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A STUDY OF BLACK WOMAN BREWSTER PLACE IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S

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ABSTRACT

*The present paper is an attempt at approaching Gloria Naylor's first volume of short stories by asking and answering the question of Naylor's feminist slant as it comes across in the volume. Gloria Naylor, a strong African American voice of the contemporary period, appeared on the literary scene with the publication of her debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. Her fiction is a testimony to the resilience and adaptability, strengths and struggles, hopes and fears of the black women in the challenging conditions of the American society. These women do not have fairytale endings of perfect lives but neither are they crushed by their very imperfect ones. They survive by maintaining enthusiasm, commitment and resilience in their lives and are able to challenge the established system. They may not live happily ever after but they live on. Naylor emphasizes the need of strong will, bonding with each other, rootedness in their culture and a sense of self-worth in order to exist in the oppressive conditions of a white racist society. She asserts that this journey towards self-fulfillment and self-assertion must be continual and must emerge from one's sense of belongingness. The present paper explores the indomitable spirit of black womanhood that refuses to give in to the acute oppressive and hostile system of a white racist society.*

KEYWORDS: *Gloria Naylor, The Women of Brewster Place, black feminism, stylistic devices.*

INTRODUCTION

Gloria Naylor's fiction depicts how black men and women struggle to survive and succeed in the oppressive world of racism. Her fictional world generally contains portions of her own life and looks more convincing as she is the part of what she writes "that outline did not say that black

was beautiful, it did not say that black was ugly. It said simply: You are. You exist. It reverberated enough to give me courage to pick up the pen. And it's what finally validated me" (171). With a great confidence and authority she writes about the places and the people she is well acquainted with. Naylor's fictional world is singularly a world of black community, and

she selects her characters from its all layers—working to upper class one, and urban North to rural South. The uniqueness of her characters is that they are individuals, capable of controlling, to a certain extent, their own destinies. Her novels bear the literary influence of the women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. As a story teller, Naylor, like other talented authors, has helped shape the course of African American literary tradition during the last three decades. A writer chooses the subject that has touched him/her in some way, through direct experience, or indirect knowledge. No literary work can move the reader unless it embodies the writer's felt experience, something that has stirred his/her soul, forcing expression in words. In a racist society where blacks are dehumanized and degraded on account of their Negroid features, they often feel themselves inferior and are haunted by a nagging sense of self rejection. Being dark and Negroid and therefore treated as inferior sub-human, the blacks often crave for the white standards of superiority in order to make themselves acceptable as human beings. Naylor was deeply concerned for the black women and realized that the complexity of their lives was not being addressed by the writers. She has taken the challenge to write about the complex lives of black women as well as the various exploitative conditions they encounter within or outside their communities only because they are black, women and poor. In a conversation with Toni Morrison, Naylor has clearly stated for Southern Review in 1985 I wrote because I had no choice, but



that was a long road from gathering the authority within myself to believe that I could actually be a writer. The writers I had been taught to love were either male or white And who was I to argue that Ellison, Austin, Dickens, the Brontes, Baldwin and Faulkner weren't masters? They were and are. But inside there was still the faintest whisper: Was there no one telling my story? And since it appeared there was not, how could I presume to? (567-93)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Women of Brewster Place (1982) won the National Book Award for first fiction in 1983. This novel is noted for its portrayal of Black Women's relationship and their search to quench their quest for identity. Naylor's focus in this novel has been on seven women who belong to different class and have different backgrounds but come into contact with one another at a place named Brewster Place. These women have a strong bonding with each other which helps them to endure the brutalities of urban life and supports them to survive despite crushing poverty, personal tragedy and threatening neighborhood.

This novel introduces the privileged Americans to the struggles and sufferings of those who will never see the American Dream because for them 'survival itself' is victory. There are different stories about different women and each story is linked to the next in some way or the other. The novel consists of seven narratives; each about a particular woman character illuminates her present situation, while abundant flashbacks

recapitulate here earlier experiences. These women are the residents of Brewster Place, which according to the author, is ‘the bastard child of several clandestine meetings...’ (1) The first section of the book focuses on the experiences of Mattie Michael who is one of the inmates of Brewster Place. She has spent the early years of her life in Tennessee under the strict vigilance of a doting father who has worked to fulfill all the desires of his daughter. But the moment she ignores her father’s repeated warning against Butch Fuller, she has to face the consequences. Her father, Samuel Michael, after knowing about her pregnancy, first broods over it in a “torturing silence” (19) but soon breaks into a violent rage, battering and bruising the daughter he claims to love. In a patriarchal society, when established moral standards are defied, women are generally the first to be exposed to the firing line. Clinging desperately onto the shreds of their self-respect, some men give way to their baser instincts. The anger and hatred shown towards Mattie, not towards Butch Fuller shows the double standards that operate in male-dominated societies. Mattie is treated only as an object with which family honour is associated, not as a dignified and thinking human being. Her father fails to understand her predicament and treats her badly. It is her mother Fannie who saves her from the physical violence enacted upon her by her father. Fannie cocks the gun aimed for the centre of his chest saying: “Hit my child again and I’ll meet your soul in hell!” (24)



This incident forces Mattie to think about herself and her position in the family. She realizes that she is also a human being and has her own desires and ability to make decisions about her life. Realizing this fact she decides to leave her home and goes to Ashville in North Carolina and works hard to bring up her son Basil all alone, supported only by her inner strength. Through the character of Mattie, Naylor projects the struggle of a black woman, the mother of an illegitimate child, who has the capacity to resist and survive in an environment of poverty, hostility, neglect and racial discrimination. All the three men in her life desert her when she needs them most – Butch does not come forward to share the responsibility as a father, Samuel holds only her responsible for spoiling the name of the family, and Basil runs away from prison when she has arranged the required money for the bond for his release. However, Mattie comes out of these ordeals a little more strengthened, with dignity and with an increased sense of self-awareness and selfassertion. She becomes a woman of substance from a non-entity and as a mother figure helps other women who are in distress. Mattie suffers only because of black men in her life, whereas Etta Mae Johnson suffers due to both white and black. Through her story, Naylor reveals various exploitative conditions encountered by black women in the south and the factors responsible for their migration to north. White men thought it to be their birth right to sexually exploit any black woman at their disposal. She is considered only a thing bereft of any feelings and emotions. Etta

used to live a life full of love, safety, vitality and enthusiasm just like any other young girl. She was not aware of the dangers and harsh realities of the society around her till she came into direct confrontation with them. Etta rejects the sexual advances of a white man which results in the destruction of her father's property with the implied and firm approval of the sheriff, which forces her to leave her home town.

Etta suffers because of white people in her hometown and later because of men of her own community. Racism and sexism compel her to channel her spirit of independence into inauspicious relationship with different men and to move from one city to another in search of a place that would allow her to be herself without restraints. She aspires to get permanence in life and wants to marry Reverend Moreland Woods, a charismatic black preacher but she is seduced by him and then dumped. She is not broken even when she realizes that her heartfelt desire of happy and stable relationship with the man of her choice can never be fulfilled. She supports her life with her strong will to survive and refuses to follow the miserable condition of other black women who are oppressed and mistreated. She asserts herself as an individual having a sense of self-esteem and free will. Mattie and Etta are forced to leave their native places, but Kiswana Browne leaves her home willfully. She is a well-educated girl belonging to a rich black family. She lives in posh Linden Hill, where the life of women is confined and they are insulated from rest of the community.



Kiswana feels suffocated there as she finds herself unable to establish a bond between herself and her black culture while staying there. She is so fond of her roots, culture and community that she rebels against her parents to realize and assert her black hood. She leaves her home and comes to stay at Brewster Place to accomplish this purpose and to share the agony and pain of her people living there. She works for the betterment of the suppressed women in Brewster Place and makes them aware of their rights. She is the force behind the collective decision of women of Brewster Place to fight against their white landlord. She realizes her potential as an individual and mobilizes other women to assert their individuality as respectable human beings. Though in her house Mrs. Browne is an oppressed human being, she shows enough courage to visit the poor neighborhood where her daughter Kiswana stays. She understands the feelings of her daughter but does not support her in her cause because she has no doubt regarding her identity and rejects the narrow concept of blackness. Naylor reveals the consequences of the failure of black men in realizing their American Dream through the story of Lucielia Louse Turner (Ciel). It is observed that when men suffer, their women are also made to suffer along, directly or indirectly. Ciel, a skinny, light coloured beautiful girl is married to Eugene and has a baby girl. When she becomes pregnant with the second child, her husband forces her to abort the child as he finds himself unable to bear the burden of two children. As he moves away in search of a good job and money, she tries

to stop him from going for the sake of their daughter, Serena. During their confrontation Serena goes near an electric socket and puts her finger in it. Ciel loses both her children abruptly—one through an abortion and the other through electrocution. What can be more shocking for a mother than losing her children? But her husband leaves her alone in this stressful situation for greener pastures. She is so shocked that she is traumatized in a death-in life state. With the help of Mattie, who is a mother figure in Brewster Place, Ciel undergoes a mystical birth, one that is spiritual in nature and outside the watchful gaze of male dominated society. This new morning is the self-consciousness that awakens in her after harsh treatment by her husband Eugene. Despite all these adversities, Lucielia Turner shows remarkable resilience and is able to survive. Ultimately she leaves Brewster Place and goes to San Francisco where she finds a new job as well as a reliable man who cares for her. She is ready to take on life with a new perspective of hope and self-confidence.

GENDER, CLASS POWER AND ETHNICITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S

Naylor's first literary work, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), is a celebration of the black female experience, as she focuses on seven African-American heroines who strive and manage to survive in an impoverished and threatening environment. Taking into account that the short-story cycle is gender focused, our investigation will try to reveal to what extent Gloria



Naylor is a feminist and in what way Naylor chooses to deal with/highlight the concept of female gender. It is generally accepted that being a woman writer means having a feminist perspective (or at least a woman's point of view), but it is important to pay attention to the fact that the subject Naylor (as an African-American writer) approaches, the messages she tries to convey, her vantage point, her life experience and her goals in writing stories about women are essentially different from those of the representatives of the Euro-American feminism. In order to have a correct perspective on Gloria Naylor's feminist slant, we begin by trying to locate Naylor as a writer within the general feminist movement in the USA. The feminist movement in the USA was fired by the major emancipation movements of the late 1960s (the civil rights and black power movements), and it was mainly led by and expressed the voices of the middle class white women. For that reason, the experiences, truths, priorities and demands voiced at that particular time could barely coincide with those of the black American women, taking into account that the latter group's plight has always been considerably more complex. African-American women suffered triple oppression most often experienced simultaneously: as race (ethnic group), as class and as gender. For that reason, for African-American women liberation meant: their liberation from the political repression of the race and the improvement of the life of the black community by resisting Eurocentric models and standards, as well as by turning to

authentic Afrocentric ones; their liberation from class politics and limitations; and their liberation from a patriarchal sexist system within the African American community. In light of what is essential for Black feminism, it becomes clear that the attitude of most African-American female writers has been most accurately defined by Alice Walker who adopted the term “womanist ” from black folk expression to signify a black feminist or feminist of color, a woman concerned with the spiritual survival of an entire community: male and female African-American people. Hence, here is what Barbara Smith points out when it comes to approaching the literature of African-American women:

“When Black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's words they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity.”

Another element that underlies the specificity of African-American female writing is the stylistic range. Thus, according to Bambara, in geocentric writing there is a proneness for “the feeling place”, language “finesse”, “handling of children”, “two-plus-two reality”, the universe of “cups, bowls and other [domestic] motifs”,



all of which “fashion a woman's vocabulary to deal with the ‘silences’ of [women’s] lives” (qtd Bell 243). In her introduction to *Midnight Birds*, Mary Helen Washington too agrees that to record their lives “[b]lack women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images”, but “for purposes of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space”

Because Eurocentric stylistic traits and categories cannot be completely and appropriately applied to the fiction of black women writers, an overview of the styles of various texts, as well as the findings of a number of essays on black feminist criticism, have led to conclusion that many black women novelists employ to a greater or lesser degree the following structural and stylistic elements:

“(1) motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression; (2) black female protagonists; (3) spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity; (4) a centrality of female bonding or networking; (5) a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community; (6) deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions; (7) iconography of women's clothing; and (8) black female language.”

In what follows we will try to identify the elements discussed above as they come across in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and the context of Naylor’s literary production. First of all, with this

volume it became clear that, although Naylor, as a woman writer, chose from the onset of her career to reclaim the stories of black women she felt had been largely excluded from written history, she still could not separate herself from the entire black community, which means that she offered a fine observation of the entire community of men and women. In 1992, in the TV interview series titled *In Black and White* directed and produced by Matteo Bellinelli, she expressed her desire to “help us celebrate voraciously that which is ours,” stressing that African-Americans, irrespective of gender, must maintain their identity in a world dominated by the Eurocentric representatives. Seven years later, in the PBS series on African-American culture *I’ll Make Me a World*, she declared:

“I am a black female writer and I have no qualms whatsoever with people saying that I’m a black female writer. What I take umbrage with is the fact that some might try to use that identity - that which is me - as a way to ghettoize my material and my output. I am female and black and American. No butts are in that identity. Now you go off and do the work to somehow broaden yourself so you understand what America is really about. Because it’s about me.”

It is true that in her written work (not only in *The Women of Brewster Place*) she has mainly addressed and redressed the representation of women within the large context of the contemporary American literary landscape, but she also revised codes of power, dominance, and assertion on all



three axes: gender, race and class. Both her work and her interviews prove that in approaching the unique experience of African-American women she has raised feminist issues, but she did it without the sloganism specific to European or Euro-American feminists. Although, racial themes are not necessarily of interest in *The Women of Brewster Place*, the volume is based on a major reference to racial issues and the consequences of class dominance in the USA. This is the description of the place itself, Brewster, a dead end street that the rest of the world has forgotten, an impoverished run-down isolated tenement neighborhood, home in the 1970s to a community of underprivileged African-Americans. The Brewster Place has undergone birth, maturation, aging, and death, all of them at the hand of the WASP politicians and decision makers in the city council. At the time the narrated events are set, the street is waiting for its demise, while watching its last generation of children, the African-Americans who “came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason” (4) being “torn away from it by court orders and eviction notices” (191), but the place is “too tired and sick to help them” (idem). On the other hand, by making Brewster Place, a dead end street, the author had it cleverly disconnected from the business of the city by the wall, which allowed her to focus on the domestic everyday lives of her Afro-American characters fairly untouched by whites.

The most important black feminism mark of the book is its range of protagonists. The

volume demonstrates that Gloria Naylor's favorite characters are women, Afro-American ones. Her women are all engaged in tough struggles to maintain balance, their human dignity and emotional integrity in an impersonal sexist, classicist and racial world. All of her women are struggling to survive as African-Americans in a white-dominated class-divided society, but most importantly, as women in a male-dominated environment. According to the list of characteristics of black feminism quoted above, female characters of color are supposed to undergo "spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity" (qtd Bell 137). Unfortunately, Gloria Naylor's world does not offer such chance at growth and reinvention to its female representatives. With the exception of Kiswana Browne (who is not at all underprivileged), and maybe Lucielia Louise Turner (although her actual progress after leaving Brewster Place is never revealed), all the others have had their dreams shattered, their spirit and courage to transcend the circumstances of their unhappy pasts broken, and have nothing to look forward to except bleak futures. The fourth point on the list is female bonding and networking. A great emphasis is placed on female bonding in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Each female character having experienced pain and profound grief at the hands of a man/ men in their lives (fathers, lovers, husbands and sons) manages to find strength in her ties with at least another women. Men come, destroy hopes for a better future and go. It is the network of women in the community who



stay and pick up the pieces. The most important example in this respect is Mattie Michaels relationships with women. Living now in the last place her destiny will ever bring her (the desolate Brewster Place), Mattie, just like Miss Eva in the former's youth, puts her kindness, support and wisdom at the service of the other women in the block, becoming their healer, educator, mother, and confidante. When Lucielia Louise Turner (her niece) loses her young daughter Serena (the only thing she has ever loved without pain) and shuts herself from the world craving to die, Mattie rocks Lucielia in her arms and takes her "back into the womb" (103) to create a new birth for her. She takes Lucielia to the source of her pain – "they found it - a slight sliver of a splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin" (104) – and helps her remove the pain – "the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal" (idem). After that she baths Lucielia and puts to bed, in a final act of maternal care.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the answer to the first question in the introduction is that Gloria Naylor is an authentic feminist writer, but she is the kind of feminist situated within the boundaries of a more complex and specific feminism, as it is understood by Afro-American women exclusively. Her primary concern in *The Women of Brewster Place* is to represent a

range of African American women in their struggle to gain dignity and autonomy as human beings, their plight being complicated by the fact that their lives are indirectly conditioned by the factors of class and race, and directly oppressed by the gender factor. The fact that almost all eight criteria of black feminism quoted by Bell are met in Naylor's first cycle of short-stories makes the volume a valuable contribution to the widespread efforts occurring during the 1980s and 1990s to revise the codes of power, dominance, and assertion present in a male literature, and portray and give a voice to the women of color from an inside perspective.

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