

Recreating the Biblical Story: Vision to Free Black Women in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*

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Abstract

The United States has a strong Puritan heritage which influences the national agendas and mores. The Bible plays an important role in setting up the national culture. It is their sacred text which they follow strictly. As they are interested in showing their sacredness to others, they miss out on enjoying life. The Bible is not against enjoyment. People misuse the Bible and blame others for their unholy life. Gloria Naylor conflicts with such misreading and shows the broad ideas of the Bible. She in her novel *Bailey's Café* revises some of the biblical stories to show how the patriarchal society has formulated the religious book to suppress women. This article showcases how in bible the character Jezebel is cast to the dogs under the patriarchal power whereas Naylor recreates the story and gives a new life to Jesse under Eve's nurture.

Index Terms: Bible, black women, misuse, Jezebel, patriarchal.

Full Paper

Naylor revises the biblical story of Jezebel in her novel *Bailey's Café*. In order to maintain her husband's (Ahab) authority in the Old Testament and to satisfy his greed Jezebel arranged for the murder of Naboth: "But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up" (I King 21:25). The Lord's word came to Elijah that Ahab should be punished for being a party to the murder of Naboth, "And of Jezebel also spake the Lord, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel" (I Kings 21.23). It was from Elija's point of view that Jezebel was considered a wicked woman but Naylor changes the whole story.

Jesse is from the working class people from the docks. She is married into the king's family, who do not treat her as their equal. They work very hard in the sea to earn their living. The women in the docks are strong as they have to make home for such hardy men. Her mother is a brave woman. Whenever her brothers fight with her after drinking heavy liquor she shows them a big scar in her belly and tells them "I got this cause I wouldn't take no shit from a man; you think I'm gonna take it from a *boy*?" (BC 121). Immediately they will accept their mistake and apologize. This complete surrender is not because of pity but because of her power. All the men in the docks respect women.

Jesse cannot come out of the shock when she is married to the Kings. She has seen husbands beat their wives in the docks but it is different in the Kings family. She says that "there are worse things than hitting a woman. Like having your husband call you stupid and lazy in front of a whole roomful of people while you stand there and smile and smile and smile" (BC 121).

They spread rumors about her but still she stays there because she loves her husband. He does not care about others' words except those of Uncle Eli. Wilson remarks that "Uncle Eli King, the family patriarch, has been determined from its inception to destroy the relationship, because he believes that Jesse Bell is not worthy of the King name" (117). The ultimate patriarchal order which Uncle Eli establishes in the King's family is the same order which Elijah institutes in the Bible. She hates him to the core as she states: "I don't think he was anybody's uncle cause that woulda meant he had to be somebody's mother's

child. A woman wouldna birthed him. A woman woulda seen the hate in his eyes for us the minute he slipped out of her, and she woulda crushed his puny little head between her knees” (BC 123).

Her husband respected him and obeyed him. She cannot sort out the reason for his obedience. He is different from others in the family. He loves everything about a woman: “I mean, even little things like how I managed to get the seams in my stockings straight or how I penciled in the beauty mark over the right side of my lips” (BC 123).

She cooks very well but her cooking is a new thing to him: “I’m putting on the hog. Frying catfish. Washing and chopping collard greens. Baking biscuits. Smothering pork chops till they cried for mercy. Macaroni salad with *homemade* mayonnaise” (BC 123-124). But he cannot eat any. She figures out the reason one day when she prepares oxtail soup. When he asks what it is she is startled. She wonders how he “A colored man, brought up in Harlem... didn’t know what oxtail soup was?” She understands that “Uncle Eli never let the Kings eat like that. He called it slave food—that old Tom” (BC 124). “Uncle Eli even criticizes the soul food that Jesse Bell prepares for her family, referring to it as slave food. Ironically, many others in the king clan find Jesse Bell, her parties, and her food pleasing, often sneaking to Jesse Bell’s house to enjoy her home cooking, that is, until Uncle Eli learns of the betrayal and admonishes the culprits” (Wilson 117).

In southern food ways—the foods themselves, the methods of preparation, the rituals governing eating, the meanings assigned to each and every dish—can be found the unfolding story of the region. Food provides a rich resource for southern cultural expression, one deeply tapped and endlessly enriched by generations of southern writers. (Flora and Mackethan 279)

Even though the King was brought up in Harlem he does not understand the African values because he has been brought up by Uncle Eli according to White values. Jesse unwillingly attends many parties with her husband. In parties Uncle Eli addresses all the other wives of the King family as Mrs. Kings but he always address her as Jesse Bell. He does so in order to insult her but she feels proud to be called Bell. Uncle Eli treats white folks as his Gods. He directs his household according to the life style of the whites. He believes that it is the right way to uplift the family. But Jesse thinks, “To raise something, you gotta first see it as being low-down. And I didn’t see a damn thing wrong with being colored. And where did Uncle Eli want us to be lifted upto? Why, white folks” (BC 125). Most of the colored people at the top level treat their own culture as inferior. They try to change their culture to please the white. They even suppress the working class people with such values. Eugenia Collier comments on Paule Marshall’s Selina realizing the importance of African history in *Brown Girl*:

She begins with the illusion which distorts all except the very wise or the very lucky: that the white world is the real world and that our salvation lies in our being accepted by whites. Losing everything along the way, she progresses step by step into the realization pointed out by Dr. Du Bois nearly a century ago, that you cannot measure yourself by the tape of a people who are historically your enemy; that true selfhood begins with the acceptance of your own historical context—that is your community. (Evans 304)

But Uncle Eli has none of it.

Jesse gives birth to a son and hopes that they will accept her. She believes that her son will possess the brain of the Kings and the spirit of the Bells but Uncle Eli takes him away from her. He raises him as a King. The boy does not respect her and her people. When he gets a seat in Harvard University Uncle Eli invites her people to celebrate. She knows that his intention is to insult them in front of her son so she warns them about rain. But her people, who are bold enough to face any challenge, accept the invitation for the party. As it is a rainy day the King’s people stay under the striped tent. But her people brave the rain. She manages to get as many umbrellas as she can. They cannot make a fire. They drink the beer that they have brought and eat potatoes. She runs here and there to help them: “And the crowd under that striped tent looking out at ‘em like they were a bunch of trained monkeys from the circus. My husband told me I

shouldn't keep running out there with them in the rain; they were welcome under the tent. And I told him to go to hell. Couldn't he see what was going on?" (BC 130)

Her mother dies of pneumonia a week after the party. She blames Uncle Eli for her death but her husband says that as she has crossed ninety it is foolish to blame Uncle Eli for her death. When she has no respect in her own home she does not allow her husband to touch her and becomes a drug addict: "In spite of her power over her husband, Jesse loses him to the masculine traditions and ideas of Uncle Eli. Most of Eli's suggestions for how the family should operate are based on the power of money, whereas Jesse's are connected to family bonding" (Kelley 102).

Uncle Eli follows the white culture, which Jesse considers empty. She even knows the richness of the African culture. The American search for spirituality proves to be the superiority of the African culture. Felton and Loris opine on Charles Johnson's idea of cultural nationalism:

Culture Nationalism [presents] an apparently new American hunger for spirituality, moral values, breadth of vision, and a retreat from materialism in its more vulgar forms.... The political ground from which it springs is a sickened reaction against racism, individualism seen as selfishness and opportunism, American imperialist adventures after World War II, corruption in government and business, and the denial of black racial identity uncritically accepted by a few early proponents of integration. As such, the primary thrust of Cultural Nationalism is the reaffirmation of the hope of black men and women...that they can lead lives of deeper creativity and spirituality. (211)

Jezebel in the Bible is cast to the dogs under the patriarchal power whereas Naylor recreates the story and gives a new life to Jesse under Eve's nurture. Thus Naylor revives the Biblical stories from the Old and the New Testaments to devalue the western culture and in turn heal human pain through African cultural elements.

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