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FEMININITY AND SOCIETY CULTURE IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts at studying Gloria Naylor's two works, The Women of Brewster Place and Mama Day through Black Feminist Perspectives in order to discuss motherhood and its connections to African models of female leadership. It indicates Naylor's different viewpoints in these two novels: the first novel tries to show obsessed women who suffer in male-dominated society and a strong bond which keeps them alive. These women are in a constant state of struggle in their lives to find their identities. In the second novel, natural forces and ancestral powers connect these women together. Brewster Place offers women close relationship with each other and Willow Springs offers a setting for a healing community with roots in female folk tradition and nature. However, these black women take refuge in cooperating and feeling sympathy for each other to assuage their sufferings and to find a way for their plight in dire and desperate situations through an intimate relationship, sharing their experiences with each other and using powers of intuition and nature.

KEYWORDS: Motherhood, Community, Cooperation, Nature, Intuition, Female Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

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 aspects 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 "ethic 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 (1997) 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

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gloria Naylor, in her novels *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Mama Day* (1988) notices the special bond that exists between women characters, including women of different generations. In each novel, a community of women emerges—sustaining, enabling, and enriching the lives of each other. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor indicates the women's sense of isolation, their mistreatment by men and their search for identity through shared experiences. Nnaemeka (1997) states,



"Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves" (19). And in *Mama Day*, according to Andrews (1989), these bonds confer "identity, purpose, and strength for survival". In addition, he sees Naylor as moving into the realm of "matriarchal mythmaking" in *Mama Day*, with the real power in the novel coming from folktradition, nature, and "fore mothering" (2). As Lamothe (2005) says, "Naylor longs for a lost connection with a past place and time as central to and even crucial to the construction of modern, urban African Americans' identities".

The Women of Brewster Place is almost entirely about women. In this "novel in seven stories", Naylor focuses on a number of black women who share the common experience of living on a dead end street called Brewster Place. As Naylor (1982) states, "These women come from a variety of backgrounds, with individual goals and dreams; they experience, fight against and sometimes transcend—the fate of the black women in America today" (Book Cover). The black women experience oppression in their relationships with the men in their lives. They defend themselves against their men as well as the white society. They share common concerns, such as the raising of children and these women centered communities are defenses against sexism and racism, in other words against the abuses that are inflicted on black women.

In *Mama Day*, both the contemporary and the historical bonds between women are important, for, relating to the past helps make possible a connection in the present. As Willis (1987) says, "For black women, history is a bridge defined along motherliness" (6). Here the female community becomes empowered by natural forces and religious traditions in the coastal island community of Willow Springs. In this novel, the bond between women is not because of their isolation, abuse at the hands of men or loss of identity in the white and black bourgeois worlds. It is a force that transcends particulars and is allied to nature itself. The historical connection runs from the legendary free spirit who founded the community, Sapphira Wade, through Miranda (*Mama Day*) to her niece, Ophelia. This connection among women is related to nature through Miranda's extraordinary powers of intuition, magic, and fertility as well as through the cyclical sense of time that pervades the island community. At the climax of the novel, this form of sisterhood is affirmed and strengthened. At the same time, sisterhood can still be jeopardized by the seductions of modern America and the evil and divisive jealousies of someone like Ruby, who nearly succeeds in killing Ophelia with night shade poison.

Gloria Naylor: Gloria Naylor (1950-) is a leading African American novelist. She is well known also as an essayist, screenplay writer, columnist, and educator. Naylor once recalled: Growing up in the North in integrated schools, I wasn't taught anything about Black history or literature. When I



discovered that there was this whole long literary tradition of Black folk in this country, I felt I had been cheated about of something. I wanted to sit down and write about something that I hadn't read about and that was all about me – the Black woman in America (qtd. in Goldstein).

A Verbal Picture of Human Existence:

Gloria Naylor's individual stories in the novel are loosely connected and are gripping, moving and completely believable. Anyone who reads the novel can appreciate a vivid verbal picture of human existence, and won't mind if those pictures are not especially happy ones. They would find Naylor's portraits deeply rewarding and moving. *Bailey's Café* is a collection of deeply moving personal stories from (mainly) women deeply scarred by life. Author Gloria Naylor reveals an extraordinary ability to imagine, create and relate the stories of half dozen people nearly destroyed by their pasts, yet getting some glimmer of hope in Eve's boarding house, arrived at via *Bailey's Café*.

A Series of Loosely Connected Stories:

The novel itself is comprised of a series of loosely connected stories - each one from a different woman's point of view and it culminates with a magically real, communal celebration of the birth of Mariam's son George during the Christmas season.

Narration by Bailey: The novel is narrated by Bailey – not really his name, but when he and his wife, Nadine, took over the run-down café called *Bailey's*, he was stuck with name by his customers. It was 1948 and

Bailey, a Negro WWII vet and avid fan of baseball, especially the Negro pro league, is the richest character of the book. Since he narrates the story and sets the stage for the other characters to reveal their lives to us, there is a tendency to think of him as the author. That led to a special appreciation of Naylor's considerable ability to make us think that fanatic male in 1948 could be the author herself. In addition to the powerful characterization of Bailey, her historical accuracy and sensibility are also noteworthy.

The Locale and Characters: Bailey's Café is set in a run-down neighborhood of Chicago. Down the street is Eve's boarding house. Women don't go to Eve's and take a room, but find their way there, and may be invited by Eve, if and only if she thinks the boarding house may be a way-station back into a meaningful existence. Along the way we learn Eve's story herself and some of her boarders. There is Sadie who tries to earn love by being the perfect fulfiller of anyone's needs for order, cleanliness and elegance. Esther, who hides from light to obscure what used to happen to her in the dark cellar of her home. Mary is so beautiful that her life had only one public meaning until she scarred her face. Jesse Bell moves from the slums to the hill top with disastrous results. The Ethiopian, Mariam, suffering genital mutilation and a virgin pregnancy for propriety's sake. And finally Miss Maple, rich well-educated son of a wealthy Negro family, who becomes the transvestite house keeper / bouncer for Eve's home. Bailey's own extraordinary story is thrown in for good measure.



In Search of Authorial Voice: The part of her ongoing search for an authorial voice is to tell - or, rather, retell the experiences of women of color, Naylor chooses to locate her fourth novel within a specifically cultured and gendered context where voice and all of its associations are directed toward subverting the myriad forms of authority, patriarchy, and constructing a new world order among partially dispossessed women world-wide. The novel itself is comprised of a series of loosely connected stories - each one from a different woman's point of view - and it culminates with a magically real, communal celebration of the birth of Mariam's son George during the Christmas season. For the first time not only is there oneness among a culturally diverse group whose traditions and customs span the globe, but the voices of women also unify in the ritualization of George's arrival. George's long-awaited birth, like that of the Messiah, could signal either an end or, hopefully, new beginnings for the pluralistic group present. But in this climactic scene, after conjuring an image of global harmony, Naylor denies the reader/audience the privilege of knowing the fate of the young mother and son: "Does Mariam find acceptance among an American Jewish community? What is to become of George, now en route to Wallace P. Andrews Boys' Home?"

No Satisfactory Ending?: The novel's unresolved closure serves to encourage a participatory involvement from the reader/audience and is a strategy present in much of African American writing. Bailey,

the fatherly World War II veteran and proprietor of the cafe, is unable to offer a satisfactory ending to the moving stories that unfold. Instead, he merely invites the reader/audience to empathize with the women whose tragic tales comprise the written text:

“If this was like that sappy violin music on Make-Believe Ballroom, we could wrap it all up with a lot of happy endings to leave you feeling real good that you took the time to listen,” Bailey informs us in “The Wrap.” But I don't believe that life is supposed to make you feel good, or to make you feel miserable either. Life is just supposed to make you feel.”

Naylor uses Bailey's voice in establishing the time, place, mood, and character for each woman's story, except that of Mariam, a curiously virginal unwed mother whose touching account of anti-Semitism and sexism recreates a vital sisterhood among women of color across the Diaspora who often find themselves at odds with notions of female sexuality prescribed by patriarchy. Ultimately, Naylor's goal as creator and sovereign of the decidedly new fictive cosmology which emerges in the novel's ambiguous climactic scene is to affect some sort of unity among the widely disparate voices of women, not just within but outside the text. Karla Holloway, in her discussion of the responsive strategy of black women's narratives, refers to the technique as “a collective ‘speaking out’ by all the voices gathered within the text, authorial, narrative, and even the implicated reader” (11). Thus,



in retelling Mariam's tale, Eve and Bailey's otherwise reticent help-meet Nadine forms a duet, for the male voice is severely limited in its ability to decode the very private experiences the women relate. Bailey can offer empathy but not immediacy between Mariam, the speaking subject, and the reader/audience.

CONCLUSION

Naylor's particular triumph as a contemporary African American woman writer has much to do with her success at moving beyond the one-dimensional portraits of male figures that brought her criticism with the publication of *The Women of Brewster Place*. Bailey, unlike his fictional predecessors residing at the decaying Brewster, is no mere shadow of a man. He is endowed with a certain psychological depth and complexity of character, despite the ambiguities associated with his assumed name. It is Bailey whose veiled comments offer insight into the close relationship between the written text and the distinctly black oral forms of expression. Gloria Naylor values independence for women, rather than their being controlled by men. She privileges women's connections to other women and establishes a model of family continuity in distinct opposition to the broken Afro-American families found in many other novels. In this positive vision of maternity, two sides of womanhood—the wise, beneficent matriarch and the angry, jealous sexual female—are shown to be inextricably connected. One side acts for the other. Thus,

Naylor's works *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day* reinforce the importance of connections to an African model of female leadership.

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