



The Double Burden of Race and Gender in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract: *The Women of Brewster Place*, by Gloria Naylor, creates a strong image of black women in an unwelcoming American society who have to bear the double burden of racism and sex. This paper examines the lives of Naylor's female characters and how they suffer and survive in a society of racism, patriarchy and poverty. In the background, there is a symbol of social neglect and exclusion representing the poor urban neighbourhood where they live, which is shown as Brewster Place. It is a manifestation of the restriction of black women's bodies, dreams, and movements in a racially unjust and male-dominated society. The paper explores the physical violence, emotional pain, economic deprivation, and social marginalization of various women in the novel through simple close reading and a few basic concepts of black feminism and intersectionality. It also examines how they develop friendship, tell one another stories and construct a sense of community that helps them to beat back and survive this dual oppression. The novel's composite nature, of several stories that are tied together, enables Naylor to show more than one black woman and her modes. The paper argues that Naylor not only exposes the pain of Black women but also celebrates their strength, self-respect, and solidarity. Through this, *The Women of Brewster Place* is a significant focus for insights into the intersection of race and gender as it pertains to the lives of Black women, and the power of community as a silent resistance.

Key:words Black women, race, gender, double burden, Black feminism, intersectionality

The Women of Brewster Place is an important novel in the African American tradition because it depicts the harrowing lives of black women in an environment that is racist and sexist. The novel is not about the suffering of one woman but the suffering of several women and how their suffering is linked to the larger world of forces. Naylor clearly explains that Black women are oppressed in a double way; they suffer from oppression as Black people and they suffer from oppression as women. That is why the novel is a very effective source for examining race and gender. As one critic notes, the Black women in Naylor's fiction "suffered from racism and became the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands of the whites as well as the blacks," which clearly shows that they are attacked from more than one side at the same time (The Criterion, 2010).

The place of the novel is of crucial importance to the meaning of the novel. Brewster Place is more than a street and a neighbourhood; it is a symbol of the lack of care, isolation and restriction. The women who inhabit it are marginalized; the state of the place mirrors the fractured nature of their lives in terms of their freedom, equality, and dignity. The wall at the end of Brewster Place is significant because it symbolizes barriers that these women encounter daily. Social systems prevent them from living freely and fully, having their dreams and hopes come to pass. Thus, the site becomes an effective symbol of racial and gender oppression.

The double burden is a key concept in the novel. The women of Brewster Place suffer in one simple way is black. They experience pain at the intersection of race and gender, and at times class and sexuality can also intensify their suffering. The experience of a Black woman is not the same as a white woman due to the impact of race on her position in society, and the experience of a Black man is not the same as a Black woman because of the effect of gender on his position in the family and in society. This is evident in the lives of women who are poor,



abandoned, insulted, attacked and unsupported, as shown by Naylor. We know their suffering is not a coincidence, it is part of a system that places Black women at the bottom of society.

One of the most memorable characters in the novel is Mattie Michael and Mattie's Naylor who demonstrates pain and strength. The burden is on Mattie, as from the start her life becomes hard, with the anger of her father as she becomes pregnant, while the man responsible is not burdened. It is evident that there is a lack of equality when it comes to women, particularly Black women, and what is measured against their bodies and their choices. Years later Mattie suffers poverty, instability and disappointment in her marriage. She doesn't turn selfish and bitter, but rather she turns to be a source of care and support for others in Brewster Place. Her character shows how in the world of Black women, it takes a lot of hardship to be carried quietly and also to carry the burden of people's emotional needs.

This is another aspect of Black womanhood that is told in Etta Mae Johnson's story. Despite her need for love, comfort, and acceptance, Etta's life is one of movement, instability, and disappointment. Society forms a quick opinion of women like Etta, particularly one who does not conform to the model of the good woman. Being a black woman is on her own a bad social place to be in, and being a woman who looks for love and safety in marriage makes her easy to condemn and ignore. Naylor employs the character of Etta to illustrate the absence of understanding and kindness towards Black women. Her life demonstrates that when the world provides little refuge for women such as her, emotional longing can be a cause of pain.

Kiswana Browne is another important character in the novel. She is young, educated and politically engaged, and she wants to feel very much like one of the black people and the black struggle. Naylor raises issues of class and self-definition and social responsibility in Kiswana. Kiswana does not try to fit into the mould of some of the other women, but she is out to confront social injustice and she wants to organize the people around her. But even her story illustrates that it is no easy task to be a Black woman, as she must face racism not just from society, but from expectations of women. Her feud with her mother also illustrates two generations of black women who react to oppression in different ways. Kiswana demonstrates that resistance can manifest itself in political consciousness and action.

Another sad truth is revealed through Cora Lee's character. She is the mother of many children, yet she is caught up in poverty, social condemnation, and lack of support. Poor black women are not afforded a stable family life as society expects them to be perfect mothers. Cora Lee's life illustrates the burden of motherhood when there is no income, no security and no real assistance from institutions. Her character further challenges the notion of individual female responsibility for social issues that are indeed the result of greater social inequalities. Naylor does not depict her in a mocking or cruel light, but she does cause the reader to understand the pressure these women are under.

Lorraine and Theresa's stories are significant, in particular because they provide more than one aspect to the novel's topic of oppression. They are a lesbian couple, different from the norms accepted by the other people. This is because they are not just black and female, but a victim of homophobia. It is particularly terrible violence to which Lorraine is subjected, but it is also very social violence. It is born out of hatred, fear and the urge to punish a woman who does not conform to certain roles. Her attack is one of the moments most painful for the novel because it gives one a glimpse of how racism, sexism, poverty and hatred toward the same sex can intersect within a black woman's body. Naylor shows the brutality of a society that will not protect or provide justice for Black women in this moment.

Violence is not confined to the novel to direct physical attack. A lot of the women experience emotional violence, neglect, rejection and loneliness. Some are left by their husband, some are stuck in an unloving relationship, and some have wounds of humiliation and disappointment. Emotional pain can be just as debilitating as physical pain, says Naylor, as it slowly eats away at self-worth and hope. It is significant in terms of the double burden of race



and gender, because oppression can manifest in so many ways and ways it is not just in the legal codes or in the face of oppression. The lack of acknowledgement, unwantedness, and less value are placed on the women causing them to live with a feeling of an inside-out world and it becomes their reality.

The novel also explores the theme of motherhood, which is presented in a realistic and non-preachy manner. The women, much less backed by their partners, often end up taking care of the children, the house, and the emotional aspects of the relationship. Expecting black women to be strong, patient, and sacrificing only makes things harder for them. Motherhood does not have a fixed and firm definition in the novel, as it can be associated with fear, poverty and fatigue. Many of the women, though, receive emotional support and a drive to live through motherhood. Naylor's mastery is as much in demonstrating the two simultaneously, care as love and care as labour.

The novel is characterized in many visible and invisible ways by the male power and patriarchy. Some men are not present or responsible, others are controlling, self-centred, violent. Naylor doesn't set this up to fault on any man, she makes it clear that it's a system where women learn to take pain and men learn to abuse power in a system that is patriarchal society. Nevertheless, this system is most harmful to women. Their situation is especially challenging because racism is part of the larger social structure, and racism, coupled with a masculine social attitude, is met with sexism for black women. The novel thus calls the reader to recognize that there must be both gender justice and race justice.

The novel is not just a story about suffering, however. Its most beautiful and meaningful thing is the friendship and solidarity of the woman. They converse, they console, they comfort, they nurse each other, in many ways they comprise a small support system within a hostile environment. Through no fault of their own, they do not always agree and their life is quite different from theirs, but they suffer the same kind of pain and share the same need for human contact. This is a secret resistance; a life together. When society does not protect them, they start to protect themselves as they can. In this way, Naylor argues that community can be a potent response to oppression.

The sharing of this sense of solidarity is particularly poignant after Lorraine's suffering. The women are united in their anger and grief. They are emotional descendants, which is to say, they are united by their common plight, and those who recognize it make it public resistance. Although they may not be able to eradicate the whole social structure that exists around them, they can refuse to be silent and isolated. One of the most powerful concepts in the novel is that of oppressed people who do not necessarily win in the moment, but can still win by building a sense of dignity in community through feeling and memory.

Naylor's storytelling technique also supports the theme in the novel. *The Women of Brewster Place* consists of several interwoven stories, and this is a form that works well since lots of voices are heard. The novel is not about one main heroine, but rather all experiences of being a black woman and the impossibility of one woman embodying them all. This structure provides the novel with breadth and complexity, and maintains emotional unity. It also speaks of the concept of community, as the women are different people with different lives, but they share space, suffering and struggle. The novel takes the form of its message.

The second noteworthy characteristic of the novel is its human flavour. Naylor is sympathetic, clear and honest in his writing. She is not just a social example of her characters; she is a human being with dreams, memories, fear, anger and tenderness. Due to this, readers are not just confronted with oppression as an idea but feel it in the lives of the characters. That is why this novel is still so strong for readers today. It invites one to reflect on the injustice in our society, but also on the price of that injustice in the lives of everyday people.

Another way of looking at strength is challenged by the novel. Typically, strength is represented as loud, visible and heroic, but in Naylor's piece, strength can be softer. It is observed in endurance, in care, when not giving up entirely, and when one continues to live despite repeated hurt. The black women in the novel are not portrayed as



perfect or invulnerable, but they are portrayed as extremely strong. Often the resistance is personal, emotional and communal, not formal political.

To sum up, *The Women of Brewster Place* is a powerful representation of the double burden of race and gender. It demonstrates that black women are subject to several systems that cause them to suffer, such as, racism, patriarchy, poverty and social neglect. Gloria Naylor shows the readers many examples of Black women's heartfelt suffering in Mattie, Etta, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Lorraine, and Theresa, but she also shows us their courage, compassion, and endurance. The novel has no easy answers, but it does contain a valuable lesson, where, Womankind can create relationships of caring and meaning even in the broken places. While they are united, they have the power to survive and to claim their humanity, but their unity does not obliterate oppression. The novel is, in part, a novel of suffering, but also a novel of strength and dignity, and the quest for a fuller life.

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