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Sacrifice, Spirituality, and the Struggle for Identity in African American Women's Literature

At the beginning of the novels, *The Salt Eaters*, *Mama Day*, and *Paradise*, Velma Henry, Cocoa Day, and Mavis Albright, respectively, are trapped in a prison of their own making. They are a product of societal expectation which feed into feelings of being overwhelmed in a male dominated society. Thus, a mental and physical breakdown of the mind, body, and spirit is inevitable. Exploring possibilities for redemption from patriarchy and racism, Toni Cade-Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison illustrate the beauty of an African American woman's spirit that rises up when she is allowed to be herself. Through the characters of Minnie Ransom, Mama Day, and Consalata Sosa, we see older women who are confident, wise, and brave. These women are deeply connected to their spirituality as they help the younger women of their communities realize their potential to break the shackles that bind them. This presentation will argue that Toni Cade-Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison use their protagonists to demonstrate how the internalization of gender norms that idealize women as self-sacrificing care-givers must be overcome in order for women to claim the uniqueness of their spirits.

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, all depict women who are broken by society. In *The Salt Eaters*, Toni Cade-Bambara harmonizes the earthly with the supernatural as civil rights activist Velma Henry throws off her blanket of guilt and hopeless depression through spiritual healing conducted by an elder woman of her community. Furthermore, Bambara suggests that modern African American women share a spiritual connection which is deeply rooted in their African heritage. As the story opens, Velma

is in a clinic where she is being healed by Minnie Ransom, a spiritual leader. The juxtaposition of modern medicine and ancient spirituality draws a line between the physical and the supernatural. The clinic represents societal norms and becomes a doorway into the spirit world through which Velma must pass in order to achieve solitude and a personal awakening. Only through complete isolation from the world can she throw off gender norms and reclaim her uniqueness of spirit. The healing service, led by Minnie, is conducted as members of the community circle around Velma, whom they deem as sick. Velma's physical and psychological sicknesses are symptoms of her deeper spiritual emptiness which result in her attempted suicide. For Velma, the civil rights cause has lost its focus as the activist movement in her community has become increasingly factional. This, along with the death of her marriage and the pressures of her job create a suffocating vacuum from which death seems the only release. Velma's spiritual bareness creates a crisis of identity which feeds into feelings of being overwhelmed in a world she no longer recognizes.

Minnie Ransom, with the aid of "old wife" an ancestral spirit, draws Velma back to the reality of her true independent spirit by taking her on a journey into the past through a series of flashbacks. Bambara writes, "Minnie places the balls of three fingers against Velma's forehead cupping gently the two stony portions of the temporal bone. Velma inhales in gasps and exhales in shudders as she feels warmth spreading throughout her body. Her eyebrows draw in toward Minnie's touch as if to ward off the invading fingers. Then Minnie's hands went away quickly, and Velma felt she was losing her sight" (Bambara, pg. 200) . Velma loses her sight literally so that she may see her past more clearly. Through a spiritual hypnosis Velma descends into a

trance and revisits her past. Through flashbacks, Minnie helps Velma discover the futility of self-sacrifice and the importance of resisting gender norms and societal expectations.

In one of these flashbacks Velma is transported back to the civil rights rally of her youth. She has been marching all day, she is tired and sweaty, covered in dust, and on her period, to add insult to injury, she is also without feminine products. The only bathroom she can find is a broken down old gas station across the street from the rally. Disheveled and feeling exhausted, she returns to the rally just as a shiny black car pulls up. An impeccably dressed African American man steps out amid wild applause and cheers, he is flanked by his entourage. The crowd greets them like rock stars as they walk to the platform. After his speech, they get back in their car and leave. Disheartened, Velma realizes her hard work has gone unnoticed. It is in that moment, she realizes self-sacrifice does not equal redemption. Thus, Velma finds redemption in the realization that she is not responsible for the actions of others nor is it necessary for her to sacrifice herself on the altar of civil rights.

Velma continues to see the futility of self-sacrifice as she relives other parts of her life. She is oppressed by her sexiest husband James Lee Henry, aka, Obie. Obie does not respect her as an independent and professional woman. He resents her for doing “man’s work”, and because she is smarter than he is and far more enlightened. She is a woman with a mission to create a better life for African American people through her activism and the clinic, which she founded with the help of other activists. While Obie established and ran the Academy of the Seven Arts, Velma was doing all of the work in the day to day running and organization of the school. Obie’s resentment stems from his own inadequacies which spill over into their bedroom when Obie accuses her of being frigid; consequently, he begins to have affairs. Demoralized by her

husband's infidelity, Velma finds solace in the arms of another man. During the healing she explores the events of her marriage and her subsequent infidelity; she is able to finally forgive herself while acknowledging Obie's culpability. Through reaching a spiritual plane of redemption and acceptance, Velma resolves to never again be society's sacrificial lamb. As she emerges from her trance she feels joy. Bambara writes, "The patient turning smoothly on the stool, head thrown back about to shout, to laugh, to sing. No need for Minnie's hands now so the healer withdraws them, drops them in her lap, rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl that drops down on the stool, a burst cocoon" (pg. 295).

As in Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, redefines women apart from suffering and loss to reveal women's autonomy and individual spirituality. Gloria Naylor's female protagonists seek spirituality by reclaiming their own unique personhood; thereby living lives devoid of shame and filled with purpose, achieving an inner knowledge of self and having the ability to go after what they want without sacrifice. The matriarch of the all African America town of Willow Springs, Mama Day, guides the community and presides over births and deaths alike. Also a spiritual leader and healer, she possesses the ability to change the world around her. Mama Day's spirituality springs from generations of feminine history. Her great grandmother, Sapphira Wade, was an enslaved woman on the island of Willow Springs who married the plantation owner, Boscombe Wade. Shortly before his death she gained the deed to the island and created a community of free African Americans' during the pre-civil war era. Sapphira's legacy of spirituality and wisdom, created generations of strong women who were unafraid to break with gender norms. Mama Day's connection to her ancestor Sapphira Wade is so strong that she

can hear the cries of the slaves and the clangs of their shackles. The echoes of their ancestors' is felt not only by Mama Day, but by the whole community.

When Mama Day's great niece Cocoa and her new husband George come home from New York, Mama Day is overjoyed; however, Cocoa is battling her own demons. She has allowed the dictates of society to determine her self-worth. Born with lighter skin than many of the African American women on the island, Cocoa has always felt judged by her outward appearance. When she and George arrive in Willow Springs their vacation soon becomes a journey of self-discovery and spiritual renewal.

Cocoa's physical and spiritual health is threatened when she crosses paths with the paranoid and insecure Ruby. Convinced that Cocoa is having an affair with her husband, Ruby is so consumed by jealousy that she uses voodoo and nightshade to poison Cocoa. Cocoa's physical illness is a trope both for her loss of self and communal identity which she experiences as a result of negotiating society's competing expectations of her as a black woman. Willow Springs suffers as its residents negotiate the past that binds them with the pull of modernity and progress. As Mama Day heals Cocoa, George makes the ultimate sacrifice, he unwittingly gives up his life. George cannot fathom magic and in his disregard for Mama Day's wisdom, he makes a fatal mistake. By George's death, Naylor is suggesting that women have to stop being the one to sacrifice; and as Cocoa recovers from this near death experience, she refuses to let loss and sacrifice be the way of the future.

As women reclaim their spirits, they move farther away from societal expectations and gender norms. In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison introduces five women who have sacrificed everything. The women seek sanctuary in a convent run by Consolata Sosa, a woman who has

known the loss of family, home, and love. Mavis, Seneca, Pallas, and Gigi arrive separately, but are running from the same demons. Having given their identities to a society governed by men, they have suffered abuse, sexual depravity, and loss of children, home, and family. As Consolata claims her power and her worth she is able to lift up each woman by revealing the goddess within, finding personal healing as she becomes a spiritual teacher and healer to the lost women of the convent.

Mavis, who is fleeing an abusive husband, the death of her babies and the estrangement of her children overcomes her fear and guilt by ascending to a new spiritual plane of forgiveness. Another woman of the convent is Gigi; branded a harlot, she oozes sexuality as she throws up walls to keep people out, society has labeled her a “throw away” woman. While at the convent she learns to respect herself as she connects with her inner spirit and learns what it means to be part of a family. Sixteen-year-old Pallas is pregnant and alone. She has been rejected by both her parents and has retreated behind a wall of silence. It is only through Consolata’s intervention and love that Pallas becomes whole. Pallas achieves a spiritual plane of unconditional love as she brings her baby into the world. The last woman, Seneca, seeks refuge within the walls of the convent. She too transforms her sacrifice and loss into a spiritual awakening as her pain and suffering become self-discovery and enlightenment.

In the midst of a male-dominated society, these cast off women of *Paradise* find redemption through community, strength, and love within a sanctuary of sisterhood. Sacrifice, loss, and abuse fall away as the women embark on a journey of healing and self-discovery. Consolata leads them through an exploration of what brought them to this place. She helps them cast off the old internalizations of sacrifice, “the female duty”, hatred, anger, and judgment.

Mavis, Pallas, Gigi, and Seneca lift each other up as they begin their individual expeditions of self-discovery. They embark upon a spiritual quest to heal their fractured selves by reinventing what it means to be a woman. They create and support their own metamorphosis through what Gershon calls “a god of their own creation; a god who is ‘the other’ for women, who can support and encourage female becoming; a god who represents the self-love of women and their own incarnation apart from the male gaze “. I would argue that “god of their own creation” is a goddess who manifests herself through a woman’s unique spirit.

African American spirituality is woven throughout the works of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor. Spirituality heals the broken spirits of the women in the novels *The Salt Eaters*, *Paradise*, and *Mama Day*. For the female protagonists, societal expectations of motherhood as an unconditional self-sacrifice create an overwhelming downward spiral of self-denial and hopeless depression. The female characters become consumed with family and community obligations to such an extent that their own spiritual health is abandoned. Through reconnecting with their own spirituality these women find salvation. Therefore, Toni Cade-Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison use their protagonists to demonstrate how the internalization of gender norms that idealize women as self-sacrificing care-givers must be overcome in order for women to claim the uniqueness of their spirits.

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