

A Study of Epistemic Violence and Women's Resistance in *Tar Baby*

JIA Si-yi

School of Foreign Studies, Capital University of Economics and Business, 100070, Beijing, China

In light of the postcolonial theory, this thesis attempts to analyze the marginal plight of the low class and women images in *Tar Baby* from the perspective of Gayatri C. Spivak's epistemic violence. Under the influence of epistemic violence, the resistance strategy in *Tar Baby* is highlighted in order to interpret the resistance thought displayed by Toni Morrison in the *Tar Baby*. Toni Morrison expresses the appeal of an active strategy to resist epistemic violence against cultural hegemony and the white dominant society.

Keywords: epistemic violence, resistance, Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*

Introduction

Toni Morrison, a famous African American female writer, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Due to the particularity of her identity and experience, she often focuses on the living conditions of the black, exposing the destruction of the hegemonic culture to the minority culture. Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* tells the story of the love between Jadine, adopted by Valerian, a white candy merchant, and Son, a black man who suddenly arrives on Isle des Chevaliers. Jadine and Son eventually fall apart due to their different values. The story ends with the open ending of Son's search for Jadine. In *Tar Baby*, it shows the different experiences of characters of different races, genders and classes, thus showing the different fates of the characters.

Postcolonial theory plays an important role in the interpretation of this novel. Gayatri C. Spivak, one of the representatives of postcolonial, is often called "a feminist Marxist deconstructivist" (MacCabe, 1987, p. ix). She often pays close attention to the life of women at the low class, because they are oppressed by race, gender, class and other aspects, and their resistance path is extremely difficult. Based on the epistemic violence proposed by Spivak in *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism* and her later works, this thesis attempts to analyze the epistemic violence and the thought of protest displayed by Toni Morrison in *Tar Baby*.

Epistemic Violence

Spivak first proposed epistemic violence in *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*. By analyzing Antoinette in *Wilde Sargasso Sea*, Spivak says she must "read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (Spivak, 1987, p. 251). In the face of the imperialist hegemony, the people at

the bottom all rise up against it. Although the final outcome of resistance is compromise or destruction, it proves that these three women writers are conspirators of imperialism to a certain extent. In a post-colonial discourse, marginalized people live under patriarchal and imperialist violence. Spivak's unique perspective of race, gender and class has stirred up the consciousness of blackness against violence. Epistemic violence hides the exploitation of imperialism, which often acts in the name of truth and in the image of mercy. On the other hand, in this article mentioned above, Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* remains silent and lost her voice; Antoinette in *Wilde Sargasso Sea* cannot integrate into both Western culture and local culture, and she is an incomplete self. There is no denying the consequences of epistemic violence that are an absolute silence individual or an incomplete self. It is their sense of resistance that is of great research significance.

Epistemic Violence in *Tar Baby*

A Hidden Oppressor and the Oppressed Woman in a White Family

Spivak is very concerned with the relationship between cultural hegemony and violence. As a feminist, she reinterpreted women and men. In *In Other Worlds*, she says "I construct my definitions as a woman not in terms of a woman's putative essence but in terms of words currently in use. 'Man' is such a word in common usage. Not a word, the word" (Spivak, 1987, p. 77). Those inferior women are always held down by men and deprived of their dignity. Valerian, the candy merchant in *Tar Baby*, makes his fortune by these raw materials of cutting cane and picking it into beans for making candy. But Toni Morrison goes on to point out that "he probably thought he was a law-abiding man, they all did, and they all always did, because they had not the dignity of wild animals" (Morrison, 2004, p. 203). The merchant represented by Valerian is the real thief, but he sees himself as a law-abiding, benevolent citizen who always gives a helping hand to those in need. From these sentences, "And the Street Brothers Candy Company never left the neighborhood or forgot the workers.... When they bought machines to do what the Swedish and German women had done they kept them on in other capacities" (Morrison, 2004, p. 52), Valerian's hidden violence is shown. He creates images that are decent, fair and generous, which legitimizes his colonization and cultural hegemony, but can't escape its nature of predatory. At the same time, the locals are enjoying the fact that Valerian is paying them.

At the same time, his soft violence against his wife is actually a kind of cultural hegemony, Valerian is a candy merchant from a German immigrant family, while Margaret comes from an Italian family, poor and ordinary. This creates a gap between them both. He always expresses his opinions to his wife, keeping her in check even at mealtimes, orders her to eat at the same pace as he does. Her husband even punishes her for forgetting to put the salad things back. "There is a rhythm to a meal. I've always told you that.... Speed has nothing to do with it. Pace does, Valerian answered" (Morrison, 2004, p. 63). At the same time, indifference to his wife is also shown in the plot in which Son appears. Son, as a man who suddenly shows up at Valerian's house, Margaret screams in fear, which is a perfectly normal reaction. But Valerian doesn't speak until Margaret has been consoled by others, but his tone is still grumbling, "Margaret, this is not the Met. It's a simple house on a simple island. Michael's not even here yet..." (Morrison, 2004, p. 79). His indifference to his wife is reflected in every conversation, thus adding to the legitimacy of violence. The servants have no right to question this. At the same time, through the white master's indifference to Margaret, the servants know that violence is permeated through the white family.

From the analysis of Valerian's supposedly legitimate reasons for acquiring his wealth, his benevolence is superficial while his dominant power is hidden. Meanwhile, patriarchal ideology allows epistemic violence to be inflicted on women. It is shown that attention should be paid to the plight of women, who are often caught in the confusion of class, gender and education. Even as a wife of a white family, Margaret doesn't feel free, and is bound by the rules of her husband and subjected to unequal dialogues. Women play the role of accessories in the family, and the long-term repression can not be resolved. This condition is represented by Margaret in the *Tar Baby*.

An Accomplice and the Black Women's Aphasic in Epistemic Violence

Suffering from race, gender, and class discrimination, black women suffer a lot of violence. Influenced by patriarchal ideology, black women also suffer from white cultural hegemony. Influenced by the values of the white, they tend to think that black women are vulgar and ugly. Black women are often seen as tools for the birth and upbringing of children, so the violence is hidden in all aspects of black women. Living under the long-term stereotype, black women often lose their right to speak, which eventually leads to an aphasic deficit.

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine, a girl adopted by Valerian, is a black woman. As a black woman with a white mask, she is actually an accomplice to the colonists. Jadine, as a model, is obsessed with material pleasures. With Valerian's support, she completes art history studies and later works as a model. Under the influence of white education, she pursues material belongings, the wealth and status that her body can bring her. Michael, Valerian's son, comments that Jadine is a lady who has abandoned her history and her people. "About why I was studying art history at that snotty school instead of—I don't know what. Organizing or something. He said I was abandoning my history. My people" (Morrison, 2004, p. 72). Education separates Jadine from her own ethnic group. And her choice of career also reflects her pursuit of material belongings over her inheritance.

Jadine's treatment of her aunt Ondine shows that the epistemic violence against black people is already in her mind. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine prepares Ondine high heels for Christmas, "exactng a promise from her aunt that she would wear hers to dinner" (Morrison, 2004, p. 196), but actually "Ondine was irritable, her aching feet encased in high heels with zircons up the back" (Morrison, 2004, p. 200). Jadine is just for her dignity of having a decent aunt, but she didn't take into account her feelings of Ondine. She wants her aunt to look well dressed for the traditional white holiday. Another example, as we can see from the many details of the *Tar Baby*, is that Jadine is raised by Sydney and Ondine, but is grateful to Valerian who provides her tuition and education. Jadine thinks that taking care of Jadine is a kind of turn rather than a responsibility. In the episode where Jadine and Ondine fight, Jadine says "you are asking me to parent you. Please don't. I can't do that now" (Morrison, 2004, p. 281). Jadine doesn't want to undertake the responsibility of standing up for the daughter. She wants to pursue her own life and career. The white American model of education led her to deviate from her own race. Through the setup of this plot, epistemic violence is inflicted on Ondine. Therefore, the influence of white values into the black woman has resulted in the continuation of epistemic violence in the form of education. The cultural hegemony of the white influences Jadine to recognize that violence exists between the black and the black.

Gideon and Thérèse, as the Black Caribbean from the island of Queen of France, have no right to speak in *Tar Baby*. They are hired to take the Valerian family as domestic workers. Despite having their own names, in the Valerian family, Gideon is called Yardman, and Thérèse is called Mary. In a family of white people who didn't

deserve a name, Son was the first to break the balance. But no matter how many times he repeats their names, the white family still ignores their names. At the dinner table on Christmas Eve, when Son mentions Gideon, Valerian doesn't even know Yardman's actual name. In *Tar Baby*, there is a plot in Valerian's home:

"Who?" asked Valerian.

"Gideon. Yardman."

"What a beautiful name. Gideon." Valerian smiled.

...

"Thérèse."

"Thérèse? Wonderful," said Valerian. "Thérèse the Thief and Gideon the Get Away Man" (Morrison, 2004, p. 201).

Even Jadine, as Valerian's accomplice, continues to make excuses for Valerian. She says that at least we knew Mary's name. Actually, Mary is not Thérèse's real name. So many black women are called Mary, they don't even have real names. Blacks represented by Yardman and Mary have long suffered epistemic violence, and as a long-oppressed black race, their voices have often been ignored. As subordinates, they have no right to speak and are kicked out by Valerian for stealing a few apples. Those apples are also transferred by the blacks, rowing eighteen miles to bring them here. Internalized by colonial ideas, they have lost sight of the plunder. The oppression in the past for a long time makes the colonists hide the relationship between exploitation and exploitation, and then the invisible exploitation of the black people is hidden under the surface of kindness and generosity.

The Women's Resistance to Epistemic Violence

Unconscious Resistance

Subalternity refers that "the capacity to access power is radically obstructed" (Morris, 2010, p. 8). In *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Spivak believes that even though women have no voice, they have the instinct to rebel. If she can escape the silence of subordinate status, she is no longer a subaltern. As a white wife, Margaret lives in a much better family than the black, but she has been subjected to epistemic violence from her husband Valerian for a long time. When she tries to be friends with Ondine, she is strongly criticized and opposed by her husband. "Valerian put a stop to it saying she should guide the servants, not consort with them.... The point was not consorting with Negroes, the point was her ignorance and her origins" (Morrison, 2004, p. 59). So even as a wife in a white family, she's still not respected. In his unconscious defiance, she then inflicts physical and emotional harm on his son.

As a mother, Margaret doesn't take on the responsibilities of a mother. Instead, the harm she inflicts on her son is an unconscious reaction against Valerian. Margaret's violent behavior toward her son is revealed through Ondine's voice. "You cut him up. You cut your baby up. Made him bleed for you. For fun you did it. Made him scream, you, you freak. You crazy white freak" (Morrison, 2004, p. 208). Behind the irritability, the sloppy candy-kisses mother love is a revolt against Valerian. Margaret's resistance is actually unconscious that "she could not control herself—which was true, for when she felt hostage to that massive insolence, that stupid trust, she could not help piercing it" (Morrison, 2004, p. 236). As the truth is revealed, Valerian goes from being an oppressor to a diminished voice man. As the person with the highest voice, he is forced to listen to Margaret's experience of hurting Michael, which makes him collapse. "He could get through it because it was some other

thing he was living" (Morrison, 2004, p. 237). He cannot ease his sorrow. He thinks about his innocence and feels guilty for knowing nothing about his wife and his son.

Conscious Resistance

Morrison says "Violence is a distortion of what we want to do" (McKay, 1983, p. 414). Toni Morrison also pays much attention to the resistance of black women under racial and gender oppression, especially the "subaltern" under violent resistance. Influenced by their long-term epistemic violence, they are more likely to resist than white women. Even though they lost their right to speak under the long-term influence of violence, they rebel with their bodies and actions and play a certain role in resisting the colonial thought of white people.

Jadine, as an accomplice to the white colonists, is a white girl with black skin. During her stay in Eloë with Son, she suffers a mental shock. The black female group carries out a strategy of violent resistance against Jadine, and the effect of violent resistance is formed in Jadine's mind. "They stood around in the room, jostling each other gently, gently—there wasn't much room—revealing one breast and then two and Jadine was shocked" (Morrison, 2004, p. 258). Jadine cannot shake the scene in her dream. She thinks the night women keep her nervous and kill the whole weekend. This time, Jadine keeps silent and cannot express her opinions. Even back in New York, the scene was haunting her. By creating emotional pressure on Jadine, black women have achieved their own physical resistance, even without speaking out. In addition, Ondine, as her aunt, also makes her voice out. "Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She has to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough even for the respect of other women" (Morrison, 2004, p. 281). Ondine's idea is the traditional concept of black people. Although Jadine does not agree with this concept and does not want to take the responsibility of supporting Ondine, Ondine realizes a voice of his own consciousness and appeal through his conversation with Jadine. She expresses her opinions by arguing with Jadine.

Thérèse, as a domestic worker in a white family, is fired by Valerian for stealing only a few apples. Meanwhile, Thérèse also has no status in her own home. At the table, there is also no right to speak. But in the process of sending Son to Isle des Chevaliers, she realizes her own resistance. Thérèse insists on steering the boat, so she moves Son to the far side of the Isle des Chevaliers to make him take a choice. She moves him not to look for the men on the site Isle des Chevaliers. She uses her actions to make Son choose whether to inherit his ancient properties or forget his tradition. Thérèse, a black woman, realizes physical resistance through practical actions. Through the struggle, it also reflects the inheritance of black culture.

Whether conscious resistance, or unconscious resistance. Toni Morrison tries to make the "Subaltern" revolt through the setting of these characters, and realizes the resistance of his own consciousness through his own body and actions.

Conclusion

In light of Spivak's discussion on epistemic violence, on the one hand, this thesis describes the women embodiment of epistemic violence in *Tar Baby*, which makes the epistemic violence of the white more visible. Epistemic violence brings hidden violence to the surface in an attempt to explain Toni Morrison's true intention in writing *Tar Baby*. In *Tar Baby*, both the benevolent colonist and the colonist's accomplice are shown in the analysis of epistemic violence. White women and black women have been subjected to varying levels of violence

in *Tar Baby*. When women realize they are marginalized by white society, they don't have the right to speak. On the other hand, based on epistemic violence, women at the bottom have not completely lost their resistance to violence even though their voices are ignored, they use their actions and bodies as tools of resistance to fight against the oppressed cultural hegemony and patriarchal ideology.

To sum up, based on the female images in *Tar Baby*, this thesis analyzes the epistemic violence in gender, class and race, so that the images of violence under the benevolent exterior can be displayed. Toni Morrison not only speaks for black women, but also appeals to the persecution of female images by the white hegemony, whether white women or black women, Toni Morrison reflects a broader cultural value. At the same time, by analyzing the resistance of female images, Toni Morrison appeals to the resistance of cultural hegemony and the appeal of racial and gender equality. Through the resistance of the female body, the significance of protest and the influence of the behavior on the cultural hegemony and the competition for their own rights are shown in *Tar Baby*.

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