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## **Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980): An Analysis**



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### **ABSTRACT**

*Like the predominating theme of Afro-American women's writing, the theme of race, gender and class governs Toni Cade Bambara's only novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980). This paper will stress these aspects barring other issues. The double suicidal attempts of Velma Henry, the protagonist, a civil rights activist and a computer analyst at a transchemecial plant involve how the Afro-American heroine is trapped in the triple jeopardy of race, gender and class. Being a Black Woman she has to experience rampant gender indiscrimination and sexism at the hands*

*of Obie, her husband and the male activists in the movement. This trauma lands her to the fatal action. Barbara Christian comments that the novels of early 1980s, the novels of the second phase have protagonists as "Socio-political" actors. This new phenomenon is observed here. Does Velma surrenders this trauma or resurrects? Minnie Ransom, the "fabled faith healer" heals Velma in the and by instilling the will to live in her. Ruth Elizabeth Burks observes that Velma "resurrects" like "Christ" for her people in the movement.*

## INTRODUCTION

Toni Cade Bambara, one of the major African-American Women Writers of the later part of the last century is a novelist, short story writer, editor and activist. Farah Jasmine Griffin (1996:229) observes that Bambara was a writer with "Social vision" who left us the legacy of social struggle and showed that writing can be both "beautiful" and "political." In an interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1979:23) Bambara points that her commitment is to use writing as a "tool to get in touch with the self." Bambara also further makes it clear that we are at "War" and the war is being fought over "truth" (Elliott Butler-Evans (1989:10) Through her entries writing and the fiction particularly Bambara explores how African-American women have been caught in the triple jeopardy of race gender, and class, the recurrent theme of entire African-American women's writing. The Female protagonist as an activist has a sufficiently long tradition. Way back Paule Marshall's second novel *The Chosen Place, Timeless People* (1969) portrays Merle Kimbana as a political activist. Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) depicts the life of a civil rights activist of the same name, and Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) paves the same thorny path. Barbara Christian (1985:179) comments that the novels of the mid 1970s and early 1980s, the novels of "the second phase" have the heroines as "Socio- Political actors." It is a significant change that the image of black heroine in African- American fiction is explored with new dimensions, The triple role she plays as an activist, as a wife, and a mother and the webs of oppression are different at these places.

Velma Henry, a civil rights activist and a computer analyst at a trans chemical plant crazily attempts double suicide by slitting open the veins of her wrists and thrusting her head in a gas oven and resurrects in the end with the healing of Minnie Ransom, "a fabled faith healer." While she was still in the process of completing the novel, Bambara (1980:174) voiced her central concern in writing this novel. She comments:

I gave myself an assignment based on observation: there is a split between the spiritual, psychic, and political forces in my community. Not since the maroon experience of Toussaints era have psychic technicians and spiritual folk (medicine people) and guerrillas (warriors) merged. It is a wasteful and dangerous split. The novel grew out of my attempt to fuse the seemingly separate frames of references of the camps; it grew out of an interest in identifying bridges; it grew out of a compulsion to understand how the energies of this period will manifest themselves in the next decade. (Elliot Butler-Evans)

W. Maurice Shipley (1982:27) is of the opinion that *The Salt Eaters* (1980) is serious novel interwoven of many subjects. He comments: In *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Bambara has interwoven mythmaking, psychological and sociological drama, literary and factual history, with political and philosophical realities. *The Salt Eaters* (1980) is a long, intricately written, trickily structured, full of learning "heavy with wisdom." Gloria T. Hull (1983:124) elaborates the novel's structure. She places it within the canonized texts of African-American literature. About the novel's importance she writes:

It is a daringly brilliant work which accomplishes even better for the 1980s what Native Son did for the 1940s,

Invisible Man for the 1950s or Song of Solomon for the 1970s, it fixes our present and challenges a way to the future. Reading it deeply should result in personal transformation; teaching it can be Dan a political act. (Barbara Smith)

Gloria T. Hull (1985:226) further maps the vista of subjects the novel covers-everything under the sun. She comments: The Salt Eaters (1980) is such a heavy book with its universal scope, ancient and modern history, world literature, anthropology, mythology, music, astronomy, physics, biology, mathematics, medicine, political theory, philosophy and engineering. Allusions everything from space age technology through Persian folklore to black American blues comfortably jostle each other. (Pryse) Sandi Russell (1992:175) labels The Salt Eaters(1980) a "difficult novel" as it is comprised of many many voices from the present as well as the "past", that intersect and interrupt one another, this is a work of high" complexity." Elliott Butler-Evans (1989:10) traces Toni Cade Bambara's ideology as a writer that is found in The salt Eaters (1980). Bambara's ideology of a "nationalist, feminist, socialist" is analysed. As a self-described nationalist-feminist- socialist, Bambara views her works as a discourse in two modes of domination : racism, which she argues, allows whites to define and determine the existence of Blacks and patriarchal oppression, through which all males exercise hegemonic privileges in their relationship with women. The Salt Eaters (1980), a novel, Melisa Walker (1991:182) calls "epic" in scope is divided into twelve chapters. A relatively short novel of less than three hundred pages long, there are seventy five named characters: journalist, engineers, musicians, doctors, activists, teachers, and a masseur. The action takes places at an imaginary town Claybourne in Georgia. The novel opens with Minnie Ransom's appeal to velma, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well ?" The same appeal in different tones is crooned throughout the novel till the end. The novel takes us to the point where Velma Henry, after her attempts of suicide is brought to the Southwest Community Infirmary for healing. So the novel runs on two parallel planes. The people watching the treatment. The actual span of the treatment is very short, but as the kra treatment continues all the characters recall the past memories and that's how the novel blooms. Susan will is (1987: 12y) defines that the novel attempts to link "black activism" to social and political situation. She

#### **COMMENTS:**

Toni Cade Bambara's novel The Sait Eaters (100) onts the attempt to link the spirit of black activism generated during the sixties to the very different political and social situation defined by the eighties. The central issues on which is the entire novel is built includes issues of gender and sexism. Elliott Butler- Evans (1989:181) suggests that Velma attempts suicide because her discord with Obie, her husband and her disappointment as an activist. He comments: Confronted with the demands and contradictions of the movement into public arena and the discord in her marriage to Oble at the personal level, Velma is driven to madness and attempted suicide Velma's attempted suicide can be read as an act of rebellion against the injustices experienced by her, and other women. Perched on a stool before Minnie, Velma listens her appeals, but her mind takes her on to the journey of t the events that led her to this disasterous event. Velma recalls Obie, her husband, sister-Palma, god mother M'Dear Sophie Heywood, adopted son Lil James. She remembers James Lee Henry

Obie, her husband making an appeal, a reconciliation of some sort. In the issue of race, gender and sexish, the elements predominating the novel, the key issues of gender and sexism lie in the strained husband-wife relations of Obie and Velma that led her to suicidal attempts. Obie's following remarks throw sufficient light on their relations. It takes something out of you, Velma, to keep all of them dead moments alive. Why can't you just forget forgive and it's some situation that was over and done with ten, fifteen years ago. But here you are still all fired up about it, still plotting, up to your jaws in ancient shit. (22) Velma points that they (she and Obie) are different people, that their natures are different, they don't match which causes clashes between them. She answers Obie: We're different people, James. Obie. Some- body all shit over you, you forgive and forget. You start talking about how we're all damared and colonialism and the under- developed blah blah. That's why everybody walks all over you (23).

Velma declares that she "can't stay with Obie" (23).

In the family and married life she is not treated equally and properly by Obie. The chasm opens at home. Velma is not only wife, mother, but an activist and a computer analyst. Her experiences in these fields also exhibit gender oppression and sexism. In husband-wife relations it is with the hands of Obie, now as an activist it is by male colleagues. A part of this activist life she works in the Academy of 7 Arts, run by Obie. The rift and chasm at the Academy, the change there is also one of the factors in tense family relations. But Obie remembers how he felt confident when Velma was there. He was probably exaggerating, but things had seemed more pulled together when Velma had been there, in the house and in the Academy. Not that her talents ran in the peace making vein. (92). Obie further ponders that the "cracking" might have begun years earlier in Velma's abortion, He ruminates: Or maybe the cracking had begun years earlier when the womb had bled, when the walls had dropped away and the baby was flushed out. (94). Obie is of the opinion that Velma "couldn't relax" so he'd grown "afraid of her" (162). He recalls how some- one has called Valma "a crackpot". He feels it how fitting". (96) Velma also recalls the unfaithfulness of Obie, when tells her to be going to DC to see Kings but he is found in a hotel with other women.

As an activist she reminds the experiences with other male activists. But here also she finds rampant sexism and gender inequality. A devoted activist "who trudged through dust, through rain, through mud" (34), she recalls an experience from her field life in boycotting at a Gulf Station, but even the basic & amenities aren't available to women activists : and in the nasty bathroom with no stall doors, and in a Gulf Station too, to the outrage she'd been reeking of wasted blood and rage. They'd marchec all merning all afternoon and mast of early evening to get there they'd kept the group intact. (34) and the dedicated services of the women activists one hand and the philanderer male leaders including Obie on the other hand, having nothing to do with the movement. What a contrast | Velma remembers: Exhausted, she was squinting the dust and grit of her lashes when the limousines pulled up, eye sit stinging shiny, black, sleek. And the door opened, the cool blue of the air-conditioned interior billowed out of the yellow and s rust red evening..... Flanked by the coat-black men in shiny sunglasses and silk and steel suits he made toward the platform..... Some leader, he looked

like King, had a delivery similar to Malcom's, dressed like Stockley, had glasses like Rap but she'd never heard him say anything useful or offensive. But what a voice. (35)

As a contrast to these memories of male leaders she further remembers the difficulties she faced as an activist at the Gulf Station: and no soap. No towels. No tissues. No machine just a spurt then a trickle of rusty water in the clogged sink then no water at all. And like a cat she'd had to lick herself clean of grit, selt, blood and rage. (36) Velma's question is a question of "identity" and "freedom." In a society based on gender oppression and sexism where she has lost both of them. Keith E. Byorman (1985:123) puts these views. succinctly when he observes : The Salt Eaters (1980) like Bambara's previous works, concerns a woman on a quest for identity and freedom Disintegration is the primary concern of Bambara's only novel, as the black community, the main character, and the book's structure are all decentred Groups committed to feminism, ecology, political activism, revolution, black capitalism, voodoo, and cynicism threaten her sense of self because she believes in *achtuxa* in achieving self- hood through work in the community. Ruby and Jan, the fellow activists talk of how Velma is another issue in the movement and thereby broadening it: Women for Action is taking on entirely too much drugs, prisons, alcohol, the schools, rape, battered women, abused children. And now Veima's talked the group into tackling the nuclear power issue.(198) Ruby and Jan like other activists are worried about the future of the movement because," Malcom gone, King gone (193) The movement splintered, unconnected." The novel's feminist discourse is further developed through the portrayal of Minnie Ranson, the "fabled faith healer of the district." Even her mode of attire-the dress made of kenti cloth, the gele, a specifically African headwear popular among Black women who identify with cultural nationalism-semiotically her cultural and political nationalism. Like Velma, the other main male characters Obie, Dr. Julius Meadows, Fred Holt, the bus driver, Campell the water journalist recall the memories. Besides the memories about Velma, Obie remembers the activities in Academy of 7 Arts, that he ran, where different programmes based on civil rights movement were implemented, but : It was starting up again, the factions, the intrigue the old ideological splits. Camps were forming threatening to tear the academy apart. (90)

But the situation became extreme: But then the hotheads had brought the guns into the place and the splits widened and Obie had not moved quickly enough, been fearful enough, was overcome with ambivalence. (92) And further : The one argued relentlessly now for the Academy to change its name from 7 Arts to Spiritual Arts and to revamp the program, strip it of material and mundane concerns like race, class, and struggle.(92) Fred Holt, the bus driver driving the group of women activists called "Women for Action" among other passengers to Claybourne has his own memories. While driving the passengers he begins to think of his dead friend Porter, a "race man" (82) doomed by his exposures to atomic blasts in 1955 but murdered by a crazy woman. Fred's memories of orton alternate with thoughts of his childhood when he sees " old man in tatters" ne thinks "it could be the Depression again" and fears unemployment, inflation, and return to poverty. (70)

Dr. Meadows who has come to observe Veima's treatment, wanders at the Claybourne festival, Mardi Gras. He overhears politically charged talk and a griot calling for

"transformation." The griot appeals : History is calling us to rule again and you lost your dead souls are standing around doing the freakie dickie Never recognizing the teachers among you to prepare you for the transformation, never recognizing the synthesizers come to forge the new alliances or the guides who throw open the new footpaths or the messengers come to end all excuses, Dreamer ? The dream is real my friends. The failure to make it work is unreality. (126) Suddenly he is assaulted by the memories of the civil rights movement. He realizes that he has paid dearly for his place in middle-class society, his expensive clothes and Omega watch. Elliott Butler Evans (1989:178) analyses the racial aspect of the novel in portraying the participation of male participation in liberation struggles, he observes: The Salt Eaters (1980) views racial conflict from a different angle. The reconstruction of the past raises issues about male participation and performance in liberation struggles and places the female differences in the foreground. Doc Serge, who runs the Southwest Community Infirmary is a former gangster and pimp now calls himself a Doc. Administer, or no, he is always dressed like "ganaster" in a foreign film. a first-class Ruth Elizabeth Burks (1984:55) comments that like "Christ" Velma will have to "resurrect" deriving strength from her "African people". She comments: Velma's double attempt at suicide fails. She is miraculously saved from physical death, but lost in a spiritual emptiness that must be filled before she can be whole. Her "insanity" the emptiness inside of her, must be relaged with spirituality which eventually derives its strength and power from within all she has to do is to want to be well and spiritually whole: Velma must perceive that she is the instrument of redemotion for her neole, as we are all. Like Christ, she must die fat least symbolically and live again to absolve herself and her people from their current sin of apathy. But unlike Christ, her metamorphosis into the world of spirit derives its strength from her people her African people. (Mari Evans)

Minnie Ransom with her spiritual guide Old Woman controls Velma's heling. The appeal "Are you sure, sweetheart that you want to be well ?" is crooned in different varsans versions throughout the novel to bring Velma from the mouth of death. The crazy Velma attempting double suicide is on the verge of death and suraly she has lost the will to live. To bring her back from death to life is to instill life force, the will to live in her and to imbibe on her mind that she can't die because her life is not her own alone, as an activist it belongs to the movement and a ultimately to the people, She is a "Christ" a "martyr". Minnie is successful in her treatment when Velma "resurrects" in the end:

Minnie Ransom staring. Her hands sliding off the shoulders of silk. The patient turning smoothly on the stool, head thrown back about to shout, to laugh, to sing. No need of Minnie's hands now. That's clear. Velma's glow aglow and two yards wide clear and unstreaked white yellow. Her eyes scanning the air surrounding Minnie, then examining her own hands, fingers stretched and radiant. No need of Minnies hands now, the healer withdraws, drops them in her lap just as Velma rising on stady legs, throws off the shawl that droops down on the stool a burst cocoon .(295)

Velma is beginning to emerge from a state of near catatonia produced, not as the result of the violent political confrontations. Because of this imagery Elenor T aylor (1984

159) fittingly judges the novel "a modern myth of creation told in a jazz mode! (Mari Evans) The flashbacks and flash forwards are the symptoms of the novel's postmodernist traits. Elliott Butler- Evans (1989:182) proves the point with the help of Fredrick Jameson. He argues the reader encounters some of the 19 traits or signs that Fredrick Jameson identified with postmodern discourse. Among these are pastiche and collage as structuring devices, the emergence of a schizophrenic textual structure, a displacement of history by "historicism", in which the past is reread and reconstructed in the present, and a valorizing and privileging nostalgia Butler-Evans (1989:176) further comments:

Fredrick Jameson's appropriation of Lacan to read schizophrenia as one of the "basic features of postmodernism".....an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material. Temporal discontinuities and "isolated, disconnected discontinuities, material signifiers are inscribed within the text. Susan & Willis (1987:139) also accept the postmodernism of the novel having disconnected details. She observes : The novel approximates a postmodern narrative whose profuse array of disconnected detail denies interpretation and suggests. a world where meaning no longer pertains. Talking about the structure of the novel in an interview with Claudia Tate (1983:29) Toni Cade Bambara comments that the sections of *The Salt Eaters* (1980) are closer to "gospel" than to jazz. Janelle Collins (1996:36) defines postmodernism into and the novel. Fragmentation with other traks of postmodernism are in it. She comments: Like other progesterone works, *The Salt Eaters* (1980) combines fabulism and realism, adopts a non-mimetic form of representation, rejects linear history in favor of a flattened one dimensional chronology of events, displays multiple-angles of vision rather a "decentered subject rather than a unified subjectivity in the charector of Velma Henry, offers a labyrinths of events instead of a plot to schizophrenic textual structure, a displacement of history by "historicism", in which the past is reread and reconstructed in the present, and a valorizing and privileging nostalgia Butler-Evans (1989:176) further comments:

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meaning. Similarly John Wideman (1980:14) argues that the "stream-of-consciousness" technique is used in the novel: Through flashbacks, stream -of-consciousness, a complex interweaving of plot, subplot and digression the substance of Velma's life and the reader must synthesize the mosaic, piece together fragmentary bits of character, story line..... In its best moments the novel recalls Faulknerian montage. One of the three working titles which Bambara used to help her stay focused- "In The Last Quarter," "The Seven Sisters", and "The Salt Eaters" this she retained. She (1980:166) explains: Salt is a partial antidote for snakebite To struggle, to develop, one needs to master ways to neutralize poisons. "Salt" also keeps the parable of Lot's Wife to the fore- ground. Without a belief in the capacity for transformation, one can become ossified. (Hillcrest: 1980:23)

The novel has also has some references to this effect :

The difference between snakes and serpents, the difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent.(8) Velma also remembers using salt as an antidote for snakebite. She slit open the part of snakebite with a knife and putting salt in it to "neutralize the s serpent." (257) Another legendary example is cited :(Salt is) Good for the eyes, the sinuses, the heart. The body needs to throw off its excess Balt for balance. Too little salt and wounds can't heal. Remember Napoleon's kharmy ? Those frogs were dropping dead from scratches because their bodies were deprived of salt. (164) Molisa Walker (1991: 181) explains the significance of the title. The title The Salt Eaters (1980) focuses the readers' attention on those who are seeking health rather than on those who are doomed. Salt eaters are people who will practise the old folk medicine including eating salt as a cure for snakebites. The cure the novel seeks, however, is for disorders caused by poisons that afflict the characters' minds, and by extension the society they create.

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