

LANGUISH OF BLACK WOMEN IN NAYLOR'S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

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Abstract

The women find themselves caught between masonry, the African tradition and a hard place, the feminist movement, their loyalties are split, and they're unable to focus on who their allegiance should be with. Feminism sought to influence popular culture by its very presence and by its persistent demands to recognize as the official voice of all women. Black feminism encompasses a comprehensive, anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-elitist perspective on social change Naylor's novel is about how the women cope, living in a men's world, and in a white world. The Women of Brewster place (1982) is a well known work that has received widespread recognition which appeased the feminist rhetoric and assured African feminist that their choice of agenda is righteous. Unearthing diverse black female voices and experiences that spanned generations, women of Brewster place depicts the black love, familial bonds, cultural aesthetic right, issues of poverty, racism, sexism and homophobia. It features the interconnected stories of seven African-American women, who live in a dilapidated housing project mired in poverty and sexual violence.

Keywords: *Feminism, poverty, violence, culture.*

Gloria Naylor (1950-2016) was an American novelist known for her sensitive nuanced portrayals of African-American women. Her success probably stems from her exploration of the African- American experiences. She stresses that African- Americans must maintain their identity in a world dominated by whites. Naylor's novels emphasize the strength of women, especially African - American women, and the effects of racism and sexism on the lives of people. Naylor's important contribution to African -American literature includes her expansion of narrative technique and privileging of the supernatural.

In the novels of Naylor, the black woman protagonist is not a Negro instead she is an individual- a human being who is in search of her identity. The character of Naylor perfectly fit in the image of a struggler and survivor. She does not create the single heroine. She gives voice to a number of female protagonists whose lives are interwoven as they all live in Brewster place. Each is the tale of one working class African- American women. Naylor's most lasting contribution to literature may well be her vivid portraits of fascinating and fantastic characters.

The Women of Brewster Place (1982), Naylor's first novel, marked her sudden and intense emergence on the American literary scene. Naylor designs her work both structurally and thematically like patchwork pieces sewn together to form the larger pattern. It portrays the plight of the exceptional aspiring woman of the century, longing to break out of her cramping role in society and compete with her male counterpart on a footing of equality. Women have been treated unequally in all societies and have thus constituted a universal underclass. She explores the predicament of helpless, subjugated women and her

approach has been an advocacy of the improvement of status of women rather than outright condemnation of a repressive male- dominated society.

The entire novel comprises of the interaction and bonding of seven women who were thrown together in close proximity to one another. Desperate acceptance is the key to Brewster place's survival. The novel depicts a predicament of the problems of urban lifestyles if one is poor and coloured. The women protagonists are not alone. They are ordinary women who survive and care for one another in times that would have devastated them. The women who were in Brewster Place are the last of its residents, "they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home" (WBP4). Naylor portrays Brewster as an undesirable place to live in. The women have only the dregs and leftovers of the greater society. The women are responsible for their lives and their fates. Theresa and Lorraine move from Linden Hills apartment to Brewster Place. They took this decision because their neighbours in Linden Hills disapproved of their relationship. Mattie Michael could have stayed forever in Miss. Eva's house. But she had made a mistake by over-coddling her son. The attitude of Mattie Michael is nurturing and motherly. It was the decision of Etta Mae to travel for thousand two hundred miles to Brewster Place. Cora Lee had an attitude of having a baby after baby. Kiswana Browne, freely chose to live in Brewster because it was in keeping with her ideals.

The stories of how the women came to live at Brewster place indicate that although their choices are limited, they do have choices. The women who live in

Brewster Place have various cultural heritages, backgrounds, past experiences, memories and skills. All these add up to make each of them able to resist in adverse situations. The women are not of a privileged class in society nor are they particularly learned or well educated. They are unable to boast their exceptional talents and extraordinary experiences.

Mattie's world is shown through her sense, her thoughts and her feelings. Her character traits are revealed through direct discourse, silences and choices and actions. She does not exist in isolation, it is a life touched by other lives which happen to be hemmed by her own. Mattie displays strength of purpose, steadiness, good upbringing and a keen sense of responsibility. She endears herself by withholding blame and not even to find fault even in those who have treated her unfairly. She is an ordinary woman who has been capable of unconditional love for son and tremendous strength of endurance.

Etta Mae launches on her tirade against Mattie at the church and loses her credibility by her lack of balanced judgement in her self-delusion. Kiswana Browne is exposed as being youthfully naïve in riding roughshod over her family's principles. It is presented through the filter of Kiswana's consciousness and the sieve of her understanding, the constant juxtaposition of her mother's stance with her own, and her mother's ability to outguess and out-talk her, undermines the reliability of Kiswana's narrative.

It is impossible to identify with Cora Lee's abnormal obsession with having babies. Lucielia, lost in her grief, Theresa, unsociable and uncaring of others' opinions, Lorraine who is eventually driven insane when she is raped. This steers the course of their stories with the omniscient narrator.

The Women of Brewster Place is more prevalent in the working class than the middle class. In the novel, a patriarchal society is the norm. Patriarchal societies may not directly sanction domestic violence, but they prevent it from happening. Women are generally the first to be exposed to the firing line. The seams which hold a patriarchal society together begin to unravel and problems begin to spiral out of control when external social forces render the men unable to play their roles as breadwinners and heads of their families. Women by sheer strength of their personalities challenge the system and stand beyond its standard norms.

The women of the African-American working class abide for being poor and for being ladies and their suffering are imposed on them because of their race. The women fulfill their roles as understanding wives and good mothers. They expect a financial and emotional support from their men. But the men ignore the expectations of women. The victory of the women in Brewster Place is undermined one, a victory that not only lies in overcoming the odds, but also in managing to endure them. "They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear" (WBP192).

References

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