



St. Joseph's Journal of Humanities and Science

ISSN: 2347 - 5331

<http://sjctnc.edu.in/6107-2/>



New Black Womanhood in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

G. Satya*

ABSTRACT

African-American literature can be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States of America. However, just as African- American history and life is extremely varied, so too is African- American literature. African- American literature has generally focused its themes with particular interest on the Black people in the United States. In the literary socio-cultural conventions Black women writers have resorted to assert and come out with unprecedented definitions of women and alternative discourses of black womanhood. Gloria Naylor focuses on the gender roles of women seen through the lens of female activities, experiences, goals, values, institutions, relationships and modes of communication in her novel *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Keywords: Black feminism, Cultural feminism.

African- American women writers emerge from a particular historical context; a context when examined from the perspective of the dominant American culture can accurately be described as oppressive. Through their writings, the contemporary African-American women writers create a self-affirming protagonist; protagonists who are able, through their own self-definition, to discover their inherent divinity.

In her fiction, Naylor illuminates the representative black American experiences from various perspectives within the contemporary society. She is best known as the author of *The Women of Brewster Place* [1982] for which she received the American Book Award for the best first novel. In this work, Naylor chronicles the aspirations and disappointments of seven female residents of Brewster Place, a dilapidated ghetto housing project located in an unidentified northern city. Naylor devotes individual chapters to the lives of her

characters, detailing the circumstances that brought the women to the neighborhood, their relationships with each other, and the devastating events that heighten the difficulty of leaving Brewster Place. As the women cope with living in a racially polarized and sexist society, they encounter abuse and indifference from their husbands, lovers and children.

The Women of Brewster Place begins with an introduction about the history of its streets, which is followed by a series of stories, each about a particular woman who lives there. The seven women of Brewster Place are Mattie Michael, an unwed mother who is displaced from her home and forced to move to Brewster Place after her son skips bail; Etta Mae Johnson, a sassy, middle-aged woman who searches for both pleasures and self- identity in various cities and with various men, but returns to Brewster Place where she has run out of money and men; Kiswana Browne, a young

*Department of English, Tagore Arts College, Pondicherry-605008.

Email: sasisharan1012@gmail.com, Mobile: +91 99946 79667

middle class black woman who rejects her background and her name Melanie and moves to Brewster Place and attempts to help the people who live there under disastrous and lamentable conditions; Lucielia Louise Turner, who tolerates abuse from her husband; Cora Lee, another unwed mother, who, in her fascination for babies, has one child after another, but neglects them when they get older; and Lorraine and Theresa, "The Two", who because they are lesbians, encounter hostility and rejection by the people of Brewster Place. All of them struggle to survive and shape their lives under the conditions and environment that overpower them.

The novel concludes with Mattie Michaels' dream-story about a black party in which all the women appear, as well as a coda which announces the death of the street. Created by the city officials, it is destroyed by them. Although each of their narratives could be called a short story, the novel consists of the interrelationship of the stories, as a pattern evolves, not only because the characters all live in Brewster Place but also because they are connected to one another. With the exception of the lesbians in "The Two", Naylor emphasizes the distinctiveness of each story by naming it after the specific women on whom she is focusing, even as she might include that woman in another story. By using this form, she heightens the individuality of her characters so that they are not seen merely as faceless "female heads of households." At the same time she stresses their interrelationships and establishes Brewster Place as a community in spite of its history of transients—a community with its own mores, strengths, and weaknesses. Even that specific Brewster Place is destroyed; its characteristics remain, for most of its inhabitants must move to a similar street. Brewster Place, then, stands for both itself and other places like it.

By creating a tapestry of nurturing women in her first novel, Naylor emphasizes how female values, derived from mothering-nurturing, communality and concern with human feelings, are central to Brewster Place's survival. Published in 1982, *The Women of Brewster Place* was preceded by a decade of American feminist writing which responded to patriarchal society's devaluation of women by revalorizing female values. In reaction to the Western Patriarchal emphasis on the individual, on the splitting of human beings

into mind and body and on completion, conquest and power, these writers saw the necessity of honoring female values. If women were to become empowered, it was necessary for them to perceive their own primacy, their centrality to their society as well as to analyze how dangerous patriarchal values were at the cost of harmonious social orders.

At the same time, the centrality of Afro-American women in their communities was in such great contrast to the American norm of women's subordination in the nuclear family that they were denigrated both in black and white society. As it is viewed by Fraser, the Afro-American mother was punished and maligned for being a "matriarch" a vortex of attitudes which culminated in the White American government policy such as the Moynihan Report and in the black cultural nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s.

Afro-American women writers of the 1970s responded to the black and white society's denigration of the black mother and of female values by showing how such a position was sexist, how it was based on a false definition of women as the ineffectual, secondary and weak forces. So Naylor's rendition of her women's lives in the community of Brewster Place indicates that she is intensely knowledgeable of the literature of her sisters and that the thought of Afro-American women during the seventies is one means by which she both celebrates and critiques the women-centered communities.

The culture of sharing and nurturing in Brewster Place is based on a black tradition in the country that harkens back to slavery. Important country novels written by the Afro-Americans have presented women characters that are mutually supportive of one another. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* [1966] reminds us that it was such values that allowed the ordinary slave to survive. Paule Marshall's Brown girl, *Brownstones* provides us with vivid scenes of Silla and her women friends around the Kitchen table, as they defend themselves against their men as well as the white society.

Toni Morrison gives a lyrical account of the Southern women like her Auntie Jimmy in the *Bluest Eye* who created communities in their own image, as well as a stunning description of the Peace's matrifocal house in *Sula*. In these novels, as in *The Women of Brewster Place*, women share common concerns such as the raising of children and like Brewster Place, these

women-centered communities act as defenses against sexism and racism, in other words against the abuses that are inflicted on the black women. But while these women may be independent, it gives the impression that this independence has been forged because of the necessity of having to fend off any possible attack; in fact, some of them would prefer not to have such independence, since they have not chosen it.

The Women of Brewster Place deals with the women's movement that began exhorting to pay attention to the relationships with other women as mothers, daughters, sisters and friends. It is also about motherhood, a concept embraced by Naylor's women, each of whom is a surrogate child or mother to the next. In this context other parallels to the action highlighted in this work can be thought of. A number of writers have portrayed strong friendships between black women e.g.; Morrison in *Sula*, Walker in *The Color Purple*, but these bonds are often broken or slackened by competitiveness, betrayal and physical or socio-economic separation. But *The Women of Brewster Place* devotes considerable attention to the special bond that can exist among women characters. These women present a collective repository of dreams, a resilient source of strength for continuing survival, if not yet the conquest.

Naylor's stories of the women are usually characterized as strong, matriarchal, and enduring ones by the media, scholarship, government policy, thus emphasizing their powerlessness. Thus in *Brewster Place* a friendship based on the shared experience of black womanhood exists sometimes in the form of the mother-daughter relationship. One of the problems several women face is that in their isolation they come to focus all their needs on their children and define themselves exclusively as mothers, thus enacting a male-defined, exploitive role. This tendency has both negative and positive consequences. The narration of the story of the seven women of Brewster Place culminates both at the levels of theme and plot towards the end where the wall is broken. The end of the narration relates the breaking of the wall as an important episode under the title "The Block Party".

As stated earlier, the broad context of the novel is the dead-end street, Brewster Place. The relevance of this setting is mentioned in the novel's prologue and epilogue, entitled "Dawn" and "Dusk"- "Dawn"

provides a description of Brewster Place and says how it came into existence. It was formed out of the political corruption and was walled off from the main boulevard when new residents, the Mediterraneans and the blacks, did not have political influence to prevent it from being separated from the rest of the city; as more blacks moved to Brewster place, gradually the Mediterraneans moved out, until it became predominantly black. These new black residents were poor, mainly uneducated and powerless. Guarded by the wall from the influence of the outside world, the residents of Brewster Place created a value system that reflected their economic circumstances and cultural background.

This description of Brewster Place allows the readers to understand and anticipate some of the problems that the main characters face and the choices available to them as a result of the socio-economic and environmental confinement. This leads to the formation of a community of residents who are predominantly black, female and poor. Thus within the context of Brewster Place, these seven women tell stories of their passions, disappointments, frustration, their struggles, tragedies and triumphs.

Thus the women have different reasons, each one has her own story, but they unite in hurling bricks and breaking down the boundaries. The dismal, incessant rain becomes cleansing and the water is described as beating down in unison with the beating of the women's hearts.

The women of Brewster Place have emancipated themselves in their process of sublimity, their search for female self in the spirit of Black sisterhood. Thus the *Brewster Place* trials down the streaks of women's journey towards realizing the ideal goals of humanity in terms of feminine revolution achievable through newly-awakened women.

REFERENCES

1. Naylor, Gloria. *The Women of Brewster Place*. London: Sphere Books, 1983.
2. Arora, Neena. "Gender oppression in Gloria Naylor's 'Women of Brewster Place' and 'Linden Hills'" in *Afro-American Literature*. Ed. R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.

3. Awkward, Michael. "Authorial Dreams of Wholeness: (Dis) Unity, (Literary) Parentage and the Women of Brewster Place" in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993.
4. Bell, Bernard W. "The Contemporary Afro-American Novel, 1: Neorealism" in *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*. Amherst: U. of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
5. Fraser, Celeste. "Stealing B(l)ack Voice: The Myth of the Black Matriarchy and The Women of Brewster Place" in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993.
6. Ranveer, Kashinath. "*Black Feminist Consciousness*" Jaipur: Rupa Books Pvt. Ltd. 1995.
7. Shockley, Ann Allen. *Afro-American Women Writers 1746-1933*. New York: New American Library, 1988.