Feminist Reading on Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract: Black women have been at the bottom of every social hierarchy created by men, based on the interaction of race, gender and class hierarchies. Triple oppression of race, gender and class has made them inferior in the society. They are taught to internalize the age old concept of femininity and hence become the victims of internalized oppression and psychological conditioning. African American black women’s fiction of the 20th century documents the process of black female character’s personal growth toward positive self-definitions. These black new women are fully conscious of their physical and psychological oppression and more capable of creating new option for themselves. They are engaged in search for meaning in their roots and tradition. Gloria Naylor’s *The women of Brewster Place* (1982) depicts the story of seven women’s journey towards identity and voice. More over they find comfort in each other’s company in establishing an identity of their own.

Key words: Oppression, Black women, Identity, Dreams, Confident, Self-Contained

Gloria Naylor is a prominent contemporary Afro-American novelist who started her career as a novelist with her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). She wrote novels that emphasis the strength of Afro-American women and the effects of triple oppression on them. Her other novels include *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey’s Cafe* (1992) and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998) Each of the novels connects with the one to follow and mention of a character or a place in one novel becomes the central focus of the next novel. Her first and the most acclaimed novel *The Women of Brewster Place* wins the National Book Award for First Novel.

*The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel in seven stories; each describes the lives of seven women. Naylor explores the experience of oppression these women had to face in their life and more importantly how they overcome the obstacles which restricts their life. Each woman’s story is important and significant. Importance of women bonding and how a woman can empower another woman to come up in life become the central focus of the next novel. Her first and the most acclaimed novel *The Women of Brewster Place* wins the National Book Award for First Novel.

Later a short, brown-skinned man called Ben took charge of Brewster Place. He is drunkard and no one in Brewster Place knew why he drank all the times. There is an untold story and a mystery behind Ben. Brewster Place soon becomes an adobe of those women who are broken and shattered but with a strong wish to take charge of their life. In the concluding paragraph of “Dawn” Naylor describes the women Brewster Place as, “They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years, like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story” (5). Naylor compares the women of Brewster Place with the classical myth of phoenix. Like a phoenix, women will rise again with new life and vigour with each fall.

After the prologue “Dawn”, Naylor starts describing about each woman in each chapter. The first woman to be narrated is about Mattie Michael whose presence can be seen from the very beginning to the end of the novel. She appears to be the strongest of all women in Brewster Place. Mattie Michael serves as a mentor to all women in Brewster Place. Gradual transformation of Mattie Michael from oppression to liberation is very evident in the novel. The Alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Reality Company” (1). From the first paragraph itself one can understand the fact that the origin of Brewster Place is vague. The Brewster Place became an adobe of “dark haired and mellow-skinned Mediterraneans” (2). No white people are cared about Brewster Place and when a new wall came up, the Brewster Place became a dead-end street.

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124
November, in the beginning of winter. Smell of someone’s cooking in Brewster Place took her to her past memories. Mattie was a very traditional young girl who accepts father’s superiority in home and never disobeyed her father. But she was seduced by the charm of Butch Fuller, a womaniser, whom his father hates like anything. Her father couldn’t bear when he realized that Mattie was pregnant. She was never willing to disclose him about the father of her child. Unable to bear the torture of her father, Mattie escaped from her home.

Mattie’s self-transformation started from her decision to leave her home. All she had in mind is about the thought of her childhood friend Etta Mae Johnson whom she thinks to give her a shelter. The second story to be narrated is about Etta and here the season shifted to summer. Etta was an independent black woman who was not ready to internalise black femininity and patriarchy and lived in her own terms. In order to lead an independent life she left her home. She is a freedom lover and always in search for a place to settle. Now, when Mattie came to Etta’s home, she was all set to go to New York, where she thinks is the best place to be. Later she met preacher Woods with whom she thinks to start a new life. But Woods sexually exploited her and left her. Eventually Etta found adobe in Brewster Place and realised that her search for places end. Brewster Place gave her answers to her search for self and places. The company of the community of black women in Brewster made her strong and courageous. In Etta, Naylor presents a woman who struggles against prejudices. All in her life, she has been looking for a man, trying to “hook herself to any promising rising black star” (60). When one would dim, she sought another. Like that way she lost her inner self, but with a hope she continues to life; a hope that someone is waiting for her. It was Mattie who has always been constant and the comfort for Etta. Etta’s Dream has been deferred but because of Mattie it has not been killed.

The next story to follow is about middle class black women, Melanie Browne who changed her name to Kiswana Brown in order to go back to her African roots and identity. Kiswana was a Civil Right activist who always had a strong intention to work for the poor black women and her own black community. She left her home in Linden Hill and her school to Brewster Place as she couldn’t bear the middle class values and systems. An argument between Kiswana and her mother becomes the major part of this chapter. Her mother, Mrs. Brown represents a middle class black woman who adopted the white class ideals. Many attempts have been taken by Mrs Brown to bring Kiswana back to home. Kiswana was strong in her decision to stay in Brewster Place and earn a living for herself. Kiswana points out to her mother that Linden Hills is inhabited by “educated blacks with a terminal case of middle-class amnesia” (84-85). She calls her mother “a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black” (85). These words of Kiswana show her strong decision to stay back in her ideals.

Lucielia Louise Turner’s (Ciel) story focuses on the failed relationship with her husband, Eugene. Things like racism and unemployment made a crack on their marriage life. Lucielia is a victim of oppression and torture of her husband and she even had a forced abortion. Here in this chapter, Mattie re-enters as an element of hope to Lucielia. Death of her only daughter, Serena and her husband’s abandonment made her fall in to the dungeons of sorrow. Mattie came as an angle to help her and give her all support and comfort. The chapter ends with a note of hope, “And Ciel lay down and cried. But Mattie knew the tears would end. And she would sleep. And morning would come” (104). Mattie was sure that Ciel would recover soon from all her sorrow and come back to life with more zeal.

Cora Lee is another mother figure who lives in a world of dreams, who has a strong affection for babies. Her love for babies ends when they grew up. Cora Lee and her seven children live the Brewster Place and her children making headaches to Miss Sophie who lives in the first floor. As a result of her strong addiction for babies she continues to have babies one after another. Transformation of Cora Lee from the world of reality forms the major theme of this chapter. And this transformation takes place when Kiswana invited Cora Lee for seeing her boy friend’s production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Cora Lee’s story is quoted with lines from plays of Shakespeare. The Chapter itself starts with the lines from Romeo and Juliet:

True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy (107).

This quote indicates that Cora Lee’s children are the end result of an idle brain.

The play in some way makes a difference in Cora Lee. Cora took new decisions, she thought of sending her children to school, attending PTA meetings, checking home works, having no longer babies and having responsible jobs. Kiswana is the main key to Cora Lee’s self-realisation and female bonding plays a major role in bringing up Cora Lee to come up in life.

Last story to be described is about two black lesbian women, Lorraine and Teresa. The only lesbians lived in Brewster Place are them. In the beginning, people lives in Brewster Place were in good terms with Lorraine and Teresa, but when they realized that Lorraine and Teresa were lesbians, they started avoiding them. Lorraine is deeply hurt by neighbour’s behaviours and very much conscious about what others think of them. She always wishes to get accepted by neighbours
but Teresa on the other hand is not at all cared about others. She is self contained and not bothered about other’s harsh words and behaviour. Teresa tries to make Lorraine understand that they have no need to convince others about their life.

Lorraine’s growing relationship with Ben made her feel more confident and self-contained. Ben always extended his helping hand towards her and consoles her. One day after a fight with Teresa, Lorraine went alone for a party, but that night she was brutally raped by a group of men who had earlier insulted her due to her sexuality. Next morning, she somehow manages to get up from the floor and saw Ben. In a moment’s anger, Lorraine took a brick and killed Ben. Here the story is shifted to Mattie’s dream in which she saw the block party and heavy rain drenching Brewster place. The women of Brewster place afraid that the blood of Ben is still in that wall. So everyone started tear it apart one by one. Mattie suddenly wakes up to a sunny morning and everybody has forced to move from Brewster place. Brewster place is now left with the dreams and hopes of women who lived there. Naylor ends her novel with a positive note:

And Brewster Place is abandoned, the living smells worn thin by seasons of winds, the grime and dirt blanketing it in an anonymous shroud. Only waiting for death, which is a second behind the expiration of its spirit in the minds of its children. But the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they’re mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into pots of soup, and they’re diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, but never disappear. So Brewster Place still waits to die (192).

From this quote we can understood the fact that Brewster Place is still alive with the dreams of women who lived there once. The women of Brewster Place transcend time and awake with their dreams with the thought of fulfilling it.

Every women who lived there had a dream and each story of this novel is connected with a common dream of these women, that is to get united made them feel strong and self-contained. More over they support, help and console each other to get rid of solitude and agony they are facing for a very long time.

Reference:


