

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

**CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication**

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, 2016

ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4

*Section: Literature*

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## **GENDER, CLASS POWER AND ETHNICITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE**

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*Abstract: The present paper is an attempt at approaching Gloria Naylor's first volume of short-stories by asking and answering the question of Naylor's feminist slant as it comes across in the volume.*

*Keywords: Gloria Naylor, The Women of Brewster Place, black feminism, stylistic devices*

Naylor's first literary work, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), is a celebration of the black female experience, as she focuses on seven African-American heroines who strive and manage to survive in an impoverished and threatening environment. Taking into account that the short-story cycle is gender focused, our investigation will try to reveal to what extent Gloria Naylor is a feminist and in what way Naylor chooses to deal with/highlight the concept of female gender.

It is generally accepted that being a woman writer means having a feminist perspective (or at least a woman's point of view), but it is important to pay attention to the fact that the subject Naylor (as an African-American writer) approaches, the messages she tries to convey, her vantage point, her life experience and her goals in writing stories about women are essentially different from those of the representatives of the Euro-American feminism.

In order to have a correct perspective on Gloria Naylor's feminist slant, we begin by trying to locate Naylor as a writer within the general feminist movement in the USA. The

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feminist movement in the USA was fired by the major emancipation movements of the late 1960s (the civil rights and black power movements), and it was mainly led by and expressed the voices of the middle class white women. For that reason, the experiences, truths, priorities and demands voiced at that particular time could barely coincide with those of the black American women, taking into account that the latter group's plight has always been considerably more complex. African-American women suffered triple oppression most often experienced simultaneously: as race (ethnic group), as class and as gender. For that reason, for African-American women liberation meant: their liberation from the political repression of the race and the improvement of the life of the black community by resisting Eurocentric models and standards, as well as by turning to authentic Afrocentric ones; their liberation from class politics and limitations; and their liberation from a patriarchal sexist system within the African-American community. In light of what is essential for Black feminism, it becomes clear that the attitude of most African-American female writers has been most accurately defined by Alice Walker who adopted the term "womanist" from black folk expression to signify a black feminist or feminist of color, a *woman* concerned with the spiritual survival of an entire community: male and female African-American people.

Hence, here is what Barbara Smith points out when it comes to approaching the literature of African-American women:

When Black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's words they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. (qtd Bell 235).

Another element that underlies the specificity of African-American female writing is the stylistic range. Thus, according to Bambara, in gynocentric writing there is a proneness

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for “the feeling place”, language “finesse”, “handling of children”, “two-plus-two reality”, the universe of “cups, bowls and other [domestic]motifs”, all of which “fashion a woman's vocabulary to deal with the ‘silences’ of [women’s] lives” (qtd Bell 243). In her introduction to *Midnight Birds*, Mary Helen Washington too agrees that to record their lives “[b]lack women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images”, but “for purposes of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space” (qtd. Bell 243)

Because Eurocentric stylistic traits and categories cannot be completely and appropriately applied to the fiction of black women writers, an overview of the styles of various texts, as well as the findings of a number of essays on black feminist criticism, have led to conclusion that many black women novelists employ to a greater or lesser degree the following structural and stylistic elements:

- (1) motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression;
- (2) black female protagonists;
- (3) spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity;
- (4) a centrality of female bonding or networking;
- (5) a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community;
- (6) deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions;
- (7) iconography of women's clothing;
- and (8) black female language. (qtd Bell 137)

In what follows we will try to identify the elements discussed above as they come across in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and the context of Naylor’s literary production. First of all, with this volume it became clear that, although Naylor, as a woman writer, chose from the onset of her career to reclaim the stories of black women she felt had been largely excluded from written history, she still could not separate herself from the entire black community, which means that she offered a fine observation of the entire community of men and women. In 1992, in the TV interview series titled *In Black and White* directed and

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produced by Matteo Bellinelli, she expressed her desire to “help us celebrate voraciously that which is ours,” stressing that African-Americans, irrespective of gender, must maintain their identity in a world dominated by the Eurocentric representatives. Seven years later, in the PBS series on African-American culture *I'll Make Me a World*, she declared:

I am a black female writer and I have no qualms whatsoever with people saying that I'm a black female writer. What I take umbrage with is the fact that some might try to use that identity - that which is me - as a way to ghettoize my material and my output. I am female and black and American. No buts are in that identity. Now you go off and do the work to somehow broaden yourself so you understand what America is really about. Because it's about me.

It is true that in her written work (not only in *The Women of Brewster Place*) she has mainly addressed and redressed the representation of women within the large context of the contemporary American literary landscape, but she also revised codes of power, dominance, and assertion on all three axes: gender, race and class. Both her work and her interviews prove that in approaching the unique experience of African-American women she has raised feminist issues, but she did it without the sloganism specific to European or Euro-American feminists.

Although, racial themes are not necessarily of interest in *The Women of Brewster Place*, the volume is based on a major reference to racial issues and the consequences of class dominance in the USA. This is the description of the place itself, Brewster, a dead end street that the rest of the world has forgotten, an impoverished run-down isolated tenement neighborhood, home in the 1970s to a community of underprivileged African-Americans. The Brewster Place has undergone birth, maturation, aging, and death, all of them at the hand of the WASP politicians and decision makers in the city council. At the time the narrated events are set, the street is waiting for its demise, while watching its last generation of children, the African-Americans who “came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason” (4) being “torn away from it by court orders and eviction notices” (191), but the place is “too tired and sick to help them” (idem). On the other hand, by making Brewster Place, a

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dead end street, the author had it cleverly disconnected from the business of the city by the wall, which allowed her to focus on the domestic everyday lives of her Afro-American characters fairly untouched by whites.

The most important black feminism mark of the book is its range of protagonists. The volume demonstrates that Gloria Naylor's favorite characters are women, Afro-American ones. Her women are all engaged in tough struggles to maintain balance, their human dignity and emotional integrity in an impersonal sexist, classicist and racial world. All of her women are struggling to survive as African-Americans in a white-dominated class-divided society, but most importantly, as women in a male-dominated environment.

According to the list of characteristics of black feminism quoted above, female characters of color are supposed to undergo "spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity" (qtd Bell 137). Unfortunately, Gloria Naylor's world does not offer such chance at growth and reinvention to its female representatives. With the exception of Kiswana Browne (who is not at all underprivileged), and maybe Lucielia Louise Turner (although her actual progress after leaving Brewster Place is never revealed), all the others have had their dreams shattered, their spirit and courage to transcend the circumstances of their unhappy pasts broken, and have nothing to look forward to except bleak futures.

The fourth point on the list is female bonding and networking. A great emphasis is placed on female bonding in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Each female character having experienced pain and profound grief at the hands of a man/ men in their lives (fathers, lovers, husbands and sons) manages to find strength in her ties with at least another women. Men come, destroy hopes for a better future and go. It is the network of women in the community who stay and pick up the pieces. The most important example in this respect is Mattie Michaels relationships with women. Living now in the last place her destiny will ever bring her (the desolate Brewster Place), Mattie, just like Miss Eva in the former's youth, puts her kindness, support and wisdom at the service of the other women in the block, becoming their healer,

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educator, mother, and confidante. When Lucielia Louise Turner (her niece) loses her young daughter Serena (the only thing she has ever loved without pain) and shuts herself from the world craving to die, Mattie rocks Lucielia in her arms and takes her “back into the womb” (103) to create a new birth for her. She takes Lucielia to the source of her pain – “they found it - a slight sliver of a splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin” (104) – and helps her remove the pain – “the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal” (idem). After that she baths Lucielia and puts to bed, in a final act of maternal care.

Every female character in the book has at least one woman who supports her in the critical stages of her life: Mattie has Etta Mae Johnson (when she is forced to flee her father’s wrath, a few months before giving birth to Basil) and Miss Eva (when she and Basil are roaming the streets of Asheville, North Carolina, homeless); Etta has Mattie Michael (when Reverend Woods, another man in a long series of men, breaks her spirit and leaves her without hope); Kiswana Browne has her mother (whom she secretly admires, despite detesting the woman’s conservative middle-class values); Lucielia Louise Turner has Mattie (who brings her back to life after her baby daughter dies accidentally); Cora Lee has Kiswana Browne (who tries to raise her awareness and better her and her children’s lives); and “the two”, Lorraine and Teresa, have each other (being in a romantic relationship with each other; but disaster strikes in their lives when their bond becomes frail).

Fifth on the list above is the focus on family and community. All female characters, except for Etta, place great importance on the feeling of belonging. They have/have had families they are devoted to, and, while none of the seven women were literally born within the community of Brewster Place, this community not only provides them with a backdrop for their lives, for their manifestations of joys, sorrows and struggling efforts, but it also deeply influences their identity.

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Next within the black feminist characteristics list is the profound exploration of emotions. Naylor not only does that, but she also enhances this exploration by both offering a deep connection between feelings and bodily sensations, and by associating these feelings with a metaphor, to highlight the spirituality of her protagonists. Thus, Mattie's attraction to Butch Fuller is depicted in connection with "the hardness of his chest under her probing fingers as she sought the handkerchief, and when she stood on her toes to wipe his wet brow, her nipples brushed the coarse denim of his overalls and began to strain against the thin dress" (14-15). Later, while she is cruelly beaten by her father, her mental ordeal is doubled by her "body contract[ing] in a painful spasm, each time the stick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach" (23). Etta, utterly disappointed at herself and the man has had one night stand with, lies in bed with her eyes closed feeling "the bleached coarseness of the sheet under her sweaty back" (72). Kiswana's love for her boyfriend has a secret physical expression as well: her "toes curled involuntarily at the passing thought of his full lips moving slowly over her instep" (77). In "Lucielia Louise Turner" we witness strong bodily sensations conveying the protagonist's grief, both before Serena's death – "A tight, icy knot formed in the center of Ciel's stomach and began to melt rapidly, watering the blood in her legs so that they almost refused to support her weight" (97) – and after – "The bile that had formed a tight knot in Ciel's stomach began to rise and gagged her just as it passed her throat. Mattie put her hand over the girl's mouth and rushed her out the new-empty room to the toilet. Ciel retched yellowish-green phlegm, and she brought up white lumps of slime that hit the seat of the toilet and rolled off, splattering onto the tiles. After a while she heaved only air, but the body did not seem to want to stop. It was exorcising the evilness of pain" (104). Cora Lee is a character making life choices based on her attraction to the thing that "felt good in the dark" (113). However, the most intense episode with respect to feelings mixed with bodily sensations is the episode of the rape in "The Two". It is a harrowing scene describing in detail Lorraine's physical and mental agony and reflecting not only the writer's heightened sensitivity and

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descriptive talent in expressing the female experience, but also her courage to adopt such emotional topic and language.

In connection with the heightened sensitivity of her characters, Naylor's text is characterized by rich imagery directly related to feelings repressed or overt. Every character's story highlights a certain metaphor. In "Mattie Michael" there is the recurrence of the smell of freshly cut sugar cane, a very powerful symbol for the sweetness and danger of carnal desire. In "Etta Mae Johnson" jazz music lyrics symbolize the main character's romantic mood and 'loose' life. A pigeon's broken flight in "Kiswana Browne" is a vivid metaphor for the title character's ending up in Brewster Place. The pigeon helped by the wind glides in circles in front of her window and Kiswana fantasizes that it bears her dreams on its back and that it will "ascend to the center of the universe"; but the wind dies out and the bird with "awkward, frantic movements" lands on the "corroded top of a fire escape on the opposite building" in Brewster Place (75). The metaphor and the leitmotif in "Lucielia Louise Turner" is water, a soul cleansing element. The episode when she washes the rice is symbolic for her giving up on her unborn baby, while the bath she takes after her child's death symbolizes a baptism. "Cora Lee" is also constructed on a dramatic metaphor: every child the young woman has is "her new baby doll" (107), a 'doll' she abandons once it has grown or she has given birth to another. Metaphorical in "The Two" is the "yellow mist", which stands for the atmosphere (made up of gossip, rejection, isolation) that surrounds the lesbian couple. Yellow (and purple) symbolizes the homo-sexual preference. All these metaphors are the result of the author's keen perception of her protagonists' feelings.

Naylor's volume of short-stories also meets the black feminism feature regarding clothing depiction, as the narrator in her descriptions offers a fairly rich clothing iconography. There are references to Mattie Michael's clothing – a thin summer dress when she is seduced by Butch Fuller, a work uniform one day in her youth, and a winter coat and no stockings when Basil was arrested. Etta Mae Johnson places great importance on what she wears, her clothing being a significant part of her identity. When she arrives in Brewster, she does it in a calculated

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way, wearing a ten-minute old dress, white sandals and oversized sunglasses (to hide her fatigue), and driving an apple-green Cadillac; and when she goes to church in order to find herself a man, she also dresses to impress - “a barrage of colors. A huge white straw hat reigned over layers of gold and pearl beads draped over too much bosom and too little dress” (62). Kiswana in an effort to highlight her ethnic heritage wears her hair beaded and her clothes style is Afro. Theresa constantly wears provocative thin Qiana dresses, while Lorraine wears smart office outfits. For Naylor’s characters, fashion is not only physical freedom, but also the emotional outlet and expression of their identity.

Finally, Gloria Naylor’s choice to render the actual speech of her characters is a pervasive feature in the volume. She combines Standard English (the narrator’s voice, used when describing places, introduce characters, and follow events; as well as a few characters’ voices) with Black vernacular (mostly in direct speech - most characters’ voices). For the latter, Naylor changes the spelling of words, uses different grammatical structures and colloquial words and phrases:

“Going to cut cane, Mr. Mike” [...]

Mr. Mike grinned. “Ain’t figure you to be goin’ catfishing with that knife, gal.”  
 (“Mattie Michael” 12)

The choice between Standard English and Black vernacular depends on the level of education of each character: Lorraine, Theresa and Kiswana, who attended college speak literary English, whereas Ben, C.C. Baker and his gang, Mattie, Etta, Butch etc. speak the vernacular. Here are two relevant examples in “The Two”:

Lorraine followed Theresa into the kitchen. “No, I’m not really tired, and fair’s fair, you cooked last night. I didn’t mean to tick off like that; it’s just that...well, Tee, have you noticed that people aren’t as nice as they used to be?” (134)

“I lives in this here block just like y’all,” Ben said slowly. “And when you ain’t got no heat, I ain’t either. It’s not my fault ‘cause the man won’t deliver no oil.”  
 (139)

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To conclude, the answer to the first question in the introduction is that Gloria Naylor is an authentic feminist writer, but she is the kind of feminist situated within the boundaries of a more complex and specific feminism, as it is understood by Afro-American women exclusively. Her primary concern in *The Women of Brewster Place* is to represent a range of African-American women in their struggle to gain dignity and autonomy as human beings, their plight being complicated by the fact that their lives are indirectly conditioned by the factors of class and race, and directly oppressed by the gender factor. The fact that almost all eight criteria of black feminism quoted by Bell are met in Naylor's first cycle of short-stories makes the volume a valuable contribution to the widespread efforts occurring during the 1980s and 1990s to revise the codes of power, dominance, and assertion present in a male literature, and portray and give a voice to the women of color from an inside perspective.

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