# Where the Power of a Woman Lies

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*Drawing examples from Afro-American fiction, Coleman explains the critical importance of hair as a representation of a woman's beauty, self-esteem, and control. Monica A. Coleman is a Junior in Cabot House concentrating in Afro-American Studies. This paper was submitted to Afro-American Studies 132z: Domestic Life in Literature, a seminar conducted by Jamaica Kincaid.*

> In the labor room of St. Joseph's hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1974, a woman lay on a cot about to deliver a baby. As she screamed out in pain from the latest contraction, her husband looked down and said, "The baby is coming. Go get the doctor. The hair is black."
> The woman is my mother,
> the man, my father
> ... and my hair is still Black.

Every morning before I went to school, my mother would sit me down on a small wooden stool for an agonizing thirty minute process called "combing my hair." I was sure that she was pulling out every strand of my hair by the root as she brushed my thick hair into some semblance of order to begin braiding. She braided my hair into several different styles during my years in elementary school: one on top and two in the back, two crisscrossed in the front with one hanging down in the back, ten or eleven randomly placed, two cornrowed down the sides, all of these with colorful yarn ribbons around the base of the plaits.

By the time I was nine, I stopped resisting the daily ritual and even began to suggest new patterns for braids. "Try a circle around my head and end with a braid right here," I would say pointing to the middle of my head. "No one else wears it like that." It became a game between my mother and me. Who could think of the fanciest styles? Nonetheless, all this pulling on my hair caused me to complain the entire time, so Mama would tell me stories to keep my attention until she was done. It was here that I learned all about the five men she dated in high school, if Grandma was as nice to her when she was little as when I was little, and what it was like to grow up in the city.

The day I was allowed to begin doing my own hair was exciting. My father thought my mother should braid my hair forever, and it required a concerted effort between my mother and myself to convince him that I was old enough at eleven to comb my hair myself. I admit that I had some crooked cornrows for a couple weeks, but I felt grown up and that made it worth it. By the time I was thirteen, I had my hair relaxed and wore it long and straight down my back. When I was fifteen, I had over 5 inches of my hair cut off to form the new bob style that most girls were wearing. As my mother watched, she cried in disbelief that I could "cut off all that hair." I explained to her that my hair was simply too hot on my neck when I ran track. The real reason for cutting my hair I see clearly now. At that time, I was being emotionally and verbally abused by my father. I felt that he was trying to control everything in my life, so I took control of the only thing that was mine: my hair.

Three years later, I stand appalled at what I have done to my shoulder-length hair. Having chemically relaxed and electrically curled it, I decided to try to reverse all the damage of five years. When I told my boyfriend that I was letting my relaxer grow out and would wear my hair in braids for the next couple of years, he almost fell over. "Don't change your hair," he argued. "It was one of the first things that attracted me to you. I like it the way it is." "But I don't," I retorted. "I don't even remember the texture of the hair my mother and I struggled over years ago." If it takes me five more years to get *my* hair back, then so be it.

For the past year, I thought this preoccupation with hair was uniquely mine. No one understands why I don't just wear it in a straight bob again, but insist on braids and thickness. However, the literature representing women of marginal cultures shows that hair is universally a strong metaphor for maturity, culture, beauty, sexuality, and control. For oppressed women in a White male society, hair is often the only thing that is their own, that they can control. In *Braids*, Maria Luisa Bombal tells her readers that women do not appreciate their hair. She writes:

> Day by day, proud human beings that we are, we have a tendency to renounce our elemental roots, which accounts for the fact that women no longer appreciate their braids. Being rationalists nowadays, women in cutting off their braids ignore that in effect they are severing ties with those magic currents which issue from the very heart of the earth. (Bombal 67)

A close examination of six novels and short stories can prove Bombal incorrect here. Women are aware of the power in their hair, and often enough, so are their men.

Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* is a novel about Tee, a young girl in the Caribbean, who is left with her Aunt Tantie after her mother's death and father's emigration to England. After winning a scholarship, Tee goes to live with pretentious Aunt Beatrice. She feels confused as she is caught between the Black, middle-class values of Beatrice and the common folk values of Tantie, with whom she spent most of her childhood. The few images of hair in this novel illuminate the metaphors of maturity and rebellion that lie in the hair of women of marginal cultures.

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To be able to manage one's own hair is a symbol of maturity. Many parents and caretakers prefer to do their children's hair as long as possible. In this way, they do not need to acknowledge the fact that their children are becoming adults. When Aunt Beatrice is combing Tee's hair one morning before school, she exclaims: "*Some* children think they are too grown-up; some children think they fell out of the sky, you know, [Tee], some children think they have *no* use whatsoever for anybody but themselves; but never mind, they soon find that they are not needed either. Here is a child who knows what it is to be child" (Hodge 84). Aunt Beatrice is holding Tee up as an example to her own daughters, whom she sees as unruly and rebellious. Her children disrespect and refuse to obey her. She complains to her husband about the way in which her daughters treat her: "You don't hear how these children talk to me Norman .. Norman! Do something!" (Hodge 71) Thus it is no surprise that the author describes her daughters' independence and rebellion as "[The daughters] simply did not allow Auntie Beatrice near their hair" (Hodge 84). Deep down inside, Tee feels as though she is far too old to have someone else comb her hair. She feels as though she is mature enought to manage it herself. Her disgust is manifest:

> And I could manage my own hair, admirably, in fact, Tantie thought — it had been some time since she had stopped combing it for me ... Auntie Beatrice had no right to take possession of my head every morning, even going so far as to tie my bows. I submitted to this, however great my distaste, for with Auntie Beatrice I was disarmed beyond all resistance, in an uncomfortable alien way. It was all I could do to slink into the bathroom every time and there angrily untie and retie my bows. (Hodge 84)

Unlike her cousins, Tee is unable to resist her Aunt Beatrice, though she longs to. She knows she is old enough to take care of her hair, but her aunt refuses to allow her that symbol of maturity. Even though another of Tee's aunts has given her permission to control her own hair, Beatrice tries "to take possession" of what Tee knows is hers to control.

Although taking care of one's own hair symbolizes maturity, and tension often exists when people seek to control another's hair; most women still maintain fond memories of childhood when someone else braided their hair. Tee recalls a time when she was young and carefree. In describing her joy in spending vacations with her grandmother, Tee concludes with a comment about having her hair braided:

> [The children] roamed the yard and swarmed down to the water and played hoop around the breadfruit tree as if we would always be wiry-limbed children whose darting about the sun would capture like amber an fix into eternity. Although [my grandmother] exclaimed upon our arrival each year at how big we'd got ...everything seemed to set in the still, hanging brightness — our games and squabbling; the hens with their heads down scratching about the yard; the agreeableness of sitting clamped between [her] knees having one's hair plaited. (Hodge 18)

While there comes a time when each woman must do her own hair, most enjoy having their hair done by someone else. The fact that someone else has control keeps childhood carefree and innocent.

Camille Yarbrough wrote a children's story called "Cornrows," about African American children who enjoy having their hair braided. The narrator, Sister, pleads with her

great-grandmother to braid her hair, "Fix my hair in braids, Great-Grammaw." The ritual of braiding hair is a time when the culture of the family is passed onto the children. In *Braids*, Maria Luisa Bombal writes that hair is the means by which women express themselves and instill their wisdom in others: "Because the green climbing plants that twine on the trees, the sweet algae clinging to the rocks, are but strands of hair, are the word, the coming and soaring of nature—its happiness and melancholy, the means of expression by which she gently instills her magic and wisdom into all living things" (74). Yarbrough uses "Cornrows" to describe the way in which women instill culture into their children. Sister writes of her great-grandmother's stories and songs with enthusiasm, "Great-Grammaw, tell me a story about cornrowed hair." The song begins:

> Child, come an sit by my knee,
> an I will tell you about your family tree.
> An I will dress yu
> as a prince should be,
> an the right name will come
> to both you an me.
> An I will braid your hair,
> an I will braid your hair...

The great-grandmother continues on with her story, telling Sister about her past and the power of her hair, "There is a spirit which lives inside of you. It keeps on growin. It never dies ... A long time ago, in a land called Africa, our ancient people worked through that spirit. To give life meanin. An through their spirit gave symbols of courage, an honor, an wisdom, an love, an strength. Some symbols took form in braided hair." Hair distinguished people: "You could tell the clan, the village, by the style of hair they wore ... you would know the princess, queen and bride by number of the braid." The story ends with Sister naming the different styles of her braids. Not only is culture transmitted through women's hair, but there is a constant acknowledgment that there is something special in hair.

Most women acknowledge the beauty of their hair. In "Cornrows," Sister's mother displays her hair, aware of its beauty: "Mama's hair was ready, and she stood up and turned around in front of the mirror like she was goin to dance or somethin." In *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, the narrator, Tambudzai, describes the time she spends with her grandmother in the fields of her garden in Zimbabwe. Her grandmother usually used this time to describe the family before it was stricken with poverty. When she describes herself as beautiful, Tambudzai thinks:

> She was not beautiful now, but I loved her, so I was ashamed that she saw me search for the lost beauty. "I wasn't always this old, with wrinkles and grey hair, without teeth. At one time I was as small and pretty and plump as you, and when I grew into a woman I was a fine woman with hair so long you could plait it into a single row down the middle of my head." (Dangarembga 18)

When Tambudzai's grandmother describes her beauty, she must mention her hair, for it is hair that makes women beautiful, especially *long* hair.

A woman's hair is beautiful and sensual. She is so aware of this that when she does not feel beautiful, she will cease to take care of it. "Juletane" by Myriam Warner-Vieyra tells the story of a Caribbean woman raised in Paris who marries an African man, Mamadou, only to be driven insane upon discovering that he already has a wife. Juletane knows in the back of her mind that her hair is pretty. When she is first dating Mamadou, she writes in her journal, "My friends thought me pretty, perhaps I was. I had no idea. I hoped that Mamadou's careful scrutiny would be positive. I had a finely chiseled, oval face, a well proportioned body for my medium height. My long thick hair was neither frizzy nor curly. I wore my hair in braids, one on either side of my head, coiled over my ears" (Vieyra 7). Again, women describe their hair when they are describing their beauty. However, she also admits that she did not really have control over her hair. Her dead godmother did:

*A woman's hair is her essence. She recognizes beauty in the length and thickness of her hair, finds culture and power in her hair, becomes jealous of others' hair, seduces and rebels with her hair.*

> According to certain people, this hairdo made me look like the type of *ingenue* who hardly exists anymore these days. I was an *ingenue*, an ignorant and foolish girl brought up by her godmother, a strict devout old maid. Since her death, a year before, I had been discovering the world. That July I had exchanged my dark severe clothes for little summer dresses, light and low-cut. All the same, I still did not dare to change my hairdo and especially not to cut my

> hair, which would have been a real sacrilege. My godmother would have been capable of coming to pull me by the feet, at night. She had threatened me with that when she was alive. Since I knew nothing about the power of the dead, I preferred not to provoke their anger. So I was satisfied just to admire the latest styles: short hair and permanents. (Vieyra 7)

Despite the new freedom Juletane discovers upon her godmother's death, she still does not change her hairstyle. Two issues about hair come into play here. First, someone tries to control Juletane and uses her hair as the medium for doing so. We know that her godmother is not only strict, but has "threatened" Juletane about her hair, instilling enough fear in her that Juletane dares not change it. Secondly, Juletane acknowledges that there is something special in her long hair. She writes that to cut her hair would have been a real sacrilege; to end her beauty.

Thus it is no surprise that Juletane's loneliness and depression result in her cutting her hair. She writes in her journal about how horrible it is to live with Mamadou and his other wife. She cannot deal with the fact that she is expected to share her husband, and begins to feel less special and less beautiful. She writes of their relationship: "Mamadou became a different person, a stranger I had just met. I no longer understood his reaction. I was choking with anguish and with unprecedented rage ... Whenever we went out he would introduce me, then forget me in a corner ... by a group of women ... I could not understand this sort of segregation where women seemed to have no importance in a man's life, except for his pleasure or as the mother of children" (Vieyra 24). Since she is unable to bear children, Juletane is useless to Mamadou. She therefore describes her world as "crumbling under her feet" and "strange and irrational" (Vieyra 25).

Finally, Juletane rebels. "I decided I would no longer share Mamadou's bed and I moved into my present room, which had been originally for the children. I cut off all my hair and out on mourning clothes. It was a way of finally crushing any hope that was still left within me" (Vieyra 37). The cutting of her hair reveals the paradoxical duality which characterizes women's hair. Juletane's spirit is broken, which becomes manifest in discarding her most precious possession, her hair. Yet she rebels because she finally takes control of her life: control from her godmother and her husband. She rejects the society that tells her bigamy is acceptable, that long hair is the beautiful norm; she retreats into her own world. As her depression deepens near the end of the novel and her insanity becomes more severe, she looks into a mirror and describes her hair as "never having grown back" (Vieyra 66). Her hair never grows back because she never again feels the security and beauty that she once felt with Mamadou. Yet she never allows him to control her again either. When women feel unloved and powerless, this distress is often reflected in the treatment of their hair—they neglect to take care of it. Conversely, they can often take back control of their lives by controlling their hair. These connections are evident in the sensual tales of *Final Mist* and *Wide Sargasso Sea.*

*Final Mist,* by Maria Luisa Bombal, is about a woman who is locked into an unromantic marriage as the second wife of her cousin, Daniel. She lives most of her married life dwelling on a one-time affair with a stranger. The story is filled with affairs and sensual images of hair while also playing on the theme of control.

There are three affairs which occur in *Final Mist.* The first one mentioned is that between the woman's husband's brother's wife and a friend. Our narrator discovers this relationship accidentally:

> I enter the salon through a side door facing the bed of rhododendrons. In the shadows two figures separate, disentangling so abruptly that Regina's tousled long hair catches on the stranger's coat button. Astonished, I can only stare. Felipe's wife fixes me with an angry expression. Her companion, a tall, dark-haired boy, bends over very calmly and unravels her long black locks, then moves his mistress' head from his chest. (Bombal 8)

There are two references to Regina's long hair within one short paragraph. The narrator's fascination with the beauty of Regina's hair is stronger than her horror at the affair itself. The narrator admires Regina's beauty again when she is napping:

> Her face is smooth, the contours of her cheekbones softened, and her skin glows like polished ivory. I go to her. I never knew that a human being could be so beautiful in repose .. I imagine her asleep like this, lying on lush carpets in a rich warm room where the floating perfume of women's hair and cigarette smoke combine to suggest some exotic mysterious life. (Bombal 11)

This is the first time the writer makes a bold reference to the exotic and sexual aspect of women's hair. Regina lives the exciting sexual life that the narrator wishes for. This is until Regina becomes very ill after attempting to kill herself. Her

husband says coldly, "They found her in her lover's house" (Bombal 39). When the narrator sees Regina she says, "Regina looks so ugly that she seems another person. They have cut her hair. The once long and luxuriant locks are straight and stringy: hanging gracelessly halfway down her neck, bathed in sweat" (Bombal 44). The cutting of Regina's hair symbolizes the end of her bold sexual affair, and her loss of control over her life. When she attempts suicide, she has lost her desire to live; the hair that symbolizes so much of her life must be sacrificed as well. The narrator has a frightening vision of the attempted suicide: "I imagine her clinging to a man, fearing to fall into the abyss that is opening beneath her ... I conjure up a momentary picture of her terrified lover holding in his trembling fingers two blood-spattered braids severed with one sharp coupling of scissors" (Bombal 45).

*Men also seem to recognize the power in women's hair; it is through her hair that he seeks to control her. Yet she desires to have control of her hair.*

The narrator also has a mental affair with Regina's lover—an affair born of her own jealousy of Regina's more exciting life, the "exotic and mysterious life" that comes from the "floating perfume of women's hair." After discovering Regina and her lover for the first time, the narrator looks at her own hair and thinks, "In front of my mirror in my room I loosen my hair, my hair which is also dark. There was a time when I wore it unbound, hanging just above my shoulders. Very straight and close to my temples, it shone like silk, shaped (as I imagined then) like a warrior's helmet—which I am sure would have delighted Regina's lover" (Bombal 8). She wishes that she had worn her hair long and beautiful as she believes it once was. Her beauty is in her hair, and she is certain that if she had continued to wear her hair down, she would emanate a sexuality that would grant her an affair. After Regina has attempted suicide, the narrator acknowledges that she is jealous of Regina's hair and the sexual adventure it grants her:

> And suddenly I feel hatred for Regina; feel envious of her suffering, her tragic love affair ... There comes over me a furious desire to grab her and shake her till her teeth rattle, demanding to know what she has to complain about, she who has everything!—love, the dizzying violence of passion, and the great deliverance that comes like a calm when the storm of sex has passed (Bombal 45).

However, the narrator is not allowed to wear her hair as she pleases. Her husband controls that aspect of her life. Living in the memory of his first wife, he forces her to wear her hair up: "My husband made me tie up my extravagant mane, because I must try in every way to imitate his first wife—who, according to him, was a perfect woman" (Bombal 8). Men also seem to recognize the power in women's hair; it is through her hair that he seeks to control her. Yet she desires to have control of her hair. The narrator feels her own hair was beautiful, that it was one of the things that made her attractive: "It pains me to see that my hair has lost that subtle red tint that used to give off a strange glow whenever I moved my head. The color is fading; it will grow duller day by day from now on. And before it loses its brilliance, its violence, there will be no one to tell me that I have lovely hair" (Bombal 8). She knows that losing control of her hair will be the end of her, making her days grow duller and duller.

The final affair of the novel, and the most sensuous, is the one between the narrator and a mysterious man she meets in the middle of the night. This is when her beauty and her hair finally receive the recognition that she feels they deserve. The first thing the stranger does is "unbind [her] hair then start to undress [her]." He wants to release all of her sensuality first. She finishes the encounter, "I submit to his hands, silent but with a beating heart. I burn with the need for him to see me naked, for my lovely body at last to receive the homage it deserves. I cry out impatiently when his fingers lose their way in the fabric" (Bombal 16). The fact that the stranger lets her hair down first illustrates that men also recognize the sensuality of women's hair.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys is another novel in which hair is used as a sexual image and a manifestation of a woman's loss of control. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of Rochester's first wife extended from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Antoinette, a white Creole in the Caribbean, marries Rochester and his cruelty toward her drives her insane. Rochester takes Antoinette back to England with him where he locks her up until her death. When Rochester first meets Antoinette through an arranged marriage in Jamaica, he describes her beauty, mentioning her hair: "He realized how beautiful she was. Her hair was combed away from her face and fell smoothly far below her waist. He could see the red and gold lights in it" (Rhys 80). Like the stranger in *Final Mist,* Rochester likes taking her hair down and admiring it. One morning after a passionate night, he thinks, "Her hair was plaited and she wore a fresh white chemise. I turned to take her in my arms, I meant to undo the careful plaits, but as

I did, [we were interrupted]" (Rhys 84). Antoinette had long dark hair that was beautiful and captivating. The relationship between Antoinette and Rochester was sexual at its best. Rochester once recalls an encounter: "One afternoon the sight of a dress which she'd left lying on her bedroom floor made me breathless and savage with desire. When I was exhausted I turned away from her and slept, still without a word or caress. I woke and she was kissing me—soft light kisses" (Rhys 93). Rochester's captivation with Antoinette's hair almost never ends.

When almost all pleasure from their relationship is gone, Antoinette goes to her obeah friend and asks her to help them. In an arranged romantic encounter, Rochester reflects, "She poured wine into two glasses and handed me one but I swear it was before dark that I longed to bury my face in her hair as I used to do" (Rhys 137). The first memory he has about the sexual encounters which had ceased up to this point is her hair. Antoinette's hair contained something mysterious and sexually powerful.

Rochester acknowledges that he is attracted to Antoinette's hair, yet its beauty evokes jealousy in others. He has an affair with one of her servants, Amelie. After the one-night affair, he remembers her saying, "Do you like my hair? Isn't it prettier than hers?" (Rhys 148). Amelie was jealous of Antoinette's hair and her husband. She was able to have Antoinette's husband for one night, but she insists on knowing if it was because of her hair. Women desire beautiful hair so much that they even find themselves envious of one another's. The power and meaning of hair to a woman cannot be over-emphasized.

Antoinette eventually loses touch with the world. Driven to insanity by Rochester, she drinks excessively and rants and raves. All she wanted was a man to give her the stability, security, and attention that she lacked in her childhood. Once Rochester mocked her family history, slept with Amelie, and started calling her "Bertha," she was unable to handle life. Rochester denies her identity and this rejection becomes evident in her hair. He hadn't seen her for a while because she had been nursed by her childhood friend. When he is able to see her, he is appalled: "The door of Antoinette's room opened. When I saw her I was too shocked to speak. Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen" (Rhys 146). Antoinette had stopped taking care of her hair. The control she lost over her life resulted in the way she stopped caring for her hair. She once perfumed it to entice Rochester. After she stops caring about her own life and stops trying to please Rochester, she is described in wild and beastly terms. Rochester describes her while still in the Caribbean: "Then she cursed me comprehensively, my eyes, my mouth, every member of my body, and it was like a dream in the large unfurnished room with the candles flickering and this red-eyed *wild-haired* stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me" (Rhys 148, emphasis mine). The hair that was once smooth with highlights is now "wild-haired." He can no longer see the beauty in her. He knows that she is going insane. He describes the inevitable process using her hair, "She'll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She'll not care who she's loving). She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would–or could.... A lunatic who always knows the time. But never does" (Rhys 165).

Antoinette continues to be described by her unkempt hair. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane sees Antoinette and describes her in these terms: "A fierce cry seemed to give the life to her favorable report: the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet" (Bronte 321). When Antoinette jumps from the top of Rochester's home, an observer notes,"I saw her and heard her with my own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair; we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood ... she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement" (Bronte 453). But when the truth is told from Antoinette's perspective in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she describes the jump as a majestic flight: "The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped over those hard stones" (Rhys 190). Antoinette sought freedom from the oppression of living with Rochester through her hair. Her hair became her wings. She thought it would hold her up.

A woman's hair is her essence. The literature proves it. She recognizes beauty in the length and thickness of her hair, finds culture and power in her hair, becomes jealous of others' hair, seduces and rebels with her hair. Men also know that hair is beautiful, sensual, and powerful. When they seek to control their women, it is either directly through their hair or reflected in their hair. There are times when she takes control of her life, and that, too, is shown in her hair. These women often come from oppressed cultures but are able to seek solace and comfort in their hair. My story is not unique. My struggle is not unique. And my desire to have what once naturally emanated from my roots is not unjustified. Maria Luisa Bombal summarizes the symbolism of hair well:

> Because a woman's hair springs from the most profound and mysterious source, whence is born the first trembling seed of life-evolving therefrom to struggle and grow among many entangling forces, thrusting through the vegetal surface into the air and on upwards to the privileged forehead of its choice (67).

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