

Oppression and Optimism in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

Rashmi

Research Scholar

Department of English & Foreign Languages

MDU, Rohtak

Abstract

In African American society, a woman excruciates under double colonization – gender discrimination and racial oppression. The gender oppression of the poor, helpless African American women by their own men and the Whites, and the sexual arrogance from within the Black community. In *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) Gloria Naylor's women engage in a fierce struggle for survival in an environment of poverty and prejudice, violence and violation. Female characters in the novels of Gloria Naylor become aware of their inhuman existence partly due to gender discrimination and suffer hard to establish their individualistic existence. The women of Gloria Naylor are victims of racial discrimination, gender oppression, sexual exploitation, male superiority and economic inadequacies. This paper, intends to probe women's agony, oppression and unawareness of her suffering, and later her awareness, optimism and ability to raise her voice against the traumatic predicament.

Keywords: Discrimination, Oppression, Poverty, Suffering, Voice and Violence.

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, which is subtitled Novel in Seven Stories, presents a ghetto within an urban American community of Brewster Place. Each of the seven stories is intertwined with the characters taking up mixed roles both prominent and subordinate in other stories. In *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) Gloria Naylor's women engage in a fierce struggle for survival in an environment of poverty and prejudice, violence and

violation and an almost crushing adversity. Although each woman has her own individual problems, all of them collectively share the problems of the black urban female. The women of Brewster place are “hard-edged, soft-centered brutally demanding and easily pleased” (*WBP* 5). These women in the words of William Bradley Hooper, “are of different ages, come from different backgrounds react differently to their blackness and to men, and have different notions personal accomplishment, but all are burdened by being both black and female” (*CLC* Volume 28:304).

Mattie Michael, the central character is presented as a middle aged woman who has moved to Brewster Place. In fact, Mattie faces a triple desertion – first by Butch Fuller, her lover, then by her father and finally by her son Basil – they desert her at moments when Mattie needs them most. Although she has been a destitute, her spirit of being an independent female does not diminish. In *Etta Mae Johnson*, Gloria Naylor presents a woman who carries herself with a head high and eyes fixed unwaveringly on her destination. When she is frustrated with her boyfriend, she moves to Brewster place. Kiswana Browne, a young revolutionary, moves from Linden Hills to Brewster Place to enable herself to be near “my people” (*WBP* 83). Kiswana’s sensitivity to the plight of her people makes her voluntarily decide to be near her people and be one of them. In her own words, she would “rather be dead” (*WBP* 85) than relenting to be “a white man’s nigger” (*WBP* 85). Ciel is Miss Eva’s granddaughter and Basil’s early childhood play mate. Mattie is her second mother. Ciel lives a life of humiliation amidst poverty and strife. Her husband Eugene is neither a loving husband to Ciel nor a caring father to his daughter Serena. “*The Two*”, last of the seven stories in the novel, refers to Theresa and Lorraine, the only women without last names, and their lesbian relationship. They are not nice girls in the eyes of the female residents of Brewster Place. The community also condemns such Lesbianism as a violation of the law of nature. After an analysis of the lives of women portrayed in Gloria Naylor’s novels, it is found that the men play, directly or indirectly a prime role in the victimization of women. While the female characters in the novels of Gloria Naylor become aware of their inhuman existence partly due to gender discrimination and suffer hard to establish their individualistic existence.

Gloria Naylor's women are desperate, determined, resilient and assertive. *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) portrays poignantly the lives of women who amidst oppression derive support and strength by a perfect bonding with other women in an imagined ghetto in the urban American community of Brewster place. Annie Gottlieb greatly appreciates Naylor's work for the feminist theme of female relationships and sisterhood :

In Gloria Naylor's fierce, loving group portrait of seven black women in one housing development... the bonds between women are the abiding ones. Most men are incalculable hunters who come and go. They are attractive-but weak and dangerous representatives of nature and violence who both fertilize and threaten the female core. (11)

The spirit of sisterhood displayed by them enables them to succeed in drawing the curtains of oppression. While the women of Gloria Naylor are victims of racial discrimination, sexual exploitation, male superiority and economic inadequacies. These women, though different in various ways, establish a strong circumstantial and psychological bonding with each other which helps them explore the redemptive possibilities in the face of crushing poverty, personal tragedy and threatening neighbourhood. When Mattie considers her pregnancy an act of shame, her mother tries to relieve her sorrowing heart of the guilt and shame, saying:

“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 fornication', 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?” . (*WBP* 20)

As a true upholder of black tradition, Fannie transmits her daughter the knowledge of their rich culture that attaches high value to motherhood. As Collins asserts: “African-American

mothers often try to protect their daughters from the dangers that lie ahead by offering them a sense of their own unique self-worth” (186). Naylor illustrates the power of sisterhood through the characters of black women with different perspectives and approaches to life in the trying circumstances. It is this loving bond between two southern sisters that keeps nurturing them despite all their soul-killing experiences in a racist and sexist society. As Larry Andrews states: “At its best this bond among women confers identity, purpose, and strength for survival” (285).

The author gives voice to the women of different backgrounds and preferences who are forced to move from one place to another for different reasons. In the beginning, they are robbed of their self-confidence and abilities to make choices and live a life of freedom and dignity, but they gradually realize their innate potentials to fight against all types of oppression by dint of the indomitable spirit, strong will, consistent efforts and solidarity. Though, at times, they fail to realize their dreams, they never sit and wail over their woes, rather move forward in life with a new zeal and optimism. They are resilient, resourceful and spiritual, and have resistance to fight back. It is the virtue of strong spirit that helps them assert their individuality. Despite all the dehumanizing conditions and forces, they demonstrate the courage and willpower to rise from the ashes of utter destruction like the supernatural image of an ‘ebony phoenix’.

In this novel Naylor has presented the life and events in the life of seven black women living in Brewster Place. Charles E. Wilson explains, “Described on the cover as a novel in seven stories. *The Women of Brewster Place* chronicles the lives of seven black women as they struggle to survive in a rapidly deteriorating neighbourhood Naylor uses several mini-plots that highlights the lives of the individual women” (*WBP37*).

The most important character that unifies the whole novel is that of Mattie Michael. It may be safely affirmed that like Tiresias in T.S. Eliot’s ‘*The Wasteland*’, she is the unifying thread in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Mattie is present from the beginning to the end and her character binds the novel into a unified whole. She is the motherly figure and a caring parent

for all the females who live in Brewster Place. Annie Gottlieb underlines – “Pregnant and disowned, she made the instinctive matriarchal decision to live without a man and invest all her love back into her child. Left in the lurch by the grown, spoiled son, she becomes the anchor for the other women of Brewster Place” (4). Gloria Naylor also underlines the fact that these women need each other to sustain in their sufferings and torments. Barbara Christian affirms, “Women mothering other women is consistent throughout this novel as they hold each other in survival”(113).

It is conspicuous that these women of Brewster Place survive because of bonding. Mattie supports Etta and Ciel and Miss Eva serves the role of mother. Again, Kiswana helps Cora Lee and her children, motivates her and guide her; she even comes to the rescue of Lorraine when she is troubled and taunted by C.C. Baker. However, Lorraine dies because her bonding and friendship with Theresa had weakened. In Brewster Place the women depend on each other for survival and for psychological support in fighting against the forces of oppression and isolation. Therefore the necessary condition for survival and negotiating sufferings and oppression is unity and bonding. The old saying ‘united we stand and divided we fall’ is very much apt and true in this case. All these seven alienated and abandoned women are also at a loss of their dreams being unfulfilled.

In ‘dream’, the seven characters of the novel, make their firm presence and show their strife against fixed and conventional myth of a sexist and racist society. All these women being united eliminate the wall of Brewster Place, which is a symbol of “dead-end street”(*WBP*25). The women believe that this wall separates them from the white world and society, so they want to demolish the gap between white and black. Mattie’s dream on one way or other tries to bridge the gap between whites and blacks. She heartily wants to put down the separation and diversity. Mattie and her remnant bevy recalcitrant and defy the rules of blacks and whites. For the protest and retaliation to the white as well as black males, the women constitute an association and this association’s principal objective is to retrieve their missing identity, their right place in the family as well as society and protest against male chauvinism as well as male tyranny. With the collapse of the wall, the Brewster Place itself collapses and the residents shift to another place, where they can live with their own way and manners, “So it had to watch, dying but not dead, as

they packed the remnants of their dreams and left”(WBP191). Although Mattie’s dreams are unrealistic but its existence and truth cannot be ignored. Thus, the women of Brewster Place ruin the wall of triple jeopardy, “...it establishes the necessity of sisterhood among black women as the key to survival and leads the road for self- discovery of self- identity”(WBP26). Through Mattie’s sleeping vision, Naylor opines the positive attitude of her protagonists, who wish to have a happy and comfortable life with all their benefactors. Within Mattie’s fancy, Cora Lee, one of the dwellers of Brewster Place, delivers the brick to Mattie. The brick is taken from Brewster Place, which is the symbol of discrimination and partiality between whites and blacks. At this time, “...all of the men and children now stood huddled in the doorways”(WBP185) . The women take control of the movement, passing the stained bricks from one hand to another until the bricks are out of Brewster Place.

The novel indeed succeeds through the characters of Mattie and other females, in raising a call of protest and drawing the attention of the readers and society as a whole against the male chauvinism in society. As Gloria Naylor prima facie comments, “And for me, that wall symbolized simply racism in this country.” (WBP35). Thus, Brewster Place is a symbol of dehumanization and struggle of women who fight for their rights as well as identity and simultaneously exhibit that they finally achieve their salvation towards life. Black women have tried to gain their lost humanity and collect an individual self through their art and literature. They have also succeeded in establishing separate branch of *Black American Literature* in general.

Women unite to break down the wall symbolizing a way of rejecting their past and the conditions that exist in that community. When Cora Lee asks Theresa to join the rest of the women with words “please...please” Theresa demands, “Now, you go back up there and bring some more, but don’t ever say that again –to any one (187)”. By rejecting the word “please,” she discards the script of submission imposed upon African- American women. Thus Gloria Naylor celebrates black- survival by overcoming racial obstacles. She calls in for the unity of women to fight together such oppressions on basis of race, class and gender.

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