

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

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## **Black Feminist Consciousness: Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place***

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Though women constitute more than half of the world's total population today they have been relegated to a secondary note and men have been considered superior. In fact to be a woman is a curse in this society. Simon de Beauvoir has beautifully said:

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other.<sup>1</sup>

For centuries women have been brushed aside as 'weaker vessels.' They have even been treated as 'squirrels' in the Ibsenian sense or 'decoys' in the sense of Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel Laureate for Literature in 2004. Every day, around the world, women are beaten, attacked, and killed. Often, this suffering occurs at the hands of their own families and is sometimes even supported by their government. Though people discuss their problems and try to bring remedial measures they are unable to bring equality. June Hannam rightly observes

Although by 1970 most women throughout the world have gained many rights according to law, in fact complete political, economic, and social equality with men remains to be achieved.<sup>2</sup>

In the annals of human history, perhaps, no other group of women have ever suffered from socio-economic, physical, cultural, and sexual torment and agonies like the black women. Being black, they suffered from racism and became the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the whites as well as the blacks. In short, the black women in America were made victims of triple jeopardy: racism, sexism, and classicism.

The black women were brought to the shores of the USA and sold on the auction block as a commodity and as a sort of a workhouse. After their sale, America, the Promised Land, became for them a 'great prison' and an 'octopus of exploitation.' They were the subject to the worst kinds of exploitation and oppression. They were forced to endure the horrors of slavery. Calvin Hernton, a well-known social scientist, described the position and fate of black women appropriately thus:

From time to time in America various individuals and groups besides Negroes have been victims of prejudice, discrimination, injustice, persecution and outright murder.... But it has been the Negro Woman, more than anyone else, who has borne the constant agonies of racial barbarity in America from the very first day she was brought in chains to this soil. The Negro Woman through the years has suffered (and endured) every sexual outrage (with all of the psychological ramifications) that a democratic society can possibly inflict upon a human being. The sexual atrocities that the Negro Women has suffered in the United States, South and North, and what these atrocities have done to her personality as a

female creature, is a tale more bloody and brutal than most of us can imagine.<sup>3</sup>

But in the course of time, the black women have developed some awareness of who they were? How they have come to America? What role has been assigned to them by the American society? Their awareness constitutes what it is to be as a black and female in the racist white America.

Black feminist consciousness means a kind of awareness of one's own destiny as a black female in America. It easily indicates black woman's self definition in terms of her present predicament and what she would like to be in future. The task of defining her own self will have to be done by herself only. As Audre Lorde aptly suggests "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment."<sup>4</sup> To put it in a nutshell, black feminist consciousness is nothing but overall awareness on the part of black women about the plight, position, positive and negative aspects of their life from the perspective that the patriarchal, racist, and sexist social order has to be changed. It is in this sense an attempt has been made to study and analyze the black feminist consciousness in the writings of Gloria Naylor.

Gloria Naylor (1950- ) is a novelist, essayist, columnist, and educator all rolled into one. She was born in New York to a transit worker and a telephone operator. With her novels like *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, *Bailey's Café*, and *The Men of Brewster Place* she is highly respected as one of the most important contemporary African-American women writers. Like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, she too tries to represent the voice of the black women through her writings – the collective voice of the women who try to empower and nurture each other. She in her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, projects black women who are totally trapped by the iniquitous system. However, in due course, they gain control of themselves. These women appear to be far away from the city life but control their own destinies in the light of their own experience.

Her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), won her instant recognition for its powerful dramatization of the struggles of seven women living in a blighted urban neighbourhood. Using interconnecting stories to portray each woman's life, Naylor skillfully explored the diversity of black female experience.<sup>5</sup>

*The Women of Brewster Place* is the story of seven women – Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Luciella Louise Turner, Cora Lee, Lorraine, and Theresa – who explore how such issues as class and sexual orientation unite and divide women. Of the seven stories, six are centered on individual characters, while the final story is about the entire community. The primary characters of each chapter are all women and the residents of Brewster Place. The main focus of the novel is on the Brewster Place and the black women who live in this locality in the form of a community. This structure gives characters an individuality that rescues them from the fate of being viewed as anonymous 'female heads of households.' To give homogeneity to their living, Naylor in the prologue 'Dawn' presents the female residents of the tenement as a vibrant community. In her own words,

They were cursed, badgered, worshipped, and shared their men. ... They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster place.<sup>6</sup>

The first and longest narrative within the novel follows Mattie Michael from her parents' home in the rural South, through her struggles to survive on her own in a northern city with her young son, Basil, and finally a middle-aged woman forced to move to Brewster Place after losing her home to bail bondsmen when her son is accused of murder. Etta Mae Johnson is an aging *femme fatale* who has existed by her ability to attach herself to successful men; she comes to live with her lifelong friend Mattie when she runs out of men to take care of her. Ciel, Mattie's adopted daughter, lives a desperate life of waiting for the father of her child to return after each of his abrupt departures; during an argument about his current exodus, their child accidentally dies.

Kiswana Browne is a starry-eyed civil rights activist from a financially secure family, now living in Brewster Place because she feels the need to remain close to the people. She organizes the residents of the neighbourhood for a rent strike against the owners of the squalid buildings in which they live. Cora Lee, the poorest and the most isolated character, is a young woman with seven children: her children are the terror of the neighbourhood and everyone tries to persuade her to stop having more. Lorraine and Theresa have arrived in Brewster Place after living in other, better, neighbourhoods around the city. They have been forced to move on when the other residents have learned they are lesbians, because Lorraine is fearful that she will lose her job as a school teacher. Theresa refuses to move again because she feels that there is no place left to run; Brewster Place is the end of the line: she does not care how their neighbours on Brewster Place treat them. Lorraine, on the other hand, ostracized by her family and fired from a teaching job, yearns to be part of the community. She wants to be embraced within it, but encounters cruel rejection when she tries to participate in the newly-formed block organization. Alienated from the other women, Lorraine ventures out alone one night and is raped in an alley by a group of young black men. Thus, the women of Brewster Place are

Hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased. In their stories, Gloria Naylor has created a community of women that has touched thousands of readers across the country.<sup>7</sup>

Naylor opens her novel with an epigraph from Langston Hughes' poem, "Harlem." The poem runs thus:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
Like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore –  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over  
Like a syrupy sweet?  
May be it just sags  
Like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?

In the aforesaid poem, the poet expresses succinctly the condition of the black people. The cycle of sorrow and joy is not prominent in their lives. Each of the lives portrayed by Naylor in this novel stands a testimony to the above fact. There is only the continuous flow of suffering after suffering that happens in the lives of the blacks. The deferred dreams do explode. But in the end each of the shattered pieces is gathered meticulously and life goes on. Nobody just gives up and dies, but stand up to the challenges and pick

up the strands of their life after every disaster. The women overcome their individual differences and unite to dismantle a wall – symbolizing racism – that separates them from the rest of the city.

The book is framed by a mythical, metaphorical day “Dawn” to “Dusk” – one is introductory chapter and the other is the concluding chapter. These two chapters speak about the spawning and condemnation of the dead-end street named Brewster Place. The intermediary chapters are titled with the names of the characters they portray, Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Cora Lee, Kiswana Browne, and Lucielia Turnwood respectively. Lorraine and Theresa are presented under the title “The Two” while the other chapter is entitled “The Block Party” that brings almost all the women characters together in a social gathering which is threatened and ruined by rain. In the end, they all get ready to celebrate once more the block party, which is also threatened by a wisp of a cloud. But they all go on because they have agreed to life’s ups and downs and they have to carry on whether they like it or not.

The 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 this 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 and their struggle, tragedies and triumphs.

Mattie Michael is the first woman in the series of anecdotes and she appears as an unwed mother. She serves as “matriarch, surrogate mother, and mentor to the other women on Brewster Place.”<sup>8</sup> In order to protect her only child named Basil, she has lost her home. Though she showers love towards him, he cheats and finally deserts her and altogether disappears from her life, leaving without a roof over her head. In fact, the Mattie-Basil relationship represents an extreme of black mother-to-son parenting often found in African-American literature: ‘mothers who love their sons to destruction through self-sacrifice and overindulgence.’ She acts as

Buffer between her son and the hostile world of both intra and interracial violence.... The result is a human being stripped of personhood, a man-child emasculated.<sup>9</sup>

Mattie’s story begins in her hometown of Rock Value, Tennessee, thirty-one years ago, when she was seduced by Butch, a black ruffian. She, along with several other characters, arrives in Brewster Place from her parents’ home in the South. She leaves her parents’ home because she is pregnant by a disreputable man named Butch Fuller. She was cautioned about Butch by her father stating that “Butch Fuller is a no-count ditch hound and no decent woman would be seen talking to him” (9).

Mattie is a decent woman by the standards of her community and lives quietly with her parents, obeys their rules, and is active in church related activities. She socializes only with those of whom her family approves. Butch Fuller understands how their different social positions in the community makes him an unwelcome visitor to Mattie’s world. However, by his charm he seduces her. After this event Mattie loses her girlhood and becomes a black woman. She never tells her father about the identity of the father of the child. Mattie and her father’s relations are based on his superior role in the home, and he believes that this daughter must never defy him. When she refuses to reveal the identity of her child’s father he predictably reacts with the usual patriarchal fury:

Her silence stole the last sanctuary for his rage. He wanted to kill the man who had sneaked into his home and distorted the faith and trust he had in his child. But she had chosen to stamp out what had hurt him the most and was now brazenly taunting him, her disobedience. (23)

Mattie understands the consequences of not adhering to the social hierarchy within her home and that her father would never forgive her for not obeying him. She, in the end, is cast out to chart the journey of her life all alone.

Etta Mae Johnson, Mattie's childhood friend, is an independent black woman who has lived her life according to her own desires. She, like Mattie, leaves home because she was compelled to disobey the social rules. Unlike Mattie, Etta refuses to submit to the Southern racist system. After a long life of running from one man to the next, Etta comes to Mattie's home at Brewster Place, hoping to find some stability. She comes home truly in the sense that there was no other place in the world for her to go. And there was no one who would understand her true self and bear with her faults and accept her as she was, making no demands upon her, except Mattie. In Etta, Naylor presents

A woman who struggles against prejudices, uses the music of Billie Holiday to deal with rejection, and finds temporary comfort in the sustaining friendship of Mattie within the community of Brewster Place.<sup>10</sup>

Life has been hard for Etta. She is unwilling to play by the rules because her spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist. She believes strongly that she was the one to decide what she wanted to do with her life. She now wants to settle down and therefore enquires about possible candidates – one of whom she might hook down to be her life partner. For that she goes to the Church and sees the way people supplicate themselves before God to solve their problems. “Unaccustomed to the irritating texture of doubt, she felt tears as its abrasiveness grated over the fragile skin of her life. Could there have been another way?” (64) She thinks that it is her own action that gives the desired or undesired results and why should anyone trouble God about their sufferings in life. She believes in doing as she pleases and takes full responsibility for whatever she did. She would face the consequences of her actions squarely and will not be afraid to challenge the world to dare meddle with her.

Later she is attracted to Reverend Morelands Woods, a charismatic black preacher, when Mattie takes her to Church, and dreams to marry him and settle down to a decent and rich life. She wants to become her personal savior, the one who will deliver her from the sins of her past and lead her to a higher place. But after sleeping with him, she realizes that it was all just a fantasy and that he wanted only sex. She leaves feeling broken, but her spirit is restored once she finds out that Mattie has stayed up all the night waiting for her. Thus, Etta, like Mattie, is cheated by Reverend Woods who has other ideas. Seduced by him, she realizes her sorry plight and understands that she must depend on her own for salvation. She is outplayed by the man with whom she is involved.

Kiswana Browne is a middle-class black woman who has moved to Brewster Place because she rejects her black middle-class background. She is different from all of Brewster Place's other residents. Kiswana and her mother confront each other about their seemingly different values and lifestyles. Mrs. Browne stands for the traditional values while Kiswana represents those middle-class blacks who reject the values of their parents and embrace those of black nationalists. Their short arguments culminate in Kiswana calling her mother a ‘white-man's nigger.’

The difference of opinion between the mother and the daughter is that the daughter feels that her parents are impervious to the black suffering. The parents exhibit their aversion to the poor by living closer to the white whereas Kiswana wants to be closer to the poor and therefore chosen Brewster Place so that she would get to know their dreams and what they required to run their everyday life. She wants to do everything within her power and encourage them to live a better life. The clash between the two women is signified through the choice of names. Kiswana had changed her name from Melanie as a rejection to the Euro-centric culture and affirmation of her allegiance to the African heritage. Throughout Kiswana's visit, Mrs. Browne refuses to address her daughter by her African name, even though Kiswana tells her no one hardly ever calls me Melanie. She informs Kiswana thus:

It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother's name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all ... Yet you needed to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud. (87)

In this way, Mrs. Browne argues that Kiswana's given name, Melanie, has a history and heritage and that by rejecting her name, she has rejected her own past. Then Kiswana suddenly realizes that her mother has trod the same universe that she herself has been travelling. In short, she denounces her parents' middle-class lifestyle, adopts an African name, drops out of college, and moves to Brewster Place to be close to whom she refers to as 'my people.' She ultimately understands her common history and struggles with other black women. Naylor seems to have modelled this character after the adherents of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s.

Lucielia Louise Turner's (also known as Ciel) story deals with the theme of the conflict between black men and women. She is Basil's early childhood playmate and Mattie is her second mother with whom she grew up. Her presence on Brewster Place indicates a relationship gone sour, but the death of her only child is the real tragedy. Her story differs from Mattie and Etta Mae. She loves Eugene very much but their relationship disintegrates because of limited job opportunities and utter poverty. She and Eugene signify the tension between black men and women caused by racism and economic depression, specifically as they affect the ability of black men to find employment. Eugene's hostility towards Ciel is directly related to his constant joblessness. Unable to face the social and political realities that are responsible for his problems and unable to provide for Ciel and his eleven months old daughter, Serena, he blames Ciel for his inability to succeed. Later when his daughter dies, he is once again upset because he has not been included in the funeral arrangement. However, Ciel understands and without intending to anger him, she resorts to silence. As a gesture of reconciliation she offers to get him a job and have her tubes tied. Despite her words and actions, Eugene plans to leave her. In desperation, she insists that he should not go because she loves him. He curtly replies "well, that ain't good enough" (100) and leaves Ciel. But one sees there is a note of hope in her when Mattie has managed through the force of her will, her love for Ciel, to unplug her, to direct her ongoing implosions outward. Mattie knows that Ciel's exertion of energy will lead to sleep and soon morning would come.

Cora Lee is another woman character who has drawn considerable attention of the critics. She is "an irresponsible black mother who loves children only when they are helpless infants and neglects them when they grow up."<sup>11</sup> She continues to have one baby after another and discards them like old dolls when they get older. All these

problems arise as she was never taught what her sex role is in the given culture. The giving of dolls and other domestic toys to young girls is designed to prepare them for their roles as mothers. They receive these toys as playthings and as a source of pleasure. Parents rarely tell young girls that a baby is not a toy but a complex human being, and that a mother is responsible not only for rearing it but also nurturing, guiding and teaching the child until it becomes an adult. When Cora was a young child, she, like other women of her culture, was given dolls by her parents. One particular toy acquires overtones of a phallic emblem “the thing that felt good in the dark” (109). Her fascination for a childhood toy and the roles assigned to it affects not only her life, but also the lives of her children who would grow up with only a faint, poignant recollection of the love and attention she bestowed on them when they were babies. As a result, they would not know how to love and nurture their own children, how to accept responsibility for their actions, and how to make reasonable choices. Thus, Cora Lee’s fascination and desire for the dead brown plastic doll, a toy approved for young girls by Western culture, has made her dangerous to herself, her children, and the society that sanctioned her love affair with baby dolls.

The last of the seven women are Lorraine and Theresa, the two black lesbian lovers, and the only lesbian residents of Brewster Place. Lorraine and Theresa are considered to be nice girls by the female residents of Brewster Place, especially when it becomes clear that the two women are not in their husband’s folds. They are accepted by the Brewster Place community as long as they maintain and display the type of behaviour considered appropriate by the community. For the other women of Brewster Place, the primary requirement for acceptance into the community was that neither Lorraine nor Theresa invites the attention or affection of the other women’s husband or boyfriends.

Once it is realized that the women are lovers, many members of the community openly disapprove of their life style. One resident in particular, Sophie, watches their every move and spreads rumours about their behavior. Lorraine is hurt by the judgemental responses of her neighbours while Theresa claims not to care what people think or say. Lorraine tries to incorporate herself into the community by attending Kiswana’s tenants’ association meeting, but there, Sophie attacks her for her sexuality. She leaves in tears, and Ben, the oldest resident and the janitor of the complex, consoles her by taking her to his apartment and telling her the story of his daughter and wife. Ben’s daughter was indirectly led into prostitution by her parents, who refused to do anything about the fact that she was being forced to sleep with their white landlord.

Lorraine gains confidence from her burgeoning relationship with Ben. After a fight with Theresa, Lorraine goes to a party on her own. Afterward, instead of coming straight home, she goes down a dark alley. She is confronted by a group of young men who had earlier insulted her because of her sexuality. They gang rape her and leave her for dead. Lorraine manages to get up just as the sun is rising. She stumbles down the alley and sees Ben. She grabs a brick and crushes his skull with it.

Following Ben’s death, Mattie has a dream that the rain that has drenched Brewster Place since Ben’s murder has suddenly stopped in time for ‘the block party’ planned by the tenants’ association. The rain eventually returns during the party, and everyone except the women run for shelter. The women believe that the wall in front of which Ben died still has blood on it, so they begin to frantically tear it apart, brick by brick. Mattie wakes to a beautiful sunny day. In the end, all of the residents of Brewster Place are forced out, and the block is condemned. Brewster Place, abandoned, lives on only in the hopes and memories of the women who once lived there.



To conclude, in Mattie's dream, all these women contribute to tearing down the wall, smashing through the barrier that cut them off from possibilities; no one is left out. The last line of Langston Hughes' poem, the book's epigraph, "Or does explode?" is demonstrated in violently graphic depiction. The answer is a resounding "Yes." But to explode is not to be destroyed. These women, "as a community, will vary their dreams into another day. When Mattie wakes from this dream, the sun is shining."<sup>12</sup>

These stories are unified by more than the street on which the characters live. The interactions of the characters and the similar struggles they live through connect the stories, as do the recurring themes and motifs. Of these unifying elements, the most notable is the dream motif, for though these women live a nightmarish existence, they are united by their common dreams. In all these women, individual identity is shaped within the matrix of a community.

Throughout the novel, characters reach out to one another across generational, cultural, and gender lines. They reach out to one another and, in doing so, are able to ease the loneliness and hardship that surround their lives. The relationships show

Individuals at their best, and they serve as a necessary counterweight to the abandonment, prejudice, and brutality that comprise much of the novel.<sup>13</sup>

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