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## Suppression to Self Assertion: Journey of Black Woman in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Gloria Naylor (1950---), 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* (1982). 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-fulfilment 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.

Gloria Naylor, a celebrated African-American novelist, was born in New York City on January 25, 1950. She has authored six novels, namely *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey's Cafe* (1992), *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998), and *1996* (2005). Her 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" (Naylor 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, alike 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)

*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 neighbourhood. Regarding selection of seven stories of seven women characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* Naylor made a statement in an interview given to Kay Bonetti in 1988:

One character, one female protagonist could not even attempt to represent the richness or diversity of the black female experience. So, the women in that work you find consciously differ, beginning with something as simple as their skin color, and they differ in their ages, their religious backgrounds, their personal backgrounds, their political affiliations, even their sexual preferences. (53-54)

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 her earlier experiences. These women are the residents of Brewster Place, which according to the author, is 'the bastard child of several clandestine meetings...' (Naylor 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 fulfil 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" (Naylor 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!" (Naylor 24). As an assertive mother Fannie exhorts Mattie to take pride feeling in motherhood and provides her emotional nurturing:

Ain't nothing to be shamed of. Havin' a baby is the most natural thing there is. The Good Book call children a gift from the Lord. And there ain't no place in that Bible of His that say babies is sinful. The sin is the fornicatin', and that's over and done with. God done forgave you of that a long time ago, and what's going on in your belly now ain't nothin' to hang your head about—you remember that? (Naylor 20)

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 self-assertion. 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. Naylor reveals:

But Rutherford County was not ready for Etta's blooming independence, and so she left one rainy summer night about three hours ahead of dawn and Johnny Brick's furious pursuing relatives. Mattie wrote and told her they had waited in ambush for two days on the county line, and then had returned and burned down her father's barn. The sheriff told Mr. Johnson that he had gotten off mighty light-considering. Mr. Johnson thought so too. After reading Mattie's letter, Etta was sorry she hadn't killed the horny white bastard when she had the chance. (Naylor 60)

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. She finds solace in her true friendship with Mattie:

There ain't nothing I ever do  
Or nothing I ever say  
That folks don't criticize me  
But I'm going to do  
Just what I want to, anyway  
And don't care just what people say  
If I should take a notion  
To jump into the ocean  
Ain't anybody's business if I do . . . (Naylor 57)

Mattie and Etta are forced to leave their native places, but 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. 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 neighbourhood 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. She tells Kiswana:

...she is alive because of the proud people who never scraped or begged or apologized for what they were. They lived asking only one thing of this world... to be allowed to be. And I learned through the blood of these people that black isn't beautiful and it isn't ugly...black is! It is not kinky hair and it is not straight hair...it just is. (Naylor 86)

Naylor reveals the consequences of the failure of black men in realising 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. The scene in which Mattie bathes Ciel and rocks her back and forth in time is very moving:

She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it – a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled - and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fats 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....And Ciel lay down and cried but Mattie knew the tears would end. And she would sleep and morning would come. (Naylor 103-105)

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.

Cora-Lee – a lady who is crazy about babies' right from her childhood because her parents always give her dolls to play with, consequently becomes obsessed with sweet little things. She has babies every year for the sole pleasure of having them. She bears children out of wedlock. She suffers physical violence which leaves scar on her inner self. She does not mind men who appear in her life like 'shadowy figures.' She feels the shadows "would sometimes

bring new babies” but at least “didn’t give you fractured jaws or bruised eyes” (Naylor 114). Though initially 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. Despite being surrounded by shadows, Cora Lee is aware of the fact that she must work for the betterment of her children. She moves from an attitude of evasion to that of taking up challenge posed to her and becomes an assertive and responsible mother.

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. She is weak and vulnerable and constantly tries to be accepted by other members of Brewster Place. She conceals her identity as a lesbian and doesn’t have the courage to accept this fact. On the other hand, 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. By juxtaposing these two women’s totally opposite reaction to the term ‘lesbian’, Naylor demonstrates the pain of being an outcast. By defying the established social system, lesbians, by their very existence, call into question society’s definition of woman at its deepest level. 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). One can sense Naylor’s feeling of outrage and contempt for the rapists when she says: “Lorraine found herself on her knees surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence – human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide” (Naylor170). Another reason for Lorraine’s destruction is her reluctance to accept what she actually is. She jeopardizes herself because she 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:

They ran back to the wall and started prying at another stained brick, Mattie digging into the crumbling mortar with her barbeque fork.... Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands.... The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and replayed out of Brewster Place.... The ‘Today Brewster –

Tomorrow America' banner had been beaten into long strands of red and gold that clung to the wet arms and faces of the women (Naylor 186).

After a week, Brewster Place is bathed in a deluge of sunlight, and the women celebrate black survival by overcoming racial obstacles collectively. The preparations for the Block Party in the end shows the vitality and enthusiasm of these black women, who despite all odds in their lives, keep moving on and celebrating every moment of their life. The victory of these women lies not in overcoming tremendous odds, but in managing to endure them as Naylor says: "They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear" (Naylor 192).

Through this chain of seven stories in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor attempts to create a microcosm of black female experience in America. She gives voice to women of different backgrounds who are forced to move from one place to another for different reasons. These women are robbed of their self-confidence, their ability to make choices and live a life of freedom and dignity in the beginning, but gradually with the help of their indomitable spirit and strong will, consistency and solidarity, these women realize their potentials to fight against oppression of all type. Though these women are not always victorious, they have resistance to fight back and assert their own individuality emerging as stronger human beings. This journey of black women is not only a physical movement from one place to other but also a psychological journey from victimization to self-consciousness, from suppression to self-assertion.

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