

Becoming whole and healed: Womanist perspective in**Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*****Author: J. Amala Jeya Shali****Research Scholar, Fatima College, Madurai****Co-author: Dr. Roselin Mary,****Retired Head & Associate Professor,****The Research Centre of English, Fatima College, Madurai.****Abstract:**

This paper aims in critically analysing Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* under the lens of Womanism. When Feminism catered the needs of White women and Anti-Racial movements supported Black men; there were none to consider the suffering of Black Women. Alice Walker's Womanism focuses on the concerns of Black women and envelops myriads of issues faced by them. It critically examines gender issues, racism, sexism, class issues and their intersection. Womanism challenges against the patriarchal power and factors that sideline women and also, it aims in the common good of the society. Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* stand as a perfect testament to it.

Keywords: Womanism, African-American, Alice Walker, community, healing

From time immemorial women have been subjected to men and patriarchal overpowering. In response to it, women have also never failed to oppose it, ask for a fair treatment. Feminism, right from its inception, focused on the better living of the white women folk and failed to consider the requirements of other minority women like the African American women or Asian American women.

When the prominent Black men, and their leaders fought against the discrimination done against the Black men and Feminism supported the White women there were none to voice out the pains and struggles that the African American women were undergoing. Hence, coloured women were subjected on the basis of race, class and gender and hence were triply marginalized. While Feminism and struggle against Racism did not include the inclusivity of Black women; pioneers like Audre Lorde and Bell Hooks proposed Black Feminist theories that supported the liberation of coloured women. And ultimately, Alice Walker's Womanism came out as an ultimate guideline to it.

In the year 1980, African-American writer, Alice Walker proposed “Womanism” as a replacement for Feminism. It focuses on the conditions and concerns of Black women and envelops myriads of issues experienced by them. It critically examines gender issues, racism, sexism, class issues and their intersection. (Linda) Alice Walker in her book *In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) defines a Womanist as “A Black feminist or feminist of color, " and " a woman who loves other women, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." (Walker 42)

Womanism challenges against the patriarchal power and factors that side-line women. Also, as its ultimate vision it aims in the common good of the society. Womanism is a beacon of hope and a solution for those who fight to reclaim their rights, voices, lives and their dignity. Womanism, at first, was put forth for the African-American woman; the woman of colour who encounter issues of discrimination, poverty, inequality and oppression. Walker’s definition of Womanism seems to be broader and more inclusive than Feminism. She mentions that “A womanist is a feminist, only more common.” (Walker 46). And it can be applied to analyse not only women of colour but could be applied to suffering women from any culture, since it is “more common.” Through Womanism Alice Walker not only advocates the liberation of an individual but also the need to support other individuals and grow together by supporting and sustaining each other. To be more specific Alice Walker aims in stressing the fact that people need to value themselves by valuing each other.

This paper aims in analysing Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* from womanist perspective. *The Salt Eaters* seem to fulfil Alice Walker’s idea of Womanism through its characters. Specially the way in which Velma Henry, the protagonist undergoes the healing process through which the whole community also gets healed. It is noteworthy that Toni Cade Bambara herself has lived a life testifying Womanism.

Bambara’s first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, is set in the fictional city of Claybourne, Georgia. The name ‘Calybourne’ suggests the origin of the creation that was made out of clay and the first man from whom the whole human race has its progeny. The novel deals with the story of Velma Henry who attempts to commit suicide by cutting her wrists and pushing her head into a gas oven. The novel opens with Minnie Ransom, a spinster and fabled vehicle of the spirit world, commonly known as the "fabled healer of the district", involving in the healing process over Velma Henry. Her treatment seems to take a longer time period since Minnie Ransom, wants Velma to internalise the fact that that she needs to be healed. She

employs non-traditional methods of healing to cure her patients. The treatment takes place in the infirmary which was built at Velma's initiative. During the process, Minnie Ransom asks Velma, 'Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?' (Bambara 3). Also, she insists the importance of having a complete healing which involves sound physical, mental and emotional and communal wellbeing "Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, because wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well" (Bambara 10). This question is not posed only to Velma Henry, but represents whole community which is in need of healing. At an extended level, the question is also put forth to the readers who would also be healed as they travel with the characters.

During the healing process, in the infirmary Minnie Ransom and Velma are surrounded by a circle of twelve senior citizens known collectively as The Master's Mind. Each member of the Master Mind represents the Zodiac sign, and they chant and hum continuously "in long meters" (*TSE* 21) to create the ambiance that Minnie Ransom needs in order to bring healing in Velma Henry. Though the healing process seems to treat Velma's physical healing, Minnie Ransom focuses on all the factors that contribute in affecting her health. She continues to ask Velma "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (*TSE* 3) she repeats asking this question since she wants Velma to have a complete and wholesome healing by giving up all the bottled up hurt, pain and agony. "... give it up, the pain, the hurt, the anger, and make room for lovely things to conspire in and fill you full. Nature abominates a so-called vacuum, don't you know?" (Bambara 16). To make Velma let go of her bitter past experiences, Minnie Ransom makes Velma to relieve her life through flashbacks. She recalls the police officer's brutal behaviour during the Civil Rights movement, the threat of nuclear power plan, the strife between Black men and women, her failing marriage, her former fiancé's paralytic attack while he was beaten at an anti-war demonstration. Thus, her mind wanders through issues of the past that has made her to commit suicide.

Apart from individual healing, the novel focuses in the historical memory that is signified through the ancestors. We understand from Bambara's description that the foremothers who are also known as Mud Mothers, are spirit beings. One among them, named Old Wife tries to communicate with Velma, frequently. But Velma rejected Mud Mothers and their powers which try to help Velma in her weaknesses. During the healing process, Velma encounters them and is afraid of them, but the Mud Mothers help Velma to get back her balance, regain her past and they restore her. Though the process is hard for Velma,

through Minnie Ransom's assistance she is willing to complete the process. As Velma stays in a metaphysical space involving the aid of the ancestral spirits, the wounds on her wrists begin to heal. Along with that she is filled with good memories and childhood reminiscences of being loved and supported by her family instead of the painful memories that hurt her recently. In addition to Velma Henry, the novel focuses on a wide range of characters and situations are mentioned at the backdrop of the upcoming Spring Festival.

The pivotal point of the novel is the healing process that takes place in different people, at different level, involving specific agents at specific areas. The level of healing denotes the physical sickness, mental damage, emotional distress incurred by an individual at various stages. For instance, Velma Henry is completely broken and has tried to commit suicide. Fred Holt, the driver suffers with ulcer issues, Sophie Heywood, is haunted by the past memories that affected her during the days of activism. Palma, Velma's sister experiences problems with menstrual cycle. Though the characters are represented with their problems in a diversified manner, the healing takes place once and for all. Velmas's healing through the Old Wife, along with Minnie Ransom's assistance resonates into the whole society as a ray of positivity and extends to form a communal bonding that makes the whole community healed and strengthened. Not only the physical issues but the whole psyche of the community that has been emotionally distressed with the issues of the nuclear powerplant and communal strife get healed. Thus, a wholesome wellness is presented to the whole community.

The healing takes place through Minnie Ransom. She is described as a woman with sharp mind, good sense of humour, person who can solve complexities, have a happy chat with her spirit guide throughout the healing process. And not as an mesmeriser, emotional trickster or as a sexually promiscuous woman as many African American women are portrayed. In the traditional healing process, Minnie Ransom "loans" a part of herself to Velma; her breath, her legs, her energy to help Velma to emerge out as a "burst cocoon".

And finally, the healing is celebrated at the annual Mardi Grass festival. The festival is a platform to celebrate African culture, acclaim the African roots and remember their tradition. It is a time for the community to strengthen their bonding and foster a sense of unity by bringing individuals into one whole community. Though the plot, narrative mode and the point of view of the novel is non-linear and shifts in time, place and action *The Salt Eaters* is

“like interweaving of voices all of which express the same sense of malaise plaguing Velma” (TSE 21).

The Salt Eaters brings in African and Afro-Caribbean spiritual and healing traditions along with Christian references and other spiritual practices. References to prayer, herbal and folk medicines, spirits, tarot cards, cowrie shells are cited. With the help of Minnie Ransom’s guidance, Velma’s mind moves from present to past, from fear to peace and recovers from being lost to a woman of sound mental and physical wellbeing. Velma’s illness does not refer to her individual sickness, but signifies the fact that she is restored and brought back to a community that is badly in need of its own healing.

The concept of communal healing represented in the novel has transformed the readers as well. Toni Morrison acknowledges her obligation to Bambara for the concept of the African spirit that unites them together that is represented both through Bambara’s life and works. The theme of healing a community through an individual’s healing has left a great impact on Morrison, that “She uses it in *Tar Baby* in which a group of African women direct the female protagonist Jardine toward her African woman-self, in their effort to prevent her from becoming the model of a European female.” (Pathak 34) Adrienne Maree Brown in the book *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* mentions that

“Toni Cade Bambara, author of *The Salt Eaters*, the one to tell us writing was a tool for the revolution, that our task was to make revolution irresistible. Bambara is a main stream in the lineage of pleasure activism, not just because of what she put on the page and into words, but also because of the ways she wove community, the way she supported other writers and organizers, the way she engaged in healing work” (45).

The novel, encompasses a mixture of characters, themes and plot focusing on the growth of individual, community and their collective healing. The narration weaves and interweaves through them and includes scattered memories, dreams and spiritual visitations connecting the characters with the ancestors and with the children unborn. Also, from concentrating the individual characters the novel throws light on political and collective wellbeing if the community. The novel aligns with Walker’s view of Feminism that in order to make a community heal, one must have personally healed and it is important for the community.

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