

Empowered Voices: Social Critique, Resistance, And Identity in Toni Cade Bambara's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the themes of social critique, resistance, and identity in Toni Cade Bambara's short stories, focusing on how her narratives illuminate the lived experiences of African Americans, particularly women and children. By examining stories such as *The Lesson*, *Gorilla*, *My Love*, and *Raymond's Run*, the paper delves into Bambara's portrayal of race, class, and gender through young protagonists' perspectives. Bambara's use of Black vernacular English, communal values, and intergenerational mentorship underscores the importance of cultural identity and solidarity. This paper further highlights Bambara's engagement with the Black Arts Movement and Black feminist thought, emphasizing her work's lasting contribution to literature and social activism. Ultimately, Bambara's storytelling not only reflects societal injustices but also inspires critical consciousness and collective action for racial and economic justice.

Keywords: *Social critique, resistance, identity, race and class, gender, Black feminism, Black vernacular English, cultural identity, Black Arts Movement, childhood awakening, intergenerational mentorship, social transformation, economic justice.*

Introduction

Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995) was a prolific writer, activist, and educator whose body of work remains integral to the discourse on race, identity, and social justice within the African American literary tradition. A leading voice in the Black Arts Movement, Bambara's fiction is firmly anchored in the lived experiences of Black individuals, particularly those residing in urban, working-class communities. Her writing is not only an artistic endeavor but also a form of activism that critiques the systemic socio-economic injustices and racial disparities that continue to plague marginalized

communities. Through her short stories, Bambara gives voice to the complexities of African American life, portraying characters that grapple with personal and societal struggles while seeking empowerment, solidarity, and self-determination.

Central to Bambara's narratives is her use of young, observant protagonists who, often at the threshold of adulthood, confront the harsh realities of an unjust world. These characters offer readers a nuanced perspective on resistance and resilience, challenging oppressive social structures while navigating the intersections of race, class, and gender. Bambara's stories serve as both a reflection of the socio-political climate of her time and a call for collective action, urging her readers to engage in social transformation.

Her storytelling is uniquely marked by its grounding in vernacular speech, cultural traditions, and communal values, which not only elevate the authenticity of her characters but also reinforce a distinctly Black aesthetic. By employing these elements, Bambara does more than craft compelling fiction—she fosters a political vision that seeks to reclaim agency, dignity, and power for African American communities. Her works invite readers into a space where racial consciousness and collective memory converge; creating a dialogue that transcends generational divides.

This paper seeks to explore how Bambara's short stories function as a dynamic medium for social critique. Through an examination of race, class, and consciousness, it will analyze the ways in which her work critiques both overt and subtle forms of oppression, and how her characters navigate the complexities of identity and resistance. In doing so, this paper will underscore Bambara's contributions to the Black Arts Movement and her lasting impact on literature and social thought.

Race, Class, and the Struggle for Awareness

Toni Cade Bambara's short stories often explore the intertwined themes of race, class, and the quest for awareness, using her narratives to challenge the systemic inequities that shape the lives of Black Americans. One of her most celebrated stories, *The Lesson*, stands as a prime example of her critique of racial and economic inequality. In this story, a group of young African American children from a disadvantaged, working-class neighborhood are taken on an educational trip by Miss Moore, an educated Black woman who seeks to expose them to a world far removed from their everyday lives. The children, including the central character Sylvia, are taken to an upscale toy store that features extravagant and expensive items—luxuries that starkly contrast with the poverty and deprivation they experience at home.

“Who are these people that spent that much for performing clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboats?. 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 ailsays 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.” (94)

This dissonance becomes a catalyst for Sylvia's awakening, as she begins to recognize the vast disparities in wealth and opportunity that exist between the affluent and the impoverished. Bambara's depiction of Sylvia's evolving consciousness is a powerful commentary on the effects of economic injustice and the stark reality of wealth inequality. The journey to the toy store acts as more than just an excursion; it becomes a moment of self-reflection and a pivotal step in Sylvia's intellectual and emotional development. As she contemplates the high-priced toys and wonders why she, like others in her community, is denied access to such luxuries, she begins to understand the fundamental social and economic structures that perpetuate these inequalities.

“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. What do you think?”

“I think,” say Sugar pushing me off her feet like she never done before, cause I whip her ass in a minute, “that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it.”(95)

Through Sylvia's eyes, Bambara critiques the wider system of economic exploitation that disproportionately affects Black communities, underscoring the harsh reality that wealth is not just a matter of personal achievement, but rather a reflection of entrenched power dynamics. The story becomes an allegory for the broader racial and economic disparities in American society, urging readers to question and confront the structural forces that perpetuate injustice.

Similarly, *Gorilla, My Love* delves into issues of racial and generational tensions, as seen through the eyes of another young girl, who feels betrayed by the adults around her. The story is narrated by Hazel, a young girl with a sharp, determined voice. Hazel reflects on an incident involving her uncle, Hunca Bubba, who she is very close to and who had promised to marry her when she grew up. However, during a road trip with her family—Hunca Bubba, her little brother Baby Jason, and their grandfather—Hazel learns that Hunca Bubba is now engaged to another woman. Hazel feels deeply betrayed because she took his childhood promise seriously, demonstrating the blurred line between childhood innocence and adult responsibilities.

Hazel also recalls a trip to the movies, where she and her friends were tricked. They went to see a movie titled *Gorilla, My Love*, but instead, a religious film was played. Hazel protested loudly and demanded her money back, but the adults in charge refused to listen.

“So I kick the door open wider and just walk right by him and sit down and tell the man about himself and what I want my money back and that goes for Baby Jason and Big Brood too. And he still trying to shuffle me out the door even though I'm sittin which shows him for the fool he is. Just like them teachers do fore they realize Mama like a stone on that spot and ain't backin up. So he ain't getting up off the money.”

This memory parallels the betrayal she feels from Hunca Bubba, who she believed would always be loyal to her. The parallel between the two incidents becomes clear: just as the theater betrayed her expectations, so did Hunca Bubba. Both experiences represent how Hazel, as a child, is beginning to

encounter the harsh realities of life—where promises are broken, and trust is not always honored. Her frustration lies in the adult world's seeming indifference to her feelings and their refusal to take her seriously. This seemingly small personal betrayal serves as a metaphor for the much larger and more pervasive betrayal experienced by African Americans, particularly the unfulfilled promises of racial equality and social justice in America. Bambara's exploration of betrayal on both a personal and societal level reflects the frustrations of a generation that has grown weary of the empty promises made by a system that has historically marginalized Black people. Hazel's experience with broken promises—on a personal scale—mirrors the broader disillusionment of Black Americans who have faced systemic neglect and the denial of their rights.

In both of these stories, Bambara employs child narrators, which adds a layer of significance to the social critiques embedded in her writing. The use of young voices allows Bambara to present complex and often painful truths about race and class through the lens of innocence and emerging awareness. These children, still in the formative stages of understanding the world, are keenly perceptive and able to see the contradictions and hypocrisies in the adult world. Their experiences of awakening to the harsh realities of race and class act as a mirror for the reader, encouraging an interrogation of the societal norms that reinforce inequality. The child narrators, in their curiosity and vulnerability, serve as powerful vehicles for questioning adult hypocrisy, the unquestioned power structures that govern society, and the contradictions inherent in American democracy.

Through Sylvia and Hazel, Bambara explores the painful process of gaining consciousness, not only of one's own identity but also of the social and political forces that shape the world. These stories highlight the importance of critical awareness in dismantling the structures of oppression that perpetuate inequality. By presenting the stories from the perspective of young, impressionable protagonists, Bambara invites her readers to confront the uncomfortable truths about race and class in America, urging them to challenge the status quo and strive for a more just society. In doing so, she underscores the urgency of fostering a critical consciousness—especially among the younger generation—as a crucial step toward social transformation and the struggle for racial and economic justice.

Gender and Intersectionality in Social Critique

Toni Cade Bambara's exploration of race and class is deeply intertwined with her examination of gender dynamics, particularly the experiences and roles of Black women in shaping both individual and collective identities. Her stories often present Black women not just as survivors, but as active agents of resistance, caretaking, and transformation within their communities. Through her vivid and complex female characters, Bambara critiques both the social structures that oppress them and the stereotypes that seek to define them. One of the most poignant examples of this is in *Raymond's Run*, where the young protagonist, Squeaky, offers a nuanced exploration of Black girlhood, resilience, and the intersections of race, class, and gender.

In *Raymond's Run*, Squeaky, a competitive runner, takes immense pride in her athletic abilities, which, in a broader cultural context, are often dismissed or overlooked for young Black girls. However, her pride in her talents is not limited to her individual achievements; she also bears the responsibility of caring for her brother Raymond, who has a developmental disability. Squeaky's relationship with Raymond is marked

by a fierce protectiveness and an unwavering sense of responsibility. Bambara uses this dynamic to challenge societal perceptions of Black girlhood, which are often stereotyped as either hyper-sexualized or disengaged from academic or athletic pursuits. Through Squeaky's character, Bambara illustrates how Black girls negotiate their identity within the overlapping pressures of race, class, and gender, particularly in a society that marginalizes them on multiple fronts.

Squeaky's journey is not just one of personal empowerment through running; it is also about asserting her agency in a world that attempts to limit her. She is portrayed as a force of nature—confident, assertive, and unapologetically self-assured in her capabilities. Bambara offers a counter-narrative to the traditional depictions of Black girlhood, which often portray young Black girls as passive or confined by their circumstances. Instead, Squeaky's resilience and sense of responsibility are framed as acts of defiance against both external and internalized limitations. Through Squeaky, Bambara presents an alternative model of Black female agency that transcends the stereotypical depictions of weakness or submission. This portrayal highlights the ability of Black girls to assert their autonomy, protect their loved ones, and challenge societal expectations, all while navigating structural obstacles such as economic inequality and racial prejudice.

Bambara's engagement with gender and intersectionality extends beyond individual empowerment to also encompass collective solidarity and communal support, particularly among women. In many of her stories, older women serve as mentors to younger women, reinforcing cultural memory and strategies for resistance. These intergenerational relationships underscore the role of Black women as knowledge-bearers, guardians of tradition, and key figures in the ongoing fight for social change. For example, in *The Lesson*, Miss Moore, the educated and politically conscious woman who takes Sylvia and her peers on the educational trip to the toy store, serves as a mentor who challenges the children to think critically about their place in society and the inequalities that shape their lives. Miss Moore's role as an educator is not just about imparting knowledge, but also about fostering a sense of collective responsibility and cultural pride within the community.

Through these intergenerational relationships, Bambara affirms the importance of Black women as pillars of resilience and social change agents within their communities. She highlights the transmission of knowledge, wisdom, and resistance strategies from one generation to the next, ensuring that the fight for justice and equality is both sustained and evolving. This focus on collective solidarity among women also highlights the importance of community ties in overcoming systemic oppression, as Black women work together to challenge the structural forces that seek to divide them.

Bambara's portrayal of Black women, particularly in the context of intersectionality, thus serves as a powerful critique of the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect to shape the lives of Black individuals, especially women. Her stories push back against dominant cultural narratives that seek to marginalize or stereotype Black women, offering instead a vision of female empowerment rooted in resilience, collective solidarity, and a deep commitment to social change. Through her nuanced characterizations and intergenerational narratives, Bambara elevates Black women as central figures in the fight for justice, equality, and cultural preservation.

Community as a Site of Resistance

A central and recurring theme in Toni Cade Bambara's work is the vital role of community in fostering awareness, resistance, and collective action against oppression. Throughout her stories, Bambara emphasizes the power of communal bonds, collective learning, and mutual support as crucial elements in the fight for social justice. Her characters, particularly those within Black working-class communities, often navigate their struggles through the strength of their communities, which provide both material and emotional sustenance in the face of systemic inequities. This communal focus is an integral part of Bambara's critique of individualism, particularly the capitalist ideals that prioritize personal success over collective well-being. Through her work, she underscores the idea that meaningful and lasting change can only be achieved through unity, shared purpose, and collective action.

In stories like *The Lesson*, the importance of mentorship and intergenerational dialogue is front and center. Miss Moore, a knowledgeable and politically conscious figure, serves as a guide for Sylvia and her peers, helping them see beyond their immediate circumstances and question the social structures that perpetuate inequality. Miss Moore's role as a mentor is emblematic of the broader role that older, wiser members of the community play in shaping the younger generation's political and social consciousness. The intergenerational exchange of knowledge, experience, and strategy becomes a key element in the fight for liberation, as it fosters a sense of collective responsibility and awareness within the community. Bambara uses characters like Miss Moore to show that social transformation does not solely depend on individual action, but rather on the building and nurturing of a strong, unified community that is capable of resisting oppression together.

Bambara's portrayal of strong community bonds also serves as a critique of the individualism and competitive ethos promoted by capitalist ideologies. In a world where success is often framed as a personal achievement, Bambara's characters illustrate the power of collective action and solidarity in addressing the deeper, structural issues of inequality. For Bambara, true liberation comes not through individual success, but through the collective struggle for justice, which requires the active participation of all members of the community. Her stories consistently highlight the importance of political and economic consciousness within the Black community, suggesting that the path to liberation lies in education, activism, and unity.

Bambara's work also challenges traditional narratives of Black suffering, which often focus on victimhood and passivity. Instead, she presents her characters as active agents in their own stories—resilient individuals who recognize their marginalization but refuse to accept it as their destiny. These characters, though often situated in oppressive environments, demonstrate the power of joy, defiance, and self-determination in the face of adversity. They refuse to be reduced to mere victims of their circumstances, and instead, they assert their autonomy and dignity by resisting the forces that seek to marginalize and silence them. This approach to resistance aligns closely with Black feminist and womanist traditions, which emphasize the capacity of Black women and communities to create alternative structures of support and resistance, often outside the frameworks of mainstream society.

Through her nuanced portrayal of Black communities, Bambara engages with Black feminist thought, which recognizes the central role of Black women in shaping the contours of resistance and social change. The strong, resilient women in her stories—whether through acts of mentorship, activism, or simple everyday survival—embody the values of solidarity, cultural preservation, and resistance. Bambara's work aligns with the womanist tradition, which prioritizes the well-being and empowerment of Black women while also acknowledging the necessity of community-based, collective struggle. Her characters embody the belief that liberation is not a singular endeavor but a communal project that requires the active participation of everyone, particularly the marginalized and oppressed, in order to create alternative, more equitable structures of support.

Ultimately, Bambara's stories provide a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant, individualistic paradigms that pervade mainstream society. Through her focus on community, mentorship, and collective resistance, she challenges readers to rethink the possibilities of social change. In Bambara's world, the struggle for justice is not just a personal journey, but a communal one—a journey that requires unity, mutual support, and a deep commitment to shared values of dignity, autonomy, and liberation.

Language and Cultural Identity

Toni Cade Bambara's use of Black vernacular English in her writing is a powerful literary tool that both affirms cultural identity and resists the linguistic dominance of standardized English. By featuring characters who speak in the rhythmic, idiomatic language of their communities, Bambara challenges dominant linguistic hierarchies that often view non-standard dialects as inferior or illegitimate. Her deliberate choice to center Black vernacular is an act of cultural reclamation, validating African American speech patterns that have historically been marginalized, distorted, or erased by mainstream society. Through this, Bambara not only captures the authentic voices of her characters but also underscores the importance of preserving and celebrating linguistic traditions that are deeply rooted in the African American experience.

In Bambara's stories, language is not merely a tool for communication but an essential marker of identity and resistance. The use of vernacular English allows her characters to assert their individuality and cultural heritage, offering a form of resistance against the pressures to assimilate into a predominantly white, English-speaking society. By foregrounding Black speech, Bambara challenges the cultural assumption that standardized English is the sole valid mode of expression, particularly in intellectual and academic contexts. Her writing celebrates the richness and complexity of Black English as a unique linguistic tradition, with its own rules, rhythms, and nuances. This serves as an act of defiance against a dominant culture that often devalues or disregards the language spoken by Black communities. We can find it in the observation of Lewis, Thabiti in her work, *Black People are My Business-Toni Cade Bambara's Practices of Liberation*;

Another striking feature of her work, specifically the story *Gorilla, My Love*, is the language and themes of social protest and ghetto stylizations. The aesthetic driving most of these stories privileges jazz's unique pitch, collaborative structure, and beat. Often the characters

are a separate voice, instrument, or medley that, taken collectively, approach a “whole” cultural representation of community. The community of voices in her stories is a medley representing the unique individual and communal ethos of Black Literature and culture. While the situation of each character are distinct, similar obstacles of internal and external oppression must be navigated to unify them” (90).

In *The Lesson*, Bambara highlights the relationship between language and social mobility through the contrast between Miss Moore’s formal, “standard” English and the vernacular spoken by the children. Miss Moore, an educated and politically conscious Black woman, uses formal speech as a means of educating and challenging her young students, but her language stands in stark contrast to the informal, idiomatic speech of the children, who are more familiar with their local dialect. This tension between Miss Moore’s formal language and the children’s vernacular reflects the broader societal division between academic education and lived experience. For the children, the language they use in their daily lives is more than just a mode of communication; it is a vital part of their identity, connecting them to their families, neighborhoods, and cultural traditions. Miss Moore’s formal language, while positioned as a tool for social mobility and empowerment, can also be alienating—suggesting that access to higher education and success requires adopting a language that feels foreign and disconnected from the realities of their lives.

Bambara’s careful depiction of this linguistic contrast highlights the complexities of social mobility for marginalized communities. While formal education and the use of standardized language are often seen as pathways to upward mobility, Bambara critiques the implicit assumption that adopting these norms is the only way to achieve success. She portrays the tension between the desire for social mobility and the need to retain one’s cultural identity, suggesting that language is not only a reflection of education but also of personal and communal belonging. Through Miss Moore’s formal speech and the children’s vernacular, Bambara reveals the complexities of moving between different social worlds and the challenges of reconciling academic aspirations with a deep-rooted cultural heritage.

Childhood as a Lens for Social Critique

Toni Cade Bambara often turns to child narrators to offer fresh, unfiltered perspectives on social inequalities. By using children as protagonists, Bambara allows the raw, untainted observations of youth to shine a light on systemic injustices, providing a stark contrast to the more compromised or conditioned views of adults. The innocence, curiosity, and lack of preconceptions in these young narrators enable them to question societal norms in a way that exposes the contradictions and flaws in the systems of race and class. Bambara’s decision to center children in her critique of social systems is both strategic and effective, as it invites readers to see the world through the eyes of those most affected by these injustices, but who are often silenced or marginalized in the broader societal narrative.

Through the child narrators in her stories, Bambara crafts narratives that are rich with both humor and keen social insight. The unguarded, straightforward observations of children are often disarmingly honest, allowing them to highlight the hypocrisies and contradictions in the adult world. Their ability to perceive injustices without the filtering mechanisms that often accompany adulthood—such as learned resignation or cynicism—makes them ideal figures for exposing the

inequities that define the racial and economic systems of society. Bambara skillfully harnesses this perspective to critique not just the overt manifestations of racism and classism, but also the more subtle ways in which they are ingrained in social structures and everyday life.

In *The Lesson*, the protagonist Sylvia's internal reflections mark a pivotal moment of growth and awareness regarding class disparities. As she navigates the contrast between her working-class background and the opulent toy store visited during the field trip, Sylvia begins to realize the extent to which wealth and privilege are distributed unevenly in society. Her evolving awareness, depicted through her internal dialogue, allows readers to see the raw, personal impact of these disparities on a young mind, untainted by the disillusionment that often accompanies adult recognition of social inequities. Bambara uses Sylvia's journey to show how exposure to these realities sparks a deeper sense of social consciousness, suggesting that the recognition of systemic injustice can begin at a young age, even before one fully understands the mechanisms behind it.

Similarly, in *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara uses the lens of childhood to depict a young girl's moment of disillusionment that mirrors the broader racial and social betrayals faced by Black Americans. The protagonist's realization that the promises and assurances made by the adults in her life are often hollow or deceptive parallels the betrayal many Black Americans feel in response to the unfulfilled promises of equality and justice in America. Through this child's eyes, Bambara highlights the gap between societal expectations and the harsh realities that many Black children face, showcasing the emotional impact of racial and social betrayal. The child's reaction to these betrayals, though marked by confusion and hurt, also becomes a site of resistance and awakening, where the child starts to question the fairness and integrity of the world around them.

In Bambara's stories, childhood becomes a powerful space for both awakening and transformation. The protagonists' journey from innocence to a deeper understanding of the social structures that shape their lives reflects a larger, societal process of engagement and resistance. Bambara suggests that social change is not just a product of adult efforts, but something that can and must begin with critical engagement from an early age. By positioning children as the key agents of this awakening, Bambara not only highlights the importance of education and early socialization in shaping future generations, but also reinforces the idea that children, when given the tools to critically engage with their surroundings, can be powerful voices for social change.

Ultimately, Bambara's use of childhood as a lens for social critique serves to remind readers that the fight for justice is not one that begins in adulthood, but one that must be cultivated from the very beginning of life. By allowing her young protagonists to question and challenge the inequities they observe, Bambara emphasizes the potential for radical transformation through the eyes and voices of the next generation. This perspective calls on both children and adults to engage in a continuous process of awakening, learning, and resistance—one that is critical for the dismantling of entrenched systems of oppression.

Conclusion

Toni Cade Bambara's short stories serve as powerful critiques of racial and class-based inequalities, while simultaneously cultivating a deep awareness of resistance and solidarity within marginalized communities. Through her dynamic characters and compelling narratives, Bambara exposes the systemic injustices that shape the lives of Black Americans, urging readers to confront and question the entrenched structures of power that perpetuate these inequalities. Her ability to intertwine social critique with storytelling allows her work to remain not only relevant but crucial in contemporary discussions on racial and economic justice. Bambara's stories are more than mere reflections of society; they are calls to action, urging individuals to reflect on their roles within oppressive systems and the possibilities for change.

At the heart of Bambara's work is her commitment to empowering readers to critically engage with the world around them. By showcasing the lived experiences of her characters, Bambara emphasizes that social transformation begins with recognition and resistance from within the community. Her writing reaffirms the idea that literature is not only a tool for personal expression but also a powerful instrument for social critique and political action. Through her stories, she offers a radical vision of social change that goes beyond individual liberation, focusing on the collective struggle for justice, solidarity, and equality.

Bambara's blend of activism and storytelling remains a vital framework for understanding the intersections of race, class, and gender in society. Her work continues to resonate in contemporary struggles against racial capitalism, gender oppression, and class disparities, providing both a historical perspective and a blueprint for future resistance. In a world where systems of oppression remain pervasive, Bambara's stories stand as a reminder that the fight for justice is ongoing and that literature, when combined with political awareness, can be a transformative force for social change. Through her rich depictions of resistance, community, and collective action, Bambara affirms that social change is not only possible but necessary—and that it is through the voices of those most affected by inequality that true transformation can begin.

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