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## Depiction of Unusual Women - A Study of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

Preetha. C., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Scholar



### Afro-American Novel

Afro-American novel is an extended prose narrative written by an Afro-American who depicts or explains in detail the experience of black Americans in a formal,

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imaginatively distinctive manner. It can be different from the other works thematically, structurally or stylistically. The Afro-American writers are very keen in giving importance to their tradition. By tradition they mean the customs beliefs and conventions inherited from the past. The Afro-American novel in general attempts to reveal how race, class and sex compound the anxiety of black men and women in search of a distinctive voice.

### **Black Women**

The Black women suffered from the twin disadvantages of racial discrimination and a pronounced gender bias. No other social group has been subjected to the worst kinds of exploitation and oppression. They were forced to endure the horrors of slavery and as a worker she was the object of continuous exploitation, occupying the lowest place on the wage scale and restricted to the most filthy and uncreative jobs. As a woman her physical image was defamed and became the target of white man's lust. A well-known scientist Calvin Hernton has described the position and fate of the black women thus:

The Negro women through the years has suffered (and endured) every sexual outrage (withal of the psychological ramifications) that a democratic society can possibly inflict upon the human -being. The sexual atrocities that the Negro women has suffered in the united states, south and North and what these atrocities have done to her personality as a female creature is a tale more bloody and brutal that most of us can imagine. (123)

### **Attempt to Regain Collective and Individual Self**

Black women have tried to gain their lost humanity and collective and individual self through their art and literature. They have also succeeded in establishing themselves as writers and creative artists of reputation. Many black women writers have provided a great deal of space to the problems of black women's life and existence in their writing,

### **Gloria Naylor and Her Novels**

Gloria Naylor is a key voice in the rich outpouring of literature by African-American

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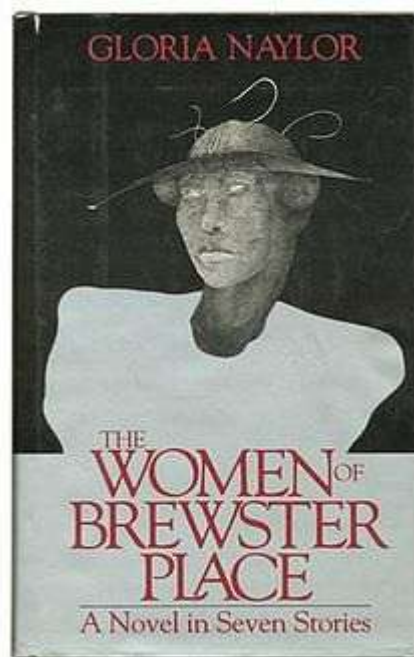
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women in the 1980s and 1990s. Her novels dramatize issues of community, connection and identity, often through their focus on powerful but careworn women who tend to be the culture bearers for their community. Naylor's portrayal of women, their relationships, and their battles represent the same intense struggle all human beings face in their quest for long and happy lives. In a review published in *Freedomways*, Loyle Hariston says that her characters. "...throb with vitality amid the shattering of their hopes and dreams". (12)

### General Focus of Black Narrative Literature



Historically, black narrative literature has been devoted to portraying whites oppressing blacks and the blacks surviving and struggling to overcome that oppression. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* depicts the black-on-black oppression much in the same tradition of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* and Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, for example. In these novels, all the sympathetic characters are women. "Women squabble; women support, women love, and women heal each other..," (6)

In the novels of Gloria Naylor suffering becomes an environment which is identified with the collective fate of the community while pride is what inspires her individual characters to pursue their separate dreams.

### *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Naylor portrays *The Women of Brewster Place* as a novel of seven stories which focuses on different women who experience and endure conflicts within themselves and as the result of their interaction with others. One may also suggest that the central characters and themes are fused into one entity, and that the novel characterizes the struggles of not one, but seven black women, who in the common setting, have different versions of their confrontations with racism and sexism. These seven women constitute the major characters or protagonists of this literary work, and their struggle comprises the theme of the novel.



The novel focuses on the Brewster Place and the black women who live in this locality in the form of community. To give homogeneity to their living, Naylor describes the "coloured daughters" of Brewster Place as follows:

...where they stood together - hands on lips, straight backed, rounded -bellied, high-behind women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed their strong teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshipped, and shared their men... They were hard- edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster place,(WBP 4-5)

### **Human Relations in a Racial Context**

The novel addresses the issues of human relations in a racial context in advanced capitalism. On closer examination it can be seen that this destiny is an extension of the capitalistic framework of modern American society which corrupts individual dreams. By placing her individual characters in such graphically defined geographic settings, Naylor has been able to bring out the dialectic of contradictions that exists between the separate dreams

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pursued by the members of the community and its collective destiny which is in the hands of historic forces. The very factors which contribute toward the economic progress of the Blacks undermine their identity.

Commenting on the moral issues raised by the chapter "The Two" Naylor has commented:

Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she was a woman. And, regardless of race, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience. When you reduce that down in this society even to something as abysmal as rape, there is no difference between women.(36)

### **Black Women - Alienated from Their Families**

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the women support one another, counteracting the violence of their fathers, boyfriends, husbands and sons. All the women in the novel are alienated from their families, other people and God.

Gloria Naylor tries to project black women's predicament in America and delineates the way they become aware about themselves and their life. She stresses that African Americans must maintain their identity in the world dominated by whites. Thus, living in Brewster Place partly defines who the women are, and becomes an important part of personal history. The story is replete with the feelings of passion, symbolic overtones, protest, discrimination foisted on the blacks of Brewster Place from the mainstream of life of the city by the wall at the end of the street. Naylor is a tragic artist who feels that only a revolution in consciousness can save the black community from imminent disaster.

### **Sexual Exploitation**

The closed- mindedness in this case of the residents is an obvious example of such "human stupidity". Naylor must understand that the difference between individuals should push them away from each other; if the differences cannot be used to enhance the relationship, then they should at least be ignored. In this novel, Mattie and Etta Mae Johnson were sexually exploited. Cora Lee, to fulfil her lustrous desires, begets many children. Kiswana's mother was the mistress of a white master. To keep her husband with herself Ciel

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aborts her baby. Lorraine and Theresa are lesbians. Though, most of the women are debased by the male tyrants, the women form a community and at the end of each chapter they seek identity within themselves. Mattie, deserted by her father and finally by her son seeks her identity in the Brewster place.

Etta, like Mattie was outplayed by a man with whom she involved. It is at her last stage Etta understands that she must depend on her own for salvation. Cora Lee, at the end understood her follies and decides to lead a life with her children. Ceil, having been rescued by Mattie, decides to live after her husband's separation from her. Thus, at the end of their chapters the women realize her plight to seek to live a better life. Also, at the end, the community of women joins together to dismantle the wall. It indicates that, they want to break the barriers that separate them from the rest of the city and seek their communal identity.

### **Needed – A Revolution in Consciousness**

Naylor is a revolutionary artist who feels that only a revolution in consciousness can save the black community from imminent disaster. If the choice is between the soul and success she wants the black community to select the soul. She wants her people to struggle to keep their dreams from going sour or getting polluted. She would like her community to suffer to keep their pride. Naylor summed up her views in these words in an interview:

For the Afro-Americans, regardless of where you climb on the ladder of success there will be racism. Under these conditions, if you give up what centers you, what is unique in you, then you are lost. The greatness of this country is the uniqueness of its people. But there is pressure to amalgamate and that is suicidal when it happens to the Afro-American. (54)

Thus, within the context of Brewster Place, these seven women tell stories of their passions, disappointments, frustration and their struggles, tragedies and triumphs with a pride.

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