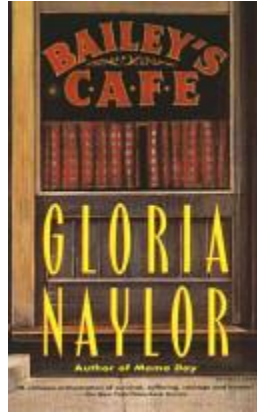


Gender and Ethnicity in Gloria Naylor's Novel *Bailey's Café*

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Gloria Naylor

Gloria Naylor (1950-) is a leading African American novelist. She is well known also as an essayist, screenplay writer, columnist, and educator. Naylor once recalled:

Growing up in the North in integrated schools, I wasn't taught anything about Black history or literature. When I discovered that there was this whole long literary tradition of Black folk in this country, I felt I had been cheated about of something. I wanted to sit down and write about something that I hadn't read about and that was all about me – the Black woman in America (qtd. in Goldstein).

Bailey's Café

Naylor chooses to locate her fourth novel *Bailey's Café* within a specifically cultured and gendered context where voice and all of its associations are directed toward subverting the

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myriad forms of authority patriarchy legitimizes and constructing a new world order among partially dispossessed women world-wide. “Bailey’s Cafe took me through the final step”, Naylor remarked during a recent book tour stop “I had envisioned four novels that would lay the foundation for a career. This one finishes that up” (qtd. in Due F2).

A Series of Loosely Connected Stories

The novel itself is comprised of a series of loosely connected stories - each one from a different woman's point of view and it culminates with a magically real, communal celebration of the birth of Mariam's son George during the Christmas season.

A Verbal Picture of Human Existence

Gloria Naylor’s individual stories in the novel are loosely connected and are gripping, moving and completely believable. Anyone who reads the novel can appreciate a vivid verbal picture of human existence, and won’t mind if those pictures are not especially happy ones. They would find Naylor’s portraits deeply rewarding and moving.

Bailey’s Café is a collection of deeply moving personal stories from (mainly) women deeply scarred by life. Author Gloria Naylor reveals an extraordinary ability to imagine, create and relate the stories of half dozen people nearly destroyed by their pasts, yet getting some glimmer of hope in Eve’s boarding house, arrived at via Bailey’s Café.

Narration by Bailey

The novel is narrated by Bailey – not really his name, but when he and his wife, Nadine, took over the run-down café called Bailey’s, he was stuck with name by his customers. It was 1948 and Bailey, a Negro WWII vet and avid fan of baseball, especially the Negro pro league, is the richest character of the book. Since he narrates the story and sets the stage for the other

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characters to reveal their lives to us, there is a tendency to think of him as the author. That led to a special appreciation of Naylor's considerable ability to make us think that fanatic male in 1948 could be the author herself. In addition to the powerful characterization of Bailey, her historical accuracy and sensibility are also noteworthy.

The Locale and Characters

Bailey's Café is set in a run-down neighborhood of Chicago. Down the street is Eve's boarding house. Women don't go to Eve's and take a room, but find their way there, and may be invited by Eve, if and only if she thinks the boarding house may be a way-station back into a meaningful existence. Along the way we learn Eve's story herself and some of her boarders. There is Sadie who tries to earn love by being the perfect fulfiller of anyone's needs for order, cleanliness and elegance. Esther, who hides from light to obscure what used to happen to her in the dark cellar of her home. Mary is so beautiful that her life had only one public meaning until she scarred her face. Jesse Bell moves from the slums to the hill top with disastrous results. The Ethiopian, Mariam, suffering genital mutilation and a virgin pregnancy for propriety's sake. And finally Miss Maple, rich well-educated son of a wealthy Negro family, who becomes the transvestite house keeper / bouncer for Eve's home. Bailey's own extraordinary story is thrown in for good measure.

Form and Content

The inter-relationship of the form of the novel and the content is a frame story, not unlike Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. There is the setting: Bailey's Café and Eve's boarding house. They provide the ground on which the characters tell their individual stories. Bailey, the narrator, is equivalent to Chaucer's own narration of his tales. The stories were so real to life, so tragic and in touch with the earth. The unreal nature of Bailey's, with a back room where

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strange and fantastic things happen from suicides and child birth in a light-flooded space resembling rural Ethiopia, and the sort of magic space of Eve's, took away a sense of the reality of the rest of the novel.

Perhaps Naylor just felt the pain and suffering, even the hopelessness of the stories were too much, and there needed to be some relief, perhaps even an appeal to the supernatural or occult to trouble-free the pain. Naylor is right about that and the stories are just so true of so many people who live harsh lives in an unforgiving world. *Baliley's Café* is filled with life, although life in deep pain, it touches, informs and enriches.

In Search of Authorial Voice

The part of her ongoing search for an authorial voice is to tell - or, rather, retell the experiences of women of color, Naylor chooses to locate her fourth novel within a specifically cultured and gendered context where voice and all of its associations are directed toward subverting the myriad forms of authority, patriarchy, and constructing a new world order among partially dispossessed women world-wide. The novel itself is comprised of a series of loosely connected stories - each one from a different woman's point of view - and it culminates with a magically real, communal celebration of the birth of Mariam's son George during the Christmas season.

For the first time not only is there oneness among a culturally diverse group whose traditions and customs span the globe, but the voices of women also unify in the ritualization of George's arrival. George's long-awaited birth, like that of the Messiah, could signal either an end or, hopefully, new beginnings for the pluralistic group present. But in this climactic scene, after conjuring an image of global harmony, Naylor denies the reader/audience the privilege of knowing the fate of the young mother and son: "Does Mariam find acceptance among an

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American Jewish community? What is to become of George, now en route to Wallace P. Andrews Boys' Home?"

No Satisfactory Ending?

The novel's unresolved closure serves to encourage a participatory involvement from the reader/audience and is a strategy present in much of African American writing. Bailey, the fatherly World War II veteran and proprietor of the cafe, is unable to offer a satisfactory ending to the moving stories that unfold. Instead, he merely invites the reader/audience to empathize with the women whose tragic tales comprise the written text:

If this was like that sappy violin music on Make-Believe Ballroom, we could wrap it all up with a lot of happy endings to leave you feeling real good that you took the time to listen," Bailey informs us in "The Wrap." But 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).

Naylor uses Bailey's voice in establishing the time, place, mood, and character for each woman's story, except that of Mariam, a curiously virginal unwed mother whose touching account of anti-Semitism and sexism recreates a vital sisterhood among women of color across the Diaspora who often find themselves at odds with notions of female sexuality prescribed by patriarchy. Ultimately, Naylor's goal as creator and sovereign of the decidedly new fictive cosmology which emerges in the novel's ambiguous climactic scene is to affect some sort of unity among the widely disparate voices of women, not just within but outside the text. Karla Holloway, in her discussion of the responsive strategy of black women's narratives, refers to the technique as "a collective 'speaking out' by all the voices gathered within the text, authorial, narrative, and even the implicated reader" (11). Thus, in retelling Mariam's tale, Eve and

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Bailey's otherwise reticent help-meet Nadine forms a duet, for the male voice is severely limited in its ability to decode the very private experiences the women relate. Bailey can offer empathy but not immediacy between Mariam, the speaking subject, and the reader/audience.

Moving Beyond the One Dimensional Portraits of Male Figures

Naylor's particular triumph as a contemporary African American woman writer has much to do with her success at moving beyond the one-dimensional portraits of male figures that brought her criticism with the publication of *The Women of Brewster Place*. Bailey, unlike his fictional predecessors residing at the decaying Brewster, is no mere shadow of a man. He is endowed with a certain psychological depth and complexity of character, despite the ambiguities associated with his assumed name. It is Bailey whose veiled comments offer insight into the close relationship between the written text and the distinctly black oral forms of expression.

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