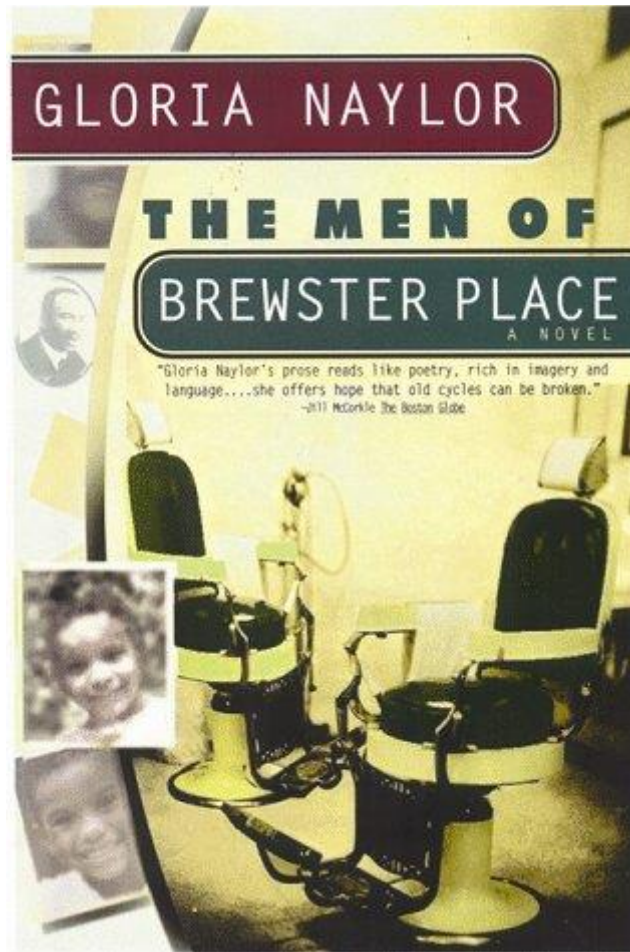


Self-Condensation for Atonement in Gloria Naylor's
The Men of Brewster Place

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Abstract

The element of strong desire for an apology is an internal reflection on one's action towards others which may bring them to punish themselves by way of atonement. *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor's fifth novel reflects the same intention of the male characters who want to confess their abandonment and ill-treatment of their women and repent towards that abuse of women, including mothers, wives, daughters and beloved ones. Although the male

characters are self-condemned, they also fight against the injustice and atrocities happening in the society. Naylor has portrayed the black men's failure as caused by their discrimination against women, which make them regret and choose to punish themselves for the exploitation of the women. Therefore, this paper makes an attempt to highlight the issues that are appropriate to the life of these miserable and unfortunate men.

Keywords: Self-condemnation, Black men, Black women, redemption, white society, injustice, atonement.

Gloria Naylor – Exploring All the Surfaces of Black Life

Gloria Naylor, a significant American storyteller, and a brilliant novelist has provided valuable social commentary on the life of blacks. Her novels focus on the African-American culture and its marginality in the American streams. The changing political circumstances in America made her focus richly on the interpersonal and familial relationship. As a feminist, Naylor undoubtedly caters her strong voice showing support to the abused women in a male chauvinistic society. In order to cope up with such a stereotyped society, each of her community women emerges, sustaining, enabling and enriching the lives of one another. Despite the fact that Naylor was influenced by other black writers, she wanted to explore all the surfaces of black life.

Masculine Threads of the World

Naylor returns to Brewster place to pick up the masculine threads of the world in the novel *The Men of Brewster Place*. It is a profound work that explores the other side of the gender issues. The novel represents the black men who are struggling to correct their faults and also trying to make sense of their lives as individuals. Through her narrative structure, Naylor's masculine street of Brewster place becomes evident. In her interwoven stories of seven men, Naylor compels the characters to confess and repent their exploitation of women.

‘Three buildings on the east; three on the west; and the wall blacking light from the south. A dead-end street. Full of shadows. It always feels like dusk on Brewster place’
(TMB-2)

Atonement

Atonement is the theory that broadly views the disturbed relationship between humanity and God by the cause of human sin. It emphasizes the benefits of forgiveness, redemption and eternal life of humanity. Similarly, Naylor's male characters are condemning themselves for their earlier faults, certainly against women. Each character wants to remit his/her sins of their past errors resulting in their choice of atonement. In this novel, the women are still present, but the primary focus is on men. It is also refreshing to see the men's problems and complexities of relationship and community. The story denotes the absence of women in the men's lives become crucial to push them toward taking responsibility for their actions.

Narrator Ben, the Deceased Janitor

Ben, the deceased janitor, once again appears to narrate the story of men who are in various moods and shades. As an incapable family man, Ben faces disaster in the form of isolation. Brother Jerome is a musician who always figures out the community men's blues. 'For his blues receive 'Amens' from the apartment where individual men turn bitter about their lives' (3). Although he is labelled as a retarded child his music gives the messages that men should struggle against the whites' discrimination.

Basil

The next character is Basil, who tries for atonement for his abandonment of his mother Mattie in the novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. After his mother's death, Basil becomes serious and is determined to marry a woman like his mother to make her life prosperous.

'I can't undo the past, but I would find some woman, somewhere, and make her life happy. I would be the father I never had; I would act like the man I'd finally grown up to be' (46).

However, he is left alone in a state of confusion when things do not turn out as he wishes. The next character is Eugene an unfortunate and jobless man who abruptly leaves his family when he fails to fulfil his own dream. Finally, he is condemning himself for his past acts when he is attracted towards a male transgender named, Chino. 'Eugene will repeatedly return to Chino for subsequent floggings searching always to pay enough for his role in Ceil's pain Serena's death'. (9)

Reverend Moreland T. Woods

Ben introduces one of the ministers of Sinai Baptist church, Reverend Moreland T. Woods. He is basically not a religious person, but his regular services to God inspired him to do something for the church and persons around him. After settling himself up in the Baptist church as a preacher, Moreland leisurely starts his old act of seducing women. For his misdeeds and injustice, women are all stirred to rallying towards the church. Among them, ninety percentage of women are pregnant and with the baby carriage.

‘WE WANT JUSTICE—NOT REVENGE read one placard. DADDY, WHEN ARE YOU COMING HOME? read another. Moreland Woods looked as if he’d stepped into a bad dream’. (151)

Drug Runner C.C. Baker

The next one is C.C. Baker, who is portrayed as a local drug runner and also the murderer of Lorraine. He has also murdered his brother Hakim but shows complete ignorance about his death. At last, he confesses the truth and seeks god’s forgiveness. ‘For the first time in his life, C.C. begins to pray. Please, God let me do this right. Give me a chance--for once--to be a real winner’. (129)

Revolutionary Character

The only revolutionary character of the novel is Abshu. In this novel, Naylor enhances the connection between Abshu and the community.

Abshu continues his battle against injustice by encouraging youngsters with Shakespeare’s play. He is a playwright as well as the head of the community centre. So, he is always determined to eliminate Moreland from the Sinai baptise church at any cost. With the help of B.B, Abshu organized a meeting which gathered fifty women in the community to protest against Woods. As a result, Moreland Woods realizes his bad dream and resigns his post. The complete support of the women folk eliminates Moreland’s power and objectives. In the last section of the novel, Naylor introduces the barber shop as a gathering place for the community men.

‘these chairs done seen many a good man as well as the bad and the ugly. They done seen rejoicing and they seen grief. Although a man grieves different from a woman a whole lot more is kept inside to bite him a little here, a little there, until the blood begins to flow’. (163)

Effects of Socio-Economic Psyche On Black Men

Even though the barbershop is the communal space of emotional exchange, it cannot prevent the effects of socio-economic psyche on black men. Naylor inscribed Greasy’s character as very relaxed in nature that made others feel ashamed of their stereotype notions. Being powerless and considering themselves to be the miserable ones in the society, the individuals are forced to be unlawful. Under such pressure, the community males are supposed to leave their family and sometimes even their life. Naylor’s work not only explores the African-American tradition but also gives insights into the life of blacks. So, it is an attempt to hint at the sufferings of black men in society. The positive depiction of the novel shows that the men struggling to correct their faults as individuals, are trying to make sense of their lives.

A Means of Survival

Ben, the narrator has learned a lesson in his isolation of being silent towards the white society as a means of survival. Despite his incapability of remedying his daughter’s sufferings, Ben turned out to be an alcoholic to question God about his manhood.

‘So I settled on killing myself---slowly with booze--- and on God understanding that I’m fighting for my man-memory, as she said, He laughed, Daddy. He laughed. And laughed’. (28)

By once again confronting failure in his life, Basil compromises with the situation to leave the family and to start his new life. Eugene’s mistake towards Ceil made himself to lash himself daily with the leather whip for redemption. Moreland’s continued assaults on women brought humiliation towards his post. All women gathered to accuse Woods in front of Sinai make him resign and apologize to God. Finally, C.C. accused of Hakim’s murder made him feel guilty and ask God for another chance to be a successful man in the society.

Realizing Their Sins Against Women

Gloria Naylor's heroes' struggles made them realize their sins against women. The novel at first cites the character's struggle then presents them as an evolving personality. The characters like Ben, Greasy, Abshu highlight their protest on injustice and white dominance. Although Naylor has undergone a lot of problems and hindrances by either black or white society, she positively reflects the community rules and traditions through her male characters. When these unfortunate tragedies become a part of their life, the men in the novel are helpless to protect their family. The characters' powerless condition is the main cause to search for atonement. Therefore, the novel *The Men of Brewster Place* is a sequel to Naylor's earlier work *The Women of Brewster Place*, where the men are given a chance to redeem themselves by apologizing for acting abusively, violently and selfishly.

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