CHAPTER- IV

DELINEATION OF THE TRAUMA OF BLACK LIFE AND THE THEME OF UNIVERSAL OPPRESSION

As Morrison shows that race matters not only in the collective cultural experience of African-American and in the construction of group identity but also in the experience of the individual, she represents, with almost clinical precision, what has, in recent years, become of interest to psychiatry and psychoanalysis: the impact of shame and trauma on the individual psyche and the family structure. Unlike tradition psychoanalytic inquires which have tended to ignore the importance of social forces on the construction of group and personal identity, recent investigations of the impact of trauma and shame on the individual as well as sociological inquiries into the ubiquity of shame and pride in daily social interactions can help bring into bold relief the effect of racist practices on African-American identity.

A race-cognizant application of shame and trauma theory – which has mainly studied the painful effects of shame and trauma
on individuals and families within the dominant white culture – shows that African Americans have been forced to deal not only with individual or family shame and trauma but also with cultural shame and racial trauma as they are designated as the racially inferior and stigmatized other and thus become the targets of white discrimination and violence. An indispensable addition to the analysis of sensitive race matters, psychoanalytic and psychiatric accounts of the impact of shame and trauma on the individual provide an invaluable and necessary starting point for an analysis of Morrison’s representations of shame and trauma in her fiction.

Morrison seems driven to speak the unspeakable in her fiction. But in foregrounding the flowers and back grounding the illicit and traumatic, she also defensively aestheticizes the shame and trauma she represents in her novels, and she reminds her reads that violence in fiction is “always verbally mediated' and thus it appears 'as something styled'”. In her constant exposure of shameful and traumatic secrets, Morrison, at times, deliberately evokes the oral quality of gossip through her meandering narrative style and her use of narrative fragments in the progressive and repeated, but constantly interrupted, telling of her characters’ stories. But even while Morrison consciously affects an
improvisational or oral style in her fiction, she also is an author who is caught up in the desire to reveal and conceal, to tell and not tell, which typifies our culture’s approach to shame and trauma. Thus readers of Morrison’s fiction may come away with the sense of narrative withholding or hesitancy as they follow and piece together a novelistic narrative that circles redundantly around the illicit, traumatic, incomprehensible secret or secrets it represents. If through her use of aesthetic design and fragmented narrative structure Morrison partly defends against the shameful secrets and physical horrors she depicts in her fiction, her description of her imagined reader as a co-conspirator and confidant also reveals that she is intent on involving her readers emotionally in her work.

Morrison began working on the *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970, first as a story in 1962 and then as a novel in 1965, a time when there was public focus on the tissue of racial beauty. Bell hooks, remarking on how the Black Power movement of the 1960s “addressed the issue of internalized racism in relation to beauty, observes that the “black is beautiful” slogan worked to intervene and alter those racist stereotypes that had always insisted black was ugly, monstrous, undesirable. Morrison, who was in part responding to the 1960s black liberation movement in
*The Bluest Eye*, recalls that the reclamation of racial beauty made her question why racial beauty was not taken for granted within the African-American community, why it needed wide public articulation to exist. Coming to recognize the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gazes, Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, set out to describe how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.

In dramatizing devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause and in depicting the same-vulnerability and shame-anxiety of the lower-class Breedloves, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* shame explores the chronic shame of being poor and black in white America. Described by Donald Nathanson as a word that provides a “prolonged immersion in the world of shame”, *The Bluest Eye* depicts the damaging impact of the race and class hierarchy on the lives of the poor and black Breedloves, who have come to comprehend their designated position in the social order. Having internalized the contempt and loathing directed at them from the shaming gaze of the humiliator – that is, the white culture – the Breedloves believe that they are relentlessly and aggressively ugly.
*The Bluest Eye*, in its relentless focus on the self-hatred of the Breedloves, points to the pernicious effects of internalized racism. Accepting as blackness, the Breedloves see themselves as ugly people, and in what Morrison describes as the woundability of Pecola Breedlove, *The Bluest Eye* dramatizes an extreme form of the same-vulnerability and shame-anxiety suffered by African Americans in white America. Morrison also depicts the intergenerational transmission of shame in her novel, showing how it is passed down from parent to child. And in the response of members of the African-American community, who end up collectively scapegoating Pecola, the novel reveals how humiliated individuals can temporarily rid themselves of their shame by humiliating others. Indeed, the ugly Pecola becomes the ultimate carrier of her family’s – and her African-American community’s – shame.

*The Bluest Eye*, then, is a complicated shame drama. It also is a trauma narrative, for Pecola, as Morrison has aptly described her, is a total and complete victim, and she is a victim not only of racial shaming but also her crippled and crippling family. In a relentless way, *The Bluest Eye* depicts the progressive traumatization of Pecola, who is rejected and physically abused by her mother,
sexually abused by her alcoholic and unpredictably violent father, and ultimately scapegoated by members of the community. In her novel, Morrison reveals not only that trauma can result from a constellation of life’s experiences or a continuing pattern of abuse, but also that incest is always, inevitably, destructive to the child. Ultimately, as the closure of *The Bluest Eye* indicates, the damage done to Pecola is total, and she steps over into madness. Her self damaged beyond repair, Pecola retreats from real life and converses with her alter identity, her only friend that is, she ends up living permanently in the dissociated world of the severely traumatized individual.

Aware that the traumatic, shame-laden subject matter of her novel is potentially disturbing to the reader, Morrison, in the opening words of Claudia’s narration – “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941” – entices the reader by invoking in the intimate back fence world of illicit gossip. In Morrison’s description, the opening phrase – “Quiet as it’s kept” – is conspirational, ‘Shh, don’t tell anyone else,’ and ‘No one allowed to know this.’ It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. In some sense it was precisely what the act of writing the book was the public exposure of a private confidence. If the
publication of the book involved exposure, the writing of *The Bluest Eye* was the disclosure of secrets, secrets we shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community.

If Morrison risks vicariously traumatizing her readers in writing about the Breedlove family and Cholly’s incestuous rape of Pecola, she also sets up potential shame conflicts in readers as she makes them privy to a shameful family secret. If a mature sense of shame – that is, the recognition that some phenomena should be kept private and shielded from public view – protects the individual in moments of increased vulnerability, it is also the case that family privacy has served to conceal the fact that the family provides a dangerous hiding place for family violence and sexual abuse. Morrison, in her strategic public exposure of the incest secret, breaks the taboo on looking and thus risks shaming her readers, for just as those who are exposed feel shame, so observers of shaming scenes can feel shame. Indeed, “Shame, by its nature, it contagious. Moreover, just as shame has an intrinsic tendency to encourage hiding, so there is a tendency for the observer of another’s shame to turn away from it”.³
Morrison’s impetus for writing *The Bluest Eye*, as she recalls, was to write a book about a kind of person that was never in literature anywhere, never taken seriously by anybody – all those peripheral little girls. As she tells the story of the Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explores the devastation caused by black self-contempt – the sense of the self as racially stained and defective, as dirty, nasty and ugly to use descriptions that recur in the text – but in a carefully shaped narrative that serves to counteract and aestheticize the raw shame and pain the novel exposes. Describing what he calls gripping art – creations that exert a power of fascination, of spellbinding force – Leon Wurmer finds in such works layers of “woundedness, idealization, and aggression”. In *The Bluest Eye*, a work that contains layers of woundedness, idealization, and aggression, Morrison exerts the power of fascination as she begins the cultural and literary work that will continue to preoccupy her by exposing the racial wounds and shame-humilations suffered by black Americans in the race-conscious and race-divided American society.

Unlike *The Bluest Eye*, which is an explicit shame drama, *Sula*, at first glance, appears to shun shame through its shameless characters, Sula and Shadrack. And yet as Leon Wurmsen remarks
in his analysis of shamelessness, if it is shame that is fought against by shamelessness, it is shame that returns in spectral form in shameless behavior. That shameless, feelingless behavior is a form of hiding and that the shameless individual is often someone who was tragically humiliated and learned to defined woundedness with a defiant show of strength is dramatized in Morrison’s novel. While part of Morrison’s explicit agenda in *Sula* is to use her two shameless characters, Sula and Shadrack, to flaunt the shaming racist stereotypes of the black Jezebel and the degenerate black madman, it is also revealing that both characters, who can be read as versions of the bad nigger folk hero, are presented as deeply shamed individuals and as social pariahs: both are nihilistic misanthropes who are defiant and yet ultimately thwarted and whose dangerous excesses are subjected to the control and containment of the black community. Not only does this point to the text’s inability to totally break free from hegemonic and shaming constructions of black identity, but it also shows that internalization – that is, the profound psychological and social introjections of negative images and meanings found in stereotypes – is a “common and profoundly problematic outcome of stereotyping disclosures”.⁵ Thus, although *Sula* is politically
invested in reimagining black cultural identity through its lawless and experimental characters, it also reveals the insidious and problematic effects of internalized racism and shaming racist stereotypes on literary discourse.

If in *Sula* Morrison pushes black-white relations to the periphery of her narrative through her inward focus on the Bottom community and on the friendship between the conventional Nel and unconventional Sula, she also begins her novel with an account of the insulting “nigger joke” that serves as the originating myth of the Bottom community of Medallion, Ohio. A joke, A nigger joke. That was the way it got started. Not the town, of course, but that part of town where the Negroes lived, the part they called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills. When a white farmer promises his salve freedom and some bottom land if he completes some difficult chores, he tricks the slave into asking for hilly, not valley, land by insisting that hilly bottom land is rich and fertile. When God looks down, it’s the bottom. That’s why we call it so. It’s the bottom of heaven – best land there is. Using a classic countershaming tactic in describing how the blacks who live in the hills can literally look down on the white folks, the *Sula* narrator shames the white shamers and uses humor to counteract shame.
But the narrator also remarks on the adult pain that exists behind the laughter of the Bottom folk, laughter that is part of the pain. The racial shaming that begins with the nigger joke played on the black founder of the Bottom community is perpetuated in the shame-ridden and drive life of an economically emasculated Bottom man like Judge Greene, who lives in a state of chronic resentment because, as he puts it, the black man has a hard row to hoe in a world run by white men. If whites have traditionally demonized blacks, the Bottom people demonize — and thus shame — whites, seeing them as an evil force. To the Bottom people, the purpose of evil is to survive it, and they determine to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine, and ignorance.

Calling attention to the same and trauma of African-American life in *Sula*, Morrison describes a world where whites are equated with the uncontrollable and uncontainable evils of life, where black survival may come at the horrible cost of self-mutilation, and where expressions of black rage at the social and economic injustices of life ultimately prove self-destructive. Morrison also evokes the dissociated world of the trauma victim in *Sula* through her enactments of scenes that are depicted in a detached and often stylized manner and that recall descriptions of the “fragmentary
sensation, on image without context”.6 To some extent *Sula* is a cracked mirror, fragments and pieces we have to see independently and put together. Morrison has suggestively remarked, pointing to the way in which her novel, with its repeated scenes of violence, replicates the disrupted, fragmented trauma narrative. From the opening description of Shadrack’s war trauma through depictions of Sula’s and Eva’s self-mutilation, Eva’s burning of Plum, Chicken Little’s drowning, Hannah’s fiery death, and the mass drowning deaths of many members of the Bottom community, the novel focuses attention on the unexpected violence of African-American life. Remarking on the chapter that describes the fiery death of Hannah, Morrison explains that the chapter – by starting out with a description of the second strange thing and then by recalling the first strange thing – warns readers, especially black readers, to expect something dreadful. But readers can also take comfort in the knowledge that whatever the unknown strange – or dreadful – event is, it has already occurred. While she may want to hold her readers in a comfortable place, she also wants them to know something awful is going to happen, so that when it happens they “won’t be shattered”.7
A novel that plays on the reader’s emotion, *Sula*, as Morrison has described it, it also hermetic and tight, if not bookish as it, like *The Bluest Eye*, demands participatory reading, inviting both a cognitive and visceral response from its audience. In part, Morrison compels reader participation through the elliptical technique of her novel. For despite the novel’s apparent chronological ordering – in chapters titled by dates beginning in 1919 and ending in 1965 – *Sula* miscues readers, forcing them to question their readings and hold their judgment in check, and thus, it has been claimed, Morrison forces readers into the habit of ‘new seeing’ by presenting events but withholding their significance until later.8,9 To the extent that this narrative technique gives readers the sense that there are narrative gaps or secrets – that is, the feeling that there are things being withheld or concealed – it acts out the hiding and concealing behavior associated with the shame scenario even as it promises, like *The Bluest Eye*, the public exposure of shame and trauma-laden secrets. And as we shall see, *Sula* is also a work that has provoked critic after critic to become caught up in the enactment of the countershaming and blame-assessment dramas promoted by the narrative.
Morrison’s novel, despite its at times wry, folksy, and gossipy narrating voice, draws attention to the depredations and humiliations suffered by Eva gruntled marriage, Eva is repeatedly shamed and victimized, for BoyBoy, did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. When BoyBoy abandons Eva, he leaves her destitute and with three young children to feed: the confused and desperately hungry. In a graphic scene that portrays Eva’s poverty but also uses the shaming imagery of the disgusting, dissmelling, and dirty infant, *Sula* describes how eva uses lard to cure Plum’s constipation. Taking her suffering infant son to the outhouse on a cold December night, Eva shoves the last bit of food she had in the world besides three beets up his ass. After the black hard stools ricochet onto the frozen ground, Eva wonders what she is doing down on her haunches with her beloved baby boy warmed by her body in the almost total darkness, her shins and teeth freezing, her nostrils assailed. Intent on provoking a visceral response from her readers in this scene, Morrison also risks disgusting them by drawing on the shame-related aversion to excreta and the fear, disgust, and humiliation associated with defecation.
If Eva is portrayed as a fierce matriarch bent on ensuring the survival of her children, she also is an abandoned – and thus shamed – wife. Eva is further humiliated when BoyBoy returns to the Bottom several years later with another woman. Even though BoyBoy appears a picture of prosperity and good will, Eva is aware of the shame lurking beneath his big city shine. Watching him dance down the steps and strut toward the waiting woman, Eva sees defeat in the stalk of his neck and in the curious tight way he holds his shoulders. When BoyBoy whispers to the woman and she laughs, Eva feels a liquid trial of hate flood her chest, and she is filled with pleasant anticipation at the thought of hating BoyBoy, an emotion that will protect her from the routine vulnerabilities of life and keep her alive and happy. Yet like the humiliated individual who makes shamefaced withdrawal to protect against further humiliation, Eva begins her retreat to her upper-floor bedroom after BoyBoy’s visit. And she becomes an arrogant, contemptuous woman who rids herself of her own shame by shaming others.

By privileging in the closure the idealized discourse of female friendship, Morrison deflects reader attention away from the adult Sula’s contempt and anger, and thus, in effect, redeems her character. Evidence of Morrison’s power to entice reader
involvement in the novel’s organizing fantasies is found in the critical conversation surrounding the closure. It has been argued, for example, that after death Sula’s dangerous power is balanced with the loving and stable power of Nel or that, in the end, Nel merges her self and Sula’s self to form a better, truer self, or that Sula leads Nel to self-understanding. Another commentator, who remarks that she still has to choke back tears at the end of the novel, views Sula as a work that can potentially rescue its women readers by inviting them to examine their alliance with other women. Yet another critics insists that Morrison’s vision of the “ill-fated friendship” of Nel and Sula urges readers “to be more conscious of and more concerned about the sacrifices of love and human potential exacted by a sexist, racist social order”.10

Apty described as novel of elegant craft and intense emotional power, Morrison’s Sula uses an elegant narrative design but also plays on the reader’s emotions as it enacts complicated shame dramas and depicts jarring scenes of disinterested violence. Through her paired characters, Nel and Sula, Morrison explores issues concerning class and shame within the African-American community as she examines the construction of black femininity, and she also uses the dangerously free and shameless Sula to
investigate, if not shamelessly flaunt, the debasing racist stereotype of the socially unrestrained and promiscuous lower-class black female. A novel that uses literary form to contain and also master the contagious, and also potentially toxic, feelings that impel the narrative – feelings of shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust, and rage – *Sula* reveals not only the same that returns in spectral form in shameless behavior but also the annihilating power of contempt through its repeated stagings of the contempt-disappear scenario.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison illustrates that shame and pride are at once social emotions, which act as shaping forces in the construction of social and group identity, and intrapsychic phenomena. Part of Morrison’s cultural project in *Song of Solomon* is to investigate the social and familial sources of black shame and pride and to distinguish between healthy and false pride. Morrison also explores the issue of class status in the social construction of black identities as she cross-questions the black bourgeoisie’s version of African-American manhood. Examining the class divisions within the African-American community, *Song of Solomon* focusing attention on intraracial shaming- the contempt that some middle-class African Americans, like members of the Dead family, feel for poor and lower-class blacks. *Song of Solomon* also deals
with the shame and pride issues surrounding skin color, the internalized racism that affords light skin a greater social value than dark skin. In deliberately setting out to confront the vexed issues surrounding color and class, *Song of Solomon* exposes what has been called the 'dirty little secret' and 'last taboo' of African-American culture, the existence of intraracial color prejudice and discrimination – the so-called color complex – which continues to be an “embrassing and controversial subject for African Americans”.

According to bell hooks, those black folks who came of age before Black Power faced the implications of color caste either through devaluation or overvaluation. If being born light meant beginning life with an advantage recognized by everyone, being born dark meant starting life handicapped, with a serious disadvantage. The 1960s black liberation movement challenged this notion with its empowering call to see black as beautiful. But in the late 1970s, around the time *Song of Solomon* was published, the politics of racial assimilation, which had always operated as backlash, not only began to undermine black self-determination but also led, in the 1980s and 1990s, to the resurgence of the color-caste hierarchy.
Song of Solomon acts out an important social mission as it deals with issues that African Americans find painful and embarrassing, such as the slavery origins of black American culture and the persistence of both intraracial color prejudice and class conflict within the African-American community. But because Song of Solomon is a densely textured narrative, it succeeds, in part, in concealing or minimizing the racial shame and trauma at its core by inviting critical analysis of its textual patterns and its use of folkloric and mythic sources. While Song of Solomon is mired in the excretory discourse of shame, it also, as is characteristic of Morrison’s fiction, counteracts shame through its rich literary discourse. Critic-readers thus tend to avoid or minimize the narrative’s racist and counterracist rhetoric, including its use of the shaming discourse of dirt and defilement, and discuss, instead, the importance of names and naming in the novel, or Morrison’s use of the monomyth of the hero, or her adaptation of the fight motif and its link to both western and African-American mythic sources, or her invocation of black oral culture. Aptly described as a work in which readers passively absorb the apparently disconnected information provided by the author at the beginning and then manage to put together the puzzle by the end of the novel, Song of
Solomon, like the other works we have investigated, enacts the concealments and hesitancies characteristic of shame and discourse.

That critic-readers often tend to bypass Song of Solomon’s tragic realism and concentrate, instead, on its magical romance points to the power of Morrison’s richly complex literary discourse to mask or divert attention away from the shame and trauma issues that impel the narrative. Morrison also uses dialogic, parodic discourse to partially shield readers from the troubling subject matter of her novel, and indeed Morrison has described Song of Solomon as her own giggle in Afro-American terms of the proto-myth of the journey to manhood. The opening scene of the novel, which tells of the aborted, suicidal flight of Mr. Smith that presages Milkman’s birth, is often read as deliberately staged dramatization of the birth of the mythic hero. As critics have observed, Milkman’s birth is accompanied by the “ritualized celebration” of Pilate’s singing and virgins (i.e., Milkman’s sisters) “strewing rose petals as a black Icarus dies”.\(^{12}\) Yet this opening scene, even as it evokes the hero’s birth, is also tinged with shame. With his blue silk wings curved around his chest, Mr. Smith masquerades as the proud hero – the flying African. But he is also an object of ridicule and
contempt as he stands on the roof of Mercy Hospital, and thus some of the Southside watchers snigger, a gold-toothed man laughs, and another calls him crazy. While the initial description of Mr. Smith evokes the shaming stereotype of the mad black man, the narrative later explains that Mr. Smith is a member of the terrorist organization, the Seven Days, and thus reveals that the cause of his madness is the racist violence perpetrated against African Americans.

Drawing attention away from such issues, the novel indulges in myth-making as it associates Mr. Smith’s leap with Milkman’s birth the next day in the all-white Mercy Hospital, which, in the covert countershaming and dialogic speech of the Southside residents, is referred to as No Mercy Hospital since it is a place that, in refusing to treat blacks, has shown no mercy toward their physical suffering. Mr. Smith’s blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier – that only birds and airplanes could fly – he lost all interest in himself. Such authorial directives focus reader attention on the theme of flight in the narrative and lead to the unavoidability of critic-telling of Milkman’s conception and birth, Morrison deliberately evokes and plays on the mythic
story of the hero’s origins. Milkman, it is often remarked, undergoes a miraculous’ birth since he is conceived through the magic of Pilate’s love potion; he is nobly born, he is “descended from American aristocrats, property owners, and he later assumes the classic hero’s journey of separation, initiation, and return”.13

The Milkman’s birth, his early years, and adult life – including his later journey south in search of gold, which becomes a search for the golden treasure of family origins and racial identity – are patterned after the protomyth of the hero, as critic after critic has remarked. It is typically argued that before Milkman can ride the air – that is, transcend human limitations – he must leave his parents’ house, encounter dangers and obstacles along the way, endure a journey to the underworld calling to mind great heroes who have made similar journeys: Aeneas, Odysseus, Tiresias, Dante, Jesus, after which he sees himself clearly and becomes intensely aware of his shortcomings. Consequently, he is able to throw off the psychic baggage he has been bearing in his soul and fly. Yet if many critic-readers, in heroizing Milkman, repeat the narrative’s focus on the pride of mythic flight, others become inadvertent players in a shame drama as they devalue Milkman. Morrison’s character, for example, has been described as an anti-
classical hero, who exhibits warped values, inadequate character formation, and self-centeredness, and it also has been argued that Morrison, although she follows the monomyth pattern in the novel, also shrewdly mocks Milkman, the alleged hero of narrative, who is presented as an intolerable egoist and who does little to warrant the honorific label of hero.

Just as the narrative rejects the false pride of Dr. Foster, so it rejects the arrogance of Macon Dead. A representative of the upwardly mobile, self-made black capitalist class, Macon, in his drive for wealth, assumes a white-identified role as he actively exploits poor blacks in the Southside area of town where is a slum landlord. A character readers love to hate, Macon has been described as the most hateful character in the novel, as a cold, objective, and calculating man, and as an acquisitive individual who is savagely mocked by Morrison. Macon, who is a colored man of property by the age of twenty-five, espouses the ethic of materialism own things. And let the things you own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too. In his opportunistic materialism and class elitism, he identifies with the hated white aggressor as he behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man. Even as the narrative describes Macon’s success as a capitalist, it
works to undercut his prideful arrogance. A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see, says the grandmother of Guitar Bains when Macon threatens to evict the Bains family for failure to pay their rent. And another tenant of Macon’s – Porter, the wild man in the attic uses shaming, racist rhetoric when he angrily refers to Macon as a baby-dicked baboon and says to him, you need killin, you really need killin.

In describing the origins of Milkman’s shame-laden nickname, Morrison appeals yet again to her readers’ voyeuristic interests while she risks provoking their shame-disgust by positing them as witnesses to a taboo, oedipally tinged scene. Ruth, who needs a balm, a gentle touch or nuzzling of some sort to make her life bearable, nurses Milkman until he is old enough to stand up and talk. While Ruth takes secret pleasure in nursing her growing son, Milkman’s secretive eyes convey his childish sense that there is something strange and wrong about this incestuous nursing ritual, which abruptly ends when Ruth is discovered by one of Macon’s tenants, Freddie, a notorious gossip. Amused at the sight of the lemony-skinned Ruth with her black-skinned son at her breast, Freddie gives Ruth’s son his nickname, Milkman. What the adult Milkman recalls is Laughter. Somebody he couldn’t see, in
the room laughing at him and at his mother, and his mother is ashamed. She lowers her eyes and won’t look at him. Look at me, Mama. Look at me. But she doesn’t and the laughter is loud now. Everybody is laughing. Even as this scene suggests Ruth’s desire to baby Milkman – to keep him dependent and treat him as her velveteened toy – it also dramatizes a common shame scenario in its account of Milkman’s childhood experience of maternal transmission of shame but also the global nature of shame: the shame-vulnerable individual’s feeling, in the moment of public exposure and ridicule, that his secret shame is visible to all.

Like Sula, Song of Solomon focuses on the maternal transmission of shame and it also is concerned with the dangers of excessive mothering. But whereas in Sula Morrison centers her attention on the woman-centered world of black matriarchy, in Song of Solomon she is concerned – especially in her representation of Macon Dead – with issues surrounding the black patriarchy. Bell hooks, in her critique of the black phallocentric view of the patriarchal role – the notion of the satisfying manhood that carries with it the phallocentric right of men to dominate women – remarks on the chokehold patriarchal masculinity imposes on black men.
*Song of Solomon* explores the black patriarchy through the figure of the stern, greedy, unloving Macon Dead.

In *Tar Baby*, which like *Song of Solomon* is located in a specific cultural moment, Morrison investigates the crisis-of-identity within the African-American community as she examines what it means to be black in the post-Civil Rights period in which the idea of black solidarity has been challenged by a recognition of the differences in values and class and education that divide African Americans. Morrison’s least popular novel, *Tar Baby* is willfully disturbing work in which Morrison openly invokes racist stereotypes and makes extensive use of the shaming discourse of dirt and defilement and insulting, contemptuous racist speech as she probes divisive race and class issues. Continuing and expanding on the cultural and literary work of her earlier novels, Morrison explores in *Tar Baby* the complex ways in which race, class, and gender are inflected in the African-American experience as she illuminates the complicated processes of constructing black identities. As Morrison exposes to public view the class tensions with the black community, placing particular stress on the black bourgeoisie’s prejudice against lower-class blacks, she points to the damaging impact of inherited and internalized racist stereotypes.
and discourses on African-American identities and the black cultural imagination.

Morrison, in her discussion of *Tar Baby*, remarks that she makes deliberate use of the Tar Baby folk tales in the novel, dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal. Although the Tar Baby folk story points to a shame racial legacy – and even the term, “Tar Baby,” has come down as a racial slur – Morrison, in a characteristic antishaming maneuver, also locates a positive African message in this story. In her original conception of the novel, Morrison saw part of her novelistic project as a reprocessing of the Tar Baby story, which she first heard as a child. The story, as she recalls, bothered her madly, if not terrified her, for she found the description of the white man creating the Tar Baby to trap the rabbit, who got stuck and more stuck, to be really monstrous. As she work on the novel, Morrison viewed the Tar Baby tale as “love story: in which a black woman is the tar baby and a black man the rabbit, and she wondered how a black woman who has enjoyed all the benefits of what the white Western world has to offer”14 would relate to the black man who came “out of the briar patch”. 15
During the process of reworking this story, she also kept in mind the racial shame attached to the term “Tar Baby,” which, as she comments, is a racial slur, like nigger, and is also a name that white people call black children, black girls. Morrison’s characteristic antishaming impulse is indicated in her description of the possible racial pride that underlies this monstrous story and racial epithet. When she discovered that there is a tar woman in African mythology, as she recalls, she began think about tar. “At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; 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”.

As Morrison dusts off the myth of the Tar Baby in her intentionally discomfiting novel, she addresses, often in blunt, shame-eliciting speech, issues of racial identity and class warfare within the black community. In Tar Baby not only is the black elitist Jadine identified as the white-constructed Tar Baby used to trap Son, the representative black underclass man of the folk, but Jadine also lacks the positive qualities Morrison associates with tar: both the maternal; nurturing qualities that act as a social
“glue,” and also the “tar” of blackness that comes from being in touch with one’s African-American roots. Because Jadine’s identity is white-constructed, she must become aware of her black roots and identity, and one of Son’s primary functions is to serve as Jadine’s guide in her search for her authentic cultural identity. But if part of Tar Baby’s cultural agenda is to celebrate black American folk roots and the maternal, nurturing tarlike qualities of black women, the narrative also expresses, through the character and voice of Jadine, the black bourgeoisie’s ambivalence about blackness. Jadine associates blackness with the proud and noble African woman in yellow, but she also links it not only to the terrifying swamp women – but also to the night women with their grotesque sagging bodies. Thus while Morrison’s novel sets out to consciously celebrate the tarlike quality of black women and the authentic black folk, it also uses Jadine’s middle-class voice and perspective to express deep anxieties about the “tar” of black – that is, the black racial identity that stains and stigmatizes.

Identifying Son with the black rural folk culture and Jadine with the Euro-American urban white culture, Tar Baby, invokes and contests dominant representations with their polarizing binarisms of black/white, nature/culture, primitive/civilized,
polluted/pure. Part of the text’s antishaming agenda is to reverse the white hierarchical value system by celebrating Son’s African black, nature-identified, primitive qualities. Yet the narrative also expresses persisting ambivalences and hesitancies in its presentation of Son, who remains off-stage, hidden in the text as it were, for the first third of the novel, and who, when he initially erupts into the narrative, is constructed as the racial, as the shamed object of contempt. As seen through the shaming gaze of both the black and white characters in the Valerian Street household, Son is the sexual savage, the dangerous primitive, and the dirty, dissmelling underclass man.

While the text’s aim is to repeat these shaming racist and class stereotypes in order to counteract them, and while Jadine’s initial fears of sexual – and racial – contamination dissipate when Son washes away his dirt and becomes stunningly attractive, the narrative continues to use Jadine’s black elitist perspective to register uneasiness about Son and the black underclass rural folk culture her represents. Through the dialogic exchanges between the underclass Son and elitist Jadine, who become lovers but fail to permanently bridge the class-education-class divide between them, Morrison points to the cultural ailment that comes out of the deep legacy of racial shame and the color-caste hierarchy. Indicating the
permanence of the cultural and emotional separation between the lovers, the novel closes without resolving the lovers’ dilemma; instead, Jadine returns to her adopted European culture and Son enters the mythic folk culture. Failing to head the racial wounds it opens, Tar Baby is unable to complete the emotional labor it begins and thus it ends in an emotional impasse. Just as the narrative is unable to overcome the cultural barriers between Son and Jadine, so critical readers remain split in their perceptions of these characters. While some critic-readers come to Jadine’s defense against Son, others act as Son’s advocate. In other words, the shame drama of blame assessment, as we shall see, is a central feature of the critical discourse that surrounds this novel.

*Tar Baby*, through its scandalized, oppositional discourse about the white defecators, challenges the dominant cultural narrative and memory. In constructing witness as a sign of racial contamination and pathological difference, *Tar Baby* also employs a classic countershaming tactic as it inverts the white racist construction of blacks as unclean and the self-degrading black construction that a nigger ain’t shit. Drawing on essentialist racist discourse by equating whiteness with defilement and degradation, the narrative actively reprojects onto whites the shame they have long projected onto blacks so that one of the coded messages in the
novel is that a white ain’t shit. Yet despite this strategy, Tar Baby, like the other Morrison works we have examined, presented its black characters as shame-ridden and shame-driven. Moreover, both Son and Therese – who, like Son, is associated with the black folk ethos and who also serves as Son’s guide into the world of myth and legend – become sites of racial shame and rage in the text.

Highlighting both gender and intraracial class conflict in Tar Baby, Morrison reveals the potentially destructive impact of racial shame on the construction African-American identities. In her next novels Morrison continues her investigation of the social production of a stigmatized racial identity as she engages in the cultural work of recovering African-American roots in slavery. In showing in Beloved how African Americans were dirtied – that is, shamed and traumatized – by slavery, Morrison dares to look more directly at the historical sources of racial shame and at the pernicious effects of internalized racism as she attempts to heal the painful and abiding wounds inflicted on black Americans by the dominant white culture.
REFERENCES


