



Strategy for Survival in Gloria Naylor's Fiction

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Abstract

African-American literature depicts the issues related to migration, slavery, racism, equality and freedom which is denied to Blacks. Black women's fiction portrays black female characters personal growth toward the search of new self definitions. These new black women are fully conscious of their psychological and physical oppression and are more capable of creating new opportunity for themselves. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel which explores the story of seven women's journey towards their search of new identity and their efforts towards empowerment.

Key words: hierarchy, victims, migration, racism, empowerment

The history of Black women is a saga of suffering and agony. Black women have succeeded in coming out of the shadow of oppression. More than twenty millions of blacks arrived in America in 1619 and the ships in which they were brought introduced them to their future full of oppression. However with the passage of time their plight improved. Her name has become synonymous with the fight of black females against oppression. It is evident that the sorry state of Blacks and particularly the black women troubled and tormented Gloria Naylor greatly. However in her novels she has striven to show a way out of this labyrinth of oppression and suffering. In fact her characters become a symbol of doggedness and hope for oppressed blacks at large. They negotiate with their sufferings successfully and empower themselves at the end. Bell Hooks has rightly marked out that black women must make use of their marginality and, "... make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well to envision and create counter-hegemony" (Hooks 15).

Feminism originated because of the wrong treatment of women at the hands of men in the society. It was a movement which sought to redress the grievances of women, aimed at advancing the position of women. The fundamental aim of Black feminism is to provide humane conditions to the community. It is a self-motivated striving to attain empowerment. The time which elapsed between Slavery and Freedom helped these black women to build a definite point of view on the various kinds of suffering and oppression they had faced. They became familiar with all kinds of suffering like sexism, racism and classism and it actually helped them to establish their own identity. They visualized a future full of justice, impartiality and equality not only for their community but for all humans at large. Black feminist consciousness actually concentrates on such thoughts which are against racism, elitism and sexism. Bell Hooks in her book *"Ain't I a Woman?"* (1981) explains the feminist consciousness in the following way:

"We black women who advocate feminist ideology, are pioneers. We are creating a

past for ourselves and our sisters. We hope that as they see us reach our goal – no longer victimized, no longer unrecognized, no longer afraid - they will take courage and follow” (196).

Black feminism is “a self-conscious process of struggle propelling women and men towards a more harmonic vision of community” (Collins). It is with this Black feminist theory, the writers have tried both pragmatically and analytically to understand and dismantle the racial, class and gender sufferings. This movement of black feminism had the following four basic themes as its guiding principles – the legacy of struggle, the interdependence of thought and action, the search for voice and the significance of empowerment in everyday life. Afro-American psyche has struggled for human dignity and independence. Molefi Kete Asante writes, “Our psychology was therefore, formed on the margins of the Promise” (Asante 23). The differences in culture, class, color and gender have been used by one group to subordinate the other. Gloria Naylor succeeds in depicting the black woman’s survival and sufferings through her works. She wants to deliver the awareness of self-definition in the minds of the blacks. As prominent critic Audre Lorde says, “If we do not define ourselves for ourselves we will be defined by others” (Lorde45).

The novels of Gloria Naylor bring to fore the sufferings of black women. The concern for the black women is uppermost in her works. This paper is an honest attempt towards highlighting the oppression and suffering faced by the black women as well as their optimism and strategies for survival and empowerment. They negotiate and face the sufferings in their life and emerge victorious. Born to black parents and that too as a female must have really made her an insider into the sufferings and setbacks suffered by the blacks. Gloria Naylor reiterates her view about the repositioning of black literature in America’s mainstream in the following words: 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 my material and my output. I am female and black and American. No buts 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 (Arana 258).

The Naylor who had been living in Robinson Ville, Mississippi migrated to Harlem to avoid the segregated life in the South and seek new opportunities in New York City. The earliest influence on Gloria was of her mother. She herself had little education but even then she encouraged Gloria to read and keep a Journal. During the interview with Donna Perry, Gloria Naylor says, “I think I kept writing as a child because I had my mother as a model... I think I kept going through her” (Perry 219-20). It was due to her mother’s formative influence that she started writing profusely. She began to feel that in the world of literature there is no place for black women till the time she read Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* which transformed her belief and life. Long years of oppression and brutal slavery taught the black women how to face the society. They have learned how to utilize their own bitter experiences for a better future. The Women of Brewster Place came from several sources. According to Naylor, “*The Women of Brewster Place* are women I never knew personally. But I have known that spirit; I have definitely known that life. That’s how those characters were born. But they lived for me as characters with their own personalities and I let them have it. I wanted to immortalize the spirit I saw in my grandmother, my great aunt and my mom” (Goldstein 36).

The Women of Brewster Place is her first novel that was written in 1982. The novel is actually based on the lives of African American women. These women are soft-centered, hard-edged, easily pleased and brutally demanding. Their stories narrate the ups and downs of many black women and agonies they face in life. This novel is narrated in seven stories. Six stories are focused on individual characters and the seventh story is about the whole community. The major characters of each chapter are all women and residents of Brewster place. It is a housing development located in an unnamed city. The inmates are victims of forced prostitution, gang rapes and exploitation while they live there. Naylor portrays the experience of physical and

psychological oppression that these black women had to face in their life and how they overcome these hurdles which restricts their life. This fiction reveals much about the introspection of black women towards life and discusses the issues about race, class and gender. Naylor interprets the stories of seven women-residents of Brewster Place and these characters are namely: Mattie Michael, Etta Mae, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Lucielia Louise Turner and "The Two" (Lorraine and Theresa). She dives deep into the unconscious and subconscious psyche of the black women and reveals their pent-up feelings. The book is framed by a mythical, metaphorical day- "Dawn" to "Dusk"- in which the street comes to life through an ugly birthing process and novel's end waits to die. The prologue, "Dawn" and the epilogue, "Dusk" represents the birth and the death of the Brewster Place. This place, according to Naylor is, "the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company" (1). And in spite of it, she however, very articulately depicts every motion as well as shade and bravery of these female characters. When the women decide to dismantle the wall at the end of their dead end street, they are working collectively to liberate themselves, both physically and mentally. Ironically it is Cora Lee, seemingly the least likely to initiate any positive change, who begins removing the bricks. She now feels equipped to take action as a result of the bond formed among the women. Brewster Place is separated from the rest of the city by a brick wall erected to control traffic in the major part of the town. Disconnected from the business of the city (North east near New York) by a wall, Brewster Place has become a dead end, literally and figuratively, for the black people who finally come to inhabit it (Branzburg 117). As Brewster Place is a dead end street so the colored used to live there are poor, powerless and ignored by others in the city. The women in Brewster Place tear down the wall which has separated them and made them different from the other residents of the city. Naylor's intention was to shatter the stereotypes about black women and also wanted to show the resilience of the downtrodden in overcoming tough circumstances.

Naylor portrays the celebration of the female spirit and her ability to transcend the cavils of everyday existence and also the microcosm of Black women in America who faced the wall of sexism, racism and classism. The Women of Brewster Place projects black women who are totally trapped by the iniquitous system. Gloria Naylor constructs a vision of gendered subordination, racial discrimination, and class-based difficulties in a way that is metonymic of the struggles many black and impoverished women face in the US. Most of the African American women writers have been preoccupied with the problem of the multiple oppression of racism-sexism-capitalism, which black women in America have undergone for years together. Gloria Naylor exposes the depth of class difference in America, focusing not simply on constructions of rich and poor, but also the intertwined issues of race, gender, and sexuality. The novel delineates seven mettlesome black ladies striving to survive in the real harsh. The seven women with seven stories of different backgrounds, lifestyles and different ages show how they withstood in the face of adverse situations like racism, sexism and poverty. The first section of the book focuses on the experience of Mattie Michael, the protagonist and a mother-like figure, acts as a guiding light both visibly and invisibly whose presence can be felt through all the stories in the novel. She was abandoned by her father, lover and even son and reached Brewster Place to lead the rest of her life and to help other ailing women like her to identify their conditions. 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!" (Naylor 24). As an assertive mother Fannie exhorts Mattie to take pride feeling in motherhood and provides her emotional nurturing. Etta Mae Johnson, a childhood friend of Mattie, wandered all over with many men and, unsatisfied with their behaviour. She moves from one city to another in search of a peaceful life. Etta presents a woman who struggles against prejudices. 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, finally approached Mattie where she could be her original self in her presence. Cora Lee, bears children out of wedlock. She suffers physical violence which leaves scar on her inner self. Cora is not as careful about her children as Mattie and Ciel are, later inspired by Kiswana she realizes that her children are also capable of becoming good citizens and she thinks about the bright future of her babies and plans to attend P.T.A. meetings, check homework and set up her children in good jobs. Her abiding bond with Kiswana Browne, who reminded her of her responsibility as a mother. Kiswana talks confidently to Cora about her dreams of reform and revolution. Excitedly she tells Cora, “. . . if we really pull together, we can put pressure on [the landlord] to start fixing this place up” (115). Kiswana, an ardent reformer of Brewster, wanted to revolt against the hiked rent and finally remembers her cultural past through her mother’s presence. Kiswana Browne leaves her home wilfully. 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 blackhood. Lucielia Louise Turner, also known as Ciel, grand daughter of Miss Eva and a childhood companion of Mattie’s son Basil, is another failure, who lost her husband’s love because of the endless pursuit of his materialistic life, got aborted to support the family economically, and also lost her only daughter. Mattie’s nurturing and caring again helps her regain her lost life and self. With Mattie’s help, Ciel is able to regroup and start over. Mattie is also able to help herself in the process “To some degree when Mattie saves Ciel, she also saves herself, and the ritual bathing that she performs on Ciel becomes a testament to the healing powers of sisterly love and bonding, particularly in the face of a chauvinistic, male-centered world” (Wilson 48).

She is ready to take on life with a new perspective of hope and self confidence. The relationship between Mattie and Ciel represent the powerful sisterhood and community that the women of Brewster Place share. The lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa, were rejected not only by their parents but also by their own black people and finally reached Brewster Place with a hope of sharing. In the story “The Two”, Naylor reveals the dilemma in the lives of lesbians, how their individual self is crushed by the conventional society and how these women come up with force to fight against such forces. Lorraine is timid and detests the word “lesbian” insisting that she is not different from other people. Theresa accepts what she is and preserves her identity as a lesbian by mixing with her own type. She depends on her own for self development, whereas Lorraine looks to others for constant approval. The rape of Lorraine has nothing to do with sexuality rather it becomes a means to force “The Two” back into patriarchal structure of the family. Naylor reveals society’s fear of women’s independence of man through Lorraine’s gang rape as C.C. Baker announces his intention to “slap that bitch in her face and teach her a lesson”(Naylor 162). Lorraine constantly negates her real self while Theresa is able to survive because of her strong convictions and belief in her potential. Naylor believes that all human beings, regardless of race and gender should enjoy political, social, and economic equality. This belief is actualized in the final section of the novel, when the community of Brewster Place chips away the wall that imprisons them, a symbol of racism and discrimination. The sacrifice of Lorraine has united them all and they feel that something has been destroyed within them. In spite of the differences they realize that she has suffered as a woman, as one of them. This hidden oneness manifests in their collective action against the wall. Even the continuous rainfall does not dampen their spirit of rebellion against the evil forces of society.

Thus *The Women of Brewster Place* emphasizes not only bonding - class, community, and motherhood - but also focuses on the inability to fulfil dreams deferred by sexism, racism and classism. *The Women of Brewster Place* is a moving portrait of the strengths, hopes and struggles of

black women. She gives voice to these black women who belong to different backgrounds, the strategies these women adopt to survive, the mistakes made and the lessons learned. They are forced to move from one place to another to find a peaceful life and to live a life of freedom and dignity. Gradually, they recollect their self confidence, then, the women are taking matters into their own hands, determined to remove – slowly, methodically and consistently – the various obstacles that have impeded their progress in life. All these seven black women with the help of their indomitable spirit and strong will realize their potentials to fight against all types of oppression. Instead of individuals struggling to survive alone or instead of allowing the past to circumscribe even their modest efforts, by the end of the novel, key characters are working together in a counter manoeuvre against the various obstacles that impede their progress. Black women’s journey is not merely a physical but also a psychological journey from victimization to self-consciousness, from suppression to self-assertion.

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