



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SOUL OF BLUES AND THE SWING OF JAZZ TELLING STORIES IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN  
GRAIN: NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *BAILEY'S CAFÉ*

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970's, the emergence of a separate and distinct black feminist literary tradition has been instrumental in exploding western literary and critical concepts and practices and has heralded the beginning of a new era in the adoption of unconventional narrative techniques by African-American novelists like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor to name only a few. Significantly, these authors have been able to articulate through their innovative narratives the experience of the marginal groups of America, especially that of African-American\* women, so long unheard and suppressed in the body of American Literature. Also, deriving from the oral heritage of folk tales, myths and lore, of slave narratives, spiritual songs and gospels, blues and jazz music (always a dominantly Negro\* domain) and of a varied and complex black\* experience in America, their narratives have captured the verve and vigor of the colloquial speech of real men and women while being evocative and lyrical in their ability to condense and represent the essence of African-American (marginal) experience in America. If "great narratives" or "grand narratives" like history, epic, romance, legend, allegory and even the novel in its traditional sense may be viewed in terms of dominant voices recording the stories of the powerful colonizing forces, the narratives negotiating spaces in history and articulating untold sagas of the oppressed are "little narratives" that tell the stories of the marginalized groups that have hitherto hovered at the periphery of social and political visibility and cognizance. Gloria Naylor, who won the American Book Award in 1983 for her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* has represented in all her novels the diversity, richness, whimsicalities, and idiosyncrasies of the African-American experience. Here, an attempt has been made to analyze Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* as a narrative that has represented the disordered urban experience of the Negroes in America, their disillusionment, frustration and pain and their struggle for survival and story of endurance. The paper has also tried to explore how structurally, stylistically and thematically, the narrative of the novel resembles blues and jazz music — music that has traditionally symbolized the essence of black culture and crystallized their emotions and trials and has been regarded as a metaphor for the African-American experience in America (*Norton Anthology*: 22).

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970's, the emergence of a separate and distinct black feminist literary tradition has been instrumental in exploding western literary and critical concepts and practices and has heralded the beginning of a new era in the adoption of unconventional narrative techniques by African-American novelists like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor to name only a few. Significantly, these authors have been able to articulate through their innovative narratives the experience of the marginal groups of America, especially that of African-American\* women, so long unheard and suppressed in the body of American Literature. Also, deriving from the oral heritage of folktales, myths and lore, of slave narratives, spiritual songs and gospels, blues and jazz music (always a dominantly Negro\* domain) and of a varied and complex black\* experience in America, their narratives have captured the verve and vigor of the colloquial speech of real men and women while being evocative and lyrical in their ability to condense and represent the essence of African-American (marginal) experience in America. If "great narratives" or "grand narratives" like history, epic, romance, legend, allegory and even the novel in its traditional sense may be viewed in terms of dominant voices recording the stories of the powerful colonizing forces, the narratives negotiating spaces in history and articulating untold sagas of the oppressed are "little narratives" that tell the stories of the marginalized groups that have

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talk's flair for story-telling, braggadocio, understatements, eloquence, spare dry poetry, loud talk menace and whispery romance (*NA:55*) — ingredients/elements that are inseparable from the African-American urban experience. The narrative in this novel is, like typical black folk music, conversational, at times lyrical, at times eloquent and moving, dryly humorous, witty and street-smart, intense, despairing and tragic, yet lively and comic and above all, full of humor, a sense of hope and possibility. Thematically as well as stylistically therefore the narrative of *Bailey's Cafe* has enough resemblances with these two forms of black music to encourage the drawing of inevitable parallels. I have used the word "strategy" instead of "structure" to suggest the deliberate artistic design of the author in adopting a narrative mode that is structurally and thematically like the blues and jazz music. Minor literature is characterized by its dynamics of politics, which is really the politics of human situation.<sup>1</sup> As the writer of a marginal narrative therefore, it is very likely that Naylor's intention would be to reject white cultural hegemony by rejecting Euro-American modes of narrative and instead adopt an indigenous form of artistic expression like the themes and structures of black folk music — the blues — and jazz, which was the product of a typically urban black American consciousness that registered the awareness and quickening tempo of the fast-changing life in the cities of the United States of America — to articulate the experience of African-Americans in America. Naylor's narrative voices resonantly the experience of the minority or the marginal group.

Dan Wakefield, in his review of *Bailey's Cafe* writes that in the novel, Naylor "takes us many keys down, and sometimes back up, in this virtuoso orchestration of survival, suffering, courage and humor, sounding through the stories of these lives."<sup>2</sup> This reference to the narrative as a piece of musical score recognizes that unmistakable quality in the narrative of the novel, which is prefaced by Naylor with a poignant blues song, that states the theme and sets the tone of the novel:

hush now can you hear it can't be far away  
 needing the blues to get there  
 look and you can hear it  
 look and you can hear  
 the blues open  
 a place never  
 closing  
 Bailey's  
 Café

The "blues" stand for the infinite, sea-blue space behind the café that represents no geographical location but "the territory of the soul" (*CP:31*) where Bailey's Café is located — a place that can be "heard" in the music of one's sadness — "blues" — a place that never closes. The first chapter introduces us to the central narrator\*\* Bailey who is the proprietor of Bailey's Cafe and who allows everyone to call him by that name though his real name is different and is never disclosed. He invites his reader/audience to listen to the "music" that will be played but warns them not to expect to get "the answer" to their queries in "a few notes": "There's a whole set to be played here if you want to stick around and listen to the music." (*BC: 4*) And so, "standing at center stage" he "sets the tempo" by telling his own "fascinating" story (*ibid*). Through his reminiscences about his childhood the reader is acquainted with Brooklyn of 1917 and as he speaks about those times, referring nostalgically to his passion for baseball and teenage hero-worship of Smokey Joe Williams, the baseball star of yesteryears, he represents, as Naylor intends him to, a typically lower middle-class African-American urban experience. His description of his first meeting with his future wife Nadine (an unusual, taciturn woman) and their subsequent courtship is rich with humor while his brief reference to their struggle for survival is deliberately understated, leaving it for the reader to draw his own inferences and imagine what has been left unsaid. As the grill-man of Bailey's Cafe, of which his wife is the co-proprietor, Bailey has come into contact with his regular customers on a personal level and as the

central narrator, he introduces the reader to the characters after which he allows the characters (with particular exceptions) to recount their stories themselves, thus allowing no dilution in the dramatic (mimetic) impact of the narrative and the first hand knowledge that allows for intense personal emotions to be expressed through the voices of these speakers (autobiographical confessors). The exceptions to this pattern are found in the chapters that deal with the stories of Sister Carrie — the pious, scripture-quoting lady (*CP:30*) the religious prude, Sugar Man — the local pimp and hustler, Sadie — the wino and two-bit prostitute (*CP:28*) and Mariam — the young Ethiopian Jewess who comes to stay in Eve's boarding house for single women. The first three are narrated by the central, eyewitness narrator Bailey while in the last, most painful and poignant story (Chapter 8) the speaker's voice changes and Nadine, Bailey's wife, breaks her silence to become the dramatic narrator. This change of narrative voice suggests the changeover to the woman's point of view and even the central narrator Bailey can be viewed from another perspective but without the interference of the author. She takes over the role of narrator claiming that no man would dare to voice the story of Mariam and her excruciating suffering. Interestingly however, the author's point-of-view breaks the narrative when Nadine becomes her mouthpiece in voicing opinions about politics and religion. Apart from that jarring note of discord,\*\*\* the intensely tragic story of the violation and mutilation of innocence is rendered with the pathos and lyricism of a blues song.

In Chapter 2 titled "The Vamp" (introductory statements in a jazz rendition), the author clearly indicates the structural scheme and the narrative strategy/design of the novel when she makes Bailey say, "Sister Carrie and Sugar Man aren't as far apart as they sound. If you don't listen below the surface, they're both one note players. Flat and predictable. But nobody comes in there with a simple story. Every one liner's got a life underneath it. Every point's got a counterpoint. Here, I'll show you; let's just take 'em one key down: ..." (*BC: 34*) The ineluctable irony of the narrative situation (Scholes: 240) arising from the disparity of the different points of view becomes apparent as the narrator himself tells his reader (much like the conspiratorial conversation of the jazz singer with his audience): "that's just two of them, and they're only minor voices... Anything really worth hearing in this greasy-spoon happens under the surface. You need to know that if you plan to stick around here and listen while we *play* (italics mine) it all out." (*BC:35*). Here the narrator/singer tells his reader/audience to listen to the under-notes rippling and throbbing beneath the surface notes that he and all the characters are playing/telling through the narrative — the real stories beneath the apparent/visible ones — clearly forewarning the reader/audience that he would miss out on things "really worth hearing" if he listened only to the surface note of the narrative/musical instrument. This ensures the interaction of the reader/audience with the narrator and characters.

In Chapter 3 titled "Mood: Indigo," the narrator tells the story of Sadie's life — the first in the series of six broken women that Naylor presents in the novel. The stark simplicity of the narrative is deliberate: "It calls for telling straight out, the way it was. Pure, simple and clean" (*BC: 40*) as it underscores the unrelieved suffering of Sadie's wasted life, the raw deal that life has meted out to her, the sheer injustice of the pain inflicted on her, her purity of soul and "goodness" defying all moral definitions. The setting of her story is the representation of the hard life that Negroes on the South side of Chicago led in those times, struggling to survive, their hopes and dreams, fears, instabilities and insecurities — the seamy underside and grim realities of the African-American existence/experience. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 have four women — Eve, Esther, Mary and Jesse Belle as characters who become autobiographical narrators, telling the primary narrator and the reader their stories, leading to stories within stories and narrations with narrations. Each of their stories strike terror in the heart of the reader with the magnitude of suffering they record, stories of intense pain and horror — narratives that are powerful as well as moving. Each story begins with Bailey's impression about the character, the shift in the narrative voice as the

character speaks in first person and finally Bailey's resuming the role of narrator and concluding impression/comments. Mary's fragmented and divided self represents the fragmented identity (symbolized by the mirror motif) of the African-Americans and their dissociation from mainstream existence — their moral dilemma, their rootlessness as they are frequently dislocated from one place to another (due to political and economic compulsions), their yearning for stability and security, their rarely-resolved problems, their restlessness and eternal quest for identity and selfhood. Eve's promise to Mary's father to return his daughter to him "whole" (BC: 113) hints at a possibility of recuperation and healing of her 'self' and soul. Esther's story represents the victimization of countless black girls ["the other twelve year olds with brothers" (BC: 98)] who are sacrificed at the altar of their families' necessity or greed. Her story of murdered innocence is punctuated with the chilling refrain of "we won't speak about this Esther" (BC: 95, 96, 97, 98, 99) — the structural phrase repeated in the narrative in the voice of her brother? /husband? /tormentor? — underlining the theme and creating a motif. Jesse Bell's story is that of a spirited girl from a working class background whose marriage to a wealthy Negro brings her into direct conflict with the chauvinistic and class conscious patriarch of the King family Uncle Eli, whose cold-blooded schemes to defame her continued till he succeeded in "kill(ing) (her) in (her) own house." (BC: 130) This story represents the gradual shift of the focus of conflict in African-American literature, hitherto concentrated on racial and class differences and has begun to be centred on a sexual and class conflict within the Negro society. Here, an independent and headstrong woman from a proletariat background clashes in a war of will with a patriarch of the elite class (emerging) and has to accept defeat because she is unacquainted with the underhand tactics and deception required in this ruthless game of power.

Eve represents the nurturing African-American woman who has taken into her protection so many shattered, unhappy women of her race, whose injured souls she helps to heal. Having been thrown out of her house by her despotic "Godfather" who claimed to have "made" her, she is able, through sheer wit and determination, to establish her own "queendom" where, in a magnificent inversion of Godfather's self-centred world of the omnipotent male, the male suitors of her women boarders have to stand in line and offer flowers (from Eve's garden - a symbol of her nurturing power) to get their attention and company. Significantly, the stories of dissociation representing the disordered and painful experience of these broken women come between the stories of Bailey and Stanley (stories of stability and equipoise) thus achieving a perfect balance in the narrative structure of the novel. Chapter nine titled "Miss Maple's Blues" presents the story of Stanley Carver, a Ph.D in Statistics. The narrative pattern is repeated as Stanley speaks in first person to the reader/audience. His massive job-hunt that has taken him across the length and breadth of the country is described in graphic and minute detail — recorded in the manner of a dispassionate statistician/cost analyst.

The disillusionment and frustration encountered by a highly qualified and eligible Negro statistician who was offered the job of a sleeping car porter, bell boy, elevator-operator, mail room clerk but not the one he was qualified for, the bitterness and utter hopelessness he felt at the unfairness of it all, the African-American experience as such is condensed in the terse narrative that is deceptively equanimous and understated. The hegemony of white culture and language is rejected when Stanley's father says that he wants him to reject the white man's words as "babble" and asks him to set his own standards and begin to identify himself as a man (BC: 182). However, Naylor's sophistication as a literary artist makes her represent the complex and paradoxical relationship of the African-Americans with white literature and culture when Stanley's father orders for him a set of volumes of Shakespeare's complete works as a graduation gift. A group of uncouth local white bullies assault them while they are receiving the books at the shipping office and they mutilate the expensive books and urinate on them. Ironically, an educated black man tries to protect and defend a sacrosanct symbol of white culture

(Shakespeare's works) from a bunch of ignorant whites whose actions finally exorcise Shakespeare — the canonical literary figure. Stanley says that he has always made it a point to sign his full name — "how could they not realize that I was an American Negro?" an emphatic claim of identity (BC: 202) and assertion of his Americanness. The comic scene where father and son dressed in women's clothes take on the group of white bullies who have stripped them of their clothing would have been hilarious had it not been fraught with so much anger and emotion. Finally, Stanley's deliberate donning of women's attire and Eve's renaming him as "Miss Maple", his job as housekeeper-cum-night time bouncer at Eve's boarding house is again a resolution that is as unusual as it is eccentric. The near-comic, near-tragic element of Stanley Carver's story is like a blues lyric — the essence of it is jazz-like in its understanding that life is unfair, a "low-down dirty shame" (NA: 56) and that African-Americans are "dismembered" (NA: 57) everyday — yet there is possibility of rejuvenation and hope and yet another day they will rise.

Titled "The Wrap", the last chapter is like the wrap-up of a blues or jazz number. Even as the reader has been prepared to expect (hoping against hope), the wrap-up is not the "happy-ending" one would wish for, but the "happiest-ending" the narrator could think of under the circumstances. The essence of Jazz and Blues that tells the story of black American endurance, "heralding the human capacity to do more than merely survive, to create an individual self or voice that can maintain itself under pressure with style and equipoise, that can confront trouble and improvise ways of coping..." (NA:56) is found in the narrative of *Bailey's Cafe*. Like all blues-idiom music, Naylor's narrative proclaims the human will to "keep on keeping on" (*ibid*). Again structurally like Jazz, the narrative of *Bailey's Cafe* has its Vamp (or introductory statements in the second chapter titled "the Vamp", breaks (solos—the sagas of suffering of six individual women) riffs (repeated structural phrases—found in the stories of Esther and Mary), the narrator addressing the reader/audience to initiate a conversation wherein other voices mingle to tell the story — thus connecting the main theme to the secondary themes — enmeshing the individual stories to weave the kaleidoscopic pattern of a complex African-American experience in America.

The voice of the central narrator (the chorus) and the other voices (bridges) together build the structure of the narrative in the novel. The interplay of the different points of view — the characters who speak not only about themselves but also about the other characters — the call and response patterns — narrator to audience and back, narrator to character and back, character to character — offering the point of view of "others" — thus interlaces multiple perspectives that allow possibilities of multi-layered interpretations. So, Eve's boardinghouse is a "whorehouse convent" (BC: 116) to Jesse Bell, bordello to some, brothel to Sister Carrie and Sugarman and shelter to the devastated women she has rehabilitated. She herself is regarded as a pimp, brothel owner, whorehouse keeper, a protector and nurturer. Like all jazz and blues-infected black literature, the narrative in *Bailey's Cafe* expresses "the American joke" and, as Ellison puts it, the "real secret of life", which is to "make life swing" (NA: 57) — as Bailey, Gabe and Miss Maple (Stanley) do, celebrating the birth of Mariam's son, joining hands to whirl around in a jubilant dance to proclaim the joy of a new beginning and the blessing embodied in the birth of a child — the creation of a new life even as the mother commits suicide.

In the final count it can be said that the narrative in Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe* has been able to capture, much in the manner of black folk music, the cadences and voices of African America and represent the African American way of life in all its diversity and fullness. Naylor's choice of titles ("The Vamp", "The Jam", "Mood: Indigo", "Eve's Song", "Miss Maple's Blues" and "The Wrap"), the reference to the narrative as "music" and the extended use of the music metaphor and her adoption of the thematic, structural and stylistic forms of black folk music in the novel are the narrative strategies that have enabled her to achieve the desired authentic effect and evocative quality in her representation. She has also been able to refute traditional narrative

methods by using the blues-idiom and the technique of jazz music, which are a part of an exclusive and indigenous black culture as well as the integration of those cultural forms with a typically urban American experience — the soul of African-American experience in America--- to articulate the experiences of that marginalized group of people in America.

#### Notes

1. Insights from “The Politics of Location: Towards Plural Discourses in Literary Studies” by Professor P.C.Kar, p.5. Keynote Address delivered at a national seminar on Narrative Theory and Practice at Tezpur University, Tezpur.
2. These lines quoted from Dan Wakefield’s article from The New York Times Book Review, October 4, 1992 [published in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. et al., Amistad: New York. 1993. p.30] provided the idea for this paper.

\*The terms African-American, Negro and black have been used here interchangeably.

\*\*Bailey plays the role of the eye witness narrator in an empirical narrative and is, in other words, the intrusive, overt and homodiegetic narrator. The dramatized narrator Bailey’s “frame narrative” has

embedded within it several “meta narratives.” Naylor has achieved here a strategic blending of theme, plot, narration and space and has offered scope for decoding by the reader.

\*\*\*The jarring note of discord may be a kind of “alienation device” that intentionally breaks the spell of the narrative in order to foreground its moral complexities and jolt the engrossed reader from his uncritical reading of Mariam’s story simply as a horrifying saga of psychic and physical trauma and violation suffered by a young girl of fourteen.

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