

Ondine's Struggle to Ending Negative Stereotypes Regarding Elderly African American Women in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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Abstract: *From a literary gerontology approach, based specifically on age and gender studies proposed by Margaret Gullette, this paper discusses the complex issue of negative stereotypes and related ageist myths associated with the elderly African American women. Through Ondine Childs' experience in Tar Baby, this paper seeks to read and understand Toni Morrison's novelistic reflection of the issue. While it maintains that Morrison provides the elderly African American female character with a strong voice to explore broad social concerns, including the popular and pervasive 'Mammy' figure, it posits, among others, the recollection of African American cultural heritage as a powerful tool for reversing age, race and gender stereotypes produced by the dominant white culture and spread throughout America.*

Keywords: Age, Ageism, Elderly, Gender, Gerontology, Mammy, Matriarch, Old, Stereotype, Woman

1. Introduction

The resistance from old African American women to negative stereotypes and to life's challenges¹ is still a concern in Morrison's fiction. The life of the majority of elderly female characters featuring in her work is influenced by both the pervasive negative ageist stereotypes and by their own perception of the experience of growing old.

In *Tar Baby*, Ondine challenges the ageism and sexism that determine the way elderly African American women are often viewed in mainstream America.

Since this study will be reading Ondine's journey in *Tar Baby* in terms of older black female representation and the claim for subjectivity, it draws on feminist age theories that are most relevant to black fiction, as they may explain the relationship between people's subjective experiences and their objective conditions in the African American context. In this regard, Margaret Gullette's approach of the notion of aging is an appropriate tool to conduct this research.

With outstanding contributions in the field of age studies, Margaret is an age critic and theorist who argues that age and aging are nothing more than cultural constructs and could, therefore, be de-constructed. She maintains that, age stereotypes, alike, are not free of cultural impositions. Thus, embarking on a journey to confront the mammy figures associated with elderly African American women implies that one looks at the cultural context in which these stereotypes have arisen.

The main research question of this study can be formulated as follows: what are the cultural constructs supporting the ageist and gender stereotypes that make growing into old age a price too high to pay for African American women in the current American context? A highly-related sub-question

¹ The phrase 'quadruple jeopardy', best summarizes these challenges, that is to say, to be old, poor, female and of minority status.

may be stated as follows: why do most African American women fail to successfully confront and shatter age and gender stereotypes associated with them ?

This study hypothesizes that Morrison wants to bring to her fellow (wo)men's attention the socio-cultural aspects that have made these negative ageist and gender stereotypes to last long. In so doing, she attempts to make them aware of the fact that it is when and only when they will embrace their own cultural values and redefine themselves according to these values that they could reconnect with their lost selves and stand against these stereotypes and erase them, once and for all.

The discussion of the paper starts with an exploration of the cultural constructs of the mature Black American female figures –the Mammy and the Matriarch– which can be traced back to pre-Civil War Era. It also analyses the way these caricatures left the antebellum southern agricultural environment, spreading throughout America and becoming mainstreamed. The second part focuses on the complex political stance Ondine takes to confront both negative ageist and gender stereotypes while the last part tackles the intertwining relationship between the recollection of African American cultural heritage, the reconstruction of an authentic identity, self-esteem and the reversal of negative ageist and gender stereotypes associated with elderly African American women.

2. On Ageist Myths and Negative Stereotypes Associated with Black Elderly Women in America

Toni Morrison shows much interest in age and gender issues. Her depiction of African American aging and aged female characters contrasts with the (mis)representation of the elderly African American female and the existing aging ideology. In so doing, Morrison intends to use her work, not only to reduce the stereotypes associated with old African American women, but also to revisit the stereotypical

representation of age and to debunk the age myths about older individuals.

The 'Mammy' and 'Matriarch' figures² are the dominant and most well known racial and ageist caricatures of black women in America.

The term 'Mammy' which was coined during the era of slavery features widely in the lexicon of ante-bellum plantation literature and folklore. It is a myth, born in the minds of the slavery defenders before the Civil War, which was propagated by writers³ who romanticized the bygone days. The Mammy was portrayed⁴ as a faithful, obedient domestic servant, providing better care for her White employer's household, nursing her employer's children, while ignoring the needs of her own family. The Mammy is depicted as having no life outside of serving the family she is working for. bellhooks explains that the "[the mammy's greatest virtue is] her love for White folk whom she willingly and passively served"⁵. The mammy is defined by service, loyalty to her White family and her acceptance of her own subordination. Collins Patricia Hill argues that "even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White 'family,' the mammy still knows her 'place' as an obedient servant. She has accepted her own subordination"⁶.

Beyond the depiction of her psychological traits, the physical representation of the Mammy is problematic, as it is essentially based on racist, ageist and sexist arguments that do not reflect reality and which are indeed degrading and humiliating⁷.

The Mammy figure is acknowledged not only as a literary creation, but also as a cultural reality that has had a troubling hold on Americans' imaginations and a huge impact on their psyche. Commenting on the Mammy's gender significance, many black feminists and scholars, including Barbara Christian, argue that the Mammy figure serves to maintain oppression of gender. Indeed, this Southern America fabric places no values on black women as mothers of their own children.

² Though 'Jezebel' and 'Sapphire' are also stereotypes associated with black females in America, they will not be discussed in the framework of this research whose main focus is on age stereotypes, because both figures (Jezebel and Sapphire) are not necessarily old ones.

³ The passive, submissive mammy image was a literary creation of mainstream writers who wanted to justify slavery as not evil and to circulate the idea that slavery was a humane institution and that black slave women were happy to be slaves. The hearty laughter and loyal servitude of the Mammy were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery.

⁴ Mary Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin: Or, Southern Life As It Is*, published in 1852, is considered as the earliest representation of the Mammy stereotype.

⁵ hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Boston: South End, 1984. P.84.

⁶ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1990. P.72.

⁷ This representation generally offers picture of an old, sedentary, darker skinned and overweight women, who is asexualized, though she has children.

The Mammy figure did not fade away with the abolition of the slavery and the end of the Civil War, but has evolved in many ways over the time:

In fact, [the Mammy figures] grew in stature during the Jim Crow era. As America turned its attention from making war to making money, a new era of manufacturing ensued, promoted by a fledgling advertising industry. Advertisers realized that Mammy had commercial value. Since the stereotype included some "positive" qualities involving her faithful devotion to the White family as domestic servant, Mammy allowed Whites to feel good about themselves while at the same time served as a authority on cooking and cleaning. Thus, Mammy became the perfect pitchwoman to sell numerous household products, but especially breakfast foods, detergents, and other household cooking and cleaning items. The Mammy caricature thus became mainstreamed⁸.

The above passage tells the reader how white capitalists used the image of the rotund, homely, mature and contented black female slave to give a real boost to their businesses. From 1875 to 1926, different Mammy-derived figures⁹ appeared on cans of baking powder, on Luzianne coffee and cleaners, on detergent bottles and on many other household products, including cooking and cleaning items, contributing thus, to the dispatching of ageist myths and caricature of black elderly women across America. The commodity culture actually plays a pivotal role in keeping alive the post-bellum plantation imaginary and the stereotypes associated with African American women, as it helped the Mammy figure leave its southern stronghold and extend to homes unable to afford servants.

The movie industry also perpetuated the Mammy figure and spread it throughout communities. "[Mammy figures] have been rampant in the movies [...] often portrayed as an overweight, large-breasted, motherly figure, who served Caucasian families in the South¹⁰. While movies set in the Old South depicted the mammy as a contented and faithful slave, films set in post-emancipation America highlighted her as the docile domestic servant, still doing household chores for Whites. In one way or another, this caricature implies that old black women were only fit to be domestic workers, confining them in narrow roles and exacerbating thus economic and gender discriminations.

Campbell and Mohr argue that exposure to stereotypes and distorted portrayals propagated by films can influence

⁸ See 'Caricatures of African Americans: Mammy', at : www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/diversity/african/1-mammy/. (Accessed on October 10, 2018)

⁹ Aunt Sally, Aunt Dinah, Aunt Jemina, who appeared on products reflect the exact physical characteristics of the Mammy; they were all, mature, if not old, overweight maids of African descent, with dark pigmentation.

¹⁰ Chen and al. 2012. "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective on How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves." *Mass Communication and Society* 15(1): 115-135. doi:10.1080/15205436.2011.569682.

actions and behaviors¹¹. In that regard, it is arguable that Mammy portrayals in movies not only affect the perceptions of old African American women compared to other racial groups but also play a significant role in how African American women view themselves.

Closely related to the Mammy figure is that of the Matriarch, a term coined in the 1960s by Daniel Moynihan. From 1960s, the image of the Mammy was replaced with that of the Matriarch. In fact, while the Mammy symbolizes 'the Black mother in the White households' the Matriarch exemplifies the mother figure in the Black home. But the Matriarch was nothing else than another variation of the Mammy stereotype. Portrayed as a bad and violent mother, hurting the members of her own family, the Matriarch stereotype raises the issue of the black women's ability and capability to take care of her own household. The portrayal of the Matriarch as a key factor of black family disintegration became very popular and reinforced the misrepresentation of the mature African American women.

In *Tar Baby*, Ondine's portrayal stands in sharp contrast to the Mammy and Matriarch figures.

3. From Obedient Mammy Figure to Political, Social and Cultural Militancy

When the reader is first introduced to Ondine Childs in *Tar Baby*, (s) he might at first mistake her for the ordinary stereotype of elderly Black women portrayed in literature. As the reader finds out from the narrator, Ondine is a very serious cook who has spent many years working hard for her White employers (Valerian Street and his wife Margaret), but her age has made her too tired to be as professional as she once was (*Tar Baby*, 97.) Yet, shortly afterward, the reader notices that Ondine is different to the mammy in many regards. She is neither weak, nor submissive and she is by no means stereotypical, unlike the mammy figure burdened by the legacy of slavery.

Ondine is portrayed as a defiant old black cook, unable to succumb to any dehumanizing actions and attitudes imposed by her white employer upon her or on other African Americans working for Valerian.

Through the portrayal of Ondine in *Tar Baby*, Morrison provides the reader with an overview of the potential of the elderly black women, and she also shares glimpses of what they can achieve when they transcend age, race and social constraints. To understand how Morrison uses Ondine's experience to deconstruct ageist myths and other stereotypes associated with the elderly black women in the American context, it is necessary to trace part of her story throughout the novel.

Tar Baby is set on a small Caribbean island called l'Arbre de la Croix, where Valerian Street, a retired white industrialist and powerful man, from an economic standpoint, and his

wife Margaret have settled. They share their home with their two black servants, Ondine and Sidney Childs, who have been married for several decades but have no children, but a niece, Jadine, a fashion model who is studying art and modeling in France and in America. Jadine's education is sponsored by Valerian, Ondine's employer.

Tar Baby highlights different relationships, including that of the two lovers, Jadine Childs, the fashion model and Son Green, a fugitive who come from very different backgrounds. One of the more prevalent and problematic relationships within the novel is that of Ondine and her employers Valerian and Margaret.

Ondine's actions and self-determination contrast with the depiction of the mammy figure discussed earlier, and Chapter Six of the novel is eloquent in this respect.

The narrator informs the reader that On Christmas Eve day, Ondine is outraged that Valerian fired both Gideon and Thérèse –because he caught Gideon stealing apples from his kitchen– without asking her opinion. She scolds Valerian for being selfish, shouts at him and criticizes him openly (with a fierce tone) and let him know she despises him as he doesn't care at all if Gideon (also called 'Yardman') and Thérèse starve to death. She did not hide the fact that she is angry because Valerian casually dismissed the people on whose labor and land he has made a fortune and thanks to whom he is currently enjoying a peaceful life in the Caribbean island.

Ondine became more furious when Valerian tried to defend his decision. It is arguable that as she takes a strong stance against Valerian and criticizes his actions, Ondine indirectly raises her voice against a large-scale capitalistic engineering that discriminates against African Americans.

As the conversation moves on, Ondine shouts out a big secret that she's been keeping to herself for many years: When Michael was young, Margaret used to torture him by sticking him with pins and burning him with cigarettes. Ondine told Margaret that she is a bad mom and let her know that she was better than her. Margaret throws a glass of water at her, which makes Ondine jump up from the table and slap Margaret across the face. Margaret fights back and the two women grapple and wrestle for a while. When they are separated, they hurl racial slurs at each other. Valerian says Ondine is fired, but the cook let her employer know she will not leave his house.

Because Ondine Childs, the cook, regards herself now as a true self, it is now possible for her to get rid from the mammy caricature and even ask explanations from her White employers and from other African Americans in l'Arbre de la Croix –Valerian's mansion–. In fact, having embraced her cultural heritage and regain her wholeness, Ondine does not fear anything and instead defend her own life and the situation of her fellow (wo) men against all prevalent threats, including economic or racial threats.

Morrison's depiction of Ondine can be considered as a fundamentally profound act of resistance. In fact, she presents views of ageing that are contrary to the ageist myths associated with elderly African American women. Morrison

¹¹ Campbell, Margaret C., and Gina S. Mohr. 2011. "Seeing Is Eating: How and When Activation of a Negative Stereotype Increases Stereotype-Conductive Behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research* 38(3): 431-444.

portraits Ondine as an elderly African American woman who reacts in power and determination to her condition and to the condition of her fellow (wo)men. Most importantly, this character not only provides a strong voice for her people to explore broad social concerns, but also gives them (especially the youth) guidance towards, what she believes could provide them with a balanced life and restore their wholeness and self-esteem: “[their] ancient properties” (Tar Baby, 113).

The reader indeed is fascinated with Ondine in her insistence to remain true to tradition and the past. Ondine claims that her niece Jadine has a duty toward her people: keeping its culture vibrant (Tar Baby, p.113). She provides her with valuable guidance¹² and invites her to embrace her “ancient properties” which symbolizes the ancestral force with whom she must (re)connect in order to (re)define herself, to regain self-esteem so as to avoid being influenced by negative gender, racial and age stereotypes.

Ondine is determined to effect changes in others and improve her community’s condition by teaching its members, the importance of the past, their true identity, and the intangible riches associated with elderly black people in an effort to deconstruct the social stereotypes imposed upon them.

As Margaret Gullette argues, age and aging are cultural constructs and could therefore be critiqued and deconstructed. Margaret views age and aging as a set of historical and cultural concepts that need to be revised¹³. Likewise, Heath Kay maintains that, it is “only when [you] understand the culturally constructed nature of age [that you can] expose its ubiquitous and stealthy influence”¹⁴.

Then, it is not a coincidence that Morrison’s old female characters bring the African traditions on the foreground. It could thus be argued that through the portrayal of elderly African American characters who are concerned with the preservation of their cultural heritage, Morrison attempts to revive the core African American identity, not in order to create news myths, but for the purposes of debunking the old ones. She indirectly rejects the rigidly conceived stereotypes associated with elderly African American women, like the mammy figure which Bond Jean Carey and Patricia Peery describe as “[a] kind of folk character largely fashioned by Whites out of half-truths and lies about the involuntary condition of Black women”¹⁵.

¹²In Tar Baby, another case in which Morrison deconstructs stereotypes associated with elderly african american characters is in the closing chapter, when Therese, another older woman of african descent, despite her very reduced eyesight, guides Son out to Isle des Chevaliers. Notwithstanding her advanced age, Therese risks a lot by making the dangerous boat crossing with Son, especially considering that she's blind.

¹³Gullette, M. (2004). *Aged by Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P. P.138.

¹⁴Heath, Kay. (2009). *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain*. Albany: State U of New York Press. P.24.

¹⁵Bond, Jean Carey, and Patricia Peery. “Is the Black Male Castrated?” *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. Toni Cade Bambara. New York: New American Library, 1970. 114-48. P.116.

Morrison actually acknowledges that the mammy figure is, to many extents, a misrepresentation of the old African American women and her function while she asserts and insists that one’s identity is grounded in cultural and ancestral truths, not in stereotypes which indeed do not reflect reality.

4. Conclusion

Caricatures of elderly African American women in relation to motherhood and domesticity which dates back to the time of slavery still arouse passion among writers, including Toni Morrison. From a literary gerontology approach, based on Margaret Gullette’s perspective on age and gender, this paper read –Ondine– Morrison’s old female character’s journey towards ending the most blatant forms of ageism, and related prejudices against old African American women. It maintains that it is the commodity culture, along with the media, including the movie industry, that keep the distorted representations and negative stereotypes associated with old African American women vibrant in America. Just like any other social constructs, negative stereotypes and related ageist myths associated with elderly African American women can be deconstructed. But, for this to happen, African Americans should revisit their past and learn to know who they really are. They should embrace their cultural heritage, along with their original self, so as to (re)define themselves not from the perspective of the racially dominant group, but according to their own cultural values.

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