

Home and Self-Actualization: A Critical Study of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract

The Women of Brewster Place by the critically-acclaimed African American novelist Gloria Naylor presents seven interconnected narratives of women who live in a one-street ghetto of Brewster Place. The reading of the novel has been restricted to either a postcolonial-feminist perspective or a racial one but the eternal quest of these women to find a firm anchorage has not been problematized enough. Naylor configures home not as a physical dwelling place but as a space for a better self-actualization of her people. The paper intends to analyze the importance Naylor attaches to home that occasionally surpasses even the need of identity-assertion in the novel.

Keywords

African American, Collective, Home, Racial segregation, Relationship, Society

Introduction

Dearth of money and scarcity of resources make ones living-condition deplorable. However, the struggle intensifies when financial inadequacy is compounded by socio-cultural impediments and oppressive political forces. African Americans, the second largest ethnic and racial minority in the United States lived this predicament for centuries. The African American history dates back to the sixteenth century when the Afro Americans were sold on the auction block as commodities and subjected to inhuman atrocities like whipping and murder. Slaves were denied the legal right to marry and the ones already married were often forcibly separated from their families. The male slaves were employed in brick yards, cotton plantations, warehouses etc while the female slaves and children were used as house-helps and menial laborers. The subjugation of women was further aggravated by racial segregation, poverty and perpetual threat of abduction by the male members of not only their community but also the superior white masters. Majorly due to economic reasons, the male members of the African American families migrated to more prosperous areas, leaving their children in the custody of their mothers. History bears testimony to the fact that the African American women have suffered physical, social, racial and economical torments much more than the men of their community. They were deprived of the security of marriage, familial solidarity and a comfortable atmosphere of home. Resultantly, these women were abused, neglected and abandoned which lead to both physical and emotional instability in them. *Black Men on Race*,

Gender and Sexuality: A Critical Reader quotes the social scientist, Calvin Hernton who elaborates on the predicament of the black women thus:

Throughout the entire span of her existence on American soil, the black woman has been alone and unprotected, not only socially but psychologically as well. She has had to fend for herself as if she were man; being black even more so. I am not implying that the black women have become frigid or “masculine.” In fact, she is potentially, if not already, the most sexual animal on this planet. It is not frigidity that I am describing. It is rigidity. And it has been this quality of austerity in the Negro woman which has enabled her to survive what few other women have ever lived through. (136)

One of the most recurrent literary refrains has been that a great art in neutral and transcends the specifics of time, language, race and gender but gradually it became evident that all these aspects are consequential in nature. For a long time, writers, especially the ones belonging to the privileged strata relegated the black characters to peripheral margins in literature. The presence of a black character was crucial to the narrative so that the white characters could emerge as powerful and over-arching. In the preface to the book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison contends that the lack of authentic African representation in the American literature is because “the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white” (4). The Harlem Renaissance saw a vehement outpour of creative energy of the African Americans in literary, theatrical and musical fields and marked a turning point in the African American history. Though this literary revolution guaranteed the African Americans an opportunity to write like their white counterparts but for a long time their narrative literature stagnated in conventional modes. It revolved around the themes like oppression of African Americans by the white population or the struggle of a black character to establish his identity in the hostile white world. Their novels aptly projected the black history of agony and deprivation but the representation of psychological depth and ethical dilemmas of the black characters was absent in their works. It is tacit that the deeply entrenched patriarchy and racial exclusion did not let the African American women participate in the writing as it was regarded as a masculine domain. Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* captures the wasted artistic genius of these women in the following words:

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality- which is the basis of art that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane. Throwing away this spirituality was their pathetic attempt to lighten the soul to a weight their work-worn, sexually abused bodies could bear. (402)

With the works of women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker the African American women's intellectual capabilities gained recognition. A critically acclaimed twentieth century American novelist, Gloria Naylor has authored novels like *The*

Women of Brewster Place, *Linden Hills*, *The Meanings of a Word*, *Mama Day*, *Bailey's Café* and *The Men of Brewster Place*. Drawing major inspiration from the writings of Toni Morrison, Naylor in her works tries to deconstruct the hegemonic nucleus patriarchy and racism within the larger framework of American society. One of the features that set her novels apart from her contemporaries is that she extensively focuses on not the protagonist but the collective consciousness of African Americans.

The novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) divided in six segments, framed by "Dawn" and "Dusk" chronicles the aspiration and struggle of the women of Brewster Place. Their collective experiences are both painful and redemptive. *The Women of Brewster Place* narrates the stories of seven women – Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Lucielia Louise Turner, Cora Lee, Lorraine and Theresa. Although each character has a separate story but the close homogeneity of their experiences make them a coherent entity. Since the primary characters of the novel are women, one of the most apparent readings of the text is a feminist one. Scholars have extensively delved on the feminist agenda of the novelist and independent women characters of the novel. For example, S. Mohanasundari says "Black women recreate and maintain their self-identities in the face of a chaotic influx of sensation that has always threatened to sweep them away. They are no more the midnight caged birds, but radiant ebony phoenixes singing joyfully, and triumphantly the song of their true self" (46).

While the feminist overtones in the novel are unmistakable another significant aspect is the novelist's extensive reflection on home. Home in the novel is not just a physical dwelling place but a site for emotional and psychological comfort. The characters are in an eternal search for home where they can escape the victimization of the outer world and have a sense of rootedness. Maxine Lavon Montgomery in the book *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance* argues that home in Naylor's fiction does not symbolize an architectural structure but it is a space that represents emotional comfort and racial sovereignty.

Quest for Home

Home has been one of the dominant themes in the work of writers across ages but its implication varies from one writer to the other. The word home has multiple connotations particularly in women writings in which it ranges from a patriarchal household to an accommodation which provides the feeling of belongingness to them. The importance of home is illustrated by Shagufta Parween as "Among the myriad connotation of home the most potent are the notion of belonging, the right to lay claim to a place as one's own, the freedom to be oneself, secure spaces that emanate feelings of inclusiveness comfort and protection. It associates with it relationship, privacy, warmth, attachment, desire, safety, happiness and freedom" (143).

The matrix of the novel is dominated by dispossession, resettlement and a continuous search for home by the women characters. In the introductory chapter titled "Dawn", Brewster Place, is described as "the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and managing director of Unico Reality Company" (1). Racial separation and economic gap between the Afro Americans and the Americans used to be the most pronounced during the allotment of houses. The dilapidated appearance of Brewster Place embodies the squalid living condition of the poor African Americans all over America.

Brewster Place which serves as home to the women characters in the novel lacks in civic amenities and proper infrastructure. Naylor graphically describes the state of Brewster Place as:

The gray bricks of the buildings were the color of dull silver during Brewster Place's youth. Although the street wasn't paved- after a heavy rain it was necessary to wade in ankle-deep to get home- there was a sense of promise in the street and in the times. The city was growing and prospering; there were plans for a new boulevard just north of the street, and it seemed as if Brewster Place was to become part of the main artery of the town . . . they were fighting for the lifeblood of their community, but there was no one fighting for Brewster Place. (2)

The first and also the longest narrative is of Mattie Michael who later emerges as a motherly figure to all the other women. Not only she nurtures other women but also obliterates their need for support and protection from the male members. The life of Mattie Michael can be broadly divided into three phases- Mattie's young days in her paternal house in rural south, her migration to the North Carolina with her son Basil and her coming to Brewster Place after losing her home and possessions in order to get a bail for her son. Mattie relishes the geniality of home that comprises of a patriarchal but doting father and a solicitous mother. Being the only child Mattie's father harbors high hopes for her future allowing her to interact with only Fred Watson, a man of social repute. A transgression in the cordial atmosphere of their home comes when compelled by "heat of an August day and the smell of sugar canes and mossy herbs" (22) Mattie succumbs to the physical advancement of Butch Fuller and gets pregnant with his child. The discontent of her father changes to rage when Mattie divulges the name of the man involved and defiantly asserts, "I ain't saying, Papa" (23). Her father beats her mercilessly and eventually breaks down into tears which mark the collapse of her paternal home and disintegration of their family. Mattie leaves her home to save her parents from social ridicule and proceeds towards the North. Naylor captures the multifarious dilemmas of Mattie on leaving her home and embarking upon a journey in search of a new accommodation.

Mattie sat in aisle seat and tried to ignore the melting of familiar landscapes. She didn't want to think about the strange city that lay ahead or even her friend Etta, who would be at the depot to meet her. And she didn't want to think about the home that had been lost to her, or her mother's tears, or the painful breach with her father that throbbed as much as the soreness that was still in her back and legs. She just wanted to lay her head on the cushioned seat and suspend time, pretend that she had been born that very moment on that very bus, and that this was all there was and ever would be. (25)

Mattie reaches her new destination and five months later gives birth to a son, Basil. Etta tries to persuade Mattie to move to New York with her. The constant movement and resettlement of Etta substantiates the fact that like all the others, she is also looking for a durable bargain. The simplistic idea of home as a place to live is negated by the novelist as Mattie says to Etta, "When you first left home, you wrote and said St. Louis was the place to be, and then it was Chicago, and then here. Now it's New York. You ain't gonna find what you are looking for that way" (26). After Etta leaves Mattie and migrates to New York, Mattie's fate is described as, "In the loneliness that rushed in to fill the vacuum her friend had left, she found herself thinking

of home” (27). Mattie compulsorily has to work for long hours in order to pay off the rent of the battered room and nurture her child. One night as a rat bites her son, she abandons her ramshackled room and sets out for forage and shelter again. She is provided lodging by an elderly lady, Eva Turner. With Turner, Mattie revives the parental affection that she had lost long back. Naylor writes, “The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable” (34). Mattie purchases the same house after the death of Turner and later is bound to offer it as a property for the bail of Basil who is charged with murder. Despite being assured by the authorities that he will be exonerated, Basil runs away resulting in the confiscation of Mattie’s house. As a result, she is forced to move to a smaller apartment in Brewster place hoping to see her son one day.

The second story narrated by Naylor is of Mattie’s childhood friend, Etta Mae Johnson. Etta spends a major portion of her life in the South, wandering in search of stability which she hopes to achieve by marrying. In Etta’s case, Naylor formulates the man-woman relationship as a game in which men are predators and Etta is a willing prey. Her intention is only to accomplish her dream of a settled life. Etta’s search for a suitable partner is actually her quest for a tangible relationship which could validate her existence and provide an anchorage to her. She says, “Being a woman alone, it seems all the more hard. Sometimes you don’t know where to turn.” (68). After a series of failed relationships and recurrent disappointments, she seeks refuge in Brewster Place. Despite Mattie’s warning who sees Etta’s association with Reverend Woods as purely carnal, Etta initiates a correspondence with him. Etta’s hopes for marriage and emotional security are thwarted by Woods as he simply seeks physical gratification from her and drops her back to Brewster Place. When she walks through the streets of Brewster she finds herself as a stranger there but “a light under the shade of Mattie’s window” (74) soothes her. Naylor writes, “Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps towards the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (74).

Not all the residents of Brewster like localities were poverty-stricken. Some African Americans deliberately dwelled in these areas to have an experience of authentic blackness and be a part of the long history of suffering and struggle of their people. Similar is the case with Melanie who christens herself as Kiswana Browne on account of its being ‘more African’. Kiswana hails from a privileged middle class family in Linden Hills but being a social activist her pride in her color and ethnicity draws her to Brewster Place. The chapter opens with Kiswana dreamily looking at the street and her imagination being interrupted by the sight of her mother approaching her apartment. Mrs. Browne chides Kiswana for abandoning the comfort of her home in Linden Hills in the favour of her misguided revolutionary passion. She says, “These streets- this building- it’s so shabby and rundown. Honey, you don’t have to live like this.” (83) The rebel in Kiswana retaliates in the words, “What do mean, *these people*. They’re my people and yours too, Mama- we’re all black. But maybe you’ve forgotten that over in Linden Hills.”(83) It is not the prosperous household in Linden Hills that gives Kiswana a feeling of home but the association with the women in Brewster Place. It connects her with them as they have the same cultural history and racial identity. Mrs. Browne advises Kiswana to work within the system as an assembly woman or a civil liberties lawyer. She cautions her that in the absence of some concrete power she would not be able to bring changes in the society.

Kiswana's revolutionary ardor can be called naïve because she does not understand the intricacies of the political system but sacrificing the congeniality of her middle class household projects the strength of her character. The unflinching solidarity she shows with her people in Brewster also substantiates her humanitarian nature. She accepts the socially deserted area of Brewster Place as her home and takes pride in the black heritage of deprivation and endurance.

Lucielia Louise Turner, affectionately addressed as Ceil is the grown up and married granddaughter of Mrs. Eva. Her family constitutes of her husband, Eugene, daughter, Serena and Mattie who is a foster mother to her. As the story unfolds, one becomes aware that Lucielia's house and relationship with her husband is tumbling gradually. She is also shown to be expecting her second child. Lucielia hopelessly tries to instill some meaning in her decaying relationship with Eugene. She also tries to persuade Mattie into believing that hers is a happy family:

He's really straight-ended up this time. He's got a new job on the docks that pays real good, and he was just so depressed before with the new baby and no work. You'll see. He's even gone out now to buy paint and stuff to fix the apartment. And, and Serena needs a daddy. (92)

Mattie replies with a parental precision, "You ain't gotta convince me, Ceil" (92). Ceil's emotional crisis is due to lack of mutual respect between her and her husband. The more she tries to prove to herself that her relationship with Eugene is improving, the animosity between them grows larger. Naylor writes, "Ceil jumped when the front door slammed shut. She waited tensely for the metallic bang of keys on the coffee table and the blast of the stereo. Lately that was how Eugene announced his presence home." (93) Lucielia aborts her second child in order to save Eugene from further exasperation. However, upon his return Eugene is eager to leave for Maine claiming to have got a job there. It is evident that he simply wants to run away from this collapsing home and relationship into a world without responsibilities. While he and Lucielia are arguing, Serena chases a roach into an electric socket and is electrocuted. This brings to the mind of the readers a similar episode in the beginning of the novel when a rat bites Mattie's son due to which she leaves her accommodation. In both the cases the inability to maintain hygiene in cloistered homes poses threat of pests to the little children. Serena's sudden death leaves Lucielia emotionally wrecked. At this point, Mattie comforts Lucielia hoping that she might be able to handle the burden of truth rather than escaping from it. Throughout, Lucielia tries to delude herself into believing that the ruffled state of her marriage is transient phase which would change soon. She is in a constant quest of home where there is warmth of relationship but reality thwarts her hope.

Naylor describes Cora Lee as a female who was obsessed with baby dolls as a young girl. When she grows into an adult, her obsession with babies continues and she conceives several times from different men. She is complacent with the 'shadows' that appear in the night and impregnate her. Cora Lee is voluntarily oblivious of their names, marital status and identity as she feels it is tiring to remember the details. Hers is probably the filthiest apartment of all the women in the novel where she lives with her awfully neglected children. She adores her children only till the time they are infants but once they outgrow their infancy, Cora Lee ignores her parental responsibilities towards them. The novelist encases the condition of her home in the words, "Cora Lee sighed slowly, turned her head from her soap opera, and looked around the

howling and flying bodies that were throwing dingy school books at each other, jumping off crippled furniture, and swinging on her sagging velveteen draperies” (108,109). While on the one hand, Lucielia Turner is shown desperate to keep her home and family together, Cora Lee lacks any determination to keep her home or children in order. One day, on being persuaded by Kiswana Browne, Cora Lee agrees to take her children to a park performance of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This incident is important because for the first time in the chapter, she attends to the morbid state of her home and children without reluctance. After watching the play her view on parenting undergoes a considerable change. She develops a desire to cultivate her children so that they can grow up into responsible adults. Thus, an exposure to the public sphere motivates her to change her chaotic apartment into a home which is more suitable for the overall development of her children.

The last account is of a lesbian couple, Lorraine and Theresa who live in Brewster Place without betraying their sexual orientation to other women. They are warmly accepted by the women of the community for ironically not engaging the attention of their husbands and boyfriends. Brewster imparts a feeling of home to Lorraine and Theresa but only till the time they adhere to the accepted codes of social propriety. As their homosexuality becomes known to their fellow residents, they are almost ostracized. While the judgmental remarks of Sophie unsettle Lorraine, Theresa is unperturbed. Lorraine coyly tries to mingle with other women on the pretext of tenants’ association meetings but Sophie ridicules her presence by pointing towards her sexuality. Lorraine leaves the meeting in tears with a hurt self-respect but she is calmed by the janitor of the complex, Ben. Ben relates the story of his daughter to her who was indirectly led into prostitution by him. Home or precisely house plays a pivotal role in Ben’s story too. Ben had come to live in Brewster after being left by his daughter and wife. He informs Lorraine that he had to let their white landlord rape his daughter as he did not have money to pay the rent. Lorraine feels so self-assured after listening to the comforting comments of Ben that despite Theresa’s repeated dissuasion, she decides to attend a party all alone. While returning back home, she is gang-raped and bruised by a pack of goons. At the break of dawn, Lorraine sees Ben and unexpectedly murders him. The murder of Ben can be seen as a revenge for the same offence he committed twice. Lorraine might have been emotionally hurt but she was safe with Theresa in their home. The antagonism of the world outside the safe confines of their home mars her completely.

The scene quickly shifts to the ‘block party’ organized by the tenants’ association. Despite the rain, the women of Brewster Place do not seek shelter. On the contrary, they tear down every brick of the wall that separates them from the main city, symbolically better opportunities. This act of violence by the women leads to the expulsion of all the residents of Brewster Place, bringing both the novel and the cohabitation of the women to an end.

Conclusion

Being an African-American-women writer, racial and gender concerns in the novels of Naylor are inevitable. However, one of the traits that had set her apart from her contemporaries is her ample focus on the basic structures of survival like home, relationships and religion. Home is of utmost importance to Naylor as her own parents who were sharecroppers in Mississippi before migrating to New York encouraged her to read and write. This kindness she confessed in an interview is not received by a lot of African American women who may be

equally or more gifted than her. Naylor's oft quoted words, "Lord keep her safe since you can't keep her sane" prove that healthy sustainability comes before identity for her.

The stories of women in the novel may be superficially different but they converge at a few common points like an intense urge to resist social bigotry and procure a secure place that can be called home. *The Women of Brewster Place* weaves a rich tapestry of the variegated conflicts and experiences of the women as they undergo the process of self-actualization. The novel also shows how in the modern capitalist America, chances were available to only the privileged section of the society. These women live in Brewster after being deserted by their fathers or jilted by their lovers. Despite their insalubrious living conditions, they are free from patriarchal oppression. Thus, the novel comprises of the stories of tragedies and triumph of these women who as Jeevan Kumar opines, "reach out to one another, and in doing so, are able to ease the loneliness and hardship that surrounds their lives" (8).

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