorporate these de-humanised people in her story:

Thérèse resented the problem and the necessity for solving it to get on with the story. “What difference does it make,” she murmured. “I don’t know what they would think about him, but I know for certain what they would do about him. Kill him. (112)

Thus Thérèse composed a tragic story where the ‘whites’ would kill the ‘black’ man, “the fast-ass” would be “grief stricken”, and blame “the machete-hair” and “the bow-tie” for the death; and everybody would be unhappy for ever. Thus she avenged vicariously – almost like the tar baby myth itself – the exploitation that the ‘blacks’ had undergone for generations.

A very significant allusion to the tar baby myth – and only one – has been made in the last chapter in connection to Thérèse and Son – the two persons related to the “blind race” and the “blind horsemen” respectively. At the end of the novel Thérèse guided Son to the mythical world of blind horsemen, in order to give him a choice between his ‘original’ world and Jadine. On entering the jungle, at first Son was faltering. Gradually, his movements became steadier in that foreign space, and finally he began to
run. He ran steadily “looking neither to the left nor to the right” (309). Meaning he was running through a familiar space.

The novel ends with the sound of his running “lickety-split” (309) – a sound that a human being is unlikely to make. The sound calls on the image of a rabbit making its way through a briar patch, an implicit reference, again, to the tar baby myth. Interestingly, Jadine made an explicit reference to a “briar patch” in the tenth chapter. After her traumatic experience of the “night women”, Jadine went back to Isle thinking that there she would be able to throw the “night women” out of her mind and would keep them “confined to the briar patch where they belonged” (290, emphasis added). But the night women cannot be “confined” to the “briar patch” because, like the Brer Rabbit\footnote{According to the popular African American version of the tar baby myth, Brer Rabbit, when caught in the trap of a tar baby by Brer Fox, was threatened with various fatal punishments, like being thrown into the fire, or slashing his flesh etc. Brer Rabbit, however, accepted all these punishments gladly, only if the Brer Fox would be kind enough not to throw him in a briar patch. Brer Fox finally fell into the trap and threw the rabbit in a briar patch, and Brer Rabbit, being at home in a briar patch, happily escaped. For details, see Hughes and Bontemps (1966).}, they are also at home in a briar patch. Instead of being “confined” they can reign even more freely in a “briar patch”. And finally Jadine realised that “she could not beat them alone” (290).

Immediately after the explicit reference to “briar patch”, in the eleventh chapter the sound “lickety-split” invokes the image of a “briar patch” even more easily. Thérèse thought Son’s attraction towards Jadine had alienated him from his birth place. It made him confused and therefore, he thought he had no choice left, other than to look for Jadine. Once being thrown into a “briar patch” he called forth all his ancient skills to survive there. By giving his handbag to Thérèse, he actually gave up his last connection to the ‘civilized’ world. And stumbling a little he began to run steadily in the jungle. Thus
he became re-familiarised with his own world. And then he had a choice as to whether he really wanted to leave this world. The open-endedness of the novel does not reveal what choice Son finally made, but it evokes the tar baby myth for one last time to bring into attention the cultural conflict that Morrison has been referring to right from the beginning.

However, Morrison here does not merely retell the tar baby myth in the context of the twentieth century; she actually reverses the myth by projecting Jadine as a living tar baby who, unlike the mythical inanimate tar babies, has a spirit of her own. Jadine, therefore, did not play the role of a puppet in the ‘white’ world, as Son indicated when he emphasised that Jadine was “made” by Valerian. As a human tar baby, Jadine is a personification of the consistency that has been associated with tar in the African culture. She is the one who can “hold things together”. (Jokinen, 1997). She was the one who photographed Son’s ‘all-black’ world, his Eloe, and gifted it to him, though she herself had no interest in that world. And only when she had left, Son realised that Jadine herself was a world, “a world and a way of being in it” (301). He realized that he was in love with not just a woman, but a ‘character’, an exceptional personality:

Let go the woman you had been looking for everywhere just because she was difficult? Because she had a temper, energy, ideas of her own and fought back? Let go a woman whose eyebrows were a study, whose face was enough to engage your attention all your life? Let go a woman who was not only a woman but a sound, all the music he had ever wanted to play, a world and a way of being in it? (301)
On ‘discovering’ this personality, Son realised the power of the living tar baby. Ironically, Son was the only person in the novel who explicitly equated Jadine to the tar baby, thereby alluding to the possibility of a living tar baby. However, not having recognized the strength of tar – despite his pride on his ‘blackness’ – he failed to grasp the might that a living tar baby could have. Consequently, once the tar baby Jadine set him “free”, the Brer Rabbit Son realised that, unlike the traditional Brer Rabbit and even unlike the traditional Trickster Hero, he did not want to be freed:

…he had not wanted to love her because he could not survive losing her. But it was done. Already done and he was in it; stuck in it and revolted by the possibility of being freed. (303)

Right from the beginning of the novel Son distinctly echoed the characteristics of a trickster. He jumped off a ship, and was able to hide himself successfully in another. Later in L’Arbe de la Croix, he tried to trick everyone. Despite his hatred for ‘white’ people, he made the hydrangea bloom to please Valerian, and even shared some ‘funny’ jokes with him. Notably, irrespective of their different skin colour, social position and education, they had a similar notion of ‘fun’ which involves ridiculing women, “They [the hydrangea] like women, you have to jack them up every once in a while. Make em [sic, them] act nice, like they are supposed to.” (149). Yet, Son apologized to Margaret, Ondine and Sydney, and tried to be friendly with Gideon and Thérèse, though he did not really care for any of them. Nevertheless, the only person he could not trick was Jadine. In spite of his initial attempts to ‘impress’ Jadine, he realised during their picnic that she could not be won over by tricks, “He sat down…and looked at her steadily. He quit. Quit
trying to make an impression.” (179). However, his contrast to the Trickster Hero comes out ever so prominently during his conversation with Thérèse and Gideon in the last chapter, as he insists on finding Jadine.

Thérèse thought Jadine had “forgotten her ancient properties” (308). Incidentally, Thérèse was the one who brought out explicitly the Brer Rabbit quality in Son by shoving him in the forest. However, the narrative offers a number of tiny hints – apart from the direct attempt of Son to equate Jadine to the tar baby – to deduce that Jadine is the very embodiment of the sacred qualities of tar. Thus by reversing the tar baby myth, Morrison draws attention to the modern African American woman who, though different from her ancestors, represents all those “true and ancient properties” in her own way.

In the tenth chapter Morrison gives a last vision of Jadine leaving the Caribbean, where the third person narrator points out the difference between the modern African American women and the “diaspora mothers”. Jadine fled to Caribbean to deal with her identity crisis. Her experience with Son taught her what her Sorbonne education and modelling carrier could not teach her. The Jadine who leaves Caribbean, however, is more matured and confident who has realised that, “A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She was the safety she longed for.” (292). Therefore, she no longer needs to be “unorphaned”.

By pointing out that a similar longing for ‘safety’ also led Margaret to marry Valerian, Morrison highlights one more resemblance between ‘black’ and ‘white’ women:
The safety she heard in his [Valerian’s] voice was in his nice square fingernails too. And it was that, not his money, that comforted her and made her feel of consequence under the beauty… (82)

However, Margaret was also disappointed, and vented her frustration with Valerian on her baby, for she did not have a life without Valerian. Jadine, however, being more educated and professional, could choose an alternative.

At the end of the tenth chapter Morrison brings in the imagery of ants, a long and apparently irrelevant description of the ants’ kingdom, to confirm that dreaming, for women, is a luxury that they cannot afford. The section, on the one hand, invokes a mythical atmosphere like in the beginning of the novel. On the other hand, by equating “soldier ants” to women, Morrison points out that women, irrespective of their skin colour, education and social position, are not permitted the lavishness of dreaming. The deliberate reiteration of the word “dreaming” in this section draws attention to the natural tendency of human beings to take refuge in dreaming, and simultaneously heightens the poignancy by reminding again and again the necessity to be pragmatic:

Straight ahead they marched, shamelessly single-minded, for soldier ants have no time for dreaming. Almost all of them are women and there is so much to do – the work is literally endless… The life of their world requires organisation so tight and sacrifice so complete there is little need for males… That is all. Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming. …soldier ants do not have time for dreaming. They are women and have much to do. (293-294)
Further, by claiming that the ants’ knowledge is “four-million-year old” (293), Morrison highlights the responsibility that women have shouldered since time immemorial to run the world, and men have never contributed much except a few sperms. This similarity between Jadine and older women – which is heightened by her confession that now she understands Ondine – points out how Jadine has retained her “true and ancient properties”.

Significantly, in this novel, Morrison has explicitly referred to the processes of story telling and myth making to highlight the fabrication of a number of myths, but not once in the novel has she tried to narrate the tar baby myth. She has left simple, at times almost imperceptible, allusions to the tar baby myth here and there in the novel, inviting her readers to deconstruct those codes. It is only the title of the novel that draws explicit attention to the tar baby myth. This strategy of not giving enough space to the central myth of the story has a dual function. On the one hand, this diverts the readers’ attention from this myth to the other myths to which she has given more space. On the other hand, in spite of this diversionary technique, the readers are forced to call forth the tar baby myth time and again, due to her small but significant references to the myth. Thus the diversionary technique actually helps in establishing the power of the tar bay myth. As this novel seems to camouflage the tar baby myth; similarly in real life, attempts have been made to camouflage racial struggle. Finally, Morrison demythifies the ‘traditional’ tar baby myth by reversing it through her entire narrative, and foregrounding the dual
struggle of the modern African American women in constructing their ‘self’ as opposed to the ‘black other’ as well as the ‘white other’.