

Characteristics of Postmodernism in the Select Works of Gloria Naylor

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ABSTRACT

Modernism which reflects a shift in knowledge and understanding and sensibility and expression is a conscious break with some of the bases, and it has been often applied to the literature and arts of the early twentieth century. Postmodernism, a continuation of modernism and sometimes the counter traditional experiments of modernism, is often applied to the literature and arts published after World War II. When Modernism searched for an abstract truth of life, postmodernism propagated that there is no universal truth of life. Postmodernism is the right lens to view the works that discuss the complexities of man with his society, religion and also with himself. Gloria Naylor, an acclaimed novelist of African American Literature, has taken daring efforts to depict the precise picture of her society and women. The present paper takes up Gloria Naylor's four novels *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988) and *Bailey's Café* (1992) for its analysis to state that Gloria Naylor has executed ingenious approaches in her plot construction, narration and characterization by using post modernistic tools to present the factual state of the African American society.

Modernism which began in the late nineteenth century and developed in the early twentieth century provided the right tools and understanding for African Americans to address their marginalization. Postmodernism, a reaction to modernism began after the Second World War and developed in the late twentieth century, though in many of its constituents follow the modernism, in certain extents questions the boundaries set by modernism. Modernism searched for an abstract truth of life; postmodernism propagated that there is no universal truth of life. The postmodern literary writers strongly believed that the world has already been fallen apart and it is difficult to locate the actual, singular meaning through literature; instead, they strive hard to reveal the world's absurdities, countless paradoxes and ironies. The use of self-consciousness, parody, irony, fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, simultaneity, and the breakdown between high and low forms of expression are the salient contrivances of postmodernism.

The elements of Postmodernism provide the right lens to have unprejudiced views of the African American literature that discusses the complexities of man with his society, religion and also with himself. Gloria Naylor, an acclaimed novelist of African American Literature, has taken daring efforts to depict the factual state of her society and constructive and depressing traits of her men and women in her novels. The use of parody, pastiche and intertextuality help Naylor to make her novels reach the reader with the realistic representations of her society. The present paper takes up Gloria Naylor's four novels *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988) and *Bailey's Café* (1992) for its analysis to state that Gloria Naylor has executed ingenious approaches in her plot construction, narration and characterization by using the elements of postmodernism. Along with the themes multiple jeopardy, race, class and gender Gloria Naylor also focuses on the psychological and sociological disadvantages of her society. Naylor shows keen interest in representing the innermost and hidden problems of women, along with their positive and negative traits.

The Women of Brewster Place, Naylor's first novel depicts the dilapidated society and the rundown womanhood. *Linden Hills*, the second novel, exposes the African Americans' desire for materialistic possessions and the loss follows. *Mama Day*, a romance, captures the war between rationality and mystic beliefs. *Bailey's Café* is a novel about diverse women and female sexuality. The women of all the four novels, the paradigms of ingenuous African American society, face tribulations in the society, in their family and for some of them,

neither the society nor the men, but their stance or psyche brings in troubles. Naylor uses Pastiche, Inter textuality, metafiction, and magical realism in her works to picture not only the dominance of racism and gender issues but also the absurdities of the individuals, and the malignity and enticement of the soul.

In postmodern literature individual works are not isolated creations and the construction of the individual, the author. Postmodernists and postmodern culture tend to be especially fascinated with styles and fashions from the past. A work is influenced by the past works and the correlation is apparent in all domains. Pastiche, taking various ideas from previous writings and literary styles and amalgamating them together to make new styles is frequently used by postmodernists. Naylor adapts certain styles from her predecessors and Dante to create a new style for her writings. Naylor's second novel *Linden Hills* (1985) is structured behind Dante's *Inferno*. *Linden Hills* is a modern version of *Inferno*, but the people are not offending God, instead, they offend themselves. The people of Linden Hills, "lured by promises and dreams of success, have achieved status and some measure of power; in the process, however, they have forfeited their hearts and souls, though they remain, like Dante's sinners, unrepentant and therefore irredeemable" (Fowler 61). While the postmodern writers use the past works completely out of their original context, Naylor, uses the same context of *Inferno*, but in a different setting to address how the dreams exterminate the inner self of African Americans. Pastiche means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements. Naylor, not only emulates Dante's *Inferno*, but also adapts epistolary style to present the life story of Luwana Packerville in *Linden Hills* previously used by Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*. Naylor is successful in using Pastiche, the combination of subjects and genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations levelheadedly.

Postmodern literature explores fragmentation in narrative style and character construction. Naylor's use of oral tradition and multiple narrators in her novels render a unique narrative style that forces a reader to travel along with the characters. "Naylor invests the spoken voice to establish a new cosmology, an underground world in which they are agents of their own destiny while other – whites and men – are marginalised" (Montgomery 6). Reliance on narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox, and the variable narrator also can be found in Naylor's works to dig out a channel to make her readers reach the realm of her characters.

Non-linear or fragmented narratives are the central features in postmodern literature. The four novels of Naylor mentioned are made of fragmented narratives. As all the novels of Naylor

share multiple protagonists, the narration is shared between multiple characters. The narration of *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Bailey's Café* are shared between several women and the prologue and epilogue by an omniscient narrator. The lives of men and women of Linden Hills are presented from the view of Willie, Lester and Willa. In *Mama Day*, the story is revealed through the conversations between Cocoa, the protagonist and her husband, George who is dead. An omniscient narrator fills the gaps and clears the doubts that arise in the minds of the readers in regard with the mythical elements blended with the unrealistic storyline.

Intertextuality, the acknowledgment of previous literary works within another literary work, the relationship between one text and another text is evidently adapted by the postmodern writers. Naylor uses Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" as an epigraph in *The Women of Brewster Place* to give an idea about the lives of African American and their dreams deferred. According to Micheal Awkward "Naylor's explorations of the consequences of deferred Afro-American women's dreams directs us intertextuality not only to Hughes' poem but also to Hurston's assertions with respect to women and dreams in the opening pages of *Their Eyes were Watching God*" (50). In the same novel, the use of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as "a thematic and structural focal point" (Montgomery 5) to make Cora Lee, one of the protagonist's narrative effective also serves as a proof for Naylor's versatility in using the texts of previous age band to represent contemporary issues. Naylor also parodies the works. Unlike Shakespeare's play there is no happy ending in the lives of Brewster Place women. Even after the end of the play the characters are not able to regain their identity and sustain the same state of affairs. Naylor maintains intertextuality among her own novels. The four novels mentioned above are inter-connected. The readers can come across either the setting or the characters of one novel in another novel.

Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Julio Cortazar, the practitioners of Magic Realism, Naylor also can be listed as a postmodernist who splendidly delineates magical realism in her work. Her third novel *Mama Day* exceptionally shifts the reader from realistic to supernatural world and vice versa. Naylor parodies Shakespeare's Miranda with the character of the same name in the novel. Fabulation is a term sometimes used interchangeably with metafiction and relates to pastiche and Magic Realism. It challenges the traditional structure of storytelling and it integrates other traditional notions of storytelling, including fantastical elements, such as magic and myth. Naylor's *Mama Day* blends the magic, myth and reality equally to present the authority of aboriginal African Americans.

The postmodern literary texts do not pretend to be new and original. They use old literary forms, genres, kinds of literature, quotation, and allusion to find a unique form to focus on their exploration into a common man's world. Fragmentation is another important aspect of postmodern literature. Various elements, concerning plot, characters, themes, imagery and factual references are fragmented and dispersed throughout the entire work.

In *Linden Hills*, Luwana Packerville, one of the protagonists, instead of fighting for her rights in real, submissively records the irrevocable losses of her life in The Bible and the pages she chooses in The Bible replicates her dismal state. In the same novel Naylor uses recipes and photographs to record the dismal tidings of Evelyn Creton Nedeed and Priscilla McGuire Nedeed respectively. In postmodern literary works the motifs like labyrinth, mask and mirror are used to visualize the chaos and paranoia prevails among the characters. In Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, mirrors are the close associates of Mary who is found with psychological impediments.

The influence of popular culture especially music such as blues, jazz, and rock that has helped to eradicate boundaries between the low and high culture, is traceable in the postmodern works. The poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's used the themes and rhythms of blues and later jazz in their poetry and the same inspired the authors of the late twentieth century. In the line Naylor also uses songs in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Jazz in *Bailey's Café*, and radio programme 'Shadow' and the songs broadcasted in it in *Bailey's Café*.

Postmodern thinkers instead of quest for any one universal truth, focus on what is held to be true within a specific community. The women of Naylor present African American's struggle in the sixties and seventies. They present a true bond between women, but the bonds are realistic and they never intend to bring in dramatic or radical transformations. They depict the lives which do not aim for high perfection or prominence but for sustenance. Naylor, instead of thrashing out supranational issues, focuses on within her community and skillfully pictures her women who are not only revolutionaries or achievers but are failures or addicts or deprived.

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