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Identity Crisis: Third Space in Gloria Naylor's *Quartet*

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Abstract:

The African American history was one of enslavement and discrimination. The African Americans began to express their experiences through their literature. The African American male writers dealt with the problem of racism in the society. The African American female writers dealt with racism and sexism that they faced in their day to day lives. These female writers sought to bring out the most disadvantage position of African American woman as they had to bear the brunt of racism and the sexist approach from their male members. Most African American writers sought to dismantle the stereotypes and highlight their precarious position. Some modern writers like Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor provide solutions to the woman problems in their writings. Gloria Naylor through her quarter presents the effects of racism and sexism on African American women and at the same time presents the third space, the special identity that they have created in order to survive.

Keywords: Discrimination, Double standards, Identity, Sexism, Third Space.

The African American history records the brutal sufferings of the Africans displaced from their native lands. The Africans, mostly from the west and south of Africa, were kidnapped by the local chieftains and sold as slaves in exchange for raw materials. They were sold to many European countries especially America to work as slaves. The journey of the kidnapped Africans along the 'middle passage' was that of untold misery. Thousands perished unable to withstand hostile treatment and travel. On arrival, their status in a foreign land was discriminatory, and they were forced to fit into an alien culture. The African Americans were forced to embrace Christianity and were considered inferior in mind and body. Moreover, they were at the disposal of their White masters and were subject to discrimination under Jim Crow's laws. The Civil Rights Movement offered conciliation only in paper and for centuries, the position of the African Americans did not improve.

During slavery the African Americans were forbidden to read and write. However, slowly several educated African Americans began to express their predicament through writing. There are instances of slave's works like Lucy Terry's 'Bars Fight', Harriet Jacobs 'Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl' etc. Slowly the educated African Americans began to express their precarious position in a foreign land through their works. The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement as well as the Black Aesthetic Movement provided ground for African American

expression. Ralf Ellison in his work 'Invisible Man' highlighted the peripheral status attributed to African men.

The writings of the African American men dwelt on their relationship and their menial position in the society. They worked on day to day humiliations in a racist society. The African American women writers dealt with their position in a racist society and the inhumanness of a sexist world. The African American women writers began to hit against the female stereotypes. The African American woman was presented as a docile, unintelligent creature capable of doing incessant work and not worthy of respect. She was presented as a lascivious creature. The African American writers brought dignity and expressed their uniqueness in their works. Female authors spoke about the family and the interracial problems like sexism in their works. Many writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Marshall, Jessie Faucet and others presented the female world and fought against the stereotypes. Later writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Nikki Giovanni expressed the African identity and predicament through modern and postmodern techniques. Many authors like Ann Petry presented the predicament of an African American woman in a prejudiced society. They worked to establish the uniqueness of the African American woman. The works of all these writers have a southern touch and are filled with African folkloric traditions. African American female writers like Maya Angelou and Gloria Naylor, through their works, insist that African American women can gain salvation only through unity and understanding.

It is said that the literature is the mirror of the society as it reflects the social behavior and presents the mindset of the people in the society. Thus we find that African American literature is about the problems of African Americans in a racist, sexist and classist society. The African American literature written by female authors deals with the various problems faced by the African American women in their families and offers solutions. Thus we find that the African Americans were displaced from Africa their first space. They were forced to fit into an alien culture (second space). From the previous experience of African origin and with the influence of American culture the African Americans have created a third space and new identity for themselves. They have created a space for themselves that is free from racism and sexism.

The third space theory was established by Homi Bhabha and he describes it as "the capacity to produce a cross-referential, generalizable unity that signifies a progression or evolution of ideas in time, as well as a critical self-reflection on their premises or determinants." Bhabha further states that by exploring the third space we might overcome polarity and emerge with our own identity. Third space is different from W.B. Dubois double consciousness. Dubois' theory states that one has one's own identity and is also identified through the perception of the others but, third space offers more flexibility. Maxine Lavon Montgomery in her work 'The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance' states that Morrison and Naylor vision an ideal space that is similar to Bhabha's third space.

Gloria Naylor, an acclaimed African American woman author, in her work 'The Women of Brewster Place' deals with the trials and tribulations in the lives of seven African American women. Most of these women have faced several loses in life and have chosen the dilapidated Brewster Place as the third space to lead their lives. The Brewster Place is situated in a dead end street cut away from the mainstream and houses women mostly separated from families. Mattie Michael, the matriarch of Brewster Place, was subject to ill-treatment in a racist and sexist world. She was brought up by a strict yet lovable father but had to leave home after she was found

pregnant. Mattie being a woman is forced to bear the brunt while Butch, her impregnator escapes clean chit. Mattie moves away from home, suffers and sacrifices a lot to bring up her son Basil. She is forsaken by the inconstant Basil and loses her home mortgaged for his bail. Thus Mattie stripped of her resources and support chooses Brewster Place as her new home. She is never dejected and provides comfort to many a woman affected by racism and sexism living in Brewster Place. Mattie's friend Etta Mae Johnson faces many disappointments in her pursuit of an ideal man. Although she succumbs to the lust of Reverend Woods, she recovers and finds solace in the friendship of Mattie waiting for her at Brewster Place. The submissive Ciel is subject to misery at the hands of her irresponsible husband, Eugene. Eugene deserts Ciel and her daughter without strong reasons and returns whenever he wishes. The selfish Eugene even forces Ciel to have an abortion. Ciel, in a stressful moment of holding to Eugene, loses her dear child. The dejected Ciel prepares herself for death but she is rejuvenated by the love and care of Mattie. The idealistic mind of Kiswane Browne finds solace in Brewster Place. Kiswane Browne foregoes her place in the opulent Linden Hills to help her folk in Brewster Place. She tries her best to gather the residents of Brewster Place and to file a case against their indifferent landlord. She does not totally succeed in her endeavor but brings out a momentary change in Cora Lee. Cora Lee is obsessed with new born babies. She is an irresponsible mother of seven children. Cora Lee is presented as the African American woman devoid of values and a product of sexism. Cora Lee chooses Brewster Place as a convenient place for the fleeting visits of her boyfriends. However she is momentarily chastised by Kiswane. The lesbians Theresa and Lorraine choose Brewster Place as a space to live their lives, undisturbed. However they are ill treated by the gossip mongers like Sophia and others. The lesbians receive support from Mattie, Etta, Kiswane etc. Thus Naylor projects Brewster Place as the third space for women wronged by a racist and sexist society.

Gloria Naylor's second novel 'Linden Hills' is presented as a symbol of black material success and spiritual degeneration. Linden Hills was established by Luther Needed after years of careful planning. Linden Hills housed African Americans who had succeeded in their lives. The successful African Americans vied with one another for a place in Linden Hills. The African Americans chose Linden Hills as a third space free from racism and was established to convert it "into a jewel-an ebony jewel that reflected the soul of Wayne County but reflected it black". (9) However Naylor presents African Americans who have lost their roots in their mad pursuit of material progress. One can trace the trauma and tension that Luther faces in his pursuit to establish Linden Hills. His wife loses her individuality and dignity in her pursuit to marry Luther and become the first lady of Linden Hills. We find that Mrs. Tilson has coaxed her husband to overwork, ignoring his health, so as to gain ascendancy in Linden Hills. Similarly she forces her daughter Roxanne to marry Xavier a successful person in Linden Hills. David a lesbian foregoes his sexuality and marries a girl to maintain his position in Linden Hills. Laurel, Chester, Lycentia, Maxwell Symth and others lead artificial lives only to become part of Linden Hills. Although, Gloria Naylor through her works reinstates the need for African Americans to progress, she warns about the dangers, in case they lose their individuality and roots, in their material pursuit. Thus Linden Hills could be ascertained as a third space created by the African Americans to prove them.

Gloria Naylor through her third novel 'Mama Day' presents an ideal island, Willow Springs, free from racism and sexism. It could be considered as a third space, an ideal place for African American existence. The island is shrouded in African folkloric traditions and beliefs, and is

headed by a matriarch, Miranda Day. The island is not severed from the mainland which is a symbol of white influence. The islanders seek the mainland for education, for work and to sell their farm produce. Willow Springs, is connected to the main island by a wooden bridge that should be rebuilt after a natural calamity. Ophelia, the matriarch's grand niece, marries George. George is city bred and is a symbol of white culture and scientific reasoning. George visits the island with his wife, two years after their marriage. He is mesmerized by the beauty of the island but is unable to comprehend the folkloric beliefs and practices. Finally he loses his life in his pursuit of save Ophelia from nightshade poison. Thus Naylor through the character of George and Miranda brings out the supremacy of African culture and beliefs by creating a third space through Willow Springs Island.

Naylor's fourth novel 'Bailey's Café' revolves around women marginalized and stamped by society as whores. Naylor traces the hostile circumstances that have forced them to become whores. Eve was found by her Godfather abandoned as an infant. She was looked after by him and was not allowed to meet boys. He exercised complete authority over her and refused to reveal her birth date, in spite of her repeated pleadings. Eve was caught red handed when she was involved in an innocent stomp game with Billy. She was immediately thrown out by Godfather and was forced to fend for herself. Eve travelled a lot and gained a lot of experience before she established her Bordeaux. She states that she evolved from delta dust and provides solace to many a woman ostracized and stamped by society as whores. Eve's boarding house provides space for the women who wish to prove themselves in spite of their negative experiences.

Esther described as ugly was forced to serve as a sex slave for twelve years in order to help her dear brother. She finds solace in Eve's Bordeaux and decides to meet people who address her as little sister. The callers who visit Esther are required to present white tulips as they show in the dark. Another character, Peaches is objectified due to her beauty. She is torn between being herself and satisfying the prying eyes of the men around her. Finally she yields to the patriarchal pressures but later hurts herself. The beautiful Peaches finds solace at Eve's Bordeaux and Eve promises Peaches' father to return her whole. The strong Jesse Bell is belittled in a patriarchal society. She is reduced to a zero and expelled from her family due Uncle Eli's schemes. Dejected and lost Jesse Bell resorts to drugs. She finally finds solace at Eve's and is cured of her addiction. The innocent tribal girl, Mariam, is expelled from beta Israel tribe that is grounded in patriarchal laws. She is disowned for not revealing the man who had impregnated her. Mariam is a victim of the inhuman tribal practice of female genital mutilation. Eve and even Bailey sympathize and provide solace to her. Eve helps Mairam deliver the baby and thus make her feel at home Mariam's mother does not trust her but Eve lends an understanding ear to Mariam's problem. Eve's Bordeaux provides space for men who were victims of a biased society. The well educated Stanley feels at home as the housekeeper of the Bordeaux, he even feels free to wear the dress of his choice. Thus we find that Naylor in this novel has used magic realism to create a third space in the form of Eve's Bordeaux. The location of the Bordeaux is not permanent and people can see it only when they need it.

Thus, Gloria Naylor through her quartet has dealt with the problems of African American women who are subject to racism, sexism and classicism in the society and in their own families. The men and women try to find solace and continue to live in the third space created by them.

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