

Multiple Protagonists in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Bailey's Café*

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Abstract:

Among the contemporary African American writers, Gloria Naylor, renders a remarkable picture of African American women through her works. Her works focus on the problems women face at home and society and the consequences. Naylor's interest in representing her women is explicit when many women, who are equally potent, rule each of her novels. Each woman is unique in her territory. Each woman brings out the complexity of life. Naylor, in her novels, takes up multiple protagonists, either male or female, and all of them share the same significance. Naylor's uniqueness lies in using multiple protagonists and presenting them as equally influential. The present paper focuses on the multiple protagonists of Naylor in the novels *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and *Bailey's Café* (1992).

PAPER:

Social reticence, cultural prohibitions and gender discrepancy generate innumerable, inexpressible emotional disturbances in women and women writers are at their best in capturing the minute changes that occur in women at every disturbance. Women's writing focuses on the omitted and proscribed segments of women; correct the misconceptions of women and erase the misinterpretations of women.

Women's writing which present the veracity, not the interpreted, introduces an inimitable women world in literature. Long years spent in redefining the women's image, has slowly changed to represent the innermost chambers of women's sociological and psychological needs. The result, the women writers of the present scenario focus on the subterranean problems women face because of their society, family, by their own men, and

most importantly, their own attitude. Gloria Naylor is a contemporary African American woman writer who focuses not only on the peculiar problems the women come across because of racism and gender issues but also the struggles they come across because of their own community, men and women and sometimes by their own self.

In representing the innermost and hidden problems of women, along with their positive and negative traits, the contemporary writers share a number of similarities. Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor are alike in depicting Black Nationalism, black society and black women. Naylor shares common attributes with her contemporaries and other African American women writers but stands unique in her setting, characterization and narration. Naylor's narrative style differs in each of her novels. Naylor is different from other women writers in presenting multiple protagonists in all her novels. Many of the writers designate the role of protagonist to either a female or two. In the case of Naylor, it is different and unique; in all her novels the role of protagonist is assigned to many and all of them are at their best. Naylor differs from the other women writers when she represents the problems of women through multiple protagonists in each of her novels. Though, many women rule a novel, no one either dominates or overrules; the rights are equally shared among all the women.

Gloria Naylor's skill in presenting rich and profound female characters is inimitable. In a conversation with Toni Morrison, Naylor says, "My emotional energy was spent creating a woman's world, telling her side of it because I knew it hadn't been done enough in literature" (579). Naylor presents the painful, pathetic lives of her women in a picturesque way and all her novels demonstrate it with the help of multiple protagonists. Generally women writers are enforced to take up a unique strategy to represent the undisclosed world of women around them. Naylor's period is the late twentieth century, and racism and its devastation have already been widely discussed, but the other issues related to the familial, social and psychological terrains need to be probed. Representing the inner struggles of women proved to be the need of the hour. Therefore, Naylor takes up the inner struggles that women experience when they vie to fix their life in a race-biased, gender-based society. "Far from being a replica of domestic novels by white women writers, Naylor's texts mirror the unique realities of black women" (Montgomery 56). Her women are from all grounds; lower class, upper class and upper middle class. Naylor's unique strategy, using multiple protagonists to represent the world of women, helps her to represent the mixed class.

Naylor's first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) is a novel of poignant inter-connected stories of seven women. The novel is set in Brewster Place, a rundown street, alienated from the other parts of the city by a wall; the wall stands as a symbol of separation. Brewster Place is a place of rescue for the desolate and depressed women who are unable to find their space in the society. They all come to Brewster Place, because they are dejected and depressed in many ways. The people of Brewster Place are of different ages, because age shows no discrimination in bringing in disappointments and depressions.

The novel speaks about seven women who are at different ages, with dissimilar characteristics and from diverse backgrounds. Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Lucielia Lousie Turner, Cora Lee, Kiswana Browne, and Lorraine and Theresa are the seven women who share their stories in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Each story has its own pains and sufferings. None of the characters narrate her story in first person but it does not spoil the purpose of sharing their hopes and losses and experiences.

Mattie Michael, the motherly figure of the novel comes to Brewster Place at her old age after losing everything in her life; her home at native place, her parents, her son, and her hard-earned house. The only thing she never loses in her life is hope and that helps her to come out of the obstacles and to help the other desolated women to identify the ray of hope. She is known as a quiet, understanding, helping woman among the other residents. Etta Mae Johnson, Mattie Michael's friend, comes to Brewster Place after she becomes tired of searching for a better life in the places like New Orleans, Chicago and New York. She brings out the problems of a black woman in finding a life partner and a peaceful life. Etta, unable to find a life partner, finally finds comfort in Mattie Michael's companionship and decides to stay at Brewster Place.

Kiswana Browne is the only resident who voluntarily chooses Brewster Place for her stay. She is at Brewster Place to serve her people. She has deserted her parents, and her home at Linden Hills and gave up her studies for the cause of serving her people. She wants to find solutions for the day-to-day problems of her people and therefore, she stays with them in their place. She tries to unite the people of Brewster Place to bring in a Tenants' Association which can help them to solve their residential problems. Ciel, the granddaughter of Eva Turner, fights hard to make a peaceful, happy family life at Brewster Place. Her expectations are not high. She wants to make a happy home with her husband and child. The carefree attitude of her husband demolishes her dream. Ciel, though she takes painful efforts to keep

her husband with her, fails completely, and loses a child in abortion and another in a domestic accident.

Cora Lee, another resident of Brewster Place leads her life with many children. Her addiction for baby dolls in her childhood turns into a craving for newborn babies in her adult age. Cora's addiction encourages men to share sexual life with her without sharing any responsibilities in child rearing and home making. Lorraine and Theresa, lesbians, who are not able to lead a peaceful life in other places, come to Brewster Place with the motive to lead a calm life. They never interfere in the matters of others and mind their own; yet, the other inquisitive residents probe into the life of 'the two' and put them into distress. Brewster Place becomes the worst choice for them when Lorraine is physically and mentally torn at gang rape. The gang rape brings in a vast change in the attitude of the women of Brewster Place and unites them to fight for their rights.

All the women of Brewster Place have some agonizing past, yet they find a ray of hope in them and the same gives them energy to survive in a racist society. Their past experiences lead them to help other women who struggle. The bond Naylor creates among the women of Brewster Place is powerful. They all find real solace in their relationship with each other.

Bailey's Café, Naylor's fourth novel deals with female sexuality. The novel which takes place in the first half of the twentieth century, like *The Women of Brewster Place*, shares the story of seven women. The women of *Bailey's Café* face tribulations in the society, in their family and for some of them their psyche brings in problems. The victimized women of *Bailey's Café* come out of oppression and revamp their life with the help of a matriarchal figure Eve. Naylor, who had already tried her hand at weaving many numbers of stories into one, not only weaves it wonderfully but also decorates it with her magical language and mysticism. Naylor's revision of biblical stories also deepens the study.

Eve who runs a bordello is the motherly figure in the novel. Eve, thrown out by her godfather, learns the hard lessons of life and uses the experience to help other women who are sexually exploited. Eve's affliction provides her energy not only to save her life but also to save the lives of other distraught women. Though Eve seems to be a tough mother, she brings in miraculous changes in the devastated lives of the women. "Battered, molested, shunned and exploited, women like Peaches, Sweet Esther, Jesse Bell and Mariam wend their way to Bailey's Café and ultimately to Eve's" (Puhr 525) to rebuild their shattered lives.

The first woman to share her story in *Bailey's Café* is Sadie. Sadie's untiring effort to gain love from her mother as a child, and from her husband as a woman, plunges her into dreams. Sadie gets addicted to dreams because of carefree parents. Later her miserable life with an egotistic husband leads her to get addicted to alcohol. Her addiction to dreams and alcohol do not allow her, in her middle age, to accept the true love that she has been searching for since her childhood. Sweet Esther, the next narrator, brings out the cramped state of emotional victims. Sweet Esther's sexual exploitation at a dark cellar, for eighteen long years, under a man who is introduced as a husband and her brother's selfishness behind it, creates an aversion in her for light and men and she leads her life in darkness even after taking residence at Eve's bordello.

Mary (Take One) shares the story of a girl who becomes the victim of her own beauty. Mary's amazing beauty brings in indescribable problems which at last turn her into a psychological victim. Mary's courageousness and stunning decision to wound her face is the result of her failure in making the world to change its perception about her. Even her daring attack to her face does not help her to erase the sexual image. Jesse Bell shares the story of a girl from the docks who fights for her identity in her family and in King's clan. Jesse Bell loses her husband, her son and at last her dignity while fighting for recognition and every loss pushes her more and more toward alcohol and drugs. The biased behavior which exists among the black communities ruins the life of a young black girl.

The pages Naylor allots to Miss Maple portray the story of a transgender. It reveals a sincere student's efforts to find his position and its failure in a white society which turns him to work at Eve's. In Mary (Take Two), the reader meets a Jewish girl, who is sure that she has never lost her virginity, but delivers a baby. Through Mary, a fourteen year old Ethiopian girl, Naylor talks about the female circumcision.

Multiple protagonists provide Naylor the space she required to probe deep into lives of women. No life is partially presented or represented; each of Naylor's women is the central character of her story. Thus, in the two books *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Bailey's Café Gloria* Naylor's concern in presenting the distinctiveness of each women and presenting the bond between the women, make each of her woman to shine with a unique superiority.

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