

EXPLORATION OF BLACK FEMALE IDENTITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

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Abstract:

*Gloria Naylor is one of the well known African-American novelists. Besides, she is known as an essayist, screenplay writer, columnist and educationist. She is widely recognized for her strong depiction of black women not in the light of allotted traditional roles to them by the society but as an individual. In this respect, she has followed the Afro-American literary tradition in the truest sense and skillfully explored the world of black female experience. In an interview with Toni Morrison, she explains the motto of her writing. In this direction, she has made her first literary attempt by publishing her first National Book Award winning novel *The Women of Brewster Place* which highlights the diverse experiences of seven black women in a hostile environment of her triple oppression: racial, gender and sexual that arises a conflict making them aware of their power and self-identity. The present research paper attempts to explore the question of black female identity through the projection of black woman's predicament and the depiction of woman to woman contact as a redemptive force in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. Here, Naylor asserts the need of black sisterhood to revert to the racism, patriarchal dominance and sexual exploitation.*

Keywords: *Exploration, conflict, identity, black sisterhood, triple oppression, redemption.*

Introduction:

Gloria Naylor is one of the well known African-American novelists. Besides, she is known as an essayist, screenplay writer, columnist and educationist. She is widely acknowledged for her strong depiction of black women. Through her novels she has portrayed the aspects of a female identity. She treats women not in the light of allotted traditional roles to them by the society but as an individual. In this respect, she has followed the Afro-American literary tradition in the truest sense and skillfully explored the world of black female experience. In an interview with Toni Morrison, she explains the motto of her writing, "I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a black woman and my perspective as a woman in general had been under represented in American Literature" (*Southern Review* 569). In this direction, she has made her first literary attempt by publishing her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982 and winning the National Book Award for the same in 1983. The novel highlights the diverse experiences of seven black women in a hostile environment of her triple oppression-racial, gender and sexual that arises a conflict through which they become aware of their power and self-identity. The present research paper attempts to explore the question of black female identity through the projection of black woman's predicament and the depiction of black sisterhood as a redemptive force in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Materials and Methods:

The present research article is based on Gloria Naylor's interview with Toni Morrison published in *Southern Review*. Moreover, it refers to the theoretical perspectives of black feminism. The methods of

analysis and interpretation are used to analyze Naylor's statement in the interview regarding the motto of her writing and the two meanings of the term 'exploration' from *New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* are used with reference to her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Discussion:

Conflict plays a pivotal role in one's life, especially in the life of African American females and consequently in the writings of African American females. *Encyclopedia of Literary Terms* defines conflict in a work of fiction as “the issue to be resolved in the story that usually occurs between two characters, the protagonist and the antagonist, or between the protagonist and society or the protagonist and himself or herself”. Being a victim of triple oppression, the female protagonists of Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* undergo these three forms of conflict. The first two are external, whereas the last is an internal making them ready to explore the question of self-identity.

New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the term 'exploration' in two ways as “the act of travelling through a place in order to find out about it or look for something in it” and “an examination of something in order to find out about it”(537). Here, the researcher aims at analyzing *The Women of Brewster Place* by taking into account these two meanings which are more apt in the present context. According to the first meaning, the writer takes us to the world of black community which consists of black men and women called as Brewster Place. It is the place named after the black women. Men are at the subordinate position and black women play a vital role in this world which is established by them. Therefore, Naylor states in its prologue titled as “Dawn” (1), “Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home” (4). In the context of the second meaning, after exploring the world of Brewster Place, the writer examines it carefully and completely in order to explore the black female identity and makes us to reflect upon the life of black women, when Naylor states, “They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story” (5). Just like their creator, the characters of this novel are also explorers who travelled to this unknown land in search of their own identity and the fulfillment of their dream which is commonly shared by them all. These black women have explored this land of Brewster which is at the outskirts of the main city with a brick wall. So, this brick wall functions as a boundary line between the world of frustration and hope where they try to establish their identity and find a relief for their sufferings and oppression in the hands of their black men. Here, they try to resolve their conflict in the mind. It is the conflict which prepares them for this exploration. This explored land serves to them as an epitome of hope, optimism and redemption for their predicament and oppression. It is the place which makes them conscious to reflect upon their position as a female and moreover as a black female. It makes them to think about their status, factors that are responsible for their lamentable plight, the other co-sufferers like them and how to overcome their sufferings. After trying to find out answers to these questions, they try to establish their own identity and rediscover themselves.

These black women through their physical contact explore the world of sufferings of their sisterhood and help each other to get rid of this world of sorrows, woes and pains. Its best illustration is the character of Mattie Michael who is helped by the old woman Miss Eva Turner and Etta Mae Johnson, while searching a shelter for herself and particularly for her baby. Later on, being a nurturing agent, Mattie occupies a central role in the life of her other black sisters such as Etta Mae Johnson, Luciella Turner and Lorraine. So, this is the black sisterhood which makes them to free themselves physically and emotionally from the trap of tyrant white as well as black men. Hence, it is the woman to woman contact which functions as a redemptive force. Naylor depicts Brewster place as a black community primarily held together by black women through their sisterhood.

'Body' plays an important role in the life of black woman which traces back her history when she has her identity depending upon her body as the greatest powerful source of bridling to create more and more slaves at service of her white master and it is the only way to have a physical contact with her own

black man. It means that both these white and black men are interested only in her body rather than her mind. Therefore, she confronts a sexual exploitation. During a sex with Reverend Woods, Etta realizes that "...They were all the same, all meshed together into one lump that rested like an iron ball on her chest" (72). Her body makes her conscious about her secondary place being only an object of sexual gratification and she tries to explore her identity.

Moreover, the structure of the novel contributes to the sense of exploration as the writer herself describes *The Women of Brewster Place* as a novel in seven stories. There are seven chapters and each chapter explores a different woman having diverse experience of racism and sexism. These seven women are the major protagonists of this literary work and their struggle forms the theme of the novel and this struggle makes them to explore their identity not in the traditional set up but as an individual. Brewster Place is the last stop on the road to the bottom in American society where black women live as they can't afford to anywhere else. It is the sign of their poverty, economical helplessness and lack of education. Still, they strive to retain their identity as a black woman. The place is described as "the dead-end street" (2) and the black women form their community. To give homogeneity to their living, Naylor describes these coloured daughters and the place as follows:

Nutmeg arms leaned over windowsills, gnarled ebony legs carried groceries up double flights of steps and saffron hands strung out wet laundry on back-yard lines. Their perspiration mingled with the steam from boiling pots of smoked pork and greens and it curled on the edges of the aroma of vinegar douches and Evening in Paris cologne that drifted through the street where they stood together- hands on hips, straight-backed, rounded-bellied, high-behinded women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed strong teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshiped, and shared their men. Their love drove them fling dishcloths in someone else's kitchen to help him make the rent, or to fling hot lye to help him forget that bitch behind the counter at the five-and-dime. They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. (4-5)

The relevance of this setting is also conveyed through its prologue and epilogue titled as "Dawn" (1-5) and "Dusk" (191-192). "Dawn" delineates how Brewster Place emerged out of political corruption and was "Cut off from the central activities of the city" (2). It was prominently known for the black community as more blacks moved to it and gradually the Mediterraneans moved out and these new black occupants were poor, uneducated, powerless and mainly female. As they are isolated, they developed their own value system and code of conduct mirroring their socio-economic and environmental confinement. Even though these women live in the similar circumstances, they have different experiences while living their lives. In such a context, these seven women tell stories of their struggle to shape their lives and establish their individuality. Besides, the geographical features of this land intensify the sense of exploration of black female identity and it has a powerful impact upon their lives. The place reminds them of their origin of being African-American and strongly prepares them to fight against the gender, racial and sexual discrimination. Hence, Barbara Christian remarked, "like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor too is intrigued by the effect of place on characters" (348).

Within this setting, the seven women narrate the reality of their lives and how they have fought against their exploitation and come out with the realization of their social and self identity. The first chapter tells the story of the exploitation of Mattie Michael who is an unwed mother and displaced from her home and forced to move to Brewster Place after her son skips bail and escapes. As a result, she is deprived of her home. Her story begins in her hometown in Tennessee, 31 years ago, when she was seduced by Butch Fuller, a black ruffian. They belonged to different social class. Mattie was a 'decent woman' by the standards of her community. She was very obedient and was living happily with her parents. She becomes a prey to the charming personality of Butch, even though she is repeatedly warned by her father. Butch

takes an advantage of her naivety and carnally exploits her. She bears a child from the black man and refuses to disclose the identity of her child's father which angers her father and she has to face the patriarchal fury for her disobedience. Naylor describes, "Mattie's body contracted in a painful spasm each time the stick smashed down on her legs and back... trying to protect her stomach...and her continued silence caused the blows to come faster and harder" (23). She is torn between the conflict- daughterly duty or motherly duty and it sets out her in the search of her identity which brings her in Brewster Place.

The second chapter deals with Mattie's friend Etta Mae Johnson who is an independent and rebellious middle aged black woman. She has lived her life according to her own desires. She refuses sexual relationship with a white man namely Jonny Brick. As a result, her father's property is destructed by Brick. In search of her identity, she moves from place to place and seeks sexual relationship with different men. Later on, she repents for her sensual life and tries to find salvation by marrying black preacher Reverend Woods as she tells to Mattie, "...I lay down with this body and get up with it every morning, and each morning it cries for just a little more rest than it did the day before. Well, I'm finally gonna get that...with a man like Reverend Woods..." (69-70). But, Reverend Woods who in turn seduces her and makes her to realize her marginalized status being a woman in the life of a white as well as a black man.

The third chapter tells the story of Kiswana Browne who is a young middle class black woman who opposes her Euro-centric background by rejecting her name Melanie which creates an opposition between Kiswana and her mother that takes her to Brewster Place in search of her racial roots. Here, while helping her black sisters, she explores her identity in their life as she remarks, "...My place was in the streets with my people, fighting for equality and a better community" (83).

The fourth chapter explores the married life of poor black couple which is full of stress and tension due to their racism and adverse economic condition. Eugene Turner is refused job due to his blackhood and poverty and this feeling of frustration is given an outlet by using an abusive language for her wife Ciel who has much understanding nature and cares a lot for the happiness of her husband. Eugene has false ideas of manhood. Hence, he is not ready to accept her second pregnancy and in their quarrel she has lost her daughter. He tells her that she is only good for "babies and bills" (94) and her love is not enough to solve their tension. It means that she is exploited physically and emotionally at the hands of her black husband being a female and she realizes her inferior position being a female and powerless in the life of her own black man. The fifth chapter is about an irresponsible black mother, Cora Lee who has a fascination for babies and likes to give birth to one child after another, but doesn't know her role as a mother in nourishing, guiding and teaching them until they become an adult. Her fascination for "the dead brown plastic" (108) doll has made her dangerous not only to herself but also to her children. She fails to accept the reality that a baby is not a toy, but a complex human being. She realizes her failure in fulfilling motherly duties.

The last chapter describes the plight of the two black lesbian lovers respectively Lorraine and Theresa. They are exploited physically and mentally by Brewster community for their homosexuality. The black woman Sophie discovers them as lesbian through their innocent everyday activities. It means that one black woman is responsible for another's exploitation and so community also disapproves them for their "unnatural ways" (131). Their 'Otherness' is not accepted by the confined society. Hence, Lorraine is violently and repeatedly raped by C.C. Baker and his five Friends to show their manhood and their feeling of hatred towards a black female race like her who are a threat to their manhood. She realizes that being a woman, the 'Otherness' of her demands can't be tolerated by the community which has a very restricted perspective. During a talk with *Publishers Weekly*, in the case of Lorraine, Naylor remarks that:

Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she is a woman... The repercussions of Lorraine's being cut off from a female network, didn't only stay with her. They came back and affected the entire black community, male and female. I feel very strongly that we as black people have to be there as nurturing agents for each other, male and female, female and female. And when that broke down in "The Two", I

wanted to show how that could destroy the community. (36)

Here, Naylor strongly feels the need of unity among black men and women for the existence of their community and asserts the need of black sisterhood to revert to the racism, gender discrimination and sexual exploitation.

Conclusion:

Naylor has focused the seven black women characters more as individuals with their strengths and weaknesses and how being oppressed, these black women become aware of their subordinate position and rebelliously act upon the ways to overcome their oppression. In this respect, woman to woman contact functions as a redemptive force which contributes to the concept of 'new womanhood'. Here, Naylor asserts the need of black sisterhood to revert to the racism, patriarchal dominance and sexual exploitation in the hands of white as well as black men. Thus, Naylor has explored the world of black women with diversified experience entitled as 'Brewster Place' which is an epitome of their empowerment and justified her motto of being a writer through this exploration of black female identity which places Naylor in the great tradition of black women's writings.

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