

## الطفلة السوداء كبطلة جمالية: قراءة تعليمية في القصة القصيرة "الدرس" للكاتبة توني كيد بامبرا

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المديرية العامة للتربية في النجف الاشرف

### الملخص

في قصتها القصيرة "الدرس" الكاتبة الامريكية السوداء توني كيد بامبرا تعمل جماليا وتعليميا على تقديم الطفلة السوداء سيلفيا كراوية وبطلة. بامبرا توظف هذا التكنيك في معظم قصصها التي تتضمنها المجموعة القصصية " غوريلا، حبيبتني". هكذا تكنيك يثير تساؤلات كثيرة ذات اهمية لدى القراء. لذا تحاول هذه الدراسة ايجاد الاجوبة لمثل تلك التساؤلات وذلك بتحليل المعاني العميقة التي يشتمل عليها الخطاب السردى القصير للكاتبة توني كيد بامبرا. ان أطار الجمالي لورقة البحث هذه يعمل على الإجابة عن الأسئلة الآتية: كيف يمكن قراءة شخصية سيلفيا جماليا؟، ماذا عن جماليات دورها الأساسى التعليمي كبطلة رئيسية بالمقارنة مع الشخصية الثانوية مثل الانسة موور وغيرها من الشخصيات الثانوية؟ كيف غرست الكاتبة أفكارها الاجتماعية و السياسية والتعليمية والجمالية على لسان الراوية البطلة الصغيرة. ان نص القصة القصيرة "الدرس" بوصفه خطابا جماليا وتعليميا يهدف الى ايقاظ الوعي لدى السود المضطهدين كي يقاوموا كل اوجه الظلم والاضطهاد للثقافة السائدة والمسيطرة للمجتمع الأمريكى الأبيض

الكلمات المفتاحية: البطل الجمالي، توني كيد بامبارا، الدرس، تصادم القيم، السرد القصي

## The Black Child as an Aesthetic Protagonist: Educational Reading in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson"

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### Abstract

In her short story, "*The Lesson*" the Black American writer Toni Cade Bambara aesthetically and educationally introduces Sylvia- the black female child as both narrator and protagonist. Bambara does the same technique in most of the short stories included in her collection "*Gorilla, My Love*". This deliberate action by Bambara raises many of the reader's crucial questions. So this study attempts to investigate the required answers for these questions by means of probing the deep layers of Bambara's short narrative discourse. The aesthetic framework of the research-paper is constructed on answering the following questions: How could we read the character of Sylvia aesthetically? What's about the aesthetics of her central educational role as a major protagonist in comparison with the antagonist, Miss Moore and the other feminist characters? How does the writer instill her social, political, educational and aesthetic notions in the words of her childish narrator and protagonist? Bambara's "*The Lesson*", as an aesthetic and educational discourse, is committed to change the consciousness of the black people in order to be ready enough to resist all forms of oppression, injustice and inequality of the prevailing mainstream culture of the white community.

**Key words:** Aesthetic protagonist, Toni Cade Bambara, *The Lesson*, Clashes of values, Short narrative discourse

## 1-Introduction

Toni Cade Bambara is an African American writer, educator and community activist, who was born in Harlem, New York. Concerning the influences that played a significant role on shaping her writing, Bambara, very often, acknowledges her parents' favor in supporting her to be a creative writer. Through her childhood, she accompanied them to visit the Appollo theatre and listen to the musicians of the forties and fifties and folk's speech on Speakers' Corner (Tate, 1983, p.28-29). Moreover, her ideological adoption of the black liberation movements affected her writing by far. Bambara is one of the Black aesthetic writers whose literature is directed to African –American audience, so they intend to write their works in African American Vernacular English. To Alice A. Deck, she was "one of the best representatives of the group of Afro-American writers who, during the 1960s, became directly involved in the cultural and sociopolitical activities in urban communities across the country" (1985, p.13). Those writers embody the philosophy of the Black Aesthetic Movement. According to Amiri Baraka, who is the spokesman of black aesthetic theory,

Black art ... has to be collective, it has to be functional, it has to be Committed...When I say collective, that it comes from the collective experience of Black people, when I say committed, it has to be committed to change, revolutionary change. When I say functional, it has to have a function to the lives of Black people.

(qtd. in Freydberg,1983,p.27)

Bambara is apt to abridge the gap between the black dialect of her people and her own narrative reading of the mainstream consciousness as an aesthetic perspective. The first concern of her writing is the black culture and community in its norms, relations and challenges. In an interview by Massiah, Bambara declares that she looks at herself as a community worker not only as a writer (1996, p.218). Bambara is like the other black women writers as Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Angela Davis and Ntosake Shange, whose their ability,

in educational administration in particular, to voice their own personal experiences through conversations and storytelling presents a new set of ideas through lived experiences that adds depth and richness to the larger larger picture of leadership in urban schools.

(Witherspoon and Brooks, 2013, p.143)

Eleanor W. Traylor argues that Bambara has "avowal to tell stories that "save lives". She adds that "pedagogical mission" of survival is very common in Bambara's fiction like other black women writers (2009, p.166). So Bambara is the writer of contemporary African American fiction whose signal achievement is that it is a teacher (p.168). In those writers' literary works, there is an educational message for both fictional characters and readers. Bambara states that "she and many of her contemporaries write stories that save lives" (qtd. in Dana A. Williams, 2009, p.9). The central goal of Bambara's fiction is to teach the black people how they "get to rise above this mess and don't tarry so long in the wilderness..." (Austin and Champion, 2002, p.16). Through her fiction, she tries to raise conscience and awareness on the part of black individuals and community as well. Her focus is on the black female children; they are really the spokeswomen of her narrative discourse. They are the protagonists whose voice mirrors wider and real view of their community. Majority of her short stories "are notable for their sassy child narrators, whose sharp insight and poignant social commentary belie their protagonists' tender years" (Ware and Braukman, 2004, p.41). She thinks that "social change happen[s] from the bottom up and the intellectual's role [is] not to analyze the change but also to participate in it" (Holmes and Wall, 2007, p.5). Bambara directs her work to awaken a revolutionary sense that makes the spirits of her people high. She creates her stories with "usable lessons" (Guy- Sheftall, p.245). Toni Morrison argues that Bambara's fiction "had work to do—revolution" (Austin and Champion, 2002, p.17).

In her fictional works, Bambara is very keen to keep black dialect as her narrative tongue. She "received immense praise for her careful use of African American's dialect which she found puzzling" (Dickson-Carr, 2005, p.42). She intentionally makes "the characters who are most connected to the black community use black English" (Page, 2007, p.31). By using black speech, she brings blacks' daily experiences alive in an aesthetic way and adds an impression of reality to her protagonists' voice. Bambara's protagonists, for the most part, are the narrators of her narratives as they "speak to themselves and to us [the readers] directly and honestly in their own voices, with their puzzlements, questions, and struggles" (Barbara, 1988, p.10). She works on the voice and language of black individual and community. Ruth Burks acknowledges that "Bambara perpetuates the struggle of her people by literally recording it in their own voices" (1984, p.48). She tries to teach her people how to make their life better. Bambara protrudes some themes to make them dominant like, proud identity, significance of education, resurrecting of cultural memory for survival, resistance to achieve social change and refusing being valued by criteria of the white culture. According to Tillie Olsen, Bambara is one of the most significant women writers who "make us profoundly conscious of what harms, degrades, denies developments, destroys; of

how much is unrealized, unlived; instead of 'oppressed victims', they tell of the ways of resistances, resiliences" (1983, p.x-xi).

Bambara is best-known for her discourse of short fiction. According to her, the discourse of "the short story is far more effective in terms of teaching us lessons" (Guy-Sheftall, p.6). She sees that the short story is important in life and literature as well. She published her first short story collection, *Gorilla, My Love* in (1972), then *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* in (1977). Also she wrote novels like *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and *Those Bones are not My Child* (1999). Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* includes fifteen short stories. Through these stories, Bambara shows us real scenes of ordinary black people's life. They present the African-American community as opposite to the white American society. In most of these stories, the black female children are narrators and protagonists as well. About this collection, Bambara said that "I pulled out a lot of stories that had a young protagonist-narrator because the voice is kind of consistent—a young tough, compassionate girl" (2009). According to Philip Bader, "*Gorilla, My Love* displays Bambara's talent for rich, musical language" (2004, p.14). Nancy Hargrove has admired Bambara's "faithful reproduction of black dialect. Her first person narrators speak conversationally and authentically" (1983, p.90). Many educators and critics deal with Barbara's "The Lesson" as one of the most significant short stories that "effectively use the [childish] narrative voice to convey social commentaries", to use the words of John Goodwin (2010, p.128).

"The Lesson" is a short story narrated from the perspective of a black female child called Sylvia. She is from a lower class family living in New York City. She and her friends get informal lessons in Mathematics and language by their neighbour Miss Moore who volunteers to teach the children of those poor families. Miss Moore is an educated woman. In a summer day, she took the children in an educational journey to a toy store in Manhattan. She wants them to realize what the value of money means and how the white people world is different from their own. Seeing the toy store, she keeps on reminding the children of their poverty. Sylvia resents Miss Moore for spoiling her summer vacation programme and describes her as a stupid woman. When the children arrive the store and see the very high prices of the toys, they are shocked by this materialistic fact. They are introduced to the world of sharp wealth and luxury. They feel the great gap between their poor world and such a luxurious one. After that crucial experience, Sylvia's reaction is totally different from that of her friends. She discredits the value of Miss Moore's lesson. Sylvia realizes her poverty but she confronts and resists the bitter reality beyond such a social inequality.

It is so significant to draw on the perspective of the aesthetic distance by means of which the text's maker can leave a space or room in the text for his/her reader to play his/her key aesthetic role in reading and analyzing the character and actions of the narrator and protagonist too. Furthermore, the reader is an active aesthetic sharer with the creator of the literary discourse. If the maker of the text injects it with an aesthetic energy, the reader has to provide it with an energetic interpretation. Focusing on such an aesthetic mutuality between the text's writer and its reader John Goodwin acknowledges that,

Bambara's "The Lesson" examines the experiences of a specific subculture and its relationship with the larger society. Bambara delves into the world of African Americans in Harlem, where she was from, and their reactions to the surrounding culture. The effectiveness of "The Lesson" derives from putting the reader into the position of the narrator. With this approach, the reader can learn through vicarious participation and by comparing the thoughts and actions of the narrator (p.128).

Reading Bambara's "The Lesson" aesthetically and educationally is the key focus of the current study. Here are some questions that I try to answer them throughout the study:

- 1-How could we read the character of Sylvia aesthetically?
- 2-What is about the aesthetics of her central educational role as a major protagonist in comparison with the antagonist, Miss Moore and the other feminist characters?
- 3-How does the writer instill her social, political, educational and aesthetic notions in the words of her childish narrator and protagonist?

## **2-Aesthetics of the Educational Role of "Sylvia" as a Major Protagonist**

In her short narrative discourse, Toni Cade Bambara is used to portray the life of her black people debating over sensitive issues such as the clashes of values among different generations. The key mechanism in all of her fictional texts is that of the Black English. By means of the vernacular English, she tries to mirror the spiritual, social, economic, political, educational, artistic, cultural and aesthetic aspects of the black modern man in America.

If life itself is a big discourse, we are either makers or changers of the reality of that discourse. Process of making or altering that discourse lies in the dormant seeds of aesthetic sensibility. One can see what Traylor comes to call as "discourse altering" and "discourse making" are both significant for debating over crucial issues such as that of clashes between aesthetic values and

materialistic ones. Experimentally and aesthetically the black narrative discourse written by a sensitive writer as Toni Cade Bambara is that of "conveying knowledge and of negotiating survival through cultural memory" (Dana A. Williams, 2009, p.7). Short fiction could work as an educational discourse, which is apt to communicate the knowledge by means of the 'cultural memory' that maintains the 'survival' of the oppressed black community. Here lies the aesthetic and educational philosophy of Bambara's narrative discourse. Her educational and aesthetic lesson, to both black adults and children, lies in the words of how to learn to see yourself for yourself", according to Traylor (p.7). Due to the significance of the narrative discourse written for an aesthetic and educational intentions, the readers and especially those "scholars of liberation" are apt to "take Toni Cade Bambara's words literally when she intuits that she and many of her contemporaries write stories that save lives" ( p.9). Bambara's key point focuses on the crucial issue of survival of both black adults and children from the manacles of brute white materialism that regressively and oppressively turns man into a mere toy manifested in a public store. Her educational and aesthetic lesson is to raise and alter the consciousness of man in order to be the maker of his ambition and dream. To make him/her, aware of the area of clashes between aesthetic and educational values and ready-made materialistic ones, is the key focus of Bambara's short fictional discourse.

In his important essay, The Twofold Significance of "Aesthetic Value", Harold Osborne acknowledges that:

Aesthetic value is commonly discussed both as a principle of assessment of discriminating among works of art on a scale of aesthetic excellence and as a term of social approbation whereby concern for works of art and objects of natural beauty is dignified and evaluated in relation to the many other occupations and diversions open to modern man.

(Philosophica 36, 1985 (2), p.5)

The lesson of aesthetic value stems from works which are committed to aesthetic principles that could change the life of modern man. Bambara touches upon reading life as an aesthetic value constructed on educational background from the very start of childhood. She concentrates on the aesthetic value one can get from the cultural reality not from that world which maintains the utilitarian value. In Bambara's narrative discourse, the aesthetic and educational value of man is to be liberated from the toy values which govern and constraint his scope of thinking. In other words,

it teaches children and adults to be in contact with their native culture, to be in contact with the aesthetic value of their struggle in order to change life into peaceful and equal one. She never consents to see them in a position of mere decorated toys in a big store. Bambara is apt to solidify and consolidate in the minds of black kids such a genre of an aesthetic value that is committed to the revolutionary and artistic motto of "Black is beautiful". As an educator and black-beauty-seeker, "Bambara makes clear that in order to situate oneself as a community activist and to displace racial and gender oppression, one must rediscover and understand the past" (Catherine Cucinella, 2002, p. 16). Resorting to the past is not a passive action at all; yet it is an aesthetic outlet that could solve the problematic situation of the material and oppressive present imposed by the Whites. However, the aesthetic sensibility that the reader comes to feel in terms of reading Bambara's "The Lesson" is that of a revolutionary and educational value. Bambara, as a social and political activist, touches upon the revolutionary notion of rejecting being completely subservient to the material manacles set by the white community. Her quest for real beauty stems from being really committed to the natural freedom related to the native culture.

In his important analytical study of Bambara's first collection, namely, *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction on Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*, Elliot Butler-Evans argues that:

The stories in *Gorilla* clearly locate the collection in the broad context of Black nationalist fiction of the 1960s. Employing classic realism as their dominant narrative form, Bambara constructed organic Black communities in which intra-racial strife was minimal, the White world remained on the periphery, and the pervasive "realities" of Black life were presented (1989, p.38).

With other writers of her generation, Bambara is keenly committed to construct such a crucial narrative discourse of "new black aesthetics" by means of which she is apt to construct a new cultural identity (Lien Vanmarsnille, 2009, p.1). As an African-American, Bambara looks like the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks who "belongs to an innovative generation of black artists who have developed a new awareness of blackness in the wake of authors such as James Baldwin and Adrienne Kennedy" (p.2). Bambara, too, looks innovative in terms of drawing her protagonists aesthetically and "giving them a voice of their own", to use the words of Vanmarsnille (p.2).

Bambara's young protagonist, Sylvia, works as a real rejection of the aggressive, oppressive, and violent practices of whites done against her black community. The narrative discourse of "The

Lesson" shows Bambara as a talented black writer who has an aesthetic "ability to portray with sensitivity and compassion the experiences of children from their point of view" (Nancy D. Hargrove, 1983, p.83).

Most of the controversial issues debated in "The Lesson" stem from the pivotal scenario of the 'sailboat toy' which are expressed in Sylvia's words:

Who are these people that spend that much for performin  
clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboat? What kinda work they do  
and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? Where we  
are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don't  
necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for  
somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand  
their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of  
pie she talkin about in the first damn place.

(*The Lesson*, p. 243).

The 'sailboat' is the only toy that mostly makes the children utterly shocked. It takes much space of discussion. The reactions of the children towards its very high price are different. It represents the great extent of oppression exerted by the white society against black people. Sylvia's reaction is very distinctive, she expresses her astonishment: "Unbelievable", I hear myself say and I am really stunned" (*The Lesson*, p.241). She asks Miss Moore about the price of a real boat. Miss Moore does not answer her. Here, Sylvia's question is ironical because the sailboat in the store is just a toy not a real one. Then why it has too much value? Sylvia criticizes the white world ideology. So the sharp differences between people on the social ladder are just related to how much money people have. It is just a materialistic criterion. Where you are on the social ladder means who you are; how much money you have means who you are. Sylvia is not allied with Miss Moore's principles of education. Miss Moore imparts the materialistic principles for the children. She just introduces the children to the ugly prejudiced world of materialism which may cause pain and despair on their part. Her lesson may cause the children culturally lost. It does not create enthusiasm for revolution, change, and freedom.

The characteristics of youth, toughness and smartness, that the reader knows about the main narrator, Sylvia, from the very start of narration may reflect that "she is strongly affected by her surroundings and has the capacity to see the truth in things" (The Gale Group, A Study Guide for Toni Cade Bambara's *The Lesson*, 2001, p.22). Sylvia strongly criticizes her people particularly the old generation when she says that "back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or

young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right" (*The Lesson*, p.236). She directs an educational message that evokes the revolutionary tendency to commit a social change. Black people should learn how to improve their lives and prove their existence as a strong peculiar identity. Sylvia is already aware of the great difference between her black world and the white world. She knows the importance and value of money. In her view, there is no sense to spend much for such toys like clowns and sailboat. When she sees the price of the sailboat that costs \$1,195, she criticizes the blind value to be paid for it as she ironically wonders: "who'd pay all that when you can buy a sailboat set for a quarter at Pop's, a tube of glue for a dime, and a ball of string for eight cents?" (*The Lesson*, p. 241). Sylvia plays the role of educator; she raises the awareness of her black people and give them a valuable lesson.

By means of her protagonist's angry reactions towards Miss Moore and the other characters, Bambara tries her best to reveal educationally and aesthetically the nature of the black woman and the power of her consciousness. In her ironical way, Sylvia reads some of the female characters in the community by means of a psychological probing into the inner layers of the character. For instance, she describes the character of Aunt Gretchen saying:

Specially Aunt Gretchen. She was the main Gofer in the family.

You got some ole dumb shit foolishness you want somebody to go for, you sent for Aunt Gretchen. She has been screwed into the go-along for so long, it's a blood-deep natural thing with her

(*The Lesson*, p.237)

The clashes of the two areas of values could be represented by two black females: Sylvia the child-protagonist and Miss Moore the adult-antagonist. The antagonist character of Miss Moore could be presented, in the eyes of Sylvia, in a very special graphic depiction (ibid, p.189):

...this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no make-up. ... Miss Moore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. and she was black as hell, cept for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky (*The Lesson*, p.237)

Her refusal to the white materialistic practices such as spending money on useless things comes true in terms of her educational role in constructing values rooted deep into the culture of her black community. Sylvia gives an educational, revolutionary and aesthetic lesson when she deliberately says: "Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven" (*The Lesson*, p.244). It's so obvious that

Bambara's educational and revolutionary resistance to the bitter reality around her comes true by means of making her main childish protagonist, Sylvia, aware of the struggle against that type of class inequality. From the beginning Sylvia has the class consciousness. She knows the sharp social inequality but avoids whatever thing enlightens such truth. Moreover, Sylvia does not accept the agreement of her friend with Miss Moore's values and principles. She considers it as betrayal. For example, when Sugar responds to Miss Moore's lesson, Sylvia says: " I am disgusted with Sugar's treachery" ( *The Lesson*, p. 244). Against the aggressive, and oppressive acts of the white society, Sylvia tends to react violently. When she compares her poor world with the so rich world, she says:" And I'm jealous and want to hit her[ Sugar]. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth" ( *The Lesson*, p.243). This image of punching 'somebody in the mouth' indicates a weapon of resisting the unfairness and inequity of the prevailing white community. Touching on such sensitive episodes, Sylvia's anger along the trip represents Bambara's revolutionary attitude towards such a crucial situation. That angry feeling is a matter of strong rejection to the materialistic values. Sylvia thinks that there is no need to spend much more money on useless things. Such situation frames the focus of being aware of the clashes of values. Thus the writer's message is apt to change the passive situation educationally and aesthetically.

### 3-Conclusion

Bambara is brave enough to encounter all the passive works done consciously or unconsciously by some educators especially the black ones. She is apt to spark a kind of ideological battle against the old-fashioned rules of the prevailing white mainstream. To her thinking, the issue of changing education should start from the very childhood. She maintains to choose a black childish character: Sylvia who looks confident, proud, young, smart and tough in the sense of confronting the oppressive and humiliating practices on the part of white community. By creating such a kind of protagonist, Bambara is committed to communicate her revolutionary lesson whose message is to liberate her black people from the manacles of the dominating white mainstream. Bambara's aesthetic and educational philosophy never comes in terms with the passive education of a stereotypical 'proper language' spoken to black children by the antagonist Miss Moore.

As an aesthetic protagonist, Sylvia plays a double role: the first is technical as she narrates the details of the trip, the second one is educational as she takes the responsibility of being aware of the humiliating mainstream culture, and the clashes of values in the whole American society. The trip of the young black kids to F. A. O. Schwarz Store in general and the point of the high prices of toys there, especially the expensive sailboat in particular are controversial since they frame the

key crucial thematic setting of Bambara's "The Lesson". By means of the trip, there is a symbolic denotation to the outdoor education in which Miss Moore urges the black children to be face-to-face with the larger community in order to understand its reality. The black children were forced by their parents to go there. Educationally, the antagonist, here, looks passive as she introduces those children to a prejudiced community that makes them feel the wide gap between their ghetto-life and that of the luxurious and extravagant white people. Those children don't like the new ways of life there. Aesthetically and educationally Bambara, represented by the narrator and protagonist Sylvia, rejects such kind of education. To her, education is a matter of awareness of self-identity and culture. She is apt to make the black kids aware of how they can change their social conditions by means of the right black education. Throughout the voice of her aesthetic and educational protagonist-Sylvia, Bambara rejects the 'proper language' of the dominating white culture spoken by the antagonist-Miss Moore. However, the lesson of her rejection comes true as she criticizes the old-fashioned rules and educational norms set by the white pedagogy. Sylvia never comes in terms with the principles of the new white world that Miss Moore is passively committed to impart to black children in that educational trip. On the contrary, Bambara believes that those children cannot get their rights in education and life in such a passive way. Therefore, the lesson beyond the sailboat toy is very controversial. It's really a pivotal issue in the whole story since it depicts the clashes of values between two different worlds. Sylvia and Sugar never like that store of white wealthy life. It's not only a matter of clashes between superiority and inferiority, but it is that of a class consciousness which bitterly reminds them of the social conditions of their living in rugged and poor slums. To Bambara's educational and aesthetic philosophy, it's not necessarily to expose the democratic principles upon which the American culture was constructed. However, the most important issue for her is to have a self-confidence and to be brave enough to confront the crucial and hard situations and change them.

In conclusion, Bambara's "The Lesson", as an aesthetic and educational discourse, is committed to change the consciousness of the black people in order to be ready enough to resist all forms of oppression, injustice and inequality of the prevailing mainstream culture of the white community.

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