

Survival Ordeal of Women in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*

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Abstract

This paper portrays the survival ordeal of women in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*. Desperate for survival, the black women defy established norms. Relegated to the margins of the society, they take recourse to odds ways of social life. In *Bailey's Café*, the life struggle of a different character. This novel has several mini plots. Gloria realizes the depths of human struggle and survival despite the odds. This café serves as a sanctuary for those who have been denied the solace of human compassion. It is also called a way station, they can do whatever they wish or they can sit quietly, because the customers have been exploited emotionally and physically. In the novel, the characters arrive from other places here. For Bailey himself it is San Francisco. Bailey got his name from the place where he lives in Bailey. For Eve, it is New Orleans, Sadie, it is Chicago, Peaches (Mary), it is Cincinnati, Maria, it is Addis Ababa, and for Miss Maple (Stanley who disguises), it is Pittsburgh. Since the Café itself is rooted in no particular place, it is the perfect haven for its transient patrons.

KEYWORDS: Survival, Women, Social Life, Struggle.

Gloria Naylor is a contemporary Black American novelist, widely read for her stunning depiction of the Black American society, particularly women. *Bailey's Café* (1992) is a popularly acclaimed novel where she narrates the pathetic lives of these women. Desperate for survival, the black women defy established norms. Relegated to the margins of the society, they take recourse to odds ways of social life.

In *Bailey's Café*, each chapter explains the life struggle of a different character. This novel has several mini plots. Charles E. Williams in *Gloria Naylor, A critical Companion* says that "The reader realizes the depths of human struggle and survival despite the odds. This café serves as a sanctuary for those who have been denied the solace of human compassion. It is also called a way station, they can do whatever they wish or they can sit quietly, because the customers have been exploited emotionally and physically" (60). In the novel, the characters arrive from other places here. For Bailey himself it is San Francisco. Bailey got his name from the place where he lives in Bailey. For Eve, it is New Orleans, Sadie, it is Chicago, Peaches (Mary), it is Cincinnati, Maria, it is Addis Ababa, and for Miss Maple (Stanley who disguises), it is Pittsburgh. Since the Café itself is rooted in no particular place, it is the perfect haven for its transient patrons.

Maxine Lavon Montgomery in *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor* says that "Bailey's Café, the way station for a multinational group of citizens in transit, and Eve's place, domicile for a largely female assembly, serves as institutional sites positioned along a path leading to freedom from imposed limits" (54). Naylor points out in *Bailey's Café*, "...

the place sits right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility..." (76). Later the omniscient narrator reveals that "one can find Bailey's Café in any town"(112).

Sadie lands at the café from the Southside of Chicago. When she is ten, she has become the house cook, maid, laundress and general caretaker for an alcoholic mother. When she is thirteen, her mother forces her into prostitution. After a few months, the mother suggests the young girl a painful abortion, not only physically but also mentally. Sadie's life becomes more miserable than a common child's life. Sadie fights to become a respectful lady, even though she is still a prostitute.

When Sadie is fourteen, her mother dies and with no visible means of support beyond prostitution, Daniel, thirty years her senior, extends a marriage proposal to her. After marriage, Sadie functions as a wife and housekeeper for twenty five years. When Daniel dies, Sadie tries to raise money to purchase the property from Daniel's daughter (from previous marriage). Sadie is relegated once again to prostitution to earn money to complete the purchase. In prostitution, she sells her body and is very particular to charge only what she needs to save for the purchase of the house. When she tells her client that she requires only \$2.04 (in order to meet her daily goal \$5.79); she has already earned \$3.75. This reveals that prostitution is not her chosen profession but her bread winning ordeal. And by the time, she was arrested and sent to jail for two weeks. She has no time to earn full money for the house.

Sadie becomes homeless. She sells her body only when she needs food or liquor which helps her temporarily forget her troubles. Sadie's story in the café ends when she rejects the marriage proposal of the local ice delivery man. Ice man's mistake is that he wants to live a life of his own choice and not hers. "Sheknew this dear man was offering her the moon, but she could give him the stars"(78). Narrative emphasis on 'moon' and 'stars', refers ambiguously to tension between masculine and feminine.

The next chapter belongs to Eve, who owns a boarding house (brothel) next door to the café. Eve is a peculiar woman, who does not allow just any downtrodden women to reside in her establishment. She provides room only to those women who truly need help. Eve has arrived Bailey from New Orleans. An orphan, Eve is raised by a stern minister, a Godfather. Even after her attaining puberty at an early stage, the Godfather launders her personal items and gives her a nightly bath. Then he stops the baths, but still prevents her from other children(boys). Eve understands that Godfather needed to discontinue the baths; she misses being touched by another human being. She longs for any kind of touch. Soon she discovers a way to be satisfied. She allows the mentally challenged boy, Billy to play Hide-and- seek and invents another game that provides her physical pleasure. Lying in a prone position, pressing her body into the ground, Eve instructs Billy to march back and forth around her body while stamping as vigorously as he can. Eve's sexual pleasure which gives her the fullest expression during the earth stomping with Billy (mentally challenged) suggests the oneness that the novel's central mother figure shares with the earth.

Maxine Lavon Montgomery in *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor* writes that "Naylor re-figures the patriarchal story of Adam and Eve in the genesis through the presentation

of a self-determining female character whose very existence questions masculine privilege and rule”(60). Therefore, Eve defines herself in opposition to Godfather who rears her. Eve’s birth suggests that she owes no allegiance to any masculine entity, human or divine. “Godfather always said that he made me” but she said “but I was born of the delta” (90).

When the Godfather finds the “game” (played with Billy), he forces Eve to leave home. Godfather’s banishment of Eve sets the stage for the autonomous, self determining life that she leads. She develops a talent for making money and a love for well-kept gardens. Never subjecting her own body to prostitution, she sees herself as providing a social service for a basic human need. Eve establishes a boarding house (brothel), the love list of gardens. And from these gardens, she insists her tenants (gentleman callers) purchase flowers to bestow upon their chosen ones (lady). Her home is a feminine place of healing, renewal, and rebirth. Eve’s actions might seem bizarre, even malevolent at times. Eve allows the young woman to regain the dignity she forfeits as a consequence of the commodity status ascribed to the black female within a capitalist system.

Next is Esther, forced into prostitution at age twelve. Esther remains in this condition for twelve more years. Then Esther becomes the property of her brother’s boss a wealthy farmer who provides her with a comfortable house and plenty of food to feed her brother’s wife and his eight children. Thus Esther is forced to what she thinks is marriage to the farmer. She is forced to do unspeakable sexual acts that the farmer insists her to perform in the house. Esther does not understand at the age of twelve that when he encourages her to play with the toys he has purchased for her, he introduces her to sexual toys and sexual games. She lives with the farmer for twelve years in order to pay her brother for each year that he cared for her, “against the shrill protests of fat wife”(98). It signals the ways in which women often act as agents of female oppression, the farmer’s wife bathes Esther in preparation for the sexual abuse that the young woman endures. Esther’s story reveals the extent to which the young woman has internalized the negative self image that the larger society assigns. Esther lacks a positive sense of self; she lives in a world that evolves no terms for her existence: “I like the white roses because they show up in the dark. I don’t. The black gal. Monkey face. Tar. Coal. Soot. Unspeakable. Pitch. Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable.”(95). Esther realizes that she is not legally married to the farmer. When she arrives at Eve’s house, Eve understands her past and provides her with a dark room in the basement. All of her clients never see her in the lights. She can function only in darkness. She insists that her callers bring white roses, which she can faintly discern in the dark.

The next chapter focuses on Mary (Peaches), described as the most beautiful woman anyone has ever seen. The Kansas-born Peaches is a light-skinned beauty a “cocoa-butter dream” (101). When Peaches lives in her parent’s home, the boys often pursue her, but her father is so protective. She is not allowed to date anyone. Peaches ironically becomes controlled by an ever-intensifying urge. She is tired to protect her more sacred self and is plagued by her beauty because men constantly flirt with her, accost her, or leer at her. Believing she has no other recourse, she engages in one affair after the other. Finding it difficult to see her father tormented in this way, she leaves home only to find herself live on the seedy side of the town and prostituting for survival.

She begins to hate herself. Her journey to Eve's place reveals the dynamics of the young woman's attempts to distance her from the harmful, controlling images present in the larger society. By the time, she was living with one man who tried to save her in the way that her father did. In an effort to rescue, her boyfriend moves her from city to city. Nothing seems to remedy the situation. She even refuses to meet any man. For two weeks, she refuses even a delivery man to answer. She almost drives herself mad, believing that her beauty will forever plague her; consequently she takes a beer can opener to disfigure her face, now she is no longer beautiful and feels relieved of the physical torment that has been a part of her entire life.

On her release from the hospital, Peaches boards a train for no pre-determined destination. She lands in Bailey's and soon directed to Eve's where she remains until the present. Her father comes to take her back to Kansas City. However, her life has changed so much since she last lived in Kansas City that she cannot simply return so easily. As the chapter ends, her father is sent to Eve's, but when he arrives there, Eve does not allow him to cross the threshold. Peaches remains at Eve's for now; the very least, she knows that she can return home whenever she wishes. Eve's declaration to Peaches's father, "Go home, my friend. I'll return your daughter to you whole"(114), reveals the transformation the young woman is to undergo.

Jesse Bell, who too comes to Bailey's, like the other women, Jesse Bell's is a story of survival against the obstacles placed before her. Jesse Bell is married into one of Manhattan's most prominent black families, the Kings. Uncle Eli King doesn't like Jesse Bell, so he destroys the relationship of her husband and her by saying of her lesbianism. According to Jesse Bell, Uncle Eli is obsessed with lifting the black race to the level of (Upper class) the White. Because of his obsession, Uncle Eli even criticizes the soul food that Jesse Bell prepares for her family, referring to it as slave food. Uncle Eli doesn't give any room for Jesse Bell's family at rainy season. Bell's mother catches cold, which leads to pneumonia, and she dies a month later. This turns Jesse Bell to seek solace in the only friend she can ultimately trust--heroin. When a lesbian club is raided, Uncle Eli sullied her entire reputation in the local newspaper. Therefore Jesse Bell becomes an incarnated junkie. Eve's visits the women's detention center periodically out of sense of civic duty, offers her the possibility of hope and Jesse Bell begins to recover from her devastating ordeal. Jesse Bell's story ends with the hope that she will be strong enough to withstand temptation.

The chapter entitled "Mary (Take Two)" follows Jesse Bell's saga. It is an unbelievable story of a woman who is different from the earlier Mary (Peaches). Naylor calls this second character Mariam. Mariam has come to live at Eve's house after having been suffered in her own country Ethiopia (Jewish), because others believe she has sinned. She finds herself pregnant though she swears that she has never been with a man. Those in her village believe Mariam to be lying and when she refuses to name the father of her child, she is cast from the village. She arrives in Addis Ababa and from there she finds Gabe's (a Jew) shop. Gabe takes her to Eve's house (which is near to his rival's {Bailey} place). He is the owner of a Pawn shop. He knows that Mariam will be treated with respect only at Eve's.

Naylor's longest and most comprehensive chapter is "Miss Maple's Blues". Miss Maple is actually a man; named Stanley, who becomes Miss Maple after suffering a series of setbacks in America. Hailing from a multicultural heritage, Stanley is destined to succeed in his life. Stanley gets a degree from Stanford University, ultimately earning his Ph.D but not before he is drafted. He is not considering as a full fledged citizen in America. This incident makes his transformation from Stanley to Miss Maple. Stanley tries to get a blue-color job but no one is willing to hire a black man for the job. Continuing his travel from the west to east, Stanley soon discovers that he cannot get job by wearing stifling men's clothing. He then decides to wear loose women's clothes, figuring that his chances of landing job. Later he finds job as a housekeeper at Eve's. Living at Eve's for two years, the brothel housekeeper has become financially successful. The expense of corporate greed is the ultimate defiant act and represents Stanley's continued intellectual development. His story ends with the hope that he will be able to start his own company and finally chart his own course.

In the final chapter, entitled "The Wrap", Bailey attempts to conclude what has been an unconventional story. Constructing a neat package at the end is all but impossible. In this final chapter, Bailey allows greater insights into his love-hate friendship with Gabe, the Russian Jew. Mariam who prepares of the birth for her child is a black and a Jew. Everyone tries a good solution for Muslim. Gabe seeks passage for her to Israel but her entrance is denied. Bailey asks to give shelter for her and her child but no one comes forward to assist. Soon after she delivers her robust son, Mariam dies. The child named George was sent to a shelter for homeless boys. The ending is neither happy nor sad; it is just a matter-of-fact incident. Bailey submits "I don't believe that life is supposed to make you feel good, or to make you feel miserable either. Life is just supposed to make you feel"(219).

Maxine Lavon Montgomery in *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor* further adds that "The journey to Bailey's Cafe is ultimately a pilgrimage leading back to the rich cultural traditions of a transnational community" (72). As a result of Naylor's efforts to highlight the experiences of a diverse group of displaced citizens of the world, the household emerging in the novel's culminating scene is global in nature and represents a range of cultures, religions, and ethnicities. Naylor attempts to reestablish a commitment to the inclusion of all kinds of people. Naylor also impels her readers to question their understanding of what is normal or standard. Naylor blends several themes like marginality, change and transition, and respect for others reality in an effort to encourage compassion and sensitivity for difference. Another significant theme is establishing and maintaining respects for others reality (point of view). Charles E. Williams observes in *Gloria Naylor, A Critical Companion*, "Naylor explores the idea of defying boundaries and discarding labels" (127). Naylor forces the readers to reconsider these characters only in the context of their individual lives. From Naylor's point of view true integration would come only when Black citizens have equal access to all elements of prosperity. In short, America would act American until then no progress will occur.

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