

A Delineation of Deprived and Exploited in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract

Gloria Naylor is one of the leading African-American novelists. She is also known as an essayist, screenplay writer, columnist and educationist. She is widely recognized for her strong delineation of black women. She treats women not in the light of allotted traditional roles to her by the society but as an individual. She has proficiently depicted the world of black female experience. Her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) highlights the varied experiences of seven black women in a hostile environment of their triple oppression-racial, gender and sexual exploitation and how they become conscious of their power and self-identity through their exploitation. The present research paper intends to delineate the black woman's predicament due to racism, patriarchal dominance and sexual exploitation in the hands of white as well as black men. Here, Naylor emphasizes the need of black sisterhood and the feeling of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' to overcome this triple exploitation.

Keywords: triple oppression, deprived, conflict, black female identity, black sisterhood

Introduction:

Gloria Naylor is one of the leading African-American novelists. She is also known as an essayist, screenplay writer, columnist and educationist. She is widely recognized for her strong delineation of black women. Her novels depict the aspects of a female identity. She treats women not in the light of allotted traditional roles to her by the society but as an individual. In this respect, she has followed the African American literary tradition in the truest sense. She has proficiently depicted the world of black female experience. In an interview with Toni Morrison, she describes the motto of her writing, "I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a black woman and my perspective as a woman in general had been

under represented in American Literature." (569) True to her motto, she published her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982 and received the National Book Award for the same in 1983. Her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) highlights the varied experiences of seven black women in a hostile environment of their triple oppression-racial, gender and sexual exploitation and how they become conscious of their power and self-identity through their exploitation. The present research paper intends to project the black woman's predicament due to racism, patriarchal dominance and sexual exploitation in the hands of white as well as black men. Here, Naylor emphasizes the need of black sisterhood to overcome this triple exploitation.

Methodology:

The present research paper employs the theoretical perspective of black feminism. The methods of analysis and interpretation are used to analyze the concerned aspect.

Discussion:

The Women of Brewster Place describes the world of black community which consists of black men and women called as Brewster Place. It is the place which named after the black women and makes us to reflect upon the life of black women. Just like their creator, the characters of this novel have also travelled to this land in search of the fulfillment of their dream which is commonly shared by them all. This land of Brewster is at the outskirts of the main city with a brick wall. So, this brick wall functions as a boundary line between the world of frustration and hope where they try to find a relief for their sufferings and oppression in the hands of their black men. This land functions as an epitome of hope, optimism and redemption for their predicament and oppression. It is the place which makes them conscious to reflect upon their position as a female and moreover as a black female. These black women through their physical contact investigate the world of sufferings of their sisterhood and help each other to get rid of this world of sorrows, woes and pains

Naylor depicts Brewster place as a black community primarily kept unified by black women through their sisterhood. 'Body' plays an important role in the life of black woman which traces back her history when she has her identity depending upon her body as the greatest powerful source of

bridling to create more and more slaves at service of her white master and it is the only tool to have a physical contact with her own black man. It means that both these white and black men are interested only in her body rather than her mind. So, she has to face sexual exploitation. Her body makes her conscious about her identity and she tries to explore her identity.

The novel consists of seven chapters and each chapter delineates a different woman having varied experience of racism and sexism. These seven women are the major protagonists and their struggle forms the theme of the novel. Brewster Place is the last stop on the road to the bottom in American society where black women live as they can't afford to anywhere else. It is the sign of their poverty, economical helplessness and lack of education. Even though these women live in the similar circumstances, they have different experiences while living their lives. The place reminds them of their origin of being African-American and strongly prepares them to fight against the gender, racial and sexual discrimination. Hence, Barbara Christian remarked, "like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor too is intrigued by the effect of place on characters." (348)

Within this setting, the seven women share the reality of their deprived and exploited lives. The first chapter depicts the story of the exploitation of Mattie Michael who is an unwed mother and displaced from her home and forced to move to Brewster Place after her son skips bail and escapes. As a result, she is deprived of her home. Her story starts in her hometown in Tennessee, 31 years ago, when she was seduced by Butch Fuller a black ruffian. They belonged

to different social class. Mattie was a 'decent woman' by the standards of her community. She was very obedient and was living happily with her parents. She becomes a prey to the charming personality of Butch, even though she is warned by her father. Butch carnally exploits her. She bears a child from the black man and refuses to disclose the identity of her child's father which angers her father. So, she has to face the patriarchal wrath. She is torn between the conflict- daughterly duty or motherly duty which sets out her in the search of her identity.

The second chapter describes the agony of Mattie's friend Etta Mae Johnson who is an independent and rebellious middle aged black woman. She has lived her life according to her own desires. She rejects sexual intercourse with a white man namely Jonny Brick. As a consequence, her father's property is destructed by Brick. She moves from place to place and seeks sexual relationship with different men in search of her identity. Later on, she repents for her sensual life. Then, she tries to find redemption by marrying black preacher Reverend Woods who in turn seduces her. Due to this, she realizes her subordinate status being a woman in a life of man.

The third chapter narrates the story of Kiswana Browne who is a young middle class black woman who rebels against her Euro-centric background by rejecting her name Melanie which creates hostility between Kiswana and her mother that takes her to Brewster Place in search of her racial roots.

The fourth chapter deals with the married life of poor black couple who is full

of stress and tension due to their racism and adverse economic conditions. Eugene Turner is refused a job due to his blackhood and poverty. It frustrates Eugene and this feeling of frustration is given an outlet by using an abusive language for her wife Ciel. Ciel has much understanding nature and cares a lot for the happiness of her husband. Eugene has very wrong ideas of manhood. Hence, he is not ready to accept her second pregnancy and in their quarrel she has lost her 11 years old daughter. He tells her that she is only fit for babies and bills and her love is not enough to solve their tension. It means that she is exploited physically and emotionally at the hands of her black husband being a female and she realizes her inferior position being a female and helpless in the life of her own black man.

The fifth chapter delineates another unwed mother who has a fascination for babies and likes to give birth to one child after another, but declines to take care of them as they grow up. She doesn't know her role as a mother in nourishing, guiding and teaching them until they become an adult. Her absorption for "the dead brown plastic doll" has made her hazardous not only to herself but also to her children.

The last chapter depicts the dilemma of the two black lesbian lovers respectively Lorraine and Theresa. They are exploited physically and mentally by Brewster community for their homosexuality. The black woman Sophie finds them as lesbian through their innocent everyday activities. It means that one black woman is responsible for another's exploitation and so community also rejects them by using the words such as 'nasty' and 'unnatural'. Their 'Otherness' is not welcomed by the confined society.

Hence, Lorraine is fiercely and repeatedly raped by C.C. Baker and his five Friends to show their manhood and their feeling of detestation towards a black female race like her who are a threat to their manhood. In this context, during a talk with *Publishers Weekly*, Naylor remarks that:

Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she is a woman...The repercussions of Lorraine's being cut off from a female network, didn't only stay with her. They came back and affected the entire black community, male and female. I feel very strongly that we as black people have to be there as nurturing agents for each other, male and female, female and female. And when that broke down in "The Two", I wanted to show how that could destroy the community. (36)

Here, Naylor stresses the need of harmony among black men and women for the

existence of their community and also underlines the feeling of black sisterhood to overcome racism, gender discrimination and sexual exploitation.

Conclusion:

Naylor has delineated the seven black women more as individuals with their strengths and weaknesses and how being exploited, these black women become conscious of their subsidiary position and rebelliously act upon the ways to overcome their exploitation. Here, Naylor underlines the principle of black sisterhood and the feeling of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' to overcome this triple exploitation in the form of racism, patriarchal dominance and sexual exploitation in the hands of white as well as black men. Thus, Naylor has depicted the world of black women with varied experiences entitled as 'Brewster Place' which is an embodiment of their empowerment and justified her motto of being a writer.

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