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Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*: A Probe into the Hard Lives and Hardy Spirits of Afro-American Women

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Abstract

Gloria Naylor is a key voice in the rich outpouring of literature by African-American women in the 1980s and 1990s. Her novels dramatize issues of community, connection and identity, often through their focus on powerful but careworn women who tend to be the culture bearers for their community. Naylor's portrayal of women, their relationships, and their battles represent the same intense struggle all human beings face in their quest for long and happy lives. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* depicts the black-on-black oppression much in the same tradition of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* and Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, for example. In the novels of Gloria Naylor suffering becomes an environment which is identified with the collective fate of the community while pride is what inspires her individual characters to pursue their separate dreams.

Keywords

Gloria Naylor; *The Women of Brewster Place*; Afro-American Women.

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Historically, black narrative literature has been devoted to portraying whites oppressing blacks and the blacks surviving and struggling to overcome that oppression. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* depicts the black-on-black oppression much in the same tradition of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* and Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, for example. In these novels, all the sympathetic characters are women. "Women squabble; women support, women love, and women heal each other..." (6). In the novels of Gloria Naylor suffering becomes an environment which is identified with the collective fate of the community while pride is what inspires her individual characters to pursue their separate dreams.

The Black women suffered from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and a pronounced gender bias. No other social group has been subjected to the worst kinds of exploitation and oppression. They were forced to endure the horrors of slavery and as a worker she was the object of continuous exploitation, occupying the lowest place on the wage scale and restricted to the most filthy and uncreative jobs. As a woman her

physical image was defamed and became the target of white man's lust. A well-known scientist Calvin Hernton has described the position and fate of the black women thus:

The Negro women through the years have suffered (and endured) every sexual outrage (withal of the psychological ramifications) that a democratic society can possibly inflict upon the human -being. The sexual atrocities that the Negro women has suffered in the united states, south and North and what these atrocities have done to her personality as a female creature is a tale more bloody and brutal that most of us can imagine. (123)

Black women have tried to gain their lost humanity and collective and individual self through their art and literature. They have also succeeded in establishing themselves as writers and creative artists of reputation. Many black women writers have provided a great deal of space to the problems of black women's life and existence in their writing.

Naylor portrays *The Women of Brewster Place* as a novel of seven stories which focuses on different women who experience and endure conflicts within themselves and as the result of their interaction with others. One may also suggest that the central characters and themes are fused into one entity, and that the novel characterizes the struggles of not one, but seven black women, who in the common setting, have different versions of their confrontations with racism and sexism. These seven women constitute the major characters or protagonists of this literary work, and their struggle comprises the theme of the novel.

The novel focuses on the Brewster Place and the black women who live in this locality in the form of community. To give homogeneity to their

living, Naylor describes the “coloured daughters” of *Brewster Place* as follows:

Where they stood together - hands on lips, straight backed, rounded -bellied, high-behind women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed their strong teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshipped, and shared their men... They were hard- edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster place. (WBP 4-5)

The novel addresses the issues of human relations in a racial context in advanced capitalism. On closer examination it can be seen that this destiny is an extension of the capitalistic framework of modern American society which corrupts individual dreams. By placing her individual characters in such graphically defined geographic settings, Naylor has been able to bring out the dialectic of contradictions that exists between the separate dreams pursued by the members of the community and its collective destiny which is in the hands of historic forces. The very factors which contribute toward the economic progress of the Blacks undermine their identity.

Commenting on the moral issues raised by the chapter “The Two” Naylor has commented:

Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian; they raped her because she was a woman. And, regardless of race, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience. When you reduce that down in this society even to something as abysmal as rape, there is no difference between women. (36)

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the women support one another, counteracting the violence of their fathers, boyfriends, husbands and sons.

All the women in the novel are alienated from their families, other people and God. Gloria Naylor tries to project black women's predicament in America and delineates the way they become aware about themselves and their life. She stresses that African Americans must maintain their identity in the world dominated by whites. Thus, living in Brewster Place partly defines who the women are, and becomes an important part of personal history. The story is replete with the feelings of passion, symbolic overtones, protest, discrimination foisted on the blacks of Brewster Place from the mainstream of life of the city by the wall at the end of the street. Naylor is a tragic artist who feels that only a revolution in consciousness can save the black community from imminent disaster.

The closed- mindedness in this case of the residents is an obvious example such “human stupidity”. Naylor must understand that the difference between individuals should push them away from each other; if the differences cannot be used to enhance the relationship, then they should at least be ignored. In this novel, Mattie and Etta Mae Johnson were sexually exploited. Cora Lee, to fulfil her lustrous desires, begets many children. Kiswana's mother was the mistress of a white master. To keep her husband with herself Ciel aborts her baby. Lorraine and Theresa are lesbians. Though, most of the women are debased by the male tyrants, the women form a community and at the end of each chapter they seek identity within themselves. Mattie, deserted by her father and finally by her son seeks her identity in the Brewster place.

Etta, like Mattie was outplayed by a man with whom she involved. It is at her last stage Etta understands that she must depend on her own for salvation. Cora Lee, at the end understood her follies and decides to lead a life with her children. Ceil, having been rescued by Mattie, decides to live after her husband's separation from her. Thus, at the end of their chapters

the women realize her plight to seek to live a better life. Also, at the end, the community of women joins together to dismantle the wall. It indicates that, they want to break the barriers that separate them from the rest of the city and seek their communal identity. In one of her interviews Naylor speak that she can relate herself with the women of Brewster place since the idea for this novel comes out of her own personal diary. She shares:

The novel began with my using in an odd way the sort of confessional writing that I began with in my diary. I was going to Brooklyn college at that point, and because of a relationship, I was going through a personal moment of pain: I just felt I was going to die. So I said to myself, what could make another woman hurt the way I'm hurting? That's when I invented "Lucielia" Louise Turner.

Recent critical discussions on mothers and motherhood in novels by Afro-American women writers have largely participated in feminist dialogue concerning mothers and daughters. The discussions of maternity in Afro-American women's fiction have departed from European archetypes, comparing fictional characters to mothers in actual Afro-American families and attributing their strength to economic, political and cultural circumstances. The novels often combine two elements: a positive model of maternity (or female leadership) and a trace of magic or supernatural. Surreal elements in novels may be read as a sign of an African presence, while the mother figures may be viewed as expressions of a conception of female authority derived from West African women's traditions. Such a reading exposes what is distinctively female and African. In doing so, it complements much contemporary criticism of literature by Afro-American women which focuses on feminist and Afro-American aspect of texts.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (1991) traces black American women's West African heritage, considering the importance of other mothers" and strong maternal leaders. She asserts that female bonding is further evident in an "ethics of caring" (215) derived from African traditions. By developing her stories around strong women who are influenced by African traditions, Gloria Naylor succeeds in presenting an alternative to the dominant culture's representations of black women. With reference to black women's writings, Nnaemeka argues, "The texts discuss women's solidarity as an issue of survival; solidarity among women offers a safety net and a breath of fresh air in a suffocating, constraining environment" (19). The experiences Black women writers depict in their texts may reflect the lives of black women. Naylor asserts in an interview:

I wanted to write a book that reflect the diversity and the richness of the black female experience in America-and no one woman could do that for me, and no one geographical location could do that for me. That's when the idea got born that Brewster Place would be a microcosm of American society, that on that street would come all of these different women, and what they would share would be that wall. I varied the characters as much as I possibly could. I varied their skin colour - they move from alabaster to ebony--varied their religious beliefs, their political beliefs, their social classes. (36)

Brewster place is largely a community of women ; men are mostly absent or itinerant, drafting in and out of their women's lives, leaving behind the pregnancies and unpaid bills. The women who live in Brewster place are drawn together because they live on the same dead end street and also because they share a common fate. The dreams of Brewster's

inhabitants are what keep them alive. The dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection.

Naylor is a revolutionary artist who feels that only a revolution in consciousness can save the black community from imminent disaster. If the choice is between the soul and success she wants the black community to select the soul. She wants her people to struggle to keep their dreams from going sour or getting polluted. She would like her community to suffer to keep their pride. Naylor summed up her views in these words in an interview:

For the Afro-Americans, regardless of where you climb on the ladder of success there will be racism. Under these conditions, if you give up what centers you, what is unique in you, then you are lost. The greatness of this country is the uniqueness of its people. But there is pressure to amalgamate and that is suicidal when it happens to the Afro-American. (54)

Thus, within the context of *Brewster Place*, these seven women tell stories of their passions, disappointments, frustration and their struggles, tragedies and triumphs with a pride.

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