

Gender Issues in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster place

S. Mohanasundari,

Assistant Professor of English (SF), Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Erode

Abstract: *Gloria Naylor, a celebrated Afro-American novelist, established her own identity as a female as well as a black women writer, with extreme state of prominence in Afro-American literature. She has faithfully depicted through her set of writings her vision of the world in which human being confront evil and a life of illusion and despair. She is rightly recognized for speaking out the rights of women and also other social issues. Naylor realistically portrays the varied lives of African Americans, particularly her minority and a woman in a Caucasian, male-oriented society. Naylor in her novel The Women of Brewster Place portrays the plight of the exceptional aspiring woman of the century, longing to break out of her cramping role in society and compete with her male counterpart on a footing of equality. Women have been treated unequally in all societies and have thus constituted a universal underclass. She explores the predicament of helpless, subjugated women and her approach has been an advocacy of the improvement of status of women rather than outright condemnation of a repressive male-dominated society. In the novels of Naylor, the black woman protagonist is not a Negro instead she is an individual-a human being who is in search of her identity. The character of Naylor perfectly fit in the image of a struggler and survivor.*

Key words: *feminist, oppression, society, tradition, victim*

I. Introduction

Gloria Naylor, a celebrated Afro-American novelist, established her own identity as a female as well as a black women writer, with extreme state of prominence in Afro-American literature. She has faithfully depicted through her set of writings her vision of the world in which human being confront evil and a life of illusion and despair. She is rightly recognized for speaking out the rights of women and also other social issues. Brad Leithauser said, "Gloria Naylor's is a strong voice, and a compassionate one..." Emily Dickson who is a lecturer in humanities says about Naylor: "... she writes-and speaks- with the solid, decided vigour of someone who has given her subject its thoughtful due". Naylor is recognized for her moving stories of African-American women. Known for her lyrical prose and her skillful infusion of the mythical and magical in her novels, Naylor realistically portrays the varied lives of African Americans, particularly her minority and a woman in a Caucasian, male-oriented society.

African American literature tends to focus on themes of interest to Black people, such as the role of African Americans within the larger American society and issues such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom, and equality. Being an African woman by birth and tradition Naylor herself faced a lot many challenging and perplexing circumstances but she resisted all tough that came her way. She grew up in a time and region in which black women used to live traditionally. There was no career for them. They had to live household women. But Naylor rejected to play a traditional feminine role and also rejected chauvinism.

Naylor explores the female mystique through a series of sturdy female characters that are actually the central character in her novels. She does not treat women in the acknowledged role allocated to her by the society like that of a mother or a wife but as an individual. Naylor wanted to be free from the strict standards of the traditional society. She depicts the female experience of oppression and exploitation in a male dominated Black society. She provides women with new directions to overcome the constraints of the personal and the political and evolve their own modes of resistance. Women are not able to exercise autonomy either over their lives or their bodies since they are controlled and determined for them by men. The feminists promoted the idea of a universal womanhood cutting across all barriers of age, income, class, race and other divisive factors. The feminist commitment to combat all forms of patriarchy and sexism has given a semblance of unified ideology to feminist criticism.

Naylor in her novel *The Women of Brewster Place* portrays the plight of the exceptional aspiring woman of the century, longing to break out of her cramping role in society and compete with her male counterpart on a footing of equality. Women have been treated unequally in all societies and have thus constituted a universal underclass. She explores the predicament of helpless, subjugated women and her approach has been an advocacy of the improvement of status of women rather than outright condemnation of a repressive male-dominated society.

The novel is a celebration of the riches and diversities of the black female experience. Composed of seven stories, it interconnects the lives of varied urban black women who live on the imaginary street of Brewster Place. Gloria Naylor undermines the conservative stereotypes of Black poverty, by presenting the living diversity of Black female experience, struggling to survive in the ghetto. Naylor's book *The Women of Brewster Place* represents these concerns in the best manner. The intermingled lives of bright, desperate, determined, resilient black women search for an authentic self and move across oppressive tracts of experience.

Naylor in her novels deals with the multifarious ways in which women have been silenced and kept ignorant by the dominant culture. Her contention is that it is the human need to create and maintain a true self in a social context. Such an endeavour becomes an ordeal for those who are doubly oppressed for those who are muted and mutilated psychically through crossfire of caste, sex and colonialism. Though the dehumanizing society destroys the victim both physically and psychologically and leaves her into a pathetic state of powerlessness and psychic impotency, 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. African-American women, both in life and literature have transcended the geometric oppression of race, gender and class announcing the spectacle of radiant Black female self in an unprecedented manner. It is an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to authentic consciousness, from suspendedness total liberation.

Gloria Naylor presents the confrontation of the female protagonists with the patriarchal oppressive environment. Mattie Micheal, the main protagonist hails from a traditional family. Mattie is shaped by the predominance of patriarchy. The strict vigilance and stifling care of her father seeks explanation for her every activity. His domination over her leads her to offer explanation for everything she does. She is deprived of social interaction. "Her father would kill her if he heard she had seen walking with Butch Fuller"(10). He alienates her from her surroundings. She feels trapped in an oppressive environment. Her ignorance and limiting of consciousness in the form of her father hamper her free thinking. Consequently she easily falls a prey in the hands of Butch, a notorious womanizer.

Naylor depicts the physical abuse that Mattie incurs at the hand of her father. As a doting father he works hard to fulfill all her wishes. But when she declares her pregnancy and fails to reveal the name of Butch he beats demanding the name of the man who had sneaked into his home and distorted the faith and trust he had in his child. He cannot tolerate his disobedience. Her pregnancy aggravates her father who cherishes high hopes for her. She is subjected to brutal beatings. She is thrashed so mercilessly that she is reduced to a "pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor".

"I ain't saying, papa". And she braced herself for the impact of the large callused hand that was coming toward her face. He still held her by the hair so she took the force of the two blows with her neck muscles, and her eyes went dim as the blood dripped down her chin from her split lip. The grip on her hair tightened, and she was forced even closer to his face as she answered the silent question in his narrowing eyes.(22-23)

His aggressiveness pushes her to unleash herself from the torturing mental and physical pains. She considers herself as a new woman with a new understanding and consciousness all set to begin.

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. But just then the baby moved, and put her hands on her stomach and knew that she was nurturing within her what had gone before and would come after. This child would tie her to that past and future as inextricably as it was now tied to her every heartbeat.(25)

With a new born understanding she moves ahead in life. She moves from submission to assertion in order to acquire an identity and to fit into the mainstream of the society.

Mattie's problems encompassing physical, emotional and economic spheres are many and varied. Even in her desperate and forlorn situation she does not lose courage. She takes up a temporary job to fend for herself and her son. Her tenacious and strong willed mind to raise him as a single parent ends in finding a job in a book bindery. She nurtures him with utmost care. Mattie holds herself responsible for her past action. She carries that guilt in her conscience. She tries to screen her guilt in her sacrifice of promising marriage or relationship.

Grown up as an egocentric person, Basil fails to introduce himself to the struggles of his mother's life. He falls into the bad company and is imprisoned for the charge of murder. Mattie posts bail after offering up her house, her only property, as collateral. Even though the attorney assures basil that he will be exonerated, he flees at the thought of having to endure a trial. Consequently, Mattie loses her house and is relegated to live in Brewster place. A gradual awakening dawns on her that Basil is not her son but a representative of community of men in the universe. She makes up her mind to lead a life asserting her individuality and not to merely subject to the male dominancy. As an outcome of her clear vision of her stance she moves to Brewster place.

Her suffering lead her to a new consciousness and instill self-confidence into her. A new phase of life begins when she moves to Brewster place. She acts as a supporter, a guide and a source of energy to the other characters, who are often baffled by the problems of life and death.

In the novels of Naylor, the black woman protagonist is not a Negro instead she is an individual-a human being who is in search of her identity. They raise their voice to break the chains of societal bigotry. They have the capacity to resist and struggle, to make they noticeable and perceptible and thus define their autonomy. The character of Naylor perfectly fit in the image of a struggler and survivor.

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