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A Post Colonial approach in Gloria Naylor's Fiction

Abstract

We will apply a post colonial approach to Gloria Naylor's work *The Women of Brewster Place*. It will inhibit the aspects of post colonialism used as ghettoization and racialism. Afro-American means people of African descent residing in U.S. In the novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), which I will discuss about these people and the aspects of magic realism applied in lives of these women.

In the postcolonial period, it could also be referred as post war period the focus was on education, health and more on personal and family problems. Gaps opened up between the city life secured and the lives of Black Afro-Americans, racism emerged as a problem. Brewster Place exploded in violence by C.C.Baker which has been amplified rather controlled by policing of the State. In *The Ghetto and the Underclass Essays of race and Social Policy* by John Rex, it presents social policies framed by US for the immigrants' slaves. In the post-colonial world, it could also be referred as post-war period the focus was on education, health and more on personal and family problems. In 1967 the new policy was concerned with the process of urbanization and sub urbanization. From a situation in which the great cities had been seen as the very centers of high civilization and culture, the United States has moved to a situation in which these cities were seen as desolate, deserted and dangerous places. There seemed to be a secular change occurring within its civilization in which the natural process of urban development was producing a wholly new ideal style of life and the 'Inner City' remained as a festering sore on the body politic. The problem was to treat that sore, to provide the whole of urban civilization itself. The Blacks were the minorities in U.S. they did not had access to public housing, mainstream working class white population lived on public houses. Blacks lived in dilapidated ghetto.

On the other hand, the research paper begins with the writings of Loyle Hairstone on writing for *Freedomways*, a quarterly review of the freedom movement raises the issue that Naylor does not foresee the novel as a freedom movement. She does not see the novel as realistic but rather than as mythic. The characters though involved “seem constantly on the verge of breaking out into magical powers.”

Now I would like to discuss the novel and to show light on these perspectives. *The Women of Brewster Place* depicts seven courageous black women who are struggling to survive harsh realities of life. Gloria Naylor's vivid portrayal of the women of this novel, their relationships, and their battles with society represents the same intense struggle all human beings face in their quest for long, happy lives Her success probably stems from her exploration of the African-American experience, and her desire to "... help us celebrate voraciously that which is ours," as she tells Bellinelli in the interview series, *In Black and White*. She stresses that African Americans must maintain their identity in a world dominated by whites. She says this with pride as she is Afro- American writer and she wants to build the identity of Afro-American writers to write for her nation and culture. Let us talk about afro-American women their culture and society. The African-American struggle for freedom from slavery to the current struggle of the present generation to make their way in a world that, on the surface, has changed rapidly, but that in reality remains all too similar to the world their parents and their grandparents inherited. Although the African-American experience has changed drastically over the years, there is still so much that remains the same. Yet another generation remains disenfranchised and burdened by poverty.

In this novel every woman has at least one or the other person whom she loves selflessly and unconditionally, and when she is faced with the horrors of modern life, such as the death of a child or the loss of a lover, the women come together with kindness, generosity, and the strong bond which ties the spirit of African American women. There is a gentle yet unshakable will in them that refuses to be destroyed by betrayal, loss, and violence. Brewster Place is a dead-end street in fact and in symbol, for the women who move there are trapped by their hopes and fears. For them, Brewster Place is both the birth and the death of their dreams. The brick wall that separates Brewster Place from the nicer neighborhoods represents the wall of prejudice and

shame, racism and sexism that must be smashed by the residents. They alone can effect change in this climate of hostility and mistrust which they are facing with courage. The garbage in the alley symbolizes the character of the street toughs who run drugs, rape, and kill here. No one can stop them until the women on Brewster Place join forces and souls to fight back. Every women of Brewster Place tries to resolve the problem, it will only be effective when Men of Brewster Place come together and withheld their responsibility. You can come to know the Men of this place by reading Gloria Naylor's book *The Men of Brewster Place*. They come to their home and meet these women for rest and relief and get lost in worldly pleasures. These women try much to make their living place home. Their living place is a dilapidated ghetto.

The Women of Brewster Place are called colored daughters by the novelists. As the title suggests, Naylor's novel is about a community of women. Naylor writes about them, "Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home." Although the undisputed leader of this community is Mattie, the women are presented as sisters who mentor, nurture, guide, and heal one another. As Mattie Michael nursed Cora Lee when her husband deserted her, she aborted her child and her daughter demised. With the exceptions of Kiswana and "the two," they are Lorraine and Thersa. These women are refugees from the South, women for whom Brewster Place is both literally and figuratively a dead end street where they could come and reside but from here they could not escape.

This is the opening of the book. "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore and then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over like syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?" Langston Hughes

.

The book opens with a poem by Langston Hughes. Gloria Naylor, the author, uses poetry and song lyrics throughout her book as a vehicle to help the reader understand what she is trying to convey about the various women. The opening poem tells us that this book will be about unrealized dreams and their living conditions. It challenges us to answer the question as we encounter each woman's story. They have tragedy, pain and grief in their lives. Their dreams have been deferred. The collective women of Brewster Place do at the end of the novel in

Mattie's dream, they come together and tear down the wall, and it was once baptized by vomit and later stained by blood. If the epilogue calls the prologue, so the final emphasis of the dream persistently recalls the poem by Langston Hughes by which Gloria Naylor's book *The Women of Brewster Place* begins: "What happens to a dream deferred?"

The poem talks about unfulfilled dreams. The poem suggests one's deferred dreams, desires, hopes become life-denying. The novel talks about decay of Brewster Place in other words it also talks about moral decay that causes despair and destruction. Naylor draws our attention to the implications of her vision in terms of the novel's sensitivity to history and social context. There are reasons for Naylor's violent protests are to be found in the novel's reflection of history and moment. In the Afro American history and civil rights moment, Africans were the slaves and they were denied civil rights. They lived in colonies outside cities or a ghetto. Despite its heavy dependency on general images of birth and arrested development, the prologue provides markers that locate Brewster temporally and geographically. Its conception was a political act around the time of "The Great War".

Brewster Place was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company. The later needed to remove the police chief..... The alderman wanted the realty company to build their new shopping center on his cousin's property... (*WBP* 1)

Years later, after the second World War, Irish And Italian immigrant mothers hope that their sons will settle there when they return from combat. Then one year before the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954), the first "brown- skinned" man comes to live in Brewster place. In the fifties, we learn, Brewster inhabitants are largely Mediterranean immigrants. Reflecting demographic trends, the neighborhood becomes increasingly black through sixties and seventies.(n1) in casual details about the characters, Naylor's novel mirrors the social transformation of Afro-America. Naylor chooses a slum neighborhood—possibly an area of Boston. As these people were brown skinned, black, illiterate and poor they were not considered equal to whites. Thus this gave rise to racialism after World War II.

“All we know is Brewster Place is more than a setting for the stories. Brewster Place is the first character we are introduced to and becomes the quiet background that never changes through all the generations that come and go. It is a quiet grandmother, never judging, always allowing those who live within her to be - whatever that brings. Here there is no security but only infertile ground where the lives the women we are about to meet will grow, grow up, leave, come back, grow old, and die all within the world of Brewster Place”. (WBP N.A.)

We see early in the story a theme of baptism with the opening of Brewster Place with champagne wishing it good luck. Next, we have the dividing brick wall with its baptism of vomit from a young man's over indulgence in liquor, the first foreshadowing of what is to become of the men of Brewster Place. With the arrival of old Ben, a wino maintenance man, we have Brewster Place's first African American resident. The fact he is a tormented black man, covering his sorrows with alcohol is a foreshadowing of the ineffectiveness of the black men in our story. The women, by contrast, are described as 'hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding and easily pleased.' We are given a snap shot of what to expect of both the men and the women we encounter living in the micro-society of Brewster Place.

Violence against women has been depicted in the novel. Every woman has been victim of violence, racialism and prejudice. The novel begins with a flashback to Mattie's life as a typical young woman. But this ordinary life is brought to an abrupt halt by her father's brutal attack on her for refusing to divulge the name of her baby's father. From this first episode we come to know, Naylor portrays men as people who take advantage of others. The men in the story exhibit cowardice, alcoholism, violence, laziness, and dishonesty. The final act of violence, the gang rape of Lorraine, underscores men's violent tendencies, emphasizing the differences between the sexes.

Residents of Brewster Place are victims of ignorance, violence, and prejudice; all of the women in the novel are alienated from their families, other people, and God. For example, when Mattie

leaves her home after her father beats her, she never again sees her parents again. Then her son, for whom she gave up her life, leaves without saying goodbye. He never sees her again. Throughout the story, Naylor creates situations that stress the loneliness of the characters. Especially poignant is Lorraine's relationship with Ben. Having been rejected by people they love or want to love, Lorraine and Ben become friends. Lorraine gets parental affection from Ben, his daughter left him and went away. Lorraine's horrifying murder of Ben serves only to deepen the chasm of hopelessness felt at different times by all the characters in the story.

I would like to discuss seven major women characters of this novel. On these characters the chapters of the novel are divided. I would like to tell where did they belonged to and how did they reach Brewster Place?

Mattie's journey to Brewster Place begins in rural Tennessee, but when she becomes pregnant she leaves town to avoid her father's wrath. Her father threatens her to fire the father of her child with a pistol, who was Butch Fuller. She did not reveal the Butch's name. Mattie's father, Samuel reaction to Mattie's no response is out of proportion. Naylor's language creates a whirlwind, reminiscent in its power of one that took Elijah into heaven. Naylor's whirlwind "crumbled her father's face and exploded both of their hearts into uncountable pieces. She saw them both being spun around the room and sucked out of the windows along with everything that had passed between them"(22). Then she was thrashed by her father with a stick. Naylor uses the magical realism between whirlwind that took Elijah into heaven and Samuel's wrath made Mattie to leave home. For a while she manages to earn just enough money to pay rent on the room she shares with her baby, Basil. One night a rat bites the baby while they are sleeping and Mattie begins to search for a better place to live. Just as she is about to give up, she meets Eva Turner, an old woman who lives with her granddaughter, Ciel. Eva invites Mattie in for dinner and offers her a place to stay. Years later when the old woman dies, Mattie has saved enough money to buy the house. Ciel's parents take her away, but Mattie stays on with Basil. She refuses to see any faults in him, and when he gets in trouble with the law she puts up her house to bail him out of jail. When he jumps bail, she loses the house she had worked thirty years to own, and her long journey from Tennessee finally ends in a small apartment on Brewster Place. Though Mattie remains true to only Butch Fuller, she did not fulfilled the social obligation of marriage

because of her father's hatred towards Butch Fuller. Neither she did marry her whole life nor did she have any other lover. She only cared for her son Basil but she had to live in the ghetto because she had broken the customs.

America faced the problem of black Caribbean immigrant underclass moved from southern states. The problems of this underclass was its interests, its struggle and the dangers it was perceived to represent, this is the cause of underlying racist identity. Etta Mae Jonson comes from the small town of South Africa; the path she takes to Brewster Place is very different. Discovering early on that America is not yet ready for a bold, confident, intelligent black woman, she learns to survive by attaching herself "to any promising rising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another." She joins Mattie on Brewster Place after leaving the last in a long series of men. Attending church with Mattie, she stares enviously at the "respectable" wives of the deacons and wishes that she had taken a different path. Eyeing the attractive visiting preacher, she wonders if it is not still possible for her to change her lot in life. When Reverend Woods clearly returns her interest; Etta gladly accepts his invitation to go out for coffee, though Mattie expresses her concerns about his intentions. By the end of the evening Etta realizes that Mattie was right, and she walks up Brewster Street with a broken spirit. As she climbs the stairs to the apartment, however, she hears Mattie playing Etta's "loose life" records. With pleasure she realizes that someone is waiting up for her. She could never have respectable position in the society unless she is married. She wanted to get married but could not so she has to get shelter in Brewster Place.

Naylor writes about an autumn hour during which Kiswana's mother comes to visit. This is a story about generational differences between mother and daughter set in the early 1970's with abundant references to the civil rights movement and the growing popularity of reclaiming African roots. On one level Kiswana is trying to live on Brewster Place and help her people, but on a deeper level Naylor expresses the naiveté of her awareness. Mrs. Browne represents that Kiswana at this stage of her life is rejecting everything. She is trying to make on her own, but the freedom to do so comes with the cushion of a father with a "five figure income and a home in Linden Hills". (83) Kiswana has embraced cause of her people, much to the dismay of her mother who wants to distance these people from herself and from her daughter. Kiswana gets

angry at the use of word *these*, for she sees herself as one of them. They are poor, as is she in her own mind. What her mother and the reader realize is that the other residents of Brewster place do not have any other options.

Kiswana is dropped out of college. Which in her own defense she refers to a bourgeoisie school (83)? However, she has had enough college education to understand Marxist theory at a rudimentary level and consequently has chosen to identify with the proletariat; the wage earning classes which she now believes inhabits Linden Hills. Her college years were spent fighting in the movement (84), which focused its energy on securing voting rights, access to public accommodations, and better educational and economic opportunities for blacks through non violent protest. The irony of the fact that she had opportunity to be in college- one of the goals of the movement- and that she chose to drop out is lost by her.

Ciel, the grandchild of Eva Turner, also ends up on Brewster Place. Her chapter begins with the return of her boyfriend who had left her eleven months before when their baby, Serena, was only a month old. She is relieved to have him back, and she is still in love with him, so she tries to ignore his irresponsible behavior and mean temper. When she becomes pregnant again, however, it becomes harder to deny the problems. He complains that he will never be able to get ahead with her and two babies to care for, and although she does not want to do it, she gets an abortion. When he leaves her anyway, she finally sees him for what he is, and only regrets that she had not had this realization before the abortion. As she is thinking this, they hear a scream from Serena, who had stuck a fork in an electrical outlet. After the child's death, Ciel nearly dies from grief. She stops eating and refuses to take care of herself but Mattie did not let her die and finally gets Ciel to face her grief. Mattie becomes her mentor and nurturer. Mattie's moving ritual of bathing and cleansing Ciel draws on common sensical folkloric wisdom and links her to the tradition of black women who have nursed their sisters through grief and suffering Ciel's boyfriend is Eugene in Naylor's novel, she has explained that "I wanted the reader to see that young man did care about the death of his child, but he had been so beaten down he couldn't come through for his family" Eugene was unemployed, he was not able to support his family. He was denied access to respectable jobs because of their ethnicity and/or skin color. Previously he worked under someone in a dock. Neither the USA nor the RSA tolerated slavery in the 20th century, but

black writers show that confining people in ghettos or homelands and limiting their ability to live with and/or support their families create a form of unacknowledged slavery. Such recognized forms of colonial racism as segregation and apartheid co-exist with more subtle discriminatory practices that continue to undermine human rights in the modern world.

Eugene and many blacks did not get employed. Blacks migrated to America, American institutions had developed around the slave plantation using Black slaves, and the urban ghettos of the North were allocated to the surplus population which migrated from the south. The greatest of social scientist Myrdal, suggested as he looked at the ghettos of New York in 1964 that the only appropriate term to describe the unemployed and largely black poor was a Swedish term which he translated as 'underclass' (Myrdal 1964).

This underclass, he suggested consisted of 'unemployed and gradually unemployable families at the bottom of a society, in which for the majority of people are above the level, the basic model of society here suggested is that of a competitive and individualistic system in which the great majority of individuals are able to meet their needs and which they regard as legitimate because it allows this while at the same time maximizing their own area of choice and freedom. The problem of the underclass is that they no longer have the motivation to enter such a system. They remain caught up 'in a tangle of pathologies' living in a 'culture of poverty' and transmitting their deprivation to their children. (The Ghetto and the Underclass - 29)

Cora, who as a small child desired no other toys than a new baby doll every year, becomes a woman with large demanding family. As a child Cora dreams of new baby dolls. When her parents refuse to give her another for her thirteenth Christmas, she is heartbroken. Her mother tries to console her by telling her that she still has all her old dolls, but Cora plaintively says, "But they don't smell and feel the same as the new ones." As an adult, she continues to prefer the smell and feel of her new babies to the trials and hassles of her growing children. She is unable to cope with the children; Cora is a portrait of obsessive and arrested desire. Cora's dream projects a static world in which the mother – infant relationship must never be ruptured. Cora's attentiveness to the infant and disregard for anything outside the circle are strongly contrasted.

Her other children exist as frozen portraits of their baby days. Concerns about their schooling, rotting teeth, truancy, and slovenliness are easily drowned by the anodyne of soap operas.

Cora's men are now marginalized as shadows. They only become father of her new born babies. Men come and go; once one promised to marry her, but he never returned from a trip to the corner store to buy milk. Cora becomes Kiswana's friend. Kiswana is going to change Cora's life and open her eyes and starts inviting her to a black production of Shakespeare's play. After watching the play Cora dreams of good jobs for her older children "in insurance companies and the post offices", homes in Linden Hills- a simple catalogue of a middle class family. When her son asks her whether Shakespeare is black, she replies, "Not yet," remembering guilty how she has beaten him for writing rhymes on the bathroom walls. She came to know that no Shakespeare can be nurtured in this environment which she provides for her children. The schools in which their children study are solely confined to ghettoized society. These schools were starved of resources and were likely to produce poor results. The educational priority area is to place efficient teachers and other non-human resources.

There had been acrimonious debates about whether the alleged failure of West-Indian descended children is the 'fault' of their family and community or the 'fault' of racist teachers in the school. (Department of Education and Science 1981). (The Ghetto and the Underclass - 12)

When Lorraine and Teresa first move onto Brewster Street, the other women are relieved that they seem like nice girls who will not be after their husbands. But soon the neighbors start to notice the loving looks that pass between the two women, and soon the other women in the neighborhood reject Lorraine's gestures of friendship. Teresa and Lorraine being the homogenous sex, their affair is not accepted in the society. They are forced to live in a ghetto. Even there, residents criticize their relations. Teresa, the bolder of the two, doesn't care what the neighbors think of them, and she doesn't understand why Lorraine does care. Feeling rejected both by her neighbors and by Teresa, Lorraine finds comfort in talking to Ben, the old alcoholic handyman of Brewster Place. Lorraine reminds Ben of his estranged daughter, and Lorraine finds in Ben a new father to replace the one who kicked her out when she refused to lie about being a lesbian. One night after an argument with Teresa, Lorraine decides to go and visit Ben. As she passes through the alley near the wall, she is attacked by C .C. Baker and his friends, the

teenage boys who terrorize Brewster Place. All six of the boys rape her, leaving her near death. In her delirium and pain she sees movement at the end of the alley, and she picks up a brick to protect her from what she perceives as a possible threat from those boys she beats the drunken and oblivious Ben to death before Mattie can reach her and stop her. The "objective" picture of a battered woman scraping at the air in a bloody green and black dress is shocking. It exactly seems to have so little to do with the woman whose pain the reader has just experienced. Having recognized Lorraine as a human being who becomes a victim of violence, we recoil from the unfamiliar picture of a creature who seems less human than animal, less subject than object. As Naylor's representation retreats for even a moment to the distanced perspective... the objectifying pressure of the reader's gaze allows that reader to see not the brutality of the act of violation but the brute-like characteristics of its victim. C.C. Baker and his gang boys are violating the rules openly in a nation like America. Afro-American Women are subject to exploitation. Women irrespective of their race or color should come and stand together to fight this brutality.

The Brewster Place is separated from the city by a wall. The spread of rioting by C.C. Baker along such ethnic minority areas and the other problems and grievances these minorities have been largely come across. They face such problems because they have been isolated from the society. The wall separating Brewster Place from the main avenues of the city serves several important purposes. Following its initial creation, the wall comes to symbolize the indifference with which Brewster Place is treated by the men responsible for its creation. Because of the wall, Brewster Place is economically and culturally isolated from the rest of the city. The wall has forced Brewster Place to fend for itself. For the residents of Brewster Place, the wall of Brewster Place will be the end of the road. Their lives will go no further, regardless of how much they may hope or dream. This wall has been built around Afro- Americans either by failed opportunities or by a series of misfortunes in their lives.

The dream of the last chapter ends with the death of Lorraine and Brewster Place .After the rape of the Lorraine every woman feels anger and enraged. They damage the wall but we as readers feel that the real destruction of Brewster Place never takes place. The last chapter begins with a description of the heavy rain that follows the death of Ben. They were confined in their small places; the rain prevents the inhabitants of Brewster Place from meeting and talking about the tragedy. Instead they are faced with clogged gutters, debris, trapped odors in their apartments

and listless children. Men become aggressive and drink too much. In this way Brewster Place is a ghetto, where racial discrimination, poverty, insecurity and male inadequacy prevail.

For a week after Ben's death it rains continuously, and although they will not admit it to each other, all the women dream of Lorraine's death that week. The sun comes out for the block party. Kiswana has been organizing the block party to raise the money and take the landlord to the court. The party seems joyful and successful, and Ciel even returns to see Mattie. Even Ciel, who doesn't know what has happened by the wall, she reports to Mattie that she has been dreaming of Ben and Lorraine. The rain begins to fall again and Kiswana tries to get people to pack up, but they seem desperate to continue the party. Everyone knew this block party is important because after the death of Lorraine and Ben. It is a way forward for looking at this tragedy. As it begins to rain, the women sol licitly get involved in community, the dream of collective community party gets turned into night-mares' despair. In Mattie's dream, like the biblical claim- a little child shall lead them- Cora Lee's youngest, Sonya, is the child who discovers the stain of blood on the brick, which she tries to scrape up with "a smudged popsicle" (185). Under the control of Mattie's dream, Cora Lee delivers the brick to Mattie. By this time, however, all the men and children are huddled in the doorways, out of the rain and out of way (185). The action centers on and with the women, while the men stand on the sidelines. The women take control of the moment, passing the stained bricks from woman's hand to woman's hand until the bricks are out of Brewster Place. Kiswana, the serious one, the one who is on Brewster Place by choice, resists involvement at first, but upon accepting the brick into her hands from Ciel, accepts these women as her equals; their fight is her own. Cora Lee delivers a brick to Theresa; she joins the other women with vengeance. When she throws out for first brick, it bursts into a cloud of green smoke (188), the color of the dress Lorraine was wearing when she died. The body of brick is shattered, but the spirit arises, like an ebony phoenix, so in this way Lorraine, too, appears within the common body. In Mattie's dream, all the women contribute to tearing the wall, smashing through the barrier that cut them of possibilities no one is left out. The last line of Langston Hughes' poem epigraph, "Or does [the deferred dream] explode?" is demonstrated in violently graphic depiction. The answer is a resounding "Yes". But to explode is not to be destroyed. These women, as a community, will carry their dreams into another day. While Mattie wakes from this dream. The sun was shining. In every situation and all conditions

these women are ready to help each other. Naylor draws on a final image of an ebony phoenix to conclude "Dawn". The classical myth of the phoenix with its many variations has to do with a fabulous bird, resembling an eagle, that every five hundred years burns itself on a funeral pyre and out of its decomposing body arises again. These women will not disappear, grow old and die. For through their stories, "each in her own time with her own season" will rise again (5). The image of these women as a collective phoenix testifies to their indestructibility.

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