CHAPTER - III

THE MODERN MYTH: TONI CADE BAMBARA'S
THE SALT EATERS (1980)

Toni Cade Bambara, one of the major African American women novelists of the last quarter of the twentieth century bears a complex vision of life. Farah Jasmine Griffin (1996 :229) observes that Bambara was writer with "a social vision" who left us the legacy of social struggle and showed that writing can be both "beautiful" and "political". Griffin Comments:

Bambara left us a legacy of social vision and social struggle... legacy that writing can be both beautiful and political ... a legacy that insists upon the spiritual dimension of art and politics, a legacy in word and in deed... For the word is deed.

Bambara claims and acts upon the strength of people as individual and as communities. Bambara was "committed to the struggle in the world that are revealed in her writing. Farah Jasmine Griffin (ibid) further points out:

"She (Bambara) was committed to the struggles of the oppressed people throughout the world; though she conducted her cultural work in and for Black community. These struggles convinced her of the need of coalition between the people of color, as in (her novel The Salt Eaters 1980).

Bambara's mission in her novel/fiction/writing is to prove a legitimate way to participate in the empowerment of the community. In an
interview-article “Salvation Is The Issue” with Mari Evans, Bambara asserts:

Writing is a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me (Mari Evans 1984:42)

In an interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall Bambara also points her same “commitment is to use writing as a tool to get in touch with the self.” (Roseann P. Bell 1979:231) She uses writing not only as a means of transformation in the society but to explore the human self and psyche.

As a self described nationalist-feminist-socialist, Bambara, as Elliott Butler-Evans (1989:10) argues Bambara reviews her works in triple modes of domination: racism, which she argues, allows whites to define and determine the existence of Blacks, and patriarchal oppression, through which all males exercise hegemonic privileges in their relationship with women, and the placing of women at the lowest rung of society. For Bambara the struggle against racism is embodied in a battle of “truth”, a truth that stands in opposition to the interpretation and representation in the discourses of whites. “Bambara elucidates this position in her two interviews. In an interview article “Salvation Is The Issue” with Mari Evans, Bambara comments:

One we are at war. Two, the natural response to oppression ignorance, and mystification is wide awake resistance. Three, the natural response to stress and crisis is not breakdown
and capitulation but transformation and renewal to. The question I raise from *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) to *Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977) to *The Salt Eaters* (1980) to *Faith of the Bathier* is, is it natural (sane, healthy, wholesome, in our interest) to violate the contracts/covenants we have with our ancestors each other, our children, our selves, and God? (ibid.:47)

For Bambara “salvation is the issue” and that is why she confesses that “I produce stories that save our lives”, (ibid.:41). Writing thus for her functions to redeem people from the evil, darkness of ignorance.

She again proclaims the same motto of her writing in her interview with Claudia Tate. Bambara declares:

> We are at war, and that war is not simply a hot debate between the capitalist camp and the socialist camp over which economic/political/social arrangement will have hegemony in the world. It is not just a battle over turf and who has the right to utilize the resources for whomsoever’s benefit. The war is also being fought over the truth: What is truth about human nature, about human potential? My responsibility to myself, my neighbors, my family and the human family is to try to tell the truth. That ain’t easy. There are so few truth speaking traditions in this society in which the myth of “Western Civilization has the allegiance of so many. We have recently been encouraged and equipped to appreciate the fact that truth works; that it releases the Spirit and that it is a joyous thing. (Claudia Tate 1983:17)
In the same interview Bambara further argues that literature has the “potency for social transformation” and so she portrays the “truth about people lives” in her works. Bambara comments:

I do not think that literature is the primary instrument for social transformation, but I do think it has potency. So I work to tell the truth about people’s lives: I work to celebrate struggle, to applaud, the tradition of struggle in our community, to bring to center-stage all those characters ... (ibid:18).

This “celebration of people’s struggles” is seen in most of her stories and the novel.

The battle for “truth” that Bambara would wage against racism is echoed in her struggle against sexism. In *Black Women* (1970:8), her edited collection of black feminist essays, poems and short stories and the first publication of its kind, Bambara comments that in psychology, natural science, literature, the research strategies perpetuated the subjugation of Black women. She observes about the oppression of Black Women:

When the experts (White or Black male) turn their attention to the Black Woman, their reports get murky, for they usually clump the men and woman together and focus so heavily on white people have done to the psyches of Blacks, that what Blacks have done to and fro themselves is overlooked, and what distinguishes the men from women forgotten.

Bambara advocates a radical restructuring of male-female relationships, proposing the rejection of masculine and feminine roles and the
construction of a selfhood/Blackhood that displaces gender differentiation, thereby enabling the "Black community to move in unison against racist oppression". With this objective in mind, Bambara (ibid.:101) further comments:

I have always opposed the stereotypic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine" because I always found that either or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about and what all revolution for self is all about. I am beginning to see... the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles as obstacles to political consciousness that the way those terms are generally defined and acted up to in this part of the world is a hindrance to development.

Bambara's is thus a Black nationalist discourse. Through her entire writing and the fiction particularly, Bambara explores how African American women have been caught in the synergetic[triple jeopardy of race, gender and class, the recurrent theme of entire African American women's writing.

Bambara Christian (1986:179-180) comments that the novels of mid-1970s and early-1980s, the novels of the “second phase” portray the heroines as “Socio-Political actors” in the world. Their stance is “radical” and “rebellious”. It is a “visionary leap” of the fiction and a “rebellious act”, and a “revolt on the part of African American women novelists”.

Velma Henry, a civil rights activist and a computer analyst at a transchemical plant, crazily attempts double suicide by slitting open the veins of her wrists and even if that is not sufficient by thrusting her head in a gas oven, but survives and resurrects in the end with the healing by Minnie Ransom, “a fabled faith healer of the district”. (4) *The Salt Eaters* (1980) has an “epic” vista between these two poles.

While she was sitting in the process of completing the novel, Bambara voiced her central concern in writing this novel:

I gave myself an assignment based on the observation: there’s a split between the spiritual, psychic and political forces in my community. Not since the maroon experience of Toussaint’s (17431?-1803) (a Black liberator of Haiti) era have the psychic technicians and spiritual folk (medicine people) and guerillas (warriors) merged. It is a wasteful and dangerous split. The novel grew out of my attempt to fuse the seemingly separate frames of references of the camps. It grew out of an interest in identifying bridges; it grew out of a compulsion to understand how the energies of this period will manifest themselves in the next decade. (Elliott Butler -Evans: 1989:174-5)
The novel springs from this urge to unite these two forces. The modern and ancient modes of healing and brought together in the novel.

Bambara again voices the same concern in an interview with Claudia Tate:

Several of us had been engaged in trying to organize various sectors of the community-students, writers, psychic adepts etc and I was struck by the fact that our activists or warriors and over adepts or medicine people don’t even talk to each other. Those two camps have yet to learn-not since the days of Toussaint L’Ouverture (17432?-1803) anyway, since the days of the maroon communities. I suspect to appreciate each other’s visions, each other’s potential, each other language. The novel then came out of a problem solving impulse-what would it take to bridge the gap-to merge those frames of reference to fuse those camps? (Claudia Tate 1983:15-16)

W. Maurice Shipley (1982-27) is of the opinion that The Salt Eaters is a serious novel interwoven of many subjects. Shipley comments:

\[\sqrt{\text{In The Salt Eaters, Bambara has interwoven mythmaking, psychological and sociological drama, literary and factual history with political and philosophical realities.}}\]

The Salt Eaters is a long, intricately written, trickily structured, full of learning, “heavy” with wisdom altogether, what critics mean by a “large” book. And so Gloria T. Hull argues that The Salt Eaters is a book that that one must read. She elaborates the novel’s structure and places it within the tradition of canonized texts of
African American literature. She argues about the significance of the novel:

It is daringly brilliant work which accomplishes even better for the 1980s what Native Son did for the 1940s, Invisible Man for the 1950s or Song of Solomon for the 1970s. It fixes our present and challenges a way to the future. Reading it deeply should result in personal transformation, teaching it can be a political act. (Barbara Smith 1983:124)

Gloria T. Hull thus establishes the novel in the canon of African American fiction. Hull further maps the vista of the subject the novel encompasses in these words:

The Salt Eaters is such a ‘heavy’ book with its universal scope ... ancient and modern history, world literature, anthropology, mythology, music, astronomy, physics and biology, mathematics, medicine, political theory, philosophy and engineering. Allusions to everything from space-age technology through Persian folklore to black American blues comfortably jostle each other (Pryse & Spillers 1985:226).

One cannot afford to neglect such ‘serious’ piece of work that enriches our lives. Russell Sandi (1992-175) labels The Salt Eaters a “difficult novel” as it is comprised of a many voices from the present as well as the “past” that intersect and interrupt one another and make this a work of “high complexity”.

The Salt Eaters a novel Melisa Walker (1991:182) calls “epic” in scope is divided into twelve chapters. A relatively short novel of less than
three hundred pages long, there are seventy five named characters most are identified by their vocation or social roles; artist, politician, trade unionist, bus driver, journalists, engineers, musicians, doctors, activist, teachers as well as a masseur, a dance instructor and jewellery maker. Indeed, the novel typically reveals the characters public roles before their private ones. The novel takes place in an imaginary town Claybourne in Georgia. The novel opens with Minnie Ransom’s appeal to Velma, “Are you sure, sweetheart that you want to be well?” The same appeal is repeated persistently to the end of the novel to invoke Velmas to wholeness, health till she resurrects in the end. The opening of the novel takes us to the point where Velma Henry, after her double attempts of suicide is brought to the Southwest Community Infirmary for healing by Minnie Ransom, “a fabled faith healer of the district.” The actual ‘healing’ process lasts less than two hours but the post modernist techniques of disconnected and fragmented flash-back and ‘flash-forwards’ and collages used in make it more complex. The novel thus runs from present to past and past to present again. This weaving of past-present-and future makes the book beautiful. As Velma perches on the white stool in the healing room of the Infirmary, Minnie’s question sets her on the train of past memories in her life-her life as a civil rights activist,-sexism in the movement, forming a different group by women called ‘Women of Action,’ participation in the group of ‘Seven Sisters’, her involvement in the ‘Academy of 7 Arts’ with James Lee Henry, Obie, her husband; and
she a computer analyst at the Transchemical. Her personal life with Obie, her mother Mama Mae, her Godmother M'Dear Sophie Heywood. Not only that Velma but other characters also recall their past or set on the past journeys of their lives and Bambara intricately weaves, interconnects all the threads delicately and beautifully.

But as Velma, the protagonist is a black Civil Rights activist in the late 1970s, the actions of the novel take place in 1978 the Bicentennial year when Dr. Julius Meadows has just turned down the part of Crispus Attucks (the ex-slave who is the hero of the American Revolution) in a pageant after learning that his light skin he will have to play the role in blackface. The main thrust of the novel is to chart the denouement of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s that was at its peak in the 1960s. Thus the splintered black Civil Rights Movement is the main canvas of the novel. Susan Willis (1987:129) defines that the novel attempts to link “black activism” to social and political situation. Willis comments:

Toni Cade Bambara’s novel *The Salt Eaters* represents the attempt to link the spirit of black activism generated during the sixties to the very different political and social situation defined by the eighties.

The central issues on which the entire novel is built include issues of gender and sexism. Elliott Butler-Evans (1981-181) argues that Velma attempts suicide because of her discord with Obie, her husband and her disappointment as an activist. Butler-Evans comments:
Confronted with the demands and contradictions of the movement into public arena and the discord in her marriage to Obie at the personal level, Velma is driven to madness and attempted suicide... Velma’s attempted suicide can be red as an act of rebellion against the injustices experienced by her, and other women.

Perched on a stool before Minnie Ransom, Velma listens her appeals, but her mind takes her on to the journey of the events that led her to this disastrous event.

Velma recalls the private, personal and public worlds that overlap in her memories: the day she was baptized, an emotional encounter with her husband. She recalls her falling in love with Obie and their courtship. She recalls how she had a worn the kind of blouse to bring James Lee Henry, called Obie now under her spell.

She recalls Obie making a sport of appeal, a reconciliation of some sort. In the issue of race, gender and class, the elements predominating the novel, the key issues of gender and sexism lie in the strained husband-wife relations between Obie and Velma that led her to suicidal attempts. Obie’s following remarks throw sufficient light on their relations. Velma has the memories of what Obie says:

“Let me help you, Velma whatever it is we... what ever we’re at now ... I can help you break that habit... Learn to let go of past pain... like you got me to stop smoking ...” (22)

He (Obie) was making an appeal; a reconciliation some sort, conditions, limits and agenda, help. Something about emotional caring or daring.
James Lee could be tiresome in these moods. Her memories of Obie’s appeal continues:

“It takes something out of you, Velma, to keep all those dead moments alive. Why can’t you just ... Forget ... forgive ... and always it’s some situation that was over and done with ten, fifteen years ago. But here you are still all fired up to your jaws in ancient shit” (22).

Velma points that (She and Obie) are different people, that their natures are different, they don’t match and it causes clashes between them. She answers Obie:

“We’re different people, James, Obie. Somebody shit all over you, you forgive and forget. You start talking about we’re all damaged and colonialism and the underdeveloped blah blah. That’s why everybody walks all over you” (23).

Obie comments that Velma is the only person to try to walk over him. To this Velma retorts “That is why I just can’t stay with you. I don’t respect.” But now Obie is afraid of Velma as usual because he thinks, “... Anytime you are not in absolute control, you panic” (23). She recalls how Obie again asks her to forget the past. He says “Can’t we, Vee? Push all that past aside dump all of it.” (25) His hands were churning the air and the spiach thread was wiggling. And he urged, “Create vacuum for good things to rush in. Good things.” (25)

In the family and married life Velma is not treated equally and properly by Obie. The chasm opens at home. Velma is not only a wife,
a mother but a staunch civil rights activist and a computer analyst. Her experiences in these fields also reveal gender oppression and sexism. In husband wife relations she suffers at the hands of Obie, and as an activist it is by the male colleagues. A part of this activist life she works in the Academy of 7 Arts, run by Obie. The rift and chasm at the Academy, the change there is one of the factors in tense family relations.

*The Salt Eaters* views racial conflict from a different angle. Velma’s construction of the past raises issues about male participation and performance in liberation struggles and places male and female difference in liberation struggles in the foreground. As an activist Velma recalls the experiences with other male activists. But here also she finds rampant sexism and gender inequality. A devoted activist “who trudged through the dust, through rain, through mud. She remembers an incident when Marcus Hampden a trade Unionist was ‘imported’ to deliver a lecture before their group of activists women activists are seriously listening to him, taking down the notes, but we have contrasting picture of what male activists are doing during the speech. It presents the lack of concern on the part of male activists.

When Hampden fiddled, next to her, fiddled with the zipper on his cordovan boots while Velma, distracted, was remembering some absurdly shiny boots back in the days of marching.

Her memories criss-cross with each other. She again listens to women activists raising issues. Women campaigned together when
men vacationed on Jekyll Island. They raised money for South Africa add, composed it, gathered up the signatures and the money replaced it and absorbed the backlash. They never got reimbursed for toll calls, postage or gas. The women activists trudged the dust, through the rain, through mud, while the male activist walk the corridors of the hotel in the Chinese pajamas.

The narrative strategy is particularly effective in the juxtaposition of two images when Velma invokes her past to recall her involvement in political activism. Even basic amenities are not available to women activists. Velma rubbed her forehead, leaned back her chair and recalled:

It had been a Gulf Station of course she remembered that, the boycott had been still in effect and she’d felt funny going in there, even if it was just to use the bathroom (as she was menstruating) and a nasty bathroom with no stall doors, and in a Gulf Station too, to all the outrage. She’d been reeking of wasted blood and rage. (34)

The dedicated services of the women activists on one hand and the philander male leaders including Obie on the other hand, having nothing to do with the movement. What a contrast! Velma remembers:

Exhausted she was squinting though the dust and grit of her lashes when the limousines pulled up, eye stinging shiny, black, sleek and the door opened and the cool, blue of the air conditioned interior billowed out into the yellow and rusted evening. Her throat was splintered wood. Then the shiny black boots
stepping onto the parched grass, the knife creased pants, the jacket hanging straight, the blinding white shirt, the sky blue tie. And the roar went up... Flanked by the coal black-men in shiny sunglasses and silk and steel suits he made toward the platform.(35)

Juxtaposed is Velma’s picture is pains. She carried in search of toilet, some water to wash up, a place before to dump her bag before her bag broke or her shoulder was permanently pulled from the socket. And rounding a bend the dulcet tones of the speaker roaring out overhead. She thought of him:

Some leader, he looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcom’s dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but she’d never heard him say anything useful or offensive. But what a voice.... and the people had bought him. What disaster. But what a voice. he rolled out his r’s like the quality good yard goods he’d once had to yank from the bolts of cloth in his father’s store in Brunswick Georgia, till the day an anthropologist walked in with tape record and camera doing some work on Jekyll Island Blacks and would he be so kind as to answer a few questions about the lore and legends of the island folks, and “discovered him and launched him prominence. “Leader Sheet.” (35-36)

It is irony of movement to have such leaders and followers but contrasted is Velma’s dilemma:

And no soap. No towels. No tissue. No machine. Just a spurt then a trickle of rusty water in the clogged sink then no water at all.
And like a cat she'd to lick herself clean of grit, salt, blood and rage. (36)

And Velma recalls how she'd purchased the cowerie-shell bracelets for her artist sister, Palma who is painter, less as momento more as a criticism. Bought the cowerie shells to shame her for she should have been on the march, had no right to the cool solitude of her studio painting pictures of sailboats while sisters were being raped and workers shot and children terrorized.

Velma remembers Ruby a co-activist pouring her anger. Women activists do all the work, make coffee, sell a programme, but everybody is paid for a work except the women. There's no grant for them and women have witnessed that men are only drinking at bars and doing nothing when women book a hotel for a conference, women caucus, vote, lay out the resolution, build a union, a guild and organization. Velma comments:

You all continue lollygagging at Del Giorgios renting limousines and pussyfooting around town profiling in your three piece suits and imported pajamas while the people sweat it out through hard times. (37)

The heated discussion takes her on a flashback within a flashback. She has memories another incident of how men activists including Obie are philanderers. Women activists had camped somewhere and the incessant rains had delinked them from other activists. Everything, everybody was caked with red mud, it was like ancient mud mothers. The tents were collapsing, the bed rolls mildewed. The portable toilets
had long since not worked. The children on errands in indescribable
clothes and barefoot. Worms too. Many running down with fevers.
One doctor making rounds, stumbling with sleeplessness and
impotence. Velma goes to the hotel for help in pitiable condition.

Her shoes dangling around her neck... she’d
hitched but mostly walked, keeping her eyes
strictly off her swollen feet. Gone up to the
hotel to make some calls find another doctor,
locate the support group, to bring food and
aspirin, phone in the press notices. Try to
locate James’s group that had gone to meet up
with King in D.C.
She was hanging on to the counter with both
hands, nails splitting, hands swollen the phone
to heavy to consider handling.... She could
barely stand up. (38)

In such a traumatic condition she hears the easy laughers. It was a
familiar voice. On the dulcet tones. And she looked into the mirror, the
speaker and his cronies and women, those women, coming down the
corridor to her great shock and dismay Velma finds Obie and his
friends, the male activist with other women in the hotel, when Obie has
told her to be going to D.C. to see King. Obie a philanderer! Velma
couldn’t believe it. This is one of the reasons in the personal life that
makes Velma crazy to commit suicide.

The heated caucus again brings the scene in the hotel before
Velma’s eyes. She was too shocked to believe and stand:

Her legs trembling with fatigue, her nose
stopped up, her skin caked with mud, her face,
her hair dusted with insect wings and pollen.
Hanging by her nails her backbone on fire, her bowels boiling (and in the mirror she saw) man laughing with women... and the man who could be leader... Any minute she'd be a heap on the floor, a puddle of red mud on the carpet. (39-40)

But somebody (Obie) holds her and consoles: Velma, Aw baby don't get angry about things over and done with.” (41)

Elliott Butler-Evans (1989-279) comments that Bambara's putting these two images of male and female activists and leaders in the Civil Rights Movement “demythologizes” the male figures and shows Velma “heroic”. He observes:

The juxtaposition of two images not only demythologizes the male figures but shows Velma to be heroic and the person with the political commitment. The male body is presented as an aggregate of signifiers and suggests superficiality rather the substance.

Obie thinks that the chasms were beginning in his life of an activist and in his personal life he wanted wholeness again. Obie muses that things are not same at the Academy of Seven Arts where the programmes bases on Civil Rights Movement are implemented. He ponders:

It was starting up again, the factions, the intrigue. A reply of all the old ideological splits... Camps were forming to tear the Academy apart. He should make rounds somewhere in the building.... The sly gathering was afoot, no doubt. And tomorrow the polarities would have sharpened, the splits widened. He sat staring at the cement floor as if for cracks. He wanted wholeness against.
Everybody at the Academy was asking “What ever happened to third world solidarity?” (90)

But the violent activists have created the chasm further at the Academy. Arms were found hidden at the Academy which caused severe criticism and Obie couldn’t act quickly:

But then the hotheads had brought the guns into the place and the splits widened and Obie had not moved quickly enough been forceful enough was overcome with ambivalence. “Have to be whole to see whole,” Mrs. Haywood had counseled them. H’d tried to stay on top of all diverse plans and keep the groups with the Academy. A deep rift had been developing for centuries. (92)

Obie realises Velma’s significance and value at the Academy and home in peacekeeping process. She was vital and important there too. He thinks:

... He was probably exaggerating but things had seemed more pulled together when Velma had been there, in the house and at the academy. Not that her talents ran in peacemaking vein. But there’d been fewer opportunities for splintering wither around, popping up anywhere at any time to raise a question, audit a class, monitor a meeting, confront or cooperate. It was all of a piece Velma around. (92)

They were the key people: ‘Jan, who ran the ceramics and sculpture division’ Jan and Ruby coordinated the newsletter staff. Bertha ran the nutrition programme. But Velma is multifaceted. Obie recalls:
Velma had run the office, done the books, handled payroll, supervised the office staff and saw to it that they were not overlooked as resource people for seminars, conferences and trips, wrote the major proposals and did most of the fundraising. It took him, Jan Marcus (when he was in town). Daisy Moultrie and her mother (when they could afford to pay them), treasurer of the board, and two student interns to replace Velma at the Academy. (93)

Obie thinks that the fissures at home had ‘yawned’ wide, something “fine” had dropped through or perhaps he could not recognize Velma when people whispered and called her “a crackpot.” (94) Obie simply could not believe Velma to be crazy and mad that would lead her to suicide. He thinks that Velma’s miscarriage had affected her negatively. But it was sure that he couldn’t know her as a women after such a long time:

Or may be the cracking had begun years earlier when the womb had bled, when the walls had dropped away and the baby was flushed out. How long would it take to know the women, his woman? (94)

Obie is of the opinion that Velma “couldn’t relax” so he’d grown “afraid of her.” (162)

Suddenly there is thunder and rain and Velma remembers her heated argument with Obie the other day. She asks him to be true to each other. Velma points out his being a philanderer Obie’s argument is that she comes home drained as she gives the best of herself away.
Velma “throws away” the best of herself to the community- that is what Obie says. He says he also works for the community, but he likes their son and he objects to her taking a new job of computer analyst at the transchemical. Velma comments on his remarks that his objection to her fatigue and job are not worthwhile because when he is sleeping around indiscreetly what example can he put before his younger brother, and still she has trusted his words. He objects to her new job. Obie retreated but she didn’t trust him.

Elliott Butler- Evans (1989’174) comments the argument that Velma’s disintegration is generated by personal failure rejects some of the major ideological representations of the novel. The difficulties that Velma (and other women) experience with male dominance, the disjuncture between the might of Black cultural nationalism and its efficacy as a political tool, and the tenuous grounds on which “the Black community is constructed go unnoted.

In a long interior monologue “I might have died”. “She might have died” reflects on how she might have been died:

“I might have died.” She said aloud and shuddered. And it was totally unbelievable but that she might be anywhere but there. She tried to look around, to take in the healer the people circling her, the onlookers behind.(267) She might have died. Might have been struck by lightening where she sat. But then she might have died as an infant gasping but for M’Dear Sophie’s holding hands. (271)
Velma's question is a question of "identity" and "freedom". In a society based on gender oppression and sexism, she has lost both of them. Keith E. Byerman (1985:123) puts these views succinctly when he observes:

*The Salt Eaters* like Bambara's previous works, concerns a women on a quest for identity and freedom... disintegration is the primary concern of Bambara's only novel, as the black community, the main character and the Book's structure are all decentered. The principal action takes place in a clinic room where Velma Henry, a political activist who has attempted suicide, is being treated by Minnie Ransom, a root worker. The cause of Velma's actions seems to be her inability to deal with the conflicting demands of black community. Groups committed to feminism, ecology, political activism revolution, black capitalism, revolution, voodoo, and cynicism threaten her (Velma's) sense of self because she believes in achieving selfhood through work in the community.

Like Velma the protagonist the entire caravan of characters, major and minor, go on the train of memories. Sometimes their memories have independent tracks but as some of the characters are related with each others, their memories also crisscross with the memories of others, Obie, Minnie Ransom, Old Wife, Sophie Heywood, Palma, Ruby, Jan, Dr. Julius Meadows, Fred Holt, his friend Porter, Campbell are the major characters, Lil James, Mama Me, Roland, Doc Serge and others are the minor characters.
Many of the characters are struggling with conflicts of public and private life: most are identified by their vocation or roles. Many of the characters are little more than a name and vocation, for example, Velma is a computer analyst who may be sabotaging the data of the transchemical corporation that is polluting the neighbourhood; her husband is sleeping around, she feels alienated from her son.

Ruby and Jan the fellow activists talk of how Velma is incorporating another issue in movement and thereby broadening it. Ruby says Women for Action’ is taking on entirely too much:

Drugs, prisons, alcohol, the schools, rape, battered women, abused children. And Velma’s talked the group into tackling the nuclear power issue. And the Brotherhood ain’t doing shit about doing organizing.” (199)

It was Mrs. Sophie Heywood who said, “keep the focus on the action, not on the institution, don’t confuse the vehicle with the objective, all concerns are temporary and disappear.” (199)

Ruby and Jan like other activists are worried about the future of the movement because:

Malcom gone, King gone, Fannie Lou gone,
Angela quit. The movement splintered,
enclaves unconnected. (193)

They have heard that Velma is now working at the Transchemical as a computer analyst.

Fred Holt, the bus driver is driving the bus and carrying the women’s troupe called Seven Sisters or Women for Action’ among other
passengers. He has marital problem and is afraid of losing his job. He is grieving for Porter a friend who was murdered. Fred Holt is driving a bus whose passengers include activists, planning to join other in the café and in the carnival celebration that is about to begin. But for Fred Holt the driver, the past relentlessly intrudes on the present. Among the passengers are seven young women, antinuclear activists returning from a demonstration. While eavesdropping on the women’s talk about Bakke, Carter, the KKK, and International Women’s Day, Fred Holt begins to think of his friend “race man” doomed by his exposure to atomic blasts in 1955 but murdered by a crazy woman with knitting needles. Fred Holt, remembers:

But whatever they talked about Porter always managed to bring it round to Yucca Flats, 1955, atomic blasts, no compensation. The man was hunted and now he was gone. (82)

Fred’s memories of Porter alternate with through of his childhood, his marriage and the world around him. When he sees the “old men in tatters” he thinks “it could be the Depression again and fears, unemployment, and of return to poverty. Fred’s musings alternate with those of his passengers, who drift into thoughts about their own personal and public parts.

Fred reads on the front to T. shirt of the activists: ‘Seven Sisters ‘Academy of 7 Arts’ all the activists are in bossy T. shirt reading ‘No Nukes’ it would have meant staring the unbridled bosoms to read it
all ...he was old fashioned as his on son said, only that wasn’t the term his son had used. He’s worried about his job. He thinks he’d have to do something about his grey... hair... For years they hadn’t hired colored guys. Now, just he was getting some seniority they were taking about early retirement. He again remembers Porter and their conversation:

When he sees the old man in tatters, it reminds him of Depression, a heartbreaking scene. The memories of Depression make Fred depressed and sad. They reveal the humanitarian approach of his family to share food with the poorer and make Porter sensitive to the suffering of other. The women activists in the bus talk of the job in nuclear plants raised after the World War II. But exposure to nuclear energy is carcinogenic and many newspapers which they are reading are carrying such news items the news of the effect of radiation on workers, second a suit against a chemical plant by workers who’d left years ago and were dying of cancer. They further discuss information about the Transchemical is being collected as to the condition of the plant, its effects on our lungs etc, and Fred is worried that they are going to dump him before pension time. He again thinks how he wanted to be a musician. He thinks Porter was unfortunately dead.

The all pervasive canvas of the novel unfolds by including ecology in the Civil Rights Movement. The disaster of nuclear radioactive energy causing lethal effect on human life is symbolized by
Transchemical at Claybourne and the issue is included in the Civil Rights Movement by the protagonist, Velma Henry, who is computer analyst at the plant and is perhaps hijacking the data there. Similarly through Fred Holt and his memories of his friend Porter who died of getting exposed to radioactive rays, we realize the intensity of atomic blasts and exposure of human beings to it. Fred muses over it;

> And some asshole experts releases radioactive fumes in the air and wipes you out in the chair. Porter used to say we are dying from overexposure to some kind of wasting shit the radioactive crap, asbestos particles... (79)

He regrets that he’d not invited Porter ‘race man’ for supper for all the time of their friendship. Fred had to bribe a doctor to get his papers through and get the job with the bus company. Some kind of wasting disease was eating him up. Yucca Flats, 1955, atomic test. Fred has many more memories of Porter:

> Porter, so neat. So well read, so unfull of shit. One of the few guys around who could talk about something other then pussy, poker, pool and TV had wanted to be a newspaper reporter, go all over the world go to Africa and so what that was like. They used to sit on them stools in the Pit stop like truck drivers with their knees out the talk about Africa.... And they’d talk about family, Fred’s in New York, Porter’s wife and kids in Canada. (81)

Dr. Julius Meadows who has come to observe Velma’s treatment wanders in the Claybourne spring festival, Mardi Gras. He overhears
politically charged talk and a griot appealing for transformation. The
griot the tall man in bow, urging clear over the heads of the crowd:

History is calling us to rule again and you lost
dead souls are standing around doing the
freakie dickie. (126)

And adjusting his pace to each beat in the traffic people scurrying or
dawdling or bumping into each other, dreaming along the pavement
the griot resumes his talk:

"...never recognizing the teachers come
among you to prepare you for the
transformation, never recognizing the
synthesizers come to forge new alliances, or
the guide who throw open he new footpaths,
or the messengers come to end all the excuses.
Dreamer? The dream is real, my friends. The
failure to make out is the unreality." (126)

Meadows was out of earshot but the words still resonated. His city and
country mind drew together to ponder it all. Suddenly Dr. Julius
Medows is assaulted by memories of the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Meadow's medicinal schedule is so busy that he has no time to
spare for other social, political activities like Civil Rights Movements.
He realises that this contribution to the movement is negligible. The
carnival did strange things to people evidently. He remembers that just
before a year he'd been asked to participate in a Bicentennial pageant.
He was to play the role of Crispus Attucks. He thought it a good part.
He was flattered. He had got a number of history books to collect
information about his role and to make it effective. He was ready but he declined to do it when he was asked to play it in blackface as his skin was light.

Dr. Julius meadows is watching Velma’s treatment by Minnie, leaning against the deck, playing with the buttons of the stereo and what she sees is amazing:

that the right hand of the healer women was own its own that she had gone off somewhere and left it absent minded behind on the patient’s shoulder. And it seemed that the patient was elsewhere as well. So like the catatonics he’d observed in psychiatric. The essential self gone off, the shell left behind. Dr. Meadows ran a hand through his hair and it cracked as though there wee a storm brewing outside the window, he gazed out wondering where the catatonia was, if it might be in the woods behind the infirmary, wondered if the two women had arranged a secret rendezvous in the hills and if going there he would find them both transformed, the older woman is full of lotus under a blanket like the weathered photos his roommate had brought back from India. The younger a laurel bush, as in some legend, blooming in some pieces. Somewhere in storybook memory. (57)

Dr. Meadows witness the miracle of healing by the fabled healer of the district and he is stunned.

Meadows acknowledges how limited his contribution of the movement had been. While others were marching and risking their lives, he had written checks.
Campbell is the waiter journalist presiding over the multi-ethnic crowd of engineers, writers, activists, and artist at the local trendy café.

Doc Serge, who runs the Southwest Community Infirmary is former gangster and pimp how now calls himself a Doc. Administrator or no, he is always dressed like, a first class "gangster" in a foreign film.

Elliott Butler-Evans (1989: 178) analyses the racial aspect of the novel in portraying the male and female participation in liberation struggles. He observes:

_The Salt Eaters_ views racial conflict from different angles. The reconstruction of the past raises issues about male participation and performance in liberation struggles and places the female differences in the foreground.

The faith healer/root worker Minnie Ransom is equally important character like the protagonist, Velma Henry. Minnie adds not only to feminist dimension of the novel but also the cultural and political aspect of the novel too. Elliott Butler-Evans (1989:182) following remarks underline this statement:

The novel's feminist discourse is further developed through the depiction of Minnie Ransom, 'the fabled faith healer' of the district. Even her mode of attire-the dress made of kenti cloth, gelee, a specifically African headwear popular among Black women who identify with cultural nationalism semiotically addresses her cultural and political significance.
The novel opens with Minnie’s appeal to Velma who has committed suicide and brought for healing to Minnie at the Infirmary, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” Minnie sat before Velma humming lazily up and down the seats dropping her silky shawl, handling it as though it were a cape she’d swirl any minute over Velma’s head in “wife out Veronica, or as though it we a bath towel she was drying her back with in the privacy of her bathroom. Her description in the novel is quite in the vivid colours:

Minnie Ransom herself the fabled healer of the district, her bright-red flouncy dress drawn in at the waist with two different strips of kenti cloth, up to her elbows in a fringe of the shawl shimmering at her armpits. Her head, wrapped in some juicy hot pink gelee, was tucked way backing into her neck, her eyes peering down her nose at Velma as though old tiny spectacles perched there were slipping down. (3-4)

Minnie Ransom’s unique attire representing Black cultural nationalism in further described:

Miss Ransom in her flouncy dress and hip shoes with flowers peaking out of her turban and smelling like coconut Afrospray. (113)

Trudier Harris (2001:79) assesses Minnie as a “new, breed of strong, black women characters”, as she is “equally important” to the narrative. The character of Minnie’s strengthens the thesis of “strong, black, womanhood” of this dissertation that the very spirit of black
womanhood is strong like Minnie and not fragile. She herself being strong, ransoms and saves Velma from the throes of death and makes her aware that not committing suicide but facing life bravely and spending if for the people of the community is real life. Actually Velma also belongs to what Trudier Harris calls the “new breed of strong black character”, but she is a bit shaken and that is why she attempts suicide. But later on she survives the double attempts of suicide with the infusion of life force in her by Minnie and she resurrects in the end and knows that her life is not only her own but it belongs to the community in which she lives.

Minnie and Velma, the two major and Ruby, Jan and other minor women characters who pave the tradition of strong black womanhood like the other black women characters, in the other novels studied here (in this dissertation) are equally forceful and strong.

Minnie is a ‘savior’ and spiritual healer she ‘ransoms’ or saves Velma Henry’s spiritual well being. Trudier Harris (2001:80) comments:

Bambara quickly sets Minnie a part, not her legendary healing abilities, and places her in a range of powers that exceeds Western rationalism, for it is in the context of broader range of cultural bases that Velma’s healing will take place.

She is described as “legendary spinster” and an “Ole swamphag” (4). She is more than a witch. Her life has still been one of service to others. She has not been married and does not have children. Her extranatural

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abilities have given her the power to heal. She specifically becomes "mother" to Velma during the healing process. She uses African-American, African, and West Indian practices. Minnie's transformation, the unfolding of her gift of healing, had provided several occasions for her family and neighbours to be concerned.

Velma thinks whether Minnie was trying to hypnotize her? Minnie is the legendary spinster of Claybourne. Velma could see herself: hair matted and dusty, bandages unraveled and curled at the foot of the stool like a sleeping snake, the hospital gown huge in front, but tied up too tight in back. And Minnie Ransom perched on her stool actually waiting or answer. Minnie brings the fact to Velma's notice that here is no sense in wasting each other's time. It needed a lot of weight to be well. Velma's things when she is in Minnie's hands at the infirmary anything could happen. She could roll off the stool like a ball of wax and melt right through the floor or sail out of window, stool and all, and become some new kind of UFO. Anything could happen.

Minnie tells Velma that folks came to her in the infirmary "moaning and carrying on and say they wanna be well" and "healed"(9). The infirmary staff and other onlookers have opposite opinions about the healing. Some have total disbelief. But the others who believe in Minnie's miracle are also worried:

Others, who had witnessed the miracle of Minnie Ransom's laying on hands over the years were worried. It wasn't like her to be talking on and on taking so long a time to get started (9).
Doc Serge thinks that the whole day’s programme is disturbed. The other infirmary staff members are making cash bets with the patients and the various passers by that the healing session would take no more than five or ten minutes. Minnie’s spirit guide, the Old Woman is to help, direct her in healing. Doc Serge strolled out, various and sundry folk strolling in. But the healer was not quick in her movement this time. She had sat there for the longest time playing with her straps of the patient’s gown. And now she was goofing around deliberately it seemed exasperating the patient. She again appeals Velma “Just so’s you’re sure, sweetheart, and ready to weight when you’re well” (10). The twelve or the Master’s Mind is around Min to assist her. Mama Mae Velma’s blood mother and M’Dear Sophie Heywood Velma’s Godmother attend the healing session. But when the healing started Sophie Heywood left the treatment room. Minnie was saying to Velma, “Are you sure, sweetheart? I’m just asking is all. Taking away the miseries and you take away some folks reason for living ... ’ (16), Minnie was discharging the negative feelings from Velma’s soul and enthuse it with the life force, so that the will to alive should be created in her mind. As Minnie’s hands went out people checked their watches thinking out it to be the official beginning or end of the healing.

Minnie again said to Velma:

“I can feel sweetheart, that you’re not quite ready to dump the shit ... got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger, and make room
for the lovely things to rush in and fill you full. 
Nature abhors a so-called vacuum, don't you 
know?" (16)

She waited till she got a nod out of Velma. Minnie persistently imbibes on 
Velma's mind the positive attitude so that she can recover from the shock. 

Minnie's appeals resume after some interval. "Quit wrassling, 
sweetheart, or you may go under. I'm throwing you the life. Don't be 
too proud to live," (42) but Old Wife, who is with Min controlling the 
healing session comes to know that Velma, the patient is not following 
to what Min says. She (Velma) is somewhere else. Her mind is gone 
somewhere else as we know on the train of past memories. Old Wife 
brings this to the notice of Minnie, "Say she can't hear you, Min, don't 
even see you. Henry gal off somewhere tracking herself". Minnie is 
worried when Velma is not responding to her healing so quickly. She 
asks old Wife, "What's ailing the Henry gal so, Old Wife? She's 
draining me." To this old wife retorts that perhaps Minnie has met her 
match. Minnie expresses her concern about the attempts of these 
women of committing suicide. She prays to God to have mercy on 
these poor women as they don't know what they are doing:

Lord, have mercy, what's wrong with the 
women? If they ain't sticking their head in 
ovens and opening up their veins like this gal, 
or jumping off roofs, drinking charcoal lighter, 
pumping rat poisons in their arms and 
ramming cars into the walls ... what's wrong. 
Old wife? What is happening to the daughters 
of the yam? Seem they just don't know how to
draw up the powers from the deep like before. Not full sunned and sweet anymore. Tell me how do I welcome this daughter home to the world... (44)

Old Wife thinks that Minnie is all “wound up” that day. Old Wife says that she doesn’t like Minnie’s asking question like “Are you sure you wanna be well?” she expresses dissatisfaction about Minnie’s healing. It didn’t happen in the past. Bambara describes Minnie’s procedure of healing in these elaborate words:

Over the years it had become routine; she simply placed her left hand on the patients spine and her right hand on the navel, then clearing the channels, putting herself aside, she became available to a healing force no one had yet, to her satisfaction, captured in name. Her eyelids closed locking out the bounce and bang of light and sound and heat, sealing in the throbbing glow that spread from the corona of light at the crown of the head that moved forward between her brows that fanned out into a petaled rainbow, fanning, pulsing then contracting again into a single white flame...(47)

Minnie’s art and power of spiritual healing is further explained. She possesses some spiritual and extra natural healing powers Minnie possesses what the modern scientific medical doctors like Dr. Meadows don’t have. Bambara brings out the different between the two camps. She comments:

And (Minnie) learned to read the auras of trees and stones and plants and neighbors, far more colorful for more complex. And studied the
sun's corona, the jagged petals of magnetic colours...
On the stool or in the chair with this patient or that, Minnie could dance their dance and match their beat and echo their pitch and know their frequency as if her own. Eyes closed and the mind dropping down to the heart bubbling in the blood then beating fanning out, flooded and shining, she knew each way of being in the world and could welcome them whole again open to wholeness. Eyes wide open the swing from expand to contract, dissolve, congeal, release restrict, foot tapping throbbing in song the ebb and flow of renewal she would welcome them healed with her into her arms. (48)

Minnie discusses with Old Wife, who is omniscient what should be done to heal to Henry girl. She asks Old Wife further to give her some magic root or bat bone from her reticule bag.

Velma proves a difficult case for Minnie and one explanation springs from the loa, old Wife asserts:

"Maybe you've met you match, Min.'
"What you say?"
"Say she sure is fidgetin like she got he betsy bugs."
"She one of Oshun's witches, I suspect. What's Oshun's two cents worth on the matter? Maybe she'd like to handle this Henry gal herself."
"I don't know about the two cents cause I strictly do not mess with haints, Min. I've always been a good Christian."
"When you gonna stop calling the loa out of their names? They are the laws alive.
Trudier Harris (2001-85-5) further point out the potentials of these characters:

Bambara’s placing of the loa side by side with Christianity and indeed giving the non-Christian a slight edge ... posits them as providing and additional source for power. For Bambara, there’s a less a clash of cults then a synthesizing for them a syncretism... (Nadeen evokes... Jesus and denies later) Bambara’s black women characters therefore use all forms of belief known to them, in order to influence their words.

Minnie’s in unable to cure/heal Velma quickly she finds it difficult to retrieve Velma on the path of life way back from the suicidal road of death. As her incessant appeals to Velma continue, it makes an ever prolonged session. And suddenly it sounded like thunder in the distance. The spring festival, Mardi Gras is being celebrated and enjoyed by the people from distant corners. When people heard the thunder, people at different camps have different reactions at different places, at the side way trendy café and at the infirmary. This supernatural element in the novel which is culminating point and climax adds another dimension to the novel. Velma is basically being treated by a spiritual folk healer like Minnie and not by an advanced medical doctor like Dr. Meadows, an M. D. As Bambara has asserted the very inspiration of writing this novel, as is pointed out earlier, is to fill the chasm and bring the two camps, spiritual, folk, traditional and modern science, medicine together. The supernatural element of
thunder, rain and lighting enrich and strengthen the spiritual folk healing element that will culminate in healing Velma in the end.

A sudden downpower and then lightening suggest as if Bambara wants to indicate that the supernatural elements are helping Minnie to heal Velma. Thus these supernatural elements have their role hand/participation in healing Velma and it is a cataclysmic event:

A sudden downpower with no warning ... the lighting had flashed lighting up the purple smeared sky ...Damballah. A grumbling, growing, boiling up as if from the core of the earthwork drew a groan ...Of whatever cataclysmic event it might turn out to be, for it couldn’t be simply a storm with such frightening, thunder as was cracking the air as if the very world was splitting apart. It could be the thunder of cannons. It would mean war, or angry gods demanding someone be flung into crater. volcanoes, boiling up. Vomiting up flames and lava, death running in the streets soon to over take the café. Or and explosion at the plant (245)

Minnie notices that the music played on stereo for healing is helpful because Velma is coming back to life. She tells this to old wife. Even Doc Serge also notices and at the infirmary suddenly there is rumbling. Door opened and Fred came in and saw Doc Serge and the two women Velma and Minnie.

Campbell wondered if the portable radio in the kitchen might inform him similar storms in the other part of the country in the other parts of the world. In the park thunder catches Marcus. Obie receives a
message to come to infirmary and he is worried about Velma. And there’s an earthquake. There’s fear and dread at unspeakable level in the air because of thunder, and lightening, and the sky is lit. Sophie Haywood thinks that Velma will come back to life at Minnie’s call. It was sure that the downpower was no spring shower.

And in this tense and climax atmosphere, Velma resurrects at the end of novel. Bamara pictures Velma’s coming back thus:

Minnie Ransom staring. Her hands sliding off the shoulders of silk. The patient turning smoothly on the stool, head thrown back about to shout, to laugh, to sing. No need Minnie’s hands now. That’s clear. Velma’s glow aglow and two yards wide of clear and unstreaked white and yellow. Her eyes scanning the air around Minnie, then examining her own hands, fingers stretched and radiant. No need of Minnie’s hands now, so the healer withdraws them, drops them in her lap just as Velma, rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl drops down on the stool a burst cocoon. (295)

_The Salt Eaters_ is a novel-Bambara’s first and therefore immediately differentiated from her other works. Ruth Elizabeth Burks thinks that its language is the language of twists and turns, its sophistication, its punctuation, and its highly imaginative tones. She comments:

Its (the novel’s) characters speak a little, because have lost the desire to communicate with each other through words. Their thoughts, as conveyed by Bambara are more real to them than that which is real. (Mari Evans 1984-55)
Ruth Elizabeth Burks further points out that the “resurrection” that occurs at the end of the novel sets the people free. Velma, the central focus of this work, “epitomizes failure of language”. She attempts to take her own life, she both slits her wrists and sticks her head into an oven to make sure that it will be enough. Burks further continues:

...her (Velma’s) double attempts of suicide fails, she is miraculously saved from physical death, but lost in a spiritual emptiness that must be filled before she can be whole. Her “insanity” the emptiness inside of her, must be replaced with spirituality which eventually derives its strength and power from within... all she has to do is to want to be well and spiritually whole. Velma must perceive that she is the instrument of redemption for her people, as are we all. Like Christ, she must die (at least symbolically) and live again to absolve herself and her people from the current sin of apathy. But unlike Christ’s her metamorphosis into the world of spirit derives its strength from her people, African people. She must rekindle her roots by spiritually imbibing the swear of her people who have nurtured the earth for centuries (ibid.: 56-57)

Sophie Heywood. Velma’s godmother thinks:

“Why did Velma attempt suicide? Why didn’t she think of us the people? Did she think that her life is only her own? Way didn’t she think that she belonged to us, we people?”

The question raised by Sophie Heywood are correct. But had Velma thought in that manner she would not have committed suicide. But
Velma realizes this large perspective, and thinks in that broader angle, and that’s why she decides not to die but not live not for herself alone but for the society in the end of the novel.

Sitting on the stool Velma recalls how women activists including Palma and Ruby and other women activists raised question about the sexism in the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore Jan and Ruby who are among the other activists of Seven Sisters and other passengers in the bus that Fred is driving, describes the movement splintered. They discuss that civil rights and antiwar movements have been replaced by the women’s movement and the antinuclear movement. They discuss that when King is gone, Malcom is gone, Fanni Lou gone and Angela is quiet, the Civil Rights Movement has no furture. Ruby, and Jan who are waiting for Velma and do not know about her suicide attempts. They are thinking of how Velma is working at the transchemical plant and it is not a healthy place to work, even though she is working in the office wing. Jan points out that the workers at the plants have to report for a medical care once in a month to the company infirmary and the most dangerous thing is that they can’t see their own records.

Ruby and Jan further discuss the major threats of the looming dangers of the transchemical plant to the society. It seems that somebody at the plant wiped out the entire records. It is shocking. They Ruby and Jan discuss how it is done by moving low values to first byte and the propogating through the entire data base. Whoever this
'somebody' is he/she fouled up the entire computer bank. All the records were erased. All is gone and it is total blank and empty. Velma is interrogated for this.

Ruby and Jan discuss this issue of ecological and environmental threat of the transchemical plant and radioactive disaster at length. The plant has been shipping flatcars of sludge some kind of contaminated sludge, right through town to some burial grounds for radioactive waste that a plant in Alabama uses. And Velma who is working as a computer analyst at the plant is reported to have pulled the secret information and passed it to some investigative journalist; or some environmentalist group. That's why she is being interrogated by the plant authorities so she has asked the other activists to be in touch with some lawyers for legal advice if in case a suit is filed against her or the plant.

They go on discussing the issues of nuclear reactors, uranium-mines a international anti nuclear movement. Ruby imagines that the end of the world will be because of atomic explosion. She says:

"All this doomsday mushroom-cloud end of plant numbah is past my brain... I think all this ecological stuff is a diversion." (242)

To this Jan gets angry and succinctly elaborates on the issue that it is not a diversion but a capitalist politics in these words:

"They (the issues) are connected, whose community do you think they ship radioactive waste through or dig up waste burial grounds near? Who do you think they hire the dangerous dirty work at those plants? What
parts of the world do they test-blast-in? And all them illegal uranium mines dug up on Navejo turf—the crops dying, the sheep dying, the horses, water, cancer, Ruby, cancer. And the plant on the Harlem River and don’t get stupid on me” (242)

Ruby thinks that Jan is sounding like Velma. To this Jan points out to Ruby that there’s connection between the transchemical plant and the power configurations in the city and the quality of life in the city, region, country and the world. Ruby and Jan throw light on the antinuclear ecological movement and how the capitalist or first world countries are bringing the lives of people in third world countries or minority communities in danger. This aspect of the Civil Rights Movement which is one of the themes to the novel is brought forward and elaborated by Ruby and Jan.

Depiction of the two ‘negative’ male images in the novel are of “boymen” and of Roland, Obies brother, as rapists. The “boymen” also described as the “welfare man” and “halfmen” represent the decay and disintegration of the community. The text emphasizes their intimidation and exploitation of the women in the community. Seen through the eyes of Meadows, the narrative present an unsavoury and depressing portrait of the boymen.

This depiction of boymen as predators recalls the earlier representation of Roland, Obie’s brother, as rapist. In both instances, the male, in pursuit of their own gratification, dehumanises the women
in the community. This narrative strategy that allows the readers to witness and experience Roland's act, the novel presents it through the combined perspectives of Obie and Roland.

The focal point or centre of the action is the Southwest Community Infirmary of Claybourne, Georgia the pivotal action of healing Velma takes place at this venue. Bambara describes the ancient building of the infirmary and the tree shading it thus:

So the Southwest community Infirmary established in 1871 by the Free Coloreds of the Claybourne went up on its spot and none other at the base of Gaylord Hill directly facing the Masons Lodge, later the Fellowship Hall where the elders of the district arbitrated affairs and knew the Academy where the performing arts the martial arts, the medical arts, the scientific arts, and the arts and the humanities were taught without credit and drew from the ranks of the workers, dropouts, students housewives, ex-cons, vets, church folk, professionals, and alarming number of change agents, as they insisted calling themselves. (120)

Minnie daily places the pots of food and jugs of water under the tree planted by the Free Blacks near the infirmary for the loa that resides there. Bambara describes the life history of the tree in these words:

...at the back of the infirmary the woods began. They passed the Old Tree where Minnie Ransom daily placed the pots of food and jugs of water for the loa that resided there. Old Tree, the Free coloreds of Claybourne planted in the spring of 1871. The elders in course white robes gathered round the hole
with digging sticks: the sun in their eyes; planted the young sapling as a gift to the generations to come, as a marker in case the Infirmary could not be defended.

The text contains musical images. Human existence is a dance, one that has multiple dimensions. Illness interrupts the dance. Minnie’s job is to eliminate whatever interferes with the music and the dance.

The flashbacks and flashforward are the techniques or characteristics of the novel’s postmodernist traits. Elliott Butter Evans (1989:182) proves the point with the help of Fredrick Jameson. He argues:

...The reader encounters (in *The Salt Eaters*) some of the traits or signs that Fredrick Jameson identifies with postmodern discourse. Among these are pastiche and collage as structuring devices; the emergence of schizophrenic textual structure: a displacement of history by “historicism” in which the past is reread and reconstructed in the present, and a valorizing and privileging of nostalgia.

The structure of the novel comes very near to the conglomerate of collage of different scenes placed after one another not in sequence but in zig-zag and criss cross way. Velma’s attempt to suicide reveals her madness and schizophrenia which is another characteristic of the post modernism found in the novel. Elliott Butter-Evans (1986-176) further comments about the postmodernism of the novel.

Fredrick Jameson’s appropriation of Lacan to read schizophrenia as one of the “basic features of postmodernism”... and experience of
isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material. Temporal discontinuities and “isolated, disconnected discontinuous, material signifiers are inscribed within the text, there is heteroglossia of voices in the novel also.

*The Salt Eaters* is such a disconnected text that it is very difficult to comprehend it. Along with Velma’s madness we find numerous characters culminating in heteroglossia of voices that is the basic symptom of postmodernism.

Susan Willis (1987-139) also accepts postmodernism of the novel because of the disconnected and fragmented narration. She observes:

...the novel approximates a postmodern narrative, whose profuse array of disconnected details denies interpretation and suggests a world where meaning no longer pertains.

Talking about the structure of the novel in an interview with Claudia Tate, Toni Cade Bambara comments that the sections of *The Salt Eaters* are closer to “gospel” then to jazz (Claudia Tate 1983:29) but Elenor Trylor judges the novel “a modern myth of creation in a jazz mode.” (Mari Evans1984:59) Eleanor Traylor finds that the novel is so rich in contents that it is a “modern myth of creation of life that is told in jazz mode.” It has the qualities of a myth that have all pervasive and appealing to all. And the creation of life Velma’s coming back to life from death is told in a folkloric way-in a jazz mode.

Janelle Collins (1996-36) defines the postmodernism, in the novel. Fragmentation and other traits of postmodernism are in it. She comments:
Like other postmodern works, *The Salt Eaters* combines fabulism and realism, adopts a non-mimetic form of presentation, rejects linear history in favor of flattened one-dimensional chronology of events, displays multiple angles of vision rather than a "decentred" subject rather than a unified subjectivity in the character of Velma Henry, offers a labyrinth of events instead of a plot to follow, and rejects closure in favor of open ended meaning.

Similarly John Wideman (1980:14) argues that "the stream of consciousness" technique is used in the novel:

Through flashbacks, stream of consciousness, a complex interweaving of plot, subplot and digression, the substance of Velma's life and the reader must synthesize the mosaic piece together ... in its best moments the novel recalls Faulknerian montage.

One of the three working titles which Bambara used to help her stay focused "In the Last Quarter", The Seven Sisters," and "The Salt Eaters" this she retained Bambara explains:

Salt is a partial antidote to snakebite ... to struggle to develop, one needs to master the ways to neutralize poisons. "Salt" also keeps the parable of Lot's wife to the fore. Without a belief in the capacity for transformation, one can become ossified (Susan Willis 1987:231)

The novel also has some references to this effect:

...the mudmothers were painting the walls of the cave and calling to her ...woman with snakes in her hair ... trying to tell her about the difference between snakes and serpents, the
difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent. (8)

Salt is so important in life, Sophie Heywood muses that “you never really know a person until you’ve eaten salt together” (147) As eating salt is necessary to know a person or an antidote to snakebite, similarly throw off the excess salt out of body is also important. When Obie is thinking over the crises in his personal as well as public life, the masseur, Ahiro tells him that what he really needs is a good cry which will shed off the excess salt through his tears. Ahiro cites a legendary example to prove the point. Ahiro said:

“Obie you know what you really need?”
“What”
“A good cry, man. Good for the eyes, the sinuses, the heart. The body needs too throw off its excess salt for balance. Too little salt and wounds can’t heal. Remember Napoleon’s army? Those frogs were dropping dead from the scratches because their bodies were deprived of salt. But too much…” (164)

Velma also remembers using salt for snakebite as an antidote, she’d knows different remedies for snakebite and the bite of serpent for lifetime. She recalls how Daddy Dolphy’s snakebite is treated with salt by M’Dear Sophie Heywood. Daddy Dolphy had also told her about the use of salt as and antidote to snakebite in the woods that time. She recalls:

M’Dear had dropped her basket and salt his shirt with her shears before Velma knew what had happened. Had pushed him on the found and taken his knife from him and slit open his
shoulder before Velma could cry out “Quick, Salt.” And she’d managed to find it in the gathering basket and knew somehow it was salt and not some other odd thing to be bringing along to the woods. Daddy Dolphy had gulped some, held some is his mouth and was ripping of his sleeve when M’Dear snatched a fistful of leaves from a bush and packed a salt poultice into the wound and tied up his shoulder tightly with the sleeve tourniquet. “Helps neutralize the Venom.” M’Dear explained, her voice calm as if certain the twisting of the sleeve would do the rest. “To neutralize the serpent is another matter,” Daddy Dolphy had winked, taking deep breaths. (257-58)

Velma knows that she has learned the art of resistance to snakebite in life from the great men and women who resisted slavery like Douglass, Ida B. Wells to W.E.B DuBois. She muses:

She thought she knew that. At some point in her life she was sure Douglass, Tubman, the slave narratives, the songs, the fables, Delaney, Ida B. Wells, Blyden, DuBois, Garvey, the singers, her parents. Malcom, Coltrance the poets, her comrades, her Godmother her neighbors and had taught that. Thought she knew how to build immunity to the sting of the serpent that turned would be cells, could be cadres with cargo cults. Thought she knew how to build resistance, make the journey to the center of the circle, stay posed and centered in the work and not fly off, stay centered in the best of her people’s traditions and not be available to madness. Something crucial had been missing from the political / economic / social/ cultural/ aesthetic/ military/ psychosocial/ psychosexual mix. (258-59)
Bambara conveys the message through Velma’s understanding that to eat salt is to resist the ills in the life and society. For Bambara “salvation is the issue” and she writes “to save our lives” (Mari Evans 1984:41) for Velma to be a salt eater is to neutralize the poison, ills in the various struggles she is waging in civil rights movement. Both Velma and Minnie Ransom are the women in the movement are salt eaters but they sometimes struggle on different planes.

Trudier Harris (2001-89) calls Minnie a salt eater who has learned not to succumb to the bite of serpent... whether the serpent is the madness of potential chemical warfare and suicide in the 1960s and ’70s.

Melisa Walker (1991:181) explains the significance of the titles of the novel in these words:

The title *The Salt Eaters* focuses the reader’s attention on those who are seeking health rather than on those who are doomed. Salt eaters are people who still practice the old folk medicine, including eating salt as a cure for snakebite. The cure the novel seeks, however, is for the disorders caused by poisons that afflict the character’s minds, and by extension the society they create.”

Melisa Walker (1991-187) also comments on the “narrative anarchy” at the end of the novel:

*The Salt Eaters* does not end with despair. Velma does get well; the community is revitalized. But how? The final chapters are increasingly characterized by what Frank Kermode calls “narrative anarchy.” Something happens that changes everything.
But what? The hazy end of the novel mars its intrinsic structural and aesthetic beauty.

The novel reveals great potentials and not only critiques the ills in the personal life of civil right activists but foreshadows the larger span of the movement. Velma eats the salt as an antidote to the ills in the society to which her life largely belongs. Highly complex, using the postmodernist techniques, the novel is a labyrinth and "a modern myth of creations of life" as it creates the life of Velma i.e. she "resurrects" from death as Ruth Eleanor Burks points, like "Christ" for her people. Her double attempt of suicide fail and she is miraculously brought back to life by Minnie's healing. Coming back from the throes of death to life is indeed a modern myth of life, the dance of life defeats the dance of death.

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