

# From Margin to Center: Black Women and the Quest for Social Equity in Gloria Naylor's *the Women of Brewster Place*

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## Abstract

*The patriarchal ruling system in the American society makes life hard for blacks and even harder for black American women within their society. The rate of oppression and injustice favors a reaction from the oppressed black women who undertake to oppose submission. This article which intends through the lens of black feminist criticism and narratology to investigate black women feminists' attitudes reveals a commitment of negation of submissiveness.*

**Key Words:** Negation, submissiveness, rebelliousness boldness, solidarity.

## Resume

*La gestion patriarcale de la société américaine rend la vie difficile pour les Noirs et encore plus précaire pour la femme noire américaine. Le degré d'oppression et d'injustice favorise de la part des opprimées des actions de protection. Cet article qui ambitionne à la lumière de théories littéraires telles la critique littéraire féministe et la narratologie d'analyser la réaction des féministes noires face à l'oppression révèle leur engagement à confronter toute subjugation.*

**Mots Clés :** Négation, soumission, insoumission, estime de soi, solidarité

## Introduction

The American society according to the largest part of

literary production is ruled by a patriarchal authority. It therefore depicts women and mainly black ones under male domination. Despite the hard times that black American experience, they remain the most important references in their communities. Thus, the fiction of Naylor as a feminist is over-flooded with the cardinal actions carried by black characters in their communities. These actions in the frame of this study show an aspect of Naylor's counter-discourse that she uses to confront patriarchy.

Black American women face social injustice and fail to flourish. Despite the depth of their frustration and oppression, black women do not resign. On the contrary they confront the male-dominated system and fight in order to deserve better days in the future. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, which is the very first of Naylor's novels the narrator devotes much energy to the development of an ideal project to meet the needs of minority women who in the present case are the black American women. He colorfully depicts their daily lives obstructed by any kind of hurdle and arouses the fight for black women's promotion within the American society. These black women will first move from traditional victimization to consciousness and develop strong social values after asserting themselves because of the preponderance they hold in their communities. They need to be respected. This imperious need for respect for women finds its origins in most of traditional religions all over the world, starting from countries down in Africa to revealed religions such as Islam as Robinson explains it here:

The origin of this respect for women and their

independent roles can be found in several religions. The Egyptian Queen Mother, Hathor, Goddess of Creation, gave birth to the universe and established the traditions of her people. In Islam, Allat was the mother of Allah. In North East Africa, Mavu, the Creator-Goddess, made the earth and created humanity. (Robinson.1983: 138)

According to this study of Robinson women deserve respect because many cultures and religions firmly declare that they created humanity. Moreover, it demonstrates that women can show equal power and determination to face domination. The present contribution which purports to highlight the preponderant role of black women in the construction of a balanced American society in the light of eco-feminism will first focus on the women as the embodiment of social values through self-confidence. Then the development of a black female self-concept will be discussed and the final attention will be on The evolution of black women's mindset, move them from their female circle to the construction of a broader American community; the new American society.

### **Self-confidence as resistance**

"To assert oneself is to make other people recognize your rights or authority to do something by behaving firmly and confidently" (Wehmeier.2006: 75). Black American women undertake to express themselves and act with firmness in order to claim their place in the American society and burry down the shadow of nothingness that has for long been stuck

upon them by both black and white men. That self-confidence appears many ways in Naylor's work.

There is first the expression of pride in the race shown by some of her black characters. Seen as a race that comes last when talking about human beings, the black race is deeply scorned by the white one. This despise can find its roots in the slavery times when Blacks were taken from Africa to the new world in order to replace the native Americans who proved too weak to work on sugar canes, tobacco and cotton farms. To face that scorn some female characters exhibit pride in the black race.

That racial pride is voiced by Kiswana in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Born Melanie Browne in a wealthy family, Kiswana owns anything one can dream to possess. She even has the good reputation rich people enjoy. Despite that enviable situation, she moves from Linden Hills the rich neighborhood to the ghetto of Brewster Place in search for identity. She changes thus her name Melanie into Kiswana, an African name to remain with her African roots because she believes in an African revolution. So Kiswana who in the present context represents the black community of Brewster place asserts herself as a person of American nationality but having African origins; the African origin that white people resent so much.

There is moreover black women's assertion not only as human beings with rights but also as women. They need to do so because all along their history black women have been humiliated and ill-treated because of their black race added

to their female sex. They thus assert their value to take their place in the lives of their communities. Kiswana is the character that best epitomize that female self-assertion in *the Women of Brewster Place*. She asserts herself as a woman who needs and must be taken into account in the organization of her society. As an inhabitant of the township of Brewster Place, she undertakes to compel the dilapidated building's owner to make repairs and fix it completely; improving thus their conditions as far as their living place in Brewster place is concerned.(Christian.1990:366-367)

It appears clearly that Kiswana as a black woman asserts herself on two main levels: the race and the sex and can consequently be presented as a great example of self-assertion to be emulated. Naylor's books furthermore show the value of black women.

The assertion of women's value in *The Women of Brewster Place* is also obvious with women 's refusal to accept the traditionally imposed sexuality. Women do not practice hetero sexuality because they love it. Women deeply disapprove it. But they accept to practice it under constraints of any kind coming either from men or from their surrounding environment. The real sexual tendency of women is lesbianism and women should be free to practice it. This view is supported by Adrienne Rich in her work "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". (Rich.1997:121-122). The feeling and thought of Rich are shared by the character of Theresa in *the Women of Brewster Place*. She loves nothing but lesbianism as far as sexuality is concerned. Despite the disapproval of her whole neighborhood, she keeps on practicing. She cares nothing about scandalmongering and ill-natured gossip. Her behavior

keeps disparager hollow. Theresa shows through her sexual tendency that she assumes that she is a woman, a black woman who can do what she pleases. She also demonstrates her capacity to assert herself as a subject but no more as the sexual object anyone can play with in the black community of Brewster place.

Both Kiswana and Theresa do not have the same perception of life in their society. They nevertheless agree on one thing: the necessity for black women to assert themselves in their community.

### *Self-concept (identity affirmation) and development of racial solidarity*

Identity can briefly be defined as who or what somebody is but the assumption is to be adapted to the concept of production. The Ivorian scholar N'guessan Koffi Eugene provides of this word this simple and clear definition: "Identity is the definition of the self in relation to other people. It calls for the qualities of a person or a group which makes them different from others." (N'guessan.2011:185) Identity taken this way helps us know the main traits that make a people, the main characteristics that distinguish a people from others. The differences between people can therefore be perceived as their identity. Because Racism, classism and sex slavery have battered them down, black women need to face that power, and affirm their female identity before history. The black American woman is in the present context identified as a sister and next as a mother.

Sisterhood is the link showing interactions between black American women that allows them to take care of one another, live in harmony, and forget their daily plights, since

all of them experience the same pains and frustrations. It is an informal social institution that helps black American women, most of the time living in townships, share their experiences, hoping, and expecting better days in the future. This institution is celebrated by Barbara Christian. She explains that before the hardships of life such as oppression and domination, black women appeal to sisterhood. They rely on each other in order to remain alive and fight adversity (Christian.1990:340). In Naylor's fiction, When the young Mattie, for being pregnant of the lay about Butch Fuller, is driven out of the family's home by her angry father, she is compelled to leave and try and find a new place to live in. In Brewster Place where she arrives, she is welcomed by her lifelong friend Etta Mae Johnson. Etta provides the accommodation and almost anything that could make her feel at ease and forget about the catastrophic event, the tragedy she experienced. That attention from another woman who reveals as a "sister" soothes Mattie since she has suffered a lot with her heartbroken father.

Moreover, Brewster Place itself is described as the cradle for the implementation of sisterhood. Although Naylor chooses to deal with each round character separately, she presents them as building up a real community. Those female characters share in fact the same ideals, interests, socio-economic experiences and fate. Therefore, each one of them is deliberately or not engaged in the lives of the others and vice versa. Thus the novel starts with Mattie Michael deeply rooted in her disappointment. It then develops with the other main characters around her and ends up with all the women of Brewster Place sharing the same dream of the improvement of their socio-economic

conditions. In fact, as stated earlier, sisterhood is an informal link that attracts women, the one to the other, above all, when in need. That is why, when wandering about the city for another accommodation Mattie is once more welcomed by Miss Eva in her household. Miss Eva too is a woman and as such she thinks to know what Mattie can be in need of. She proposes to Mattie to go down the street in order to meet somebody with whom she will make love. She provides this piece of advice because Mattie is still young; demonstrating thus who the black woman is in reality.

Sisterhood in Brewster Place is furthermore taught by the way each woman cares for the others. They give the impression to share the same view point not only about their lives but also about their relations with their violent, irresponsible and furtive lovers. It is what Celeste Fraser describes about Etta Mae's failure to obtain a husband. She writes:

This relationship finds poignant expression when Mattie serves as a spiritual substitute for the husband of Etta Mae, Mattie's girlhood friend, failed to obtain. After an unsuccessful attempt to seduce a visiting minister into marriage, "Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her "in Mattie's house. (Fraser.1993:205)

Mattie becomes the husband Etta wanted but that she could not obtain. The friendship and tenderness offered by Mattie after this smarting failure help Etta swallow her

terrible despair. It sounds as decided by fate. Etta because of sisterhood takes care of Mattie who in return takes care of Etta Mae when she is depressed.

Subsequently, one sees Cora Lee, a single woman who has born six children although she has no precise financial resource. She just loves bearing children. Therefore, she obviously cannot provide their needs. Sammy, one of them even eats from garbage cans. So Kiswana assists her to help educate right her offspring. Kiswana takes the whole family to theater where they will have a different experience of life. This exploration of sisterhood in *the Women of Brewster Place* is said to be simple to grasp for Larry Andrews. She Writes: "Naylor's exploration of black sisterhood is clearest in the *Women of Brewster Place*, where she focuses almost entirely on women. In the prologue (" Dawn"), she presents the female residents of the tenement as a vibrant community". (Andrews. 1993.185).

In *the Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor focuses on the special bond that exists between women characters including their generational differences. The light is shed on that aspect by Michael Awkward in as follows: "Naylor's novel is far more tentative about celebrating the efficacy of female friendships and self-affirmation through sisterhood.(Awkward.1993.P137)" Sisterhood is depicted as a very important informal institution carrying personal and social values in the black community. It is leaned upon another concept which is motherhood, dear to black communities living in the black shanty towns which most of the time gather black women.

Facing various flaws, those women are defenseless, except their own efforts, their own self-defensive actions.

Motherhood stands thus for the actions of each woman within the whole community to 'mother' the others. Naylor's novel deals a lot with it as Ann Gottlieb writes it: "The Women of Brewster Place is a novel about motherhood, a concept embraced by Naylor's women, each of whom is a surrogate child or mother to the next. (Gottlieb.1993:5)

The women living in Brewster Place are indeed mother to each other and the case of Mattie Michael taking care of the dying Ciel testifies it. She takes care of Ciel (Andrews.1993: 287), washing and cleaning her, the way a mother does to her new born babies. This is what Michael Awkward writes about her: "Mattie Michael, the title character of the novel's section-whose maternal instincts where Ciel is concerned result from pre-Brewster days-recognizes intuitively her surrogate daughter's condition. In a heroic display of personal fortitude, Mattie forcefully intervenes." (Awkward, 1993:53)

Mattie's help for Ciel is seen as a heroic action by Awkward. In fact, this intervention soothes both the physical and moral pains suffered by Ciel. By saving the life of Ciel, Mattie becomes a hero. Mattie Michael as a female protagonist is deeply analyzed by Larry R. Andrews another author focusing on motherhood. She describes Mattie as a lady who through experiences, moved from lover to mother. She becomes a mother not only for Basil, her child but also for Ciel and the whole community of Brewster Place in her work "Black Sisterhood in Naylor's Novels". (Andrews.1993: 285)

When Mattie was in trouble, she was rescued by Miss Eva who took care of her, providing an accommodation. Then she grew up and old and in turn takes care not only of her

only son but also of the whole community of Brewster Place. Mattie mothers and saves life. At the same time, she makes us discover that though it is good to mother children, one should be careful when mothering. Motherhood in *The Women of Brewster Place* can even be analyzed following the Browne family and mainly Kiswana and her mother Mrs. Browne. Even if they do not get along about their visions of life, Kiswana is not forgotten nor abandoned by her mother. Mrs. Browne manages to find her daughter in her living place and tries to have her reconsider her position since her place is not in a ghetto but in the new building of high standards of Linden Hills.

Through their actions, Mattie Michael, Kiswana and Etta confirm the concept of motherhood in Naylor's novels. They therefore epitomize the content of the word through the actions they take before and for the sake of other black women. Moreover, Naylor's novels deal with the importance black American women grant to their families.

### ***From the female community to the community***

Before oppression and the deep denigration that has been orchestrated to blame black American women, Naylor's characterization shows the imperious need to found a new type of black American community that escapes the oppression of patriarchy. Black women have most of the time been hurt without reaction. Naylor's works show this lethargy as completely over since women discover that they can fight for their rights. Black women move thus from previous victimization to the rise of consciousness about their status as asserted by Mary Helen Washington. (Washington. 1986:195). Naylor's work, then, shows the

necessity of their full integration in the American society. They move thus from the community of women to a wider and complete community.

The first step in the formation of the community is the black women's change from their initial position of powerlessness and ever victimized persons to the rise of consciousness in order to face the oppressor, and may be, turn him down. This aim of the new black woman is voiced by Olga Kenyon dealing with the contemporary women novelists this way: "We see women moving from victimization to consciousness of their worth" (Kenyon,1991:54).

Thus, Black women abandon their traditional social position and forget about their former status of alienated women. They make a critical reflection on their situation and decide to face their destiny by gaining awareness of their real value. By behaving that way, female characters reject alienation and victimization that have ever kept them down and that they will no longer accept. It starts with the rejection of bestial obedience not only before the oppressing rules of their societies but also before the dominating presence of black men within black communities. The rise of consciousness about their real value is depicted in *the Women of Brewster Place*. Fannie Michael is an obedient housewife living with her family made of her Sam Michael her husband and chief of the household and Mattie Michael their daughter. Her daughter Mattie Michael is violently beaten by her heart-broken father, for being pregnant of the 'good for nothing' Butch Fuller. Before the violent blows, Fannie decides to abandon fear and obedience to settle the situation. She takes the shot gun of her husband and threatens to shoot him down if he does not stop

beating Mattie. This deplorable situation makes her realize her real value in the household as well as in her community. It creates a new environment and favors the formation of a new black community in which the black women are no more seen as useless persons.

The formation of the new community through the rejection of black women's victimization is also observed when some women substitute for men and act accordingly melting the former female community into a real black American community. It is illustrated in *the Women of Brewster Place*. Etta Mae Johnson is a black American woman who behaves like a man. She is like the other women a dweller of the rat-infested Brewster Place but from time to time, she leaves that place for another one and then comes back. Etta woes men like men usually do to women when they are in love with them. Thus, she calls on her friend Mattie. On a religious office, she comes across Reverend Woods, a widower she deeply falls in love with. Instead of waiting for him to take the first steps as other women will, she manages to be introduced to him and immediately endeavors to spend the night with in a hotel (Roberts.1993: 268). By initiating and conducting successfully a love affair like this, she inverts the traditional beliefs and social constructions which favors men in each point and which is consequently unfair to women. Etta leads women in the center of the black American community. She also raises black women's consciousness about their potentialities in the construction of the new community.

Another important point to be focused on is black American women's integration in their communities as well as in the American society. Literally speaking, integration is

"the act or process of combining two or more things so that they can work together" (Wehmeier. 2006:776). Integration allows linking and even mixing different things into one. Integration in the present context however is perceived as "The act or process of mixing people who have previously been separated because of color, race, religion etc.". (Wehmeier. 2006:776)

In fact, black American women have ever been categorized and therefore systematically marginalized. They have been looked upon down as second-class citizens because of the two main non-objective reasons-race and sex- that make of them the very last of their communities and even the bottom of the American society. They are from black race originally and they are above all women. Before such an injustice, the need to take action that could bring back fairness seems to be of the highest importance. Integration as a way of building a whole community which is composed of all its members is basic for black women. It can be obtained two main ways. First the dominating power recognizes its excesses and decides therefore to reduce injustice by accepting the people that has for long been oppressed. Next, before marginalization that prevents some people to take advantage of their community or society, the oppressed people can stand up and demand a new classification of the society. The second option is the one of the black women since the male dominated power does not intend to hand it.

Integration is thus obvious in Gloria Naylor's writing mainly with the character of Kiswana in *the Women of Brewster Place*. She left Linden Hills for Brewster Place, a new district she does not know since she lives elsewhere. So the community living in Brewster Place is new to her. Despite

this fact, she manages to penetrate that community of people who have their principles and beliefs about her. She endeavors to be integrated. This is her integration in the community, the materially poverty-stricken black community of Brewster Place. Next, before the classist, racist and mostly sexist attitudes of the dominating power and its uncompromising tendency, she undertakes to force them to bow, mainly about women's living conditions. Doing so, Kiswana forces integration in the white or rich society. She demands for her people worthy living conditions. She longs for pleasant flats that make the dominating people conceive and implement their unfair action on poor black people.

Therefore, integration could contribute to help black American women live a better life because they will be mixed up with the irresponsible men of their communities, teach them right and certainly enjoy better experience and opportunities in life. Olga Kenyon puts it bluntly in the following sentence: "They take their women from virtual exclusion to integration." (Kenyon.1991:73) Integration is so important to Naylor that she really takes her black American women characters from real exclusion to a real social integration which can be noticed with the case of Mattie Michael in *the Women of Brewster Place*. After being excluded by her own father for being pregnant, she becomes an important person for her community, a kind of cornerstone in Brewster Place (Awkward.1993:53) where she is depicted as a surrogate mother for the community. As it can be noticed, Naylor's female characters intend to take a better place in the society in case they fail to take a complete control of it. Since men are confidence unworthy and furtive, women must be in control. To assert their value,

women also undertake to confront men, the power of whom is supposed to have destroyed their life through racism and sexism and send them to the worst social position., Ann Allen Shockley discusses it. For her, women appeal to power in order to fight male's sexist limitations. She writes :"It is the black woman's reaction to encounter with power that forms the narrow of the feminist literary tradition. Women's response to racism and sexism of both black and white male, and struggle for self-identity and typify the depth." (Shockley,1988: XXV)

### Conclusion

The move of the black American women from periphery to the center is carried out through steps. Naylor's characters demonstrate the necessity for black women to assert themselves not only as black people but also as worthy female entities. In fact, conscious of their value as essential persons to their communities, black women prove their ability to assert themselves before the marginalization they are victims of. They then affirm the value of their identity since they know from then on, who they really are. Black American women, furthermore, develop strong values such as solidarity. Solidarity means that black American women support one another because of feelings, opinions and aims they share. They moreover develop female relationships the more obvious of which are motherhood and sisterhood. Both relationships present women as fundamental elements of the black communities since they lead women to take care of other women not only as their sisters but also as their daughters and vice versa. This study also sheds light on

Black women's preponderance in their communities. It finally presents the formation of a new community as a very important and necessary action in favor of the black women who feel at last integrated no more in their feminine communities but in a real community with men and their children.

As a whole, this analysis shows mainly the move of the black women from their communities of women to a more globalizing one, implying men and children. It asserts their rights and dignity in the American society seen as a whole. Black female characters as depicted in Gloria Naylor's fiction aim at improving the environment surrounding the black American women through the development of leadership, a feminine and sexist leadership serving not only Black women, but all of humanity. Doing so Naylor walks in the steps of the great abolitionist Sojourner Truth who downgrades men importance declaring what follows extracted from *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*: "And how came Jesus in the world? Through God who created him and a woman who bore him. Man where is your part?" (Gates and all. 1997:198) For these black women and Truth particularly, man is less valuable than women. Man is even seen as useless and her argument goes far in the metaphysics.

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