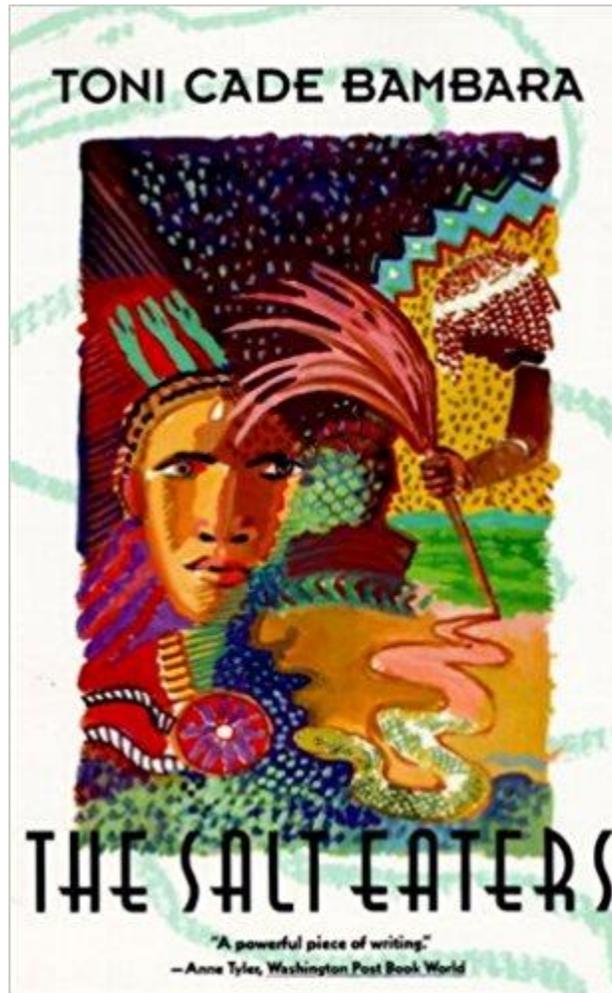


**Subaltern Culture in Toni Cade Bambara's Novel**  
*The Salt Eaters*

**P. K. Sathiya and Dr. M. Madhavan**

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Salt-Eaters-Toni-Cade-Bambara/dp/0679740767>

**Abstract**

This paper confines with African American woman novelist Toni Cade Bambara. It describes various issues socialism, racism and sexism which are clearly bewrayed in her lives

and works. Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* has been taken for the study. This Text recreates an ideology of African-American womanhood which privileges individual definition. This paper focuses on recurring themes, motifs and issues such as myth, western standards of beauty, supernatural, mothering, poverty, binal consciousness, and stigmatization and marginalization of black people. The novelist creates notable black women characters to establish their own identity among the multilayered and interconnected oppression of racism, socialism, sexism and class discord. There after these women managed to retain their identities throughout the novel. This paper adopts the comparative approach. Its analysis reflects the varied intricacies that black womanhood yields within dominant Culture and how each character either internalizes or counters the politics of race, gender and sexuality. This paper is delving on race and gender which provides readers with new insight to understand Toni Cade Bambara's novel.

**Keywords:** Toni Cade Bambara, Be wary, Healing, Sand, Salt, Mud, Obeah, Hourglass.

Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995) was an African-American author documentary filmmaker, social activist and college professor. Toni Cade Bambara's real name Meltona Mirkin Cade was born in the neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. She was born at the end of the Harlem Renaissance, During this period, the prominently African-American neighborhood became a center of black culture- particularly literature, music and visual arts. The areas rich history deeply influenced Bambara as did her relationship with her mother, who encouraged her daughter creativity, then Bambara was ten her family left Harlem, She studied English and theatre Arts at Queens College, while still in college, she published her first short story, "Sweet Town", in the magazine *Vendome*. While continue to her Master's degree. She had worked as program director at colony settlement house, services to immigrants.

Bambara first wrote to literary prominence in 1970 as the editor of the *Black Woman*, a successful anthology of fiction, poems, and essays by emerging African-American woman writers. It was also in this year that Bambara adopted her surname, which she had first seen as a signature in one of her grandmother's old sketchbooks in 1972. Bambara published her first book in 1972. A collection of short fiction called *Gorilla, my love*. Over the next decade she published a second short-story collective and a novel. She also travelled extensively in Europe, Vietnam and Cuba, among other places. Her time abroad in clouded her writing and many of her later words address the lines of people who struggle against outrage. Bambara's stories communicates with shattering force and directness both the grim reality of the black world. Its violence, poverty, determination and a sense of cultural traditions.

Bambara's first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, deals with the story of Velma Henry who tries to commit suicide. Her treatment takes a long time because first she wants to be defended that she needs to accept the fact that she needs to be cured. Minnie Ransom is faith healer who employs non-traditional methods to reclaim her disturbed customer. The treatment takes place in a medical facility where skeptical interns and traditional medical professionals witness the healing as if in attendance at an operation theatre. Velma, Shaky, dirty, affected and underdressed in a hospital gown, is seated before the aged healer, Minnie, who is swaddled in flowing robes and adorned in handcrafted ornaments. Minnie, the healer, asks a question to Velma: 'Are you sure,

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sweetheart, that you want to be well?’ (3). The healer follows with a statement of responsibility that we all must understand: “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” (10). In the opening scene, Velma Henry is bullied on a stool facing Minnie Ransom, a faith healer, whose reputation for curing her patients is impeccable. Velma and Minnie are in turn surrounded by a circle of twelve senior citizens known collectively as The Master’s Mind. Each member of the Mind represents a sign of the Zodiac, and their presence and continuous chanting and humming “in long meter” help create the proper atmosphere Minnie Ransom needs in order to bring in cure.

Minnie Ransom asks Velma in the beginning of the novel : “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?”(3)and she continues to ask this question throughout the story until Velma that in order to be well she must “... 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?” (16). In order to “give it up”, Velma relieves her life through flashbacks. As Velma sits on the stool in the clinic her mind wanders through the various injures that have brought her to the edge of aberration. In her head, she redoes scenes of police brutality during Civil Rights demonstrations, the threat of nuclear conflagration, the rift between Black men and women, the schism in her own marriage, a inaccuracy and finally the crippling of Smithy, her former fiancé, who was beaten at an anti-war demonstration and left a quadriplegia. With this terrific act she makes up her mind to commit suicide.

In the novel, one aspect of historical memory is represented by the ancestors. Velma’s break down is marked by her rejection of the Mud Mothers, or the ancient primogenitors who hold “the powers of the deep” (23). The Mothers try to communicate with her repeatedly. In one scene they call to her through an attic mirror. They try to tell her what must be done in order for her to retain balance and reclaim her spirituality. She is feared of them and angry for the intrusion on her understanding of the world. She seeks to shut them up, rejecting them, saying they cannot run her out of her own garret. The Mud Mothers call her to reclaim her past, ancestry, and spiritual restoration. With Minnie’s help she is eventually willing to go to this slough and controvert it. When Velma describe from this metaphysical space, the physical wounds she inflicts on her wrists during her suicide attempt begin to heal. With healing good memories start to come, instead of only the painful one. She is flooded with warm childhood memories of being loved and supported by her family.

All surroundings Velma and Minnie, beyond the infirmary itself, are a luminance array of characters, institutions and circumstances : Fred Holt, the bus driver nearing retirement and to repent the death of his friend, porter; Velma’s husband, Obie, who heads the fragmented Academy of the Seven Arts; the Seven Sisters performing arts group who travel toward Claybourne for the annual Mardi Grass festival; Julius Mathews, a gambler now known as Doc Serge, who is also on staff at the Infirmary; Sophie Heywood, Velma’s grandmother and a member of The Master’s Mind. *The Salt Eaters* is a “fugue like interweaving of voices all of which express the same sense of malaise plaguing Velma” (21).

All of the main characters are relevant in some way to Velma, whose fractured psyche serves as a trope for the splintering and fractures of the community, where fundamental values have been left behind in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Like other African-American women's novel of the 1970s and 1980s, *The salt Eaters* deals with the gender oppression that African-American women experienced before, during, and after civil rights. Minnie Ransom repeatedly asks Velma if she is ready for the "weight" of being well, a question the novel implicitly directs to the entire community.

The salt Eaters conglomerates African and Afro-Caribbean spiritual and healing traditions with those from Western religion and other spiritual practices. The novel includes references to prayer, tarot, cowrie shells, herbal and folk medicines, root work and obeah, among others. Under Minnie's guiding hand, Velma will move backward in time to relieve her fear and rage, as well as to recover wisdom and rootedness. Illness, however, becomes a matter of community as well as self-healing; as Velma returns to health, she is also restored to a community badly in need of its own healing. The novel ends climatically, with the apogee of preparations for a local Mardi Grass festival and a allusion storm that signals changes in the characters who need them the most, including Velma who rises from the stool as though from "a burst cocoon" (295).

Bambara has notified herself to be a black feminist. In her novel, she describes much deeper into the very roots of racism and sexism. In a subtle way, she suggests that the characters can be healed by looking inward, centering themselves in their own cultural traditions, and then by moving forward in a joint coagulation to save humanity. Bambara's used some symbols *The Salt Eaters* possesses many symbols such as the title, the setting, mud, sand, and the hourglass etc.

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