TAR BABY

Set in the contemporary world, *Tar Baby* (1981) continues and extends Toni Morrison’s cardinal concerns. Despite the more prominent role played by white characters and the larger social and geographical range in *Tar Baby*, Morrison’s key focal point remains the role of family in the lives of her characters. Particularly crucial are the issues of bilious white values and of generational continuity among modern black youth. Various critical readings of *Tar Baby* have either completely neglected or touched only partially upon these concerns of the writer.

James Coleman aptly raises a pertinent question based on his reading of the novel whether “the triumph of community, the positive influence of folk values, and immersion in the source of the natural and primitive can only be achieved outside the scope of the lives of most twentieth-century Blacks” (64) in *Tar Baby*. But Coleman fails to penetrate the core of such an important issue. While pointing out Jadine as “a hard-driving, selfish materialistic Black woman with no strong connections to other people and to the folk past,” (68) Coleman simplistically places the blame for Jadine’s attitude on Ondine. The critic goes grossly wrong in this judgement by misinterpreting and
under evaluating Online’s role in Jadine’s life; the critic fails to comprehend Online’s character, who is, infect, a repository of black familial values. Coleman also ignores the impact of oppressive socio-historic forces which makes modern black youth like Jadine “[revert] to negative white western values” (69). Speaking in the same vein, Sandra Pouchet Paquet discuss Jadine’s “disconnection from ancestral roots” and an “explicit disaffection with women’s role and status in the folk community” (500). Though Paquet rightly holds “the patronage of Valerian Street through education in select schools,” (506) responsible for Jadine’s “cultural orphanage,” (499) but she goes wrong in assuming that it is the “carefully cultivated attachment to wealth and privilege” of Jadine’s surrogate parents that leaves her a “cultural orphan” (508). Paquet does not sufficiently explore the vital angle of family, her emphasis being merely on Jadine – Son relationship.

Marilyn Sanders Mobley interprets *Tar Baby* as a “modern cautionary tale in which Morrison draws on the Afro-American oral narrative tradition to expose the pitfalls of white middle-class aspirations for the black woman and to illustrate the consequences of her social and cultural ‘misbehaviour’” (285). These consequences
Mobley illustrates by pointing out tensions inherent in the oppositions between black and white, poor and rich, Ondine and Jadine and African and Afro-American. The central reason the critic considers for Jadine’s “pitfalls” is her rejection of the “cultural constructions of race and mothering that could heal and transform her consciousness.” (286). However, a serious lacuna in Mobley’s discussion is that the issues of Jadine’s rejection of her own family and her minimalised role in it are not taken up. Also missing from the discussion are the sociohistoric reasons for Jadine’s “psychic chaos and alienation” (291). Judylyn S. Ryan’s study of Tar Baby is no different from that of Sanders. His concern is “to explore this ‘serious question’ of relationships between African men and African women in the twentieth century” (598-599). Ryan develops an extensive discourse on the antagonistic relationship between Jadine and S. Margot Gayle. Backus discusses Tar Baby’s depiction of “generational transmission of racism, sexism and child abuse in a white, American, upper-class family” (433). Backus discusses Valerian’s complicity in the child abuse by exploring, in passing, the “ways in which shattered adults compulsively re-enact the traumas of their own childhoods in the lives of their children”
Backus’ study is an analysis of psychological reasons responsible for child abuse in Street family but the critic almost totally ignores the writer’s central concern.

Tar Baby is Toni Morrison’s attempt to unveil the apocalyptic effect white values have on the institution of family, whether black or white. For the first time in her corpus, Morrison takes up a white family for detailed study. Morrison exposes the decadent impact of white values on white families as well. The white family in this novel is a miserable failure as a family unit and is doomed to spiritual stasis, alienation and neurosis. Morrison finds much to condemn since she sees it as a reflection of its racial background. The husband is so enticed by material trappings that he reaches old age without ever knowing the feelings of true love towards his wife or without ever knowing that his wife indulged in child abuse. The author sees the wife as the most unadulterated form of evil who spends years physically torturing her own child. The white family is torn asunder because it has no cultural or historical moorings to base itself on and knows no values which can be transmitted to its members. Morrison creates a black family also to underscore the defunct nature of white values. The black family is rooted in African family values and
heritage and is, therefore, immune to the failings that afflict the white family. Through Jadine, Morrison voices her concern over the pitfalls of the modern black generation which is enmeshed in the deceptive lure of white values and ways of life. Once caught by the lure of affluence, the modern black youth become psychologically and materially enslaved. The author holds non-black education responsible for producing the Americanised brand of black youth who is far removed from his own family and community ties. Morrison is not against upward mobility, but she reviles Jadine who severs her link with the ancestors and thwarts the possibility of forming a family. The price Jadine pays for such self-propulsion is through her incoherent identity and a rootless existence. Morrison also takes to task the conservative black community in the novel. The community turns into anathema for modern black youth like Jadine because of its moth-eaten ideology, poverty and illiteracy.

Afro-American families, historically, have metamorphosed in the remembered cultures of Africa, enslavement, racism, and persistent institutionalised inequality. Family life was central to African cultures and social organisations. Enslaved Africans brought this value with them to America. However, the conditions of slavery
often prohibited the existence of a stable Afro-American family. Nonetheless, kin relation rather than marriage was the linchpin of Afro-American families under slavery. This kin principle remains strong even today as Andrew Billingsley points out: “The children were provided a quality of care and protection not common in modern societies, for they belonged not alone to their father and mother, but also, and principally, to the wider kinship group” (4). Thus, one Afro-American family pattern that has emerged is that of the extended family. This family grouping includes relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, or other relatives, formally or informally adopted, who share the household with a nuclear family. Extended families have long been a strong support system for blacks in America. The nature of mutual dependence between generations has been of vital importance for such a family grouping to survive.

It is this centuries-old African tradition of an intergenerational continuity, of taking care of one’s ancestors that becomes a point of sharp focus in Tar Baby. In her novels and interviews, Morrison repeatedly underscores that the survival of a black individual hinges on his ability to establish a crucial balance between individual liberation and reciprocal obligation to his family and ancestors. For
Morrison, “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Black Women 344). Morrison further explains the import of ancestors in an interview with Elsie B. Washington: “It’s DNA, it’s where you get your information. Also it’s your protection, it’s your education. They were responsible for us, and we have to be responsible to them….And if you ignore that, you put yourself in a spiritually dangerous position of being self-sufficient, having no group that you’re dependent on” (238).

Morrison warns that self-advancement at the cost of family and community is suicidal for the blacks: “Nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (Black Women 344). The author exhibits how the long-treasured tradition of the extended family is debunked by blacks in present times. This creed is a product of a programmed Americanised education. The modern blacks are schooled in the mores of Western culture whereby individual assertion takes precedence over communal and family bonding. Stephanie A. Demetrokopolous describes the decadent values this breed of new blacks have assimilated:
The mobility of American culture is symbolic of how individuals are early and often cut off from their pasts. Self-reliance, autonomy, separation from family as the hallmark of maturation, children weaned like cats from the nest with the explicit message that no more needs will be met, adult children living far away from ailing and aging parents – these patterns of American individualism are all so strong is my life that they are as if written in concrete (132).

These white values are symptomatic of a dying culture, yet the new blacks adopt them because they succumb under the pressure to conform. In fact, these people, isolated from African roots and cultural traditions, live isolated lives. Their education, status, and way of life are vastly different from those of the black masses who remain uneducated, poorly clothed, fed, and sheltered.

Most of the story of Tar Baby unfolds on the Caribbean island, Isle des Chevaliers, where Morrison focuses on a household made-up of two central families: the white Streets, and their black servants, the Childses. Valerian Street is a wealthy candy manufacturer from Philadelphia, who has retired to the idyllic island. His young wife,
Margaret, comes with him unwillingly. As they prepare for Christmas at their mansion, L’Arbe de la Croix, they anxiously await the arrival of their adult son, Michael, who promises but never comes home. Valerian spends his days tending the plants of his greenhouse and playing the music of European classical composers, oblivious of the happenings in his own family. He is so self-absorbed that he is oblivious of the secret of Margaret’s gruesome abuse of their son during his childhood. The butler and cook of the Streets, Sydney and Ondine Childs, are devoted black servants. Their niece, Jadine, a modern woman with a graduate degree in art education and a career in high-fashion modelling, has come to the island for vacation from her jet-set modelling world. All of them live in an outwardly harmonious but a potentially volatile household. Son — uneducated, brash, and on the run from the law — prowls to about the grounds at night and steals food. He extends his roaming to the house where Margaret finds him hiding in her closet.

Son’s appearance breaks down the precarious equilibrium of the household, turning it topsy-turvy. Valerian, to provoke his terrified wife, invites him to stay in the guest room, and the members of the household debate what they should do with this strange unkempt man.
But their questions are soon rendered irrelevant as the next morning Son bathes, dresses in attractive clothes, begins serious flirtation with Jadine, and makes himself at home. When Christmas day arrives, Son takes the absent Michael’s place at the dinner table, and Sydney and Ondine step out of their roles as servants and join the others at the table as guests. Ondine throws the household into another uproar by unexpectedly revealing the long-kept secret that Michael avoids his parents because Margaret had abused him during his childhood. Son and Jadine take advantage of the chaos, spend the night together, and run off to New York. Soon enough, they are confronted with their incompatibility as a couple. Jadine will not compromise with the backward black world of Eloé, Florida, and Son can’t live in her white world. Jadine promptly forsakes whatever little responsibility she had felt towards her family and abandons Son to lead life as an expatriate in Paris. Son impulsively plunges himself into the rain forest in search of Jadine.

Morrison takes up a folktale that gives the novel its title and alters it considerably. Morrison’s mythic structure and its deconstruction destroy the white blueprint for the society which negates the humanity of blacks. The traditional Tar Baby tale is
adapted from an Africa animal folklore. A popular version of the tale comes from The Book of Negro Folklore. The authors use African animal prototypes as American fable heroes and show that the rabbit was symbolic of the weak overcoming the strong through trickery. Such a tale was representative of the master/slave relationship and was intended to train young blacks to cope with bondage by using tactics that could both undermine and outwit the white master. In turn, such tales helped slaves to retain some sense of hope in the face of insurmountable odds. The Tar Baby tale consists of a fox which is trying to catch a rabbit by placing a tar figure in a field. Brer Rabbit is confronted and angered by the mute Tar Baby and starts punching it. When the rabbit is caught in the tar, it begs and cajoles the fox not to throw it into the briar patch. Brer Rabbit is successful in its plea and is thrown into the briar patch where it was born and bred.

Several connotations could be derived out of this version of the Tar Baby tale. The tale can be read as the way black people attempt to deal with white society, or the derogatory name that whites use for black girls, or as the tar pit where one can find good material for building. Morrison presents this myth in a multifaceted way. Tar Baby is at once the white society, Son, and Jadine. The white American
society, with its ubiquitous domineering culture, plays the Tar Baby by ensnaring the minds of black people and disjointing the black family. Both Son and Jadine also exhibit traits of the Tar Baby. Son tries to lure Jadine to black culture and family. It is Jadine, however, who has the mythical accoutrements of the Tar Baby. She succeeds in weaning Son away from his black community in Eloe. Her image as the trickster, comfortable in her own well-mapped out territory of the white world, looms large enough; a very different connotation of the myth is also at work. For Morrison, tar comes to represent the symbol of a positive cultural potential. So, Tar Baby is not just the trickster but also the African woman who can “hold things together.” Morrison says:

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’s little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black women who can hold things together (Clair 122).

The “tar quality” (Wilson 131) that Morrison’s Afro-American women possess is the ability to nourish family and community. These
women have historically served dual roles of home-makers and providers. They took care of their families and loved their husbands and children. White bourgeoisie values did not preoccupy them; they believed in their ethnic identity which gave them dignity, stature and identity. Jadine grossly falls short of Morrison’s expectations of the “tar quality.” She surrenders this quality for a University degree and upward mobility. Having abandoned African ethos, the protagonist finds herself in spiritual and cultural vacuity, a malaise that afflicts the white Street family. It is for the first time in Morrison’s fictional world that we find her taking up for detailed examination the decadent values of white families. The author reduces the white Street family to a caricature of the dominant culture to unravel its quintessentially defunct structure. Demetrakopoulos shows the clarity with which Morrison depicts the lives of rich white people:

Indeed, except for F. Scott Fitzgerald’s stories and novels, I can think of no American literary works that can rival her story of how vacuous and empty wealthy white people can be. Morrison shows that white culture and white people are more subject to loss of soul, loss of self into things, into prestige (163).
Morrison makes the reader see the pathology of whites and the dysfunctional nature of their familial structure. It is the institution of family that infuses primary relationships with the qualities of faith and happiness. When the family becomes fractured, the relationships within it are stunted. In the Street family, Valerian spends his life manipulating his wife and emotionally abdicating his son. Margaret’s physical and emotional abuse of her son makes him a stranger in his family.

When marriage involves caring, mutual respect and tenderness, it flowers into understanding psychic needs of the partner. True union comes if spouses relate with each other’s intrinsic nature. In the absence of these features, the union is merely physical and short-lived. The relationship that exists between Valerian and Margaret Street does not in any way represent a normal, healthy marriage. They are a warring couple directing anger and psychological violence at each other. There is sufficient textual evidence that the Streets are not even sexually bonded. In any case, sexual contact would not have touched, much less involved, their souls. Morrison scathingly prophesies that the white family is, in essence, defunct and distorted.

Valerian and Margaret are locked in a dead-end marriage.
Theirs was a loveless marriage characterised by lack of emotional warmth and reciprocity of feelings. Margaret, for Valerian was a beautiful show-piece which could engage the attention of those who thronged his life and business. Valerian chooses Margaret as his wife, twenty years his junior, the way he does other valuable objects for their outward beauty. He decides to marry her when he first sees her riding a winter carnival float holding the paw of a polar bear. He is willing to overlook her lower-class background, her age, and her ignorance simply because she looked “like the candy that had his name. His youth lay in the red whiteness, a snowy Valentine Valerian” (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 427). With the passage of time, the physical aspect of marriage starts waning and Valerian increasingly finds his wife bereft of social status and grace. Due to the gulf between their social classes, Valerian starts treating her as though she were a socially embarrassing commodity bearing his name. He expects her to conform endlessly to his commands. When she fails to do so, he sadistically punishes her. Denise Heinze notes the repercussion of Valerian’s intimidation of Margaret: “Aware that every move is scrutinized by him, Margaret crumbles under the burden of perfection to such an extent that even mealtime turns into a psychological torture.
He monitors the number of calories she takes, the number of helpings and the speed with which she eats her meals. Chiding her in a deliberate and cynical way, Valerian says, “There is a rhythm to a male. I’ve always told you that” (p. 61). The rhythm, of course, is Valerian’s. As a result, Margaret becomes so alienated from her own body that sometimes she is unable to tell the soup from the China, or the knife from a stick of celery. She begins to view cutlery, cuisine and China as the enemy:

She was usually safe with soup, anything soft or liquid that required a spoon, but she was never sure when the confusion would return: when she would scrape her fork tines along the China trying to pick up the painted blossoms at its centre, or forget to unrap the Amaretto cookie at the side of her plate and pop the whole thing into her mouth (p.61).

Marital happiness and success stems less from merely living together or the permanent nature of the relationship and more from a meaningful dynamic interaction of the spouses. It should provide enough security and emotional support to the spouses so that they can attain maximum happiness and satisfaction. But,
Margaret is trapped in a loveless marriage. She is emotionally abandoned and neglected by her husband. It leaves her frustrated and anxiety-ridden. In fact, Margaret is severed from emotional interaction with her husband and son, and estranged from society ever since her childhood.

Ironically, Margaret’s stunning looks in her youth had brought her estrangement from her parents. Born beautiful into a family of plain parents and ordinary siblings, Margaret is ignored, despised, and finally left alone to make what she will of her assets. They decided to withdraw parental love and attention. To them, she was beautiful enough to take care of herself. Her parents stepped back and left her in an emotional vacuum:

They gave her care, but they withdrew attention. Their strength they gave to the others [of their children] who were not beautiful; their knowledge, what information they had they did not give to this single beautiful one. They saved it, distributed it instead to those whose characters had to be built (p. 54).

Margaret spent her youth “fighting off cousins in cars, dentists in chairs” (p. 82) since there was no one to turn to for protection and
support. Margaret is bewildered and injured when she does not get the love and protection she seeks in marrying Valerian.

After the marriage, she relies on Valerian to protect her from any further sexual abuse. Margot Gayle Backus observes: “Ironically, Margaret’s function is to serve as sexual object; her role is to virtually communicate sexual desirability and accessibility, so that the very image she must labor to project re-enacts the sexual vulnerability of her childhood” (433). Margaret’s extraordinary looks isolate her from her parents, and later her husband. She measures this estrangement from her family and husband in terms of steps. Her life was spent homeless as it were on “two concrete steps” of the family’s trailer home, on the “thirty-seven steps at the stadium when she was crowned; and a million wide steps in the house of Valerian Street” (p. 55). When Valerian isolates her from all social contact outside the domestic sphere, Margaret is left in a social and emotional void.

With no empathic human contact to lean on, Margaret is deeply marred by Valerian’s emotional violence. Her loneliness turns into a psychological malaise exhibited by her peevishness, neurosis and psychotic behaviour. Her disposition as a victim and a future victimizer is crystallised in her urge for rebellion. Her reaction
to her husband’s intimidation is most extreme. She becomes obsessed with disfiguring her baby’s creamy skin. Heinze reasons that “in an attempt to punish her husband [Margaret] defile[s] the symbol of his manhood and immortality, his son” (92). Margaret gets abundant opportunity to vent her displaced rage and aggression through her pathological torture of Michael with pins and cigarette butts. Ondine discloses Margaret’s betrayal of maternal trust:


Margaret’s self-justifying response to her abuse of Michael reveals her terrible loneliness and emotional insufficiency:

No one would believe that she loved him. That she was not one of those women in the National Enquirer. That she was never an overprotective or designing parent with unfulfilled dreams…. When he was an infant he seemed to want everything of her, and she didn’t know what to
give. She loved him even then. But no one would believe it (p. 58).

Margaret was incapable of meeting her infant’s basic emotional and physical needs as her own life was marked by emotional vacuity and sterility. She projects her self-estrangement and self-hatred upon her helpless infant by abusing him physically. Loneliness pushes her close to the edge of her sanity thus leading to a distorted distraction. She began to secretly torture her own son.

Margaret’s crime of child abuse elicits disparate critical responses. Backus reasons that Margaret abuses her child because she is one of those “shattered adults [who] compulsively re-enact the traumas of their childhoods, thereby passing on psychic wounds from generation to generation” (427). Barbara Hill Rigney argues that it is “sexual deprivation” which is the “ostensible reason behind [Margaret’s] abuse of her own son as well as the conscious process of self-annihilation that occupies her life” (103). Heinze disagrees with Morrison’s analysis of the vacuousness of Margaret and Valerian and finds it flimsy. Heinze observes that “the generosity that mitigates Cholly’s rape of his daughter and Pauline’s blindness to it [The Bluest Eye], stands in sharp contrast to her miserly reluctance to humanize
the Streets” (92). Heinze’s charge of a flimsy portrayal of the white family is hardly justifiable. Morrison is an avid reader of whites and blacks both and is sensitive to the nuances of both the races. To accuse Morrison of portraying the white family in disfavourable light will amount to serious misreading of the novel.

Valerian never experiences the joys of fatherhood, since he had only a peripheral role in Michael’s upbringing and a minimum of interaction and influence. The narrator offers no detailed perspective about Valerian’s relationship with his son. He wants Michael to take over the family’s business. However, Michael distances himself from his parents and Valerian comes to view him exclusively in negative terms. He has no respect for his son’s socialist political leanings, his anthropological pursuits or his insistent desire for value of life. He viciously indicts Michael and calls him a “perpetual loser,” a “kitten” (p.73), complaining “about Indians. About water. About chemicals. Mew. Meow. Meow” (p.75). In Valerian’s eyes, Margaret is directly responsible for Michael’s status as a loser. He laments: “[Margaret] made him think poetry was incompatible with property. She made a perpetual loser of one of the most beautiful, the brightest boy in the land” (p. 73). In reality, Valerian’s estrangement from his son runs
much deeper.

Valerian’s lack of a loving involvement and meaningful intervention in family matters compounds Margaret’s crime of child abuse. He makes no attempt to discover exactly why Michael used to hide under the sink in his childhood. Margaret is not solely to be blamed for the child abuse; Valerian cannot escape the blame since he has mostly been an absent father. Had he changed one diaper or spent sometime with his son, he would have known that his wife was abusing their son. Valerian only observes the relationship between mother and son with disengaged stance. Valerian justifies his own role as the absent father on the plea that his job prevented him from full participation in the domestic sphere—“Every now and then I’d come home, he’d be under the sink. Humming to himself. When I’d pull him out, ask him what he was doing there, he’d say he liked the soft…. I used to be it for him, but I wasn’t there during the day” (p.74). Valerian’s justification might seem simplistic in light of Morrison’s—serious cognisance of his part in Margaret’s child abuse: “No man should live without absorbing the sins of his kind, the foul air of his innocence, even if it did wilt rows of angel trumpets and cause them to fall from their veins” (p.245). Suitably enough, he meets his nemesis
when he is forced to acknowledge that his ignorance is actually a subterfuge for the guilt he feels for his inaction. He comes face to face with his crime and is remorseful at Ondine’s revelation. With the knowledge of the gruesome secret comes the realization that he knew nothing of his wife and son: “There was something so foul in that, something in the crime of innocence so revolting it paralized him” (p.245). Valerian crumbles into an almost infantile state.

Family, that could have been the socio-emotional glue for its members, is completely absent in case of the white Streets – a condition Morrison sees as endemic to the western world. Morrison illustrates the lovelessness, loneliness and isolation of Valerian and Margaret through the image of their separate bedrooms: “Valerian woke up. He had finished chatting to the ceiling and into his wrist the exact spelling of the message: These iceboxes are brown broken perspective v-i-o-l-i-a-x is something more and can’t be coal note. He had sipped the brandy rather quickly, annoyed by the day’s turn of events” (p.47). In another bedroom Margaret lies awake trying hard to sleep:

Margaret was not dreaming nor was she quite asleep, although the moon looking at her face believed she was.
She was experiencing the thing insomniacs dread – not being awake but the ticky-tacky thoughts that fill in the space where sleep ought to be. Rags and swatches; draincloths and crumpled paper napkins. Old griefs and embarrassments; jealousies and offence. Just common ignoble scraps not deep enough for dreaming and not light enough to dismiss. Yet she was hopeful sleep would come (p. 52).

Morrison heightens the effect of emotional estrangement of the Streets by juxtaposing them with the Childses, the elderly black couple, serving in Valerian’s house.

In sharp contrast to the sterile white couple, the Childses sleep with each other in conjugal contentment. Love flourishes in their part of the house. Though old, Sydney and Ondine Childs still have enough seductive and attractive appeal for each other. One only needs to touch the other to dispel a bad dream:

Down below, where the moon couldn’t get to, in the servant’s quarters, Sydney and Ondine made alternate trips to the bathroom and went quickly back to sleep. Ondine dreaming of sliding into water, frightened that her
heavy legs and swollen ankles will sink her. But still asleep she turns over and touches her husband’s back – the dream dissolves and with it the anxiety. He was in Baltimore now as usual…. It was a tiny dream he had each night that he would never recollect from morning to morning. So he never knew what it was exactly that refreshed him (pp. 58-59).

Ensconced in marriage, life is a celebration for the elderly black couple. For them, marriage has served as an institution which has been the source of fulfilment of all their needs — be it emotional, physical or economic.

Though Morrison leaves elaborate lovemaking scenes to the reader’s imagination, their abiding trust and concern for each other is all part of the sexual act. When Ondine cooks something special for him, Sydney helps her with her chores. The sensual element is implicit in their mutual exchange of kindness. After a hard day’s work, Sydney soothes away Ondine’s anxieties: “Lay back. Put your legs up on this pillow. Rest yourself and don’t worry about nothing. Nothing’s going to change. Everything’s going to be all right” (p.194). Like the MacTeers (The Bluest Eye), Sydney and
Ondine are a harmonious and loving couple living in a kind of domestic idyll.

Although they have spent most of their lives working for the white Streets, Sydney and Ondine do not absorb their alienating value-system. To them, family is no narrowly defined institution but is extended through the responsibility to nurture even those who are not biologically related. Mrs. MacTeer’s act (The Bluest Eye) of boarding Pecola when her own parents could not provide her shelter and care is not alien to the ethos of black community. Their selfless action is replicated by Ondine and Sydney when they realize the value and necessity of the role of surrogate parents to Sydney’s orphan niece, Jadine. In fact, they try to mould her behaviour and her thinking in a manner which could not have been different had Jadine been their own child. They give her every possible comfort and love, and treat her like a star. Ondine proudly asserts when Jadine’s photograph is published on the cover of Elle: “‘Prettiest thing I ever saw. Made those white girls disappear. Just disappear right off the page’” (p.37).

Instead of giving credit to Sydney and Ondine for her lavish upbringing, Jadine considers Valerian her godfather. For her, Sydney and Ondine are mere objects to be discarded after use. When Jadine
tries to interact with her surrogate parents on a practical level, it is clear that she feels a permanent spiritual separation from them. Truider Harris observes that “in the process of lavishing things and attention upon her, and expecting very little in return, Sydney and Ondine give Jadine the licence to trample on their hearts, as she will do later” (139). Jadine is afraid that Sydney and Ondine will want her to care for them and that she will be burdened with this couple. She conveniently forgets that they loved her and raised her as their own child. Jadine remains quite untouched by Ondine’s pitiful plea to her when she says: “Don’t you ever leave us, baby. You all we got” (p. 37). She departs to Paris to pursue her own individualistic lifestyle and leaves Sydney and Ondine to figure out for themselves their unreliable future as servants in the Street household.

After Ondine’s disclosure of Margaret’s ill-treatment of her son, at the Christmas dinner, the Childses find that their security now hinges on their ability to establish a working relationship with their white mistress. It dawns upon them that their niece has neither the wisdom nor the disposition to free them from the terms of their indenture to the white family. They comprehend that Jadine has not yet matured into her role and responsibility as a daughter. Sydney and
Ondine are deeply pained by her insensitive attitude towards them:

“You think she’ll bury us, Ondine?”

“I think we’re going to have to bury ourselves, Sydney.”

(p. 286)

Sydney seems resigned to his fate: “‘Seem like folks used to take care of folks once upon a time. Old black people must be a worrisome thing to the young ones these days’” (p. 285). Both bemoan the absence of generational continuity of their family.

With Jadine explicitly and decisively renouncing her responsibility as a daughter to her surrogate parents, Tar Baby dramatises a pronounced crisis in crossgenerational relationships. Jadine, of course, has achieved success and fame in a white-dominated world but Morrison bemoans the fact that young blacks like Jadine in their pursuit of self-advancement cast aside the familial and societal values usually associated with the black community. Jadine’s act of discarding Sydney and Ondine is an act as demonic as Sula Peace’s (Sula) act of abandoning her aged grandmother to the care of a wretched nursing home. Sula eventually pays the price for the ill-treatment of her grandmother. In their final exchange, Nel, Sula’s best friend, criticizes Sula’s independence: “You can’t act like a man. You
can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (Morrison, *Sula* 142) Though Sula eloquently defends her defiance, her efforts are mocked by her immobilization and inevitable death. Sula’s virtual defeat is replaced in Tar Baby by Jadine’s spectacular success, yet Nel’s accusatory voice comes through clearly in Tar Baby, making Jadine’s independence highly problematic.

Jadine’s defiance of conventional expectation has an exemplary force that implies the break-up and complete dissolution of familial values. She abandons her tribe and the only people who have been near-parents to her. In Tar Baby, Morrison makes a statement about a family-oriented definition of self and about the role of the ancestor in this process. Morrison identifies the use of an ancestral figure as a barometer of the protagonist’s happiness in contemporary Afro-American literature:

> What struck me in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, and it caused
huge destruction and disarray in the work itself (Morrison, *Black Women* 343).

Taking care of elders in a highly charged issue for Morrison. She warns: “When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself” (344). Judging from Morrison’s supratextual statements, Jadine is assuredly sliding down the path of psychic death in abnegating the ancestor.

Ondine attempts to confront Jadine with matrilineal connections but Jadine fails to see the link. She has ostracized herself from any responsibility in this area and she, therefore, thinks that her aunt’s motives are merely retributive. Ondine’s explanation emphasizes the reciprocal nature of mother-daughter roles, and the symbiotic relationship between modern generation and its elders. The responsibility of daughterhood is the unspoken but expected role that black women define for each other. Ondine has a real message for Jadine but, Jadine is too much caught up in the maze of personal success to assimilate it. Jadine’s belligerent attitude is evidence of her confusion. “‘You want me to pay you back. You worked for me and put up with me. Now it’s my turn to do it for you, that’s all you’re saying’” (pp. 283-84). Ondine retorts: “‘Turn? Turn? This ain’t no game a bid whist…’” (p. 284). Ondine defines the role
of a daughter in the following words:

Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can’t never learn to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child, good enough for a man…. A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her (p. 283).

Jadine doesn’t want to follow Ondine’s prescription of daughterhood. She is blissfully oblivious to the value of a matrilineal link. Negating this vital familial function, Jadine declares to Ondine: “I don’t want to learn to be the kind of woman you’re talking about because I don’t want to be that kind of woman” (p. 284). Morrison clearly convicts Jadine’s American education for her loss of the tar quality of being a homemaker and a provider simultaneously.

Jadine is one of those modern black youth who are Americanised in their education and attitude. Morrison severely castigates such black youth as are fashioned out of the programmed education system of America producing blacks as carbon copies of
whites. The black youth are churned into one giant cultural ocean in which their African heritage and familial values have been subsumed by whites. They have been criminally shortchanged by the education system of America. Their textbooks have systematically crushed a real heritage by teaching them to ignore and belittle it. The result of such assimilation is the transformation of genetic black youth into psychological white ones. To quote Morrison: “Now people choose to be Black. They used to be born Black. That’s not true anymore. You can be Black genetically and choose not to be. You just change your mind or your eyes, change anything” (Washington 236). After spending years in the white world, Jadine draws her identity from the white world. She can’t allow herself to think of her culture as unique and distinct. She can accept it only as a submerged entity within a larger cultural sphere. She chooses cultural sameness instead of cultural diversity and surrenders her social identity to an American one.

Having been removed from any virtual contact with her own people and sent to study in posh boarding schools, then to select universities, Jadine is not exposed to the kind of teachings that would acquaint her with the significance of Africa art or jazz music as parts
of her heritage. Ryan makes the following observation concerning Jadine’s non-black education: “Jadine is rootless, but in receiving a Eurocentric education, has been grafted onto a self-alienating cultural base from which to view her own and the experience of other African people” (612). Without a high level of self-awareness, and pride in her African race and heritage, Jadine's cultural allegiances lie in European art. While she claims to understand Picasso’s genius, she displays no interest in discovering the genius behind the African mask-making tradition. Jadine insists: “‘Picasso is better than an itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of his genius, not the mask-makers’” (p.72; italics in original). In this statement, Jadine not only reveals her negative stereotypical attitude towards Afro-American and African culture, but she attempts to justify her distance from these cultures. That she values Picasso’s work over the original African masks that inspire it only reiterates the extent to which she is steeped in white Western values: “Black people she knew wanted what she wanted – either steadily and carefully like Sydney and Ondine or uproariously and flashily like the theatre types or media types … ‘making it’ was on their minds and they played the game with house cards, each deck issued and dealt by the house” (p. 127).
Churned out as a typical representative of the homogenised black, Jadine expresses a deep, misplaced sense of indebtedness to the white Streets. This distorted vision is particularly revealing of her disdainful attitude towards her surrogate parents. She joins the white couple in treating her own surrogate parents as servants. Her identification with the dominant race is reflected by her seat at Valerian’s dinner table. Jadine eats with Valerian and Margaret, while her aunt cooks for her and her uncle waits on her. She is willing to defend Valerian against any criticism he might receive even if it came from her surrogate parents. When Son attacks Valerian for never having paid his debt to Ondine and Sydney for their services, Jadine shouts at him: “‘He educated me!’.... and you can’t make me think that was not an important thing to do. Because nobody else did! No-Body. Else. Did. You didn’t!’” (p. 266). To each criticism of Valerian, Jadine responds with some reference to the education he provided for her. And while Valerian’s opinion is important to her, her uncle’s and aunt’s are not: “They were family.... Nanadine and Sydney mattered a lot to her but what they thought did not” (p. 46). Nor does she give credit to her uncle and aunt for the sacrifices they made to educate and bring her up. Instead, Jadine completely denies and
distorts the truth of sacrifice her aunt and uncle made for her, telling herself that “they had gotten Valerian to pay for the tuition while they sent her the rest, having no one else to spend it on” (p. 46). She valorizes the importance of the Streets: “[Margaret] and Valerian are my… patrons….They educated members. Paid for my travel, my lodgings, my clothes, my schools” (p.118). The truth, however, emerges from Ondine’s confessions:

“We don’t have a place of our own. And the little bit of savings went to Jadine. Not that I regret a penny of it; I don’t”…. “I never minded not having children after we started taking care of her. I would have stood on my feet all day all night to put her through that school. And when my feet were gone, I would have cooked on my knees” (pp. 193-94).

Jadine’s distorted view of the world and the fractured consciousness from which its derives its genesis is fully displayed in her acceptance of her womanhood as consisting of binary oppositions. She finds family commitment and professional achievement as polemic choices. As a tar-less woman, Jadine does not have the attributes of either remaining in or constructing family relationships.
Jadine is the individualistic urbanite who is scrubbed clean of black cultural and familial fetters. Morrison castigates Jadine for disavowing her surrogate parents in order to pursue her own career. In an interview with Rosemarie K. Lester, Morrison talks of the ramifications of Jadine’s seemingly antithetical choices: “When we feel that work and the house are mutually exclusive, then we have serious emotional or psychological problems, and we feel oppressed. But if we regard it as just one more thing to do, it’s an enhancement. Black women are both ship and safe harbor” (49). The fact that Jadine cannot combine the “safe harbor” (family) and “ship” (career) suggests her spiritual distance from black womanhood. She remains a lost soul searching for happiness and fulfilment. Morrison reminds us that those black women who are steeped in familial values steer their lives in such a way that it never comes to a choice between family or career. Morrison’s emphasis on the selflessness and strength of black women is not to romanticize their limited opportunity for fulfilment outside the boundaries of their families or communities. Instead, it is to show the value and difficulty of the role they serve.

Jadine’s inclination toward upward social mobility leads to her separation from the Afro-American roots and the tar quality that
Morrison advocates. This severe flaw in Jadine effectively disqualifies her as a black woman capable of nurturing family and community in Morrisonian cosmology. Jadine’s perception of an ancestral relationship from which she is estranged occurs when she sees an African woman in a Parisian bakery. When she is celebrating her success as model evidenced in her appearance on the cover of Elle, Jadine is utterly unnerved by the African woman in a yellow attire. She triggers an identity crisis in Jadine at the moment when Jadine ought to have felt more secure with her professional achievement assured by beauty and education. In this woman, Jadine catches a glimpse of beauty, a womanliness, an innate elegance, a nurturer, an authenticity that she had never known before: “That woman’s woman – that mother/sister/she/; that unphotographable beauty” (p. 43). By calling the African woman “that mother/sister/she,” Morrison presents a threefold definition of womanhood which can thrive within the confines of family and community only. The three eggs she balances effortlessly in her “tar-black fingers” (p. 44) appear to Jadine as if the woman were boasting of her own easy acceptance of womanhood. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin explain the import of the African woman’s presence:
Whereas Jadine has just been rewarded for her conformity to Western ideals of feminity, the African woman suggests a more powerful version of black womanhood. Like some fertility goddess, she holds in her hand the secret of life. She is the mother of the world in whose black hands whiteness appears as something as easily crushed as cared for (71).

When Jadine measures herself by the archetype of black womanhood that she sees in the African woman the insecurities of her rootless condition surface in her mind. The woman in yellow makes Jadine confront her female role and her sexuality. Jadine sees “something in her eyes so powerful” (p. 42) that she follows the woman out of the store. As a symbol of repudiation of Jadine’s westernised lifestyle, the African woman “look[s] right at Jadine” (p.43) and spits on the pavement. She hates the woman for her spitting, but Jadine cannot escape feeling “lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic” (p. 45). When the sense of self is based on the denial of one’s ethnic roots, one is certain to undergo psychic chaos and alienation. So, the woman’s insult to Jadine had the powerful effect of challenging Jadine’s choices: her white boyfriend, her trendy
girlfriends, her parties, her picture on the cover of Elle and the way she lived her life. Jadine is confused and even questions her plans to marry Ryk, her white boyfriend:

I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn’t me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops, that I don’t have to straighten my hair, that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside – not American – not black – just me?

(p. 45)

It is through Son that Morrison offers Jadine the ultimate opportunity to acclimatise herself to her heritage, adapt it and revive her womanhood. Son picks up from where the African woman left off making Jadine confront her inauthenticity. Jadine and Son enjoy idyllic stay in New York because it is the place where Jadine feels at ease. She feels loved and safe: “He unorphaned her completely. Gave her a brand-new childhood” (p. 231). In turn, Son is encouraged by her need and by his apparent ability to redefine Jadine culturally and emotionally. Son’s insistence to go to Eloie, his home, with her brings
the fantasy to its inevitable conclusion. At Eloee, their diametrically opposed values and lifestyles surface and they reach an impasse, thus freezing the possibility of their relationship blossoming into marriage and family.

Since Son is rooted in family and cultural heritage, he attempts to rescue Jadine from her ignorance of and disdain for her cultural heritage. That would entail moulding Jadine into the image of his black female ancestors. However, a discrepancy in the black male-female socialisation sets the stage for some deep contentions in Son-Jadine relationship. Andrew Billingsley explains the quandary black men find themselves in:

Black men are caught up in a social system, which beams exceedingly contradictory signals to them. On the one hand, because they are males in a male-oriented society, they are expected to be dominant, powerful, and strong providers. They are consequently given higher status and considerably more privileges than black women (243).

Raised in a conservative black community of Eloee, Florida, Son is one of those black men who have been taught rigid male-female roles. Son automatically assumes that a relationship with Jadine will
automatically mean having children. He presses claims for family and community: “He smiled at the vigour of his own heartbeat at the thought of her having his baby” (p. 220). Thus, he wants Jadine to love the nurturing aspects of home and fraternity. He is fed on dreams of his community women. The dreams of “yellow houses with white doors” and “fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table” (p. 119) are nourishment to Son. Sandra Pouchet Paquet observes: “In Son’s dreams of Eloë, the African-American male ego is restored in a community of black man at the center of a black community. But however appreciative Son is of the beauty, the strength, and the toughness of black women, his vision is of male dominance; of the black women as handmaiden” (511). Though Son is a stickler for familial ties, his gender bias upsets the dynamics of his relationship with Jadine. The image feminity that Son cherishes – of the black woman taking passive role as a nurturer of the hearth – is flagrantly opposite to Jadine’s perception of the modern black woman. This terrifies Jadine and narrows the possibility of their forming a family.

The modern, educated black woman seems to snivel at the aspects of traditional female-specific role as the nurturer of hearth and home. Decadent white values and life style thwart the black woman’s
vital roles of building families and raising children. The modern black woman cannot be a complete human being, for she allows her education to keep her career separate from her nurturing role. The black woman is increasingly becoming able to define her own status and to be economically independent. She tries to seek equality in her relationship with men. Robert Staples gives an insight into the faltering dynamics of modern couples: “What was once a viable institution because women were a subservient group has lost its value for some people in these days of women’s liberation. The stability of marriage was contingent on the woman accepting her place in the home and not creating dissension by challenging the male’s prerogatives” (125). The black woman’s intrinsic quality of “accepting her place in the home” is Morrison’s tar quality. However, in advocating the tar quality Morrison does not admonish the educational and professional accomplishments of the black woman. In fact, in the Morrisonian world, the black woman is expected to achieve a balance between her roles in the domestic and professional fields. It is the historical ability of black women to keep their families and careers together. In an era where both the black male and female seek to fulfil individual desires, relationships falter and, consequently, the prospects
of the propagation of a family are not too bright.

Jadine’s tar quality is submerged by the white-like urge for freedom and self-actualization. As a result, she finds the conventions of black womanhood antithetical to her own value system. At Eloë, she is determined to resist rigid male-female role categorization. Jadine cannot “understand (or accept) her being shunted off with Ellen and the children while the men grouped on the porch and after a greeting, ignored her” (p.248). While at Eloë, Jadine is provided with yet another chance to attain the tar quality that Morrison advocates for black women. Accustomed to living an upper-class white lifestyle, Jadine finds the people of Eloë parochial and backward. Their stifling little shacks are more foreign to her than the hotel-like splendor of Valerian’s mansion. She stays in Aunt Rosa’s house where she feels claustrophobically enclosed in a dark, windowless room. She feels “she might as well have been in a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth, suffocating with the sound of plant life moving, but deprived of its sight” (p. 254). Jadine’s a becomes more pronounced when she and Son attempt to make love in Aunt Rosa’s room. This is Jadine’s second waking vision, which is even more upsetting than the earlier one in Paris. Older, black, fecund and nurturing women – her own
dead mother, her Aunt Ondine, Son’s dead wife, the African woman in yellow and other black women of her past – become a threatening part of Jadine’s dreams: “‘I have breasts too,’ she said or thought or willed, ‘I have breasts too.’ But they didn’t believe her. They just held their own higher and pushed their own farther out and looked at her,” (p. 261) and “the night women were not merely against her... 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 The “night women” accuse Jadine who for bartering the “ancient properties” (p. 308) of being a daughter, mother, and a woman for her upward mobility and self-aggrandisement. All these women castigate Jadine for her refusal to define herself in familial terms, historical tradition and culture. As they brandish their breasts before her eyes, they taunt her with their feminity. Jadine finds these women backward and sees no self-fulfilling value in the role that they serve.

Jadine is constantly haunted by dreams of the black female image that she seems to have lost. Her aunt expresses shame and disappointment over her lack of concern for her family. The African
woman, at the Parisian bakery, spits at her in disgust. The night women, in the vision at Eloe taunt her with their nurturing breasts. Having refuted her own black culture and heritage, Jadine faces tragic consequences – a divided consciousness and a psychic death. Her definitive decision to break with Son—“I can’t let you hurt me again” (p.274) — is an evidence of her stifled womanhood and lost Afro-American roots. Jadine is compelled to make her choice and she decides that it is in Paris, away from Son, where there are prospects of financial success and personal independence. She doesn’t want what Son and Eloe have to offer: “To settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building” (p. 271).

Jadine makes an extraordinary statement of self-sufficiency and independence of men, family and community. She emerges as a protagonist in the tradition of Morrison’s black men on the move, who are very much about the business of making themselves. Morrison explains this phenomenon in her conversation with Robert Stepto as “the travelling Ulysses scene,” (25) here “in the process of finding, they are also making themselves” (26). Jadine takes a literal flight and a metaphorical one in a spirit of repudiation. She chooses personal
freedom, self-reliance, and a black male spirit of adventure over the tar quality characteristic of black women. Her flight is another version of Milkman Dead’s (Song of Solomon) self-centered, self-serving airplane flight, away from a family that he construes burdensome and in the pursuit of gold and the freedom it can buy him. At the end of Tar Baby, Jadine is on the move, possessed by the powerful but problematic freedom Morrison terms as “the Ulysses thing.” Jadine is able to dismiss Son from her life as easily as she buffs a “tiny irregularity” (p.292) in a fingernail to instant perfection while on her final flight to Paris. Jadine feels “lean and male, having left quickly with no peeping back just in case – no explanatory, loophole - laden note” (p. 277). Self-indulgent and determined to live the standardised American life, without concern for the welfare of others, Jadine is the modern Negro. Morrison is critical not only of modern black youth like Jadine for their assimilation of white values and rejection of their family, heritage and history, but also of provincialism, poverty and conservatism of black community represented by people of Eloe. She bemoans the fact that black community has lagged behind miserably in a jet-set age. To quote Ryan: “The description of Jadine standing ‘up to [her] kneecaps in rot’ in Sein de Vieilles is perhaps an oblique
reference to the economic stagnation of Black communities like Eloe and, on a broader scale, to the declining economic condition of the African American community as a whole” (607-08).

Even though Son clearly claims Eloe as the source and roots of his being, there does not seem to be enough attraction in the community to maintain Son’s sense of belonging. Like Jadine, he finds his people “stupid, backwoods, dumb, dead” (p.275). Son’s rejection of his people sums up Morrison’s attitude towards the backward nature of black community.

In Tar Baby, Morrison reveals the degeneration of white values by an exposé of the emotionally sick white Street family. Its sterility and a lack of genuine human concern are symptomatic of an entire race sucked in the mire of values that rot the very institution of family. Valerian’s cynicism, coupled with Margaret’s perversion of maternal love, leads to the physical abuse of their son throughout his childhood. The revelation of Margaret’s systematic burning, pricking, and cutting Michael pushes Valerian into a sudden old age. The facade of the Street family’s cohesiveness is shattered. Morrison juxtaposes the white family with the black Childses to exemplify the innate attributes of the archetypal Afro-American family. Mutual love, faith and
understanding are the coordinates of the healthy Childses family.

Sydney and Ondine present the paradigm of parental love when they spend their lifetime’s savings to educate their surrogate daughter. Morrison appropriates the contemporary black woman’s self-advancement, but repudiates her abnegation of the tar quality, the ability to be a nurturer and a provider for her family. Through Jadine, Morrison severely castigates modern blacks mired in the swampy pit of white values. Jadine can neither take care of her surrogate parents nor form a lasting relationship with Son, whose values she finds to be diametrically opposite to those she holds dear. Repelled by domestic and procreative functions of the archetypal black woman, Jadine returns to her self-indulgent life and invites a psychic death.

As in The Bluest Eye and Beloved, Morrison censures bitterly those blacks who subscribe to individualism and walk away from the family and the community. The black community of Eloe, that should have played a pivotal role in bringing the Americanised youth back to their indigenous culture and heritage is unable to rise to the occasion since it is found to be parochial, backward and blind folded. Its parochial and primitive ways repel Jadine, and finally Son. Instead, it should have taken wayward black youth in its fold, in keeping with the
African concept of the extended family. The black community falls seriously short of serving as a glue for familial and communal cohesion. Morrison severely castigates the black community for its failure to keep pace with the outside jet-set world.