

The Expression of Love in *Long Distance Life* (1989) by Marita Golden

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Research Article

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Article History

Received: 22.12.2019

Accepted: 24.12.2019

Published: 05.01.2020



Abstract: In *Long Distance Life* (1989), Marita Golden, one of the most outstanding African American female writers, follows up her first novel, *A Woman's Place* (1986) with an impressionistic sort of saga about a black American family living in Washington, D.C., from the 1920's to the present. In Marita Golden's *Long Distance Life* as in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1979), most of the couples's love lives come to an abrupt end by means of death, divorce or a presence of an intruder that is to say another lover between the two spouses. The question of love occupies a central role in the novel in so far as all most all the relationships of the characters are motivated by the issue of love. Women's predicament in the novel is the outcome of the different aspects of love dealt with by Gloria Naylor.

Keywords: love, marriage, women, African American, family.

Introduction

Marita Golden's *Long Distance Life* is the moving saga of four generations of an African American family which has experienced the Great Migration North, the Marcus Garvey's Movement for the liberation of his black folks and the Civil Rights Movement and its expected consequences. In this family, from the oldest to the youngest, each of the members has seen his or love life falling in ruins either willingly or unwillingly. When two people love each other, it's because each of them lacks something the one can provide the other with. It may be a material, a physical or a moral support to be fulfilled so as to live in peace and harmony. In this matter of fact, love duties become a delicate commission which should be imperatively accomplished.

It is the reason why regrettable consequences arise when one of the lovers fails to accomplish such a commission. For it is common knowledge that an unhappy love affair is far more dangerous than any serious illness. As while the patience only suffers of his disease, love unhappiness, besides the two

lovers, can lead the family (relatives, children, parents...) to great frustrations. The aim of this article is to analyze the different aspects of love in the novel. In so doing, we will deal with free love and then conditioned love.

I. FREE LOVE

In Marita Golden's novel, most of the marriages are love match except Naomi Johnson's first marriage which was a mean of escaping her father's home. But when she divorces her first husband, she has gone to the north, next to her cousin Cora. In the North, Naomi manages to fulfill her dream which consisted on making a fortune and improves her family's living conditions.

Thus, her celibacy does last long in that area. Soon, she makes acquaintance with one Rayford Johnson a friend of Harold, Cora's boyfriend. Their first meeting took place one night in a party at Naomi's house. If we consider what each of them felt when they saw each other, we can foretell their future love. Because notorious attractions was noticed between them and love to remind it to you, is nothing but a physical and sentimental impulse that leads a human being towards another one. When Naomi sees Rayford, she is dazzled by his beauty: *"That night me and Cora was frying up the fish when her boyfriend Harold walked in with the handsomest man I'd ever seen"*. (Golden, 1989: 40)

As for Rayford, he is not safe from what has bitten Naomi and that tells you a good deal about his way of gazing at her: *"I was standing at the table, my hands covered in cornmeal, dipping porgies in batter, and Rayford Johnson looked at me like he didn't plan to never look anywhere else"*. (Golden, 1989:40- 41)

Rayford and Naomi not only lure one another physically but also morally. Each of them has a great regard for the other after telling reciprocally their stories. Both of them have the same commitment and the same philosophy of life which is nothing else but to set oneself the task of rising up the black community from its ashes after decades and decades of vexation and ill treatment by the white folks. In this viewpoint one can't but say that if minds think alike, hearts also feel alike.

Rayford's affection towards Naomi increases when he discovers that the house in which the party is held is her property. He also fancies her courage, her hardworking and commitment to reverse the black folks' situation. That's why he doesn't fail to have a liking for her when Naomi states: *"Well, I think the colored, I mean the Negro has got to depend on himself and develop something of his own before anybody will respect him"*.(Golden, 1989: 42-43)

In a nutshell we can say that Naomi and Rayford's hearts grow fonder and fonder as their conversation draws to a close. And when Rayford takes his leave of Naomi, the latter is aware that from now on she has found the shoes of her fit:

I felt pretty good. Had a sweetheart and no more empty bed blues. And serious as he was, rayford Johnson knew how to please a woman. Some morning I'd get outta bed when we'd been together and feel like I could tear up the house and put it back together again (Golden 1989: 45- 46)

In a word, Naomi has made a love match with Rayford contrary to Isaiah Matthews. In other words, she has married him under no pressure. Apart from Naomi; Esther Johnson (Naomi's daughter with Rayford) also falls in love with Randolph Spencer. Her love affairs with Randolph started as back as she was a young student in Dunbar High School. Randolph Spencer is the owner of the Eden Bar and Grill. A seven- year- married man, he is a father of two sons and by the way thirteen years old than Esther. Nevertheless this difference of age and this matrimonial situation have not altered little Esther' love to Randolph. She often calls on him at the Eden Bar and Grill where she sometimes accept a drink and share a happy moment with him. These reunions are for both of them fruitful in so far as they are very entertaining and very soothing:

Esther knew that when he saw her, his silent yet pleased acknowledgement would calm the fierce gyrations of her stomach muscles and the manic pulsing of her heart. He would smile and stand up in greeting just like she was a lady and thereby distinguish Esther from everyone else in the room (Golden, 1989: 66)

Yet Naomi is fierce against his daughter's relationships with Randolph. She would rather her to love Bruce, a young boy from Newark, New Jersey whose dream is to become a lawyer. According to Naomi, Bruce is more suitable than Rayford because he is younger than him. But Esther has already made her choice and happen what may. Love is blind; it does not care about age, religion or properties. It makes people do silly things and often act foolishly. Friends come to hate each other, families broken up or even relatives turn into lovers. To illustrate the truthfulness of this remark, one can only mention two theatrical novels: *le Barbier de Séville* by Beaumarchais and *Phédre* by Jean Racine.

In *Le Barbier de Séville*, an old and declining physician called Dr. Bartholo fell madly in love with his ward, a young girl whose name is Rosine. He moved heaven and earth in order to marry her. He locked her in his house and looked after her as if she were some fuel on the flames. All this shows the power of love with its blinding drives. Thank to love; an old sour man can turn into a laughing teenager.

In Racine's novel, this powerful emotion urges an aunt to make overtures to her son. Phedre is thésé's second wife and Hyppolite is the son of thésé's first marriage. During the latter's long

shipment, Phédre learns from hearsay that her husband is dead. She takes advantage from this opportunity and opens her secrets to Hyppolite.

To come down to brass tasks, we must also underline that despite the love bond that links Rayford to Esther, he still vows his undying love to Mary (his wife) whom he loves at the first sight during a visit at his father's house (Mary is the niece of his father's regular customers). He remains faithful to Mary even if Esther wants him to break with her and becomes her own. Mary also loves Rayford in distract. This is all the more obvious if one considers what she said to her husband when the latter was getting ready to meet Esther. She had promised him that she would stay awake until he came back: *"I never sleep until you are beside me. After all this time I still can't do it"*. (Golden, 1989: 89) That flirtatious conversation they had during that night shows the originality of their union.

Esther's everlasting love to Rayford is also clear after their altercation a few years after the birth of their love child Logan Spencer. In those days, Esther was very restless and miserable nevertheless she later made peace with him and their love resumed sounder than ever.

Logan also is the architect of his own love life. Prompted by a self will to build up his future, he becomes a doctor after a higher bright education at Columbia University. Yet the conditions of his family were not favourable for a successful social life. Her mother is not living in the same house with his father as a consequence his friends nicknamed him a 'bastard'. But above his entire mother's travels to America with the civil rights groups, his father's tragic_death. In spite of all, he struggled for a social success because as the saying goes 'where there is a will, there is a way'. It obviously this difficult childhood that urges him to marry Sylvia whose childhood is also very pitiful:

When she was eleven, Sylvia's parents and her two brothers were killed in a fire that destroyed the family's Roxbury double-decker house. Subsequently Sylvia was raised by an older childless aunt and uncle who enforce a decorum and rectitude upon her childhood that Sylvia gratefully accepted, as a way of absolving her guilt for surviving accepted, as a way of absolving her guilt for surviving. (Golden, 1989:217)

Logan is a man who cares much for people's fate that's why he marries Sylvia after dating her for two years. They have two children: Tiambe, a girl and Amir, a boy before getting a spectacular divorce. After three years of conjugal life, the couple begins drifting apart and no longer shares each other's minds:

One night when Logan suggested that sylvia take some classes or consider getting her degree, she told him : I' ve got all the education I'll need for the next eighteen years asleep upstairs. (Golden, 1989: 220)

They eventually put an end to their union despite the moanings of Sylvia which show that love is an everlasting feeling. You can take back whatever you may give a person except love; love remains forever in the heart.

'It's women and love that men cannot live without' (Golden, 1989:63), Rayford told his daughter in a dream (Rayford was dead still Esther communicated with him in dreams). But we are willingly going consider the other side of the coin by saying: 'it is men and love that women cannot live without'. This assertion is well justifiable. After Logan and Sylvia divorce, each of them goes in quest for a new lover. Sylvia marries a black investor in Boston where she has stayed for two years and Logan marries Felicia Kincaid, a woman he met in a party. It is in his marriage with Felicia that Logan truly savored the delights of household. He begins getting in touch with his mother-in-law Dorothy Kincaid, but also he sometimes has the visits of his family (his mother and brother) and together, they share good moments. Loving someone should include loving his/ her relatives. This is what Felicia understands by welcoming warmly Esther during the Thanksgiving dinner.

Nathaniel himself has done nothing but to follow the same path as his folks. He falls in love with Trudy, a secretary receptionist at a law firm. Nathaniel is Esther and Randolph's second son. He has lost his father while he was still lying in his mother's womb. Trudy also loves him despite his being a very tough guy and his lack of responsibility (Nathaniel is a drug dealer). She has remained faithful to him and hoping that some days she will manage to change his mind and put him in the right way. As a man whose main concern is to satisfy his passions and sexual desires, it may be conceded that Nathaniel's love for Trudy is not real love but a simple passing fancy especially when seeing him pressing her to have an abortion after knocking her up.

II.CONDITIONED LOVE

In Marita Golden's *Long Distance Life*, Naomi Johnson's marriage to Isaiah Mathews may be considered a conditioned love. They got married when Naomi was still in her teens (she was seventeen years old). As it is, if we take into account her age, we can exclude in our mind any possible love feeling because a seventeen-year-old daughter doesn't know yet who she loves and who she hates. Therefore we can sustain in all honesty that there is something that urges her to make such a premature union.

Naomi is the daughter of a family sharecropper in the South. In that very area, living conditions are very shaky for black folks as the bulk of them have not enough land and therefore depend on white men's properties.

Naomi's family is among those families struck down by poverty and living on the fringe of society. Her father is just 'hanging on farmer with five acres and two mules' (Golden, 1989: 27). He is living in extreme dependence on a Whiteman called Cartwright. "There was many a year my Daddy never saw a dollar to hold in his hand. By the time, Old Cartwright who is Daddy rented the land from". (Golden, 1989: 26)

And it is worth précising here that in America, the sharecropping system is very bad because, at the end of a good year, large hardworking black families might expect to see some cash, perhaps enough to buy new clothes and even an automobile. At the end of a bad year, and almost years seem bad to some degree, the blacks wound up in debts. Their debts are duly entered in the record books the planters keep for each black family and carry over into the following year. Families that stage on the same plantation, years after finding that they sink deeper into debts regardless of how hard they work.

In addition to her father, her mother also is like a workhorse whose main concern was nothing but to overcome their nasty situation. She has her hands worn out as she washes clothes for the white families and toiling in the farms to help her husband. Naomi, still a young and small girl, joined in the dance, "When I was nine I was washing, ironing, cooking" (Golden, 1989:27). And, after all, she would do that chore with an empty stomach:

I've gone days just eating a thin slice of fatback and a hunk of bread and was so grateful that I just went on working at whatever I was doing and just put the hunger pains outta my mind (Golden, 1989: 28).

In a word, here is the unwholesome and difficult environment where Naomi is brought up. Apart from this hectic life, she prematurely marries Isaiah Mathews the family of whom was a well-to-do one. Although they are blacks, they own lands and don't depend on white folks' land. Naomi confesses that: "His Daddy– Isaiah's father- was a real farmer, not a sharecropper like mine and he had twenty-five acres of land". (Golden, 1989:30)

In this respect, one can guess that her union is nothing but an alternative to escape her sharecropper's family. Naomi assesses it clearly as follows: "I got married the first time when I was seventeen. And I'm gonna tell you the truth, I got married mostly to get away from home". (Golden, 1989: 29)

Unfortunately, she gets divorced a few years later because she can no longer stand seeing her own family dying into deep poverty. Consequently, she considers herself as someone who is doomed to leave the South for the North, make a fortune and come back to reverse the tendency. This is the overt aim but, to be honest, one can personally maintain that such a motive is a starry-eyed – scheme in so far

as her parents had been poor since she was a baby. In other words, she was born in poverty and had grown up in poverty. Even when she was getting to marry Isaiah her family was still poor. Now, why on earth has she waited until the last moment meaning when she became Mrs. Mathews to take interest in her family's fate as far as sacrificing her marriage by hook or by crook? If going to the North to help her family was her credo, it should never have crossed her mind to get married without excluding totally the reasons for her divorce. One may nevertheless sustain that she hadn't enjoyed her household with Isaiah the way she had expected it. This seems more obvious in the following lines where she asserts:

At night, Isaiah'd come to bed the smell of soil and fertilizer still on him, despite a bath, and he'd reach for me with those big old hands and got on top of me like she was mounting a horse. And oh lord! I'd cry all the way *through it, but silent, like so he wouldn't hear. And not never nary a kiss. That hurt more than anything I think. I got more affection from the little boys I'd played house within the fields.* (Golden, 1989:31)

While in *Long Distance Life Naomi* gives her heart to Isaiah freely but ungrudgingly, *Binetou in So Long A Letter* is, to resume *Mariama Ba's* words, 'a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence' (BA, 1979: 39)

Naomi Johnson nearly passes out when she learns that her daughter Esther is in love with Randolph Spenser. Because it had never occurred in her mind that the daughter she loves dearly can have links with a man in her total ignorance. But honestly, it is impossible for Naomi to do otherwise. Naomi has done her best to give Esther the maximum a daughter should receive from her mother. Though Esther is fatherless, she is well educated and protected because her mother spares no efforts to meet her expectations. She has fulfilled her role of motherhood and at the same time that of her absent father. Subsequently, her daughter loves a man on the sly.

Thus, the worst thing of all is that Esther's lover has already possessed a wife and children. However, Naomi had warned her about those kinds of men. It is the reason why when she realized that she cannot keep her daughter loveless, she urges her two young men. Marita Golden tells us more about it in a conversation she has with Esther:

'What's happening with this Bruce anyway? Naomi asks.

He is so young.

Young well you're young. What do you want? A man?

You are not ready for that. A man right now wouldn't do anything but harm' (Golden, 1989: 79)

Furthermore, Naomi has taught chastity to her daughter when she was a small child. She never fails to remind her to be aware of the value of her body, to love and respect herself more than any man. She has never allowed her roaming the length and breadth of the city they live; keeps an eye on her instead: *“I had always pretty strict with Esther about boys and watched her pretty close”*. (Golden, 1989: 102)

But as opportunity makes thief, Esther calls on the Eden Bar and Grill (Randolph restaurant) on her ways back from school and together with Randolph, they arrange their dates. Fortunately, Naomi to whom everything became as clear as daylight before the worse comes to the worst meaning Esther’s pregnancy. When she is sure that her daughter is safe and sound she let out a sigh of relief: *“Thank God, she didn’t miss her period. I made sure of that”*. (Golden, 1989: 102)

From then on, Naomi decides to become more watchful than ever. Like any mother, Naomi Johnson doesn’t want Esther to jeopardize her life, on the contrary, she would rather she grew up into a respectful woman dignified and virtuous. But speaking personally, we can pretend that she was still a long way to go because, at a certain age, a girl or a boy opens up to love. This period called puberty is a real change in life. It is the period when young boys and young girls tend to behave in a horrible way towards their parents especially when the latter attempt to part them with their lovers. Esther’s reaction toward Naomi proves it. She wanted to meet Randolph and her mother strictly refused and kept her at home. On that occasion, she has a violent altercation with her mother as depicted by Marita Golden:

Mama, leave me alone, she said closing her ears with her hands.

I can’t Esther. I’m your mama. I got to say something. You won’t.

It’s none of your business, she said moving again towards the door.

Then I slapped Esther and I watched her eyes begin to tear and her hand touch her cheek that I had hit. (Golden, 1989: 104)

That day, Esther eventually stays at home. However, after such a good start, Naomi does not stop. She goes to meet Randolph at the Eden Bar and Grill the following week. In the restaurant, it is also a real pitched verbal battle between Naomi and Randolph. Randolph Spenser is that cunning and sweet-tongued man, as stubborn as a mule. Yet, it is men like Randolph, Naomi warned Esther about; men who are real womanizers, who would skate their lives to get their purpose. It’s the reason why Naomi has flown into a white rage when she takes a leave of him. Being now in a desperate plight, Naomi as a fervent believer turns the problem to the Almighty. She says: *“Every night I fell asleep in my bed, I would be clutching my bible in one hand and have a prayer on my lips to protect my daughter”*. (Golden, 1989: 108)

Unfortunately, Naomi does not manage to put an end to her daughter's relationships with Randolph. They keep on courting and Esther ends up being pregnant. That pregnancy explains the reason why Naomi was always cautioning Esther against playing with men. She suggests her to have an abortion as soon as she is broken the news. During a chat with Esther, she declares: "*You don't have to have it, and I will be honest with you, Esther I wish you wouldn't. I know a doctor who can....*" (Golden, 1989: 113). But Esther refuses to follow her mother's advice and gives birth to her love child- she was not married by Randolph-. As the saying goes 'like father, like son'; we add in the same 'like mother, like daughter'. This proverb does find justification in Marita Golden's novel. When Nathaniel knocks Trudy up -Nathaniel was Esther's second son- and the latter put him on the picture of it, he does nothing but entices her to have an abortion. Here is an extract of their dialogue:

'We'll have to get rid of it.

I can't do that.

Why not?

I don't believe in abortions, it's murder'. (LDL.p 304.)

The astonishing thing is that nobody has given Nathaniel that nasty idea but Esther, her own mother. Nathaniel himself confessed it: 'But you were the one who told me to tell her to get rid of it'. (LDL p. 311.)

In this respect, we can sustain that Esther nearly spread a great disorder between Nathaniel and Trudy as the latter does not share the view of her boyfriend. That abortion debate is very stormy because Nathaniel as a drug-dealer is a real aggressive man who gets his hackles up at the slightest action.

We have now established how parents in Long Distance Life especially Naomi got in their children's love lives. But when all is said and done, it must be acknowledged that those very children never let themselves downhearted by their parents, they persist obstinately in doing as they will.

Conclusion

At the end of our analysis, we can say that Marita Golden, in her novel, has depicted that love is a real source of suffering mainly for female spouses. The novel has disclosed that women experience the harshest consequences of unhappy love affairs. In Long Distance Life whether the couple has made a love match or not, a lot of troubles have been noticed between spouses. In other words, spouses' minds have been thrown into confusion by many disruptive influences.

In the economic point of view, we can take the example of Naomi, the main character in Long Distance Life, whom after marrying Isaiah Matthews to escape the hard conditions in which her parents

were living decides to divorce him and leaves for the North where she becomes the breadwinner of her family.

In the social realm, we can say that couples' dissension has a double source. Either it is a matter of parents or male partners. Marita Golden has shown how some parents intervene in their children's love lives. Naomi Johnson has done her utmost to break Esther's love links with Randolph because, she was aware that they are incompatible. Randolph is always a father and therefore too mature to possess Esther who is a teenager.

Besides parents, male partners have also a hand in domestic problems. Marita Golden has highlighted in her work that the occasional rough patches which arise between the couples are in part caused by men's unfaithfulness and irresponsibility. Mary divorces with Randolph because he is unfaithful to her with Esther.

From the divine point of view, we can notice the premature death of many male partners. This phenomenon is more obvious In Long Distance Life. From this perspective, we can mention Randolph, Rayford, and Nathaniel. Each of them has been cut down by death in the prime of youth and as a matter of fact, has left a widow in a real mess.

In the novel, we have witnessed suffering women and vulnerable children. Whether they are widows or abandoned by their husbands, women's lives are real tales of suffering. They have fallen into a deep solitude and furthermore they fended for themselves to bring up and nourish their children. In this view, they have met many obstacles in doing it. That is the reason why many failings are noticed as far as childbearing is concerned.

Through this analysis, we can suggest that Marita Golden stands for a real feminist as she has a profound commitment to prove in her work that even without the presence of their husbands in the house, women can muddle through to take care of their families. In the novel, we realize that men's status in the household tends to decrease while that of women keeps on increasing.

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