

Black Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of Black Sisterhood employed in the novel, The Women of Brewster Place by Gloria Naylor. The novel exemplifies the mystical relationship between women supporting each other despite shouldering their own burden. Throughout the novel, the oppressions confronted by the black women have been dealt with authentically and the ways they find to overcome is elaborated. Considering the conditions and situations of the women in the novel, it is evident that they are triply marginalized. Black Feministic Movement and other Black Liberation Movements certainly have a telling effect on the novel's plot construction. This article attempts to bring out the true definition of the established ideology Black Sisterhood and its application in the novel.

Keywords: Black Sisterhood, Liberation, Oppression, Mystical Relationship.

Black Feminist Movement which was prevalent during 70s and 80s has evidently reflected in the works of African-American Literature. Especially, the women writers of the black community have contributed to the significant changes in society. Gloria Naylor, one of the early prominent African-American writers, has won critical and popular acclaim for the first published novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*. It is the story weaving together the lives of seven black women – Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Cora Lee, Kiswana Browne, Lucielia Louis Turner, Lorraine and Theresa striving hard for a peaceful survival.

Black Sisterhood is deeply rooted among the women of black community which helps them overcome the challenges that life has thrown upon them. This mystical relationship has made them sustain through family dysfunctions, racist comments, marginalization, brutal patriarchy and anything else that threaten to impede their growth. When everything around a woman is a crisis, she seeks for another woman who is perhaps a sister, a mother, a grandmother, a daughter, a niece, or a friend. It is a concept explaining the special bond between girl to girl and woman to woman which marks a notable difference in the functioning of the society.

Gloria Naylor through her array of female characters has portrayed that the black women share a sisterhood of oppression and understand each other's pain and sufferings. Not alone in *The Women of Brewster Place*, her other novels also depicts and traces the powerful connection of the black females.

"Black identity is far more complex than it is commonly viewed by scholars, the media and the larger society" (Ussery 874). And when it comes to the identity of black women it is furthermore complex and crucial. "Additionally, it is assumed that black identity and consciousness are synonymous, that is simply being categorically black means that one is continuously aligned with the ideas, feelings and interests of others who share the characteristic" (Ussery 874). Naylor is very careful in detailing the features of her characters. She points out that not all black people possess the same ideas, feelings and emotions; they vary by their interests, behaviours and beliefs. It is undeniable that they carry few commonalities but projecting them through only these ideas are certainly unacceptable. Naylor's female characters celebrate their differences and embrace sisterhood to knock down the metaphorical wall (reference to the dead end brick wall of Brewster Place) that stops them from marching towards victory.

Miss Eva Turner is one of the characters that stand for the epitome of sisterhood, love, kindness and humanity. Mattie, the desolate was mothered by Miss Eva Turner, gave her shelter and food, most importantly she gave her the love she was yearning for all these years. After Miss Eva Turner passed away, Mattie has taken the role of a mother. Naylor has her women characters meet their destiny in one common place namely 'The Brewster Place'. Almost every wrecked, disheartened and damaged woman of the novel moves to Brewster Place with the hope of flourishing the hands of each other. There are obvious beliefs that if a woman is cleansed by another woman she is cleansed off the impurities, burdens that she has shouldered, the sins that she has committed and the agonies that she has undergone.

Ceil moaned... Mattie rocked... Mattie rocked out of her bed, out of the room, into the blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean Seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water... she rocked her into her childhood and let her see the murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt... (TWBP 103).

She is set free from the clenches of turmoil - abusive husband, racial discrimination, white supremacy, exploiting masters. She feels safe in the hands of a fellow woman who can comprehend what exactly she feels like, what pain she is undergoing, what she wants in life, what she wants to become and so on.

Often it is not understood what is to be a black woman by others. "I am utterly mindful of the way in which my own understanding of what is to be a black woman insurgent, intellectual/writer is increasingly subordinated to the way in which I am represented by various structures of that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy I have spent my adult life critiquing" (Hooks 814). This is the main reason for black women choosing black women to get comforted. Lorraine and Theresa are two lovers who have dejected the male community and found home in each other. They don't want to hide their relationship from the world; they are untamed by the arrogance of patriarchy. They are rebels that stand up for their rights which Naylor presents as a 'Black Sisterhood'.

Etta Mae Johnson, childhood friend of Mattie seems desperate for a male company so as to feel complete. Etta runs into an illicit affair for which she regrets later. Etta goes to Mattie defeated and tired, without a word of condemnation, Mattie receives her with love. Naylor shows that 'Black sisterhood' is very intense and unconditional, it offers only love; it heals the hurt and calms the burdened.

Not every character is forced to move to Brewster Place, Kiswana from a privileged middle class family chooses to stay in Brewster place. She, unlike other female characters, is determined, strong and highly-willed. “clearly, there is contrivance to the situation, as my stay in South Africa is temporary, and my race affords me a social power that is not afforded for African-American colleagues” (Dixon 101). Kiswana is very much alike to Dixon and she finds it hard to ill-treat fellow humans based on race, gender, class and religion. She is one of the rebels like Lorraine and Theresa, who is not afraid of voicing out what is right. When the male community failed to provide the female community with equal rights and privileges they starts to fight for it joining hands with their ‘sisters’.

The seven women find themselves coming together for a common cause that is to create a black association and in the inauguration party, the women knock down the wall that metaphors the oppression and obstacles. As the other characters begin to unfold in the progress of the story, Naylor pictures diverse black women with various stories of struggles. Naylor titles the final chapter as a ‘Dream’. Though everything turns up good and all the women find themselves self-assured and happy, Naylor ends the novel letting the readers assume that the happy ending is just an imagination. Perhaps the dream may be the unachieved dream of the seven women. Maybe one day it might come true with the help women supporting women which others call it as ‘Women Empowerment’ and Naylor puts it as ‘Black Sisterhood’.

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