

Crossing Boundaries: Black Women's Diaspora in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

عبور الحدود: شتات النساء السود في غلوريا ناييلور

نساء مكان بروستر

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Abstract

The present study aims at examining the black women's diaspora in framing the black woman's identity in Naylor's Novel *The Women of Brewster Place* in terms of the Radicalesbians' manifestation of The Woman-Identified Woman. It is an attempt of revealing the black woman's identity away from the patriarchal society. Stepping across a very forbidden taboo,

Naylor frames the black woman's identity in a very exclusive manner away from the conventional one. She presents a totally different vista of living by which a black woman can experience her freedom and true feelings towards another black woman on the basis of mutual love. Theresa and Lorraine explore their personalities through mutual love as a means of establishing and redefining the personality and identity of a black woman.

keywords: Gloria Naylor; *The Women of Brewster Place*, Woman-Identified Woman, Afro-American Identity,

المستخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى فحص ثنات النساء السود في تأطير هوية المرأة السوداء في رواية Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* من حيث تجليات الراديكاليين للمرأة التي تحدد المرأة. إنها محاولة للكشف عن هوية المرأة السوداء بعيداً عن المجتمع الأبوي. يتخطى ناييلور أحد المحرمات المحظورة للغاية ، ويؤطر هوية المرأة السوداء بطريقة حصرية للغاية بعيداً عن الهوية التقليدية. إنها تقدم مشهداً مختلفاً تماماً للعيش يمكن للمرأة السوداء من خلاله تجربة حريتها ومشاعرها الحقيقية تجاه امرأة سوداء أخرى على أساس الحب المتبادل. تستكشف تيريزا ولورين شخصياتهما من خلال الحب المتبادل كوسيلة لتأسيس وإعادة تعريف شخصية وهوية المرأة السوداء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: غلوريا ناييلور نساء مكان بروستر ، امرأة محددة الهوية ، هوية أمريكية أفريقية.

Introduction

The Women of Brewster Place is the winner of the Pulitzer American Book Award for first fiction for the year 1983. This novel sheds light on different aspects of Black woman's character, hopes, love, friendship, and woman-identified-women. In *Women of Brewster Place*, such issues have been tackled especially black lesbianism which is depicted as being necessarily biologically determined. Such a literary work has attempted an honest and overt reflection of black lesbianism and its implications. In

addition to the central Black lesbian couple, the novel portrays strong black women characters caught in an exploitative heterosexual relationship.

Naylor tries to go beyond boundaries and create, via her characters, her world of black identity, love, and woman-identifies away from the black and white patriarchy. The invisibility of this unique black woman as a social entity and as a literary subject may be attributed to several causes. First, the presumption on the part of the white feminists that the woman's experience, as opposed to the man, was the one represented by the white woman's experience. Their apparent blindness toward any womanhood that was not white womanhood led them to ignore the richness and uniqueness of Black women's lives and experiences. Secondly, white woman writers did not know enough about the Black lesbian to be able to write about them. As a result, there were so many books written by and about white lesbians, whereas the black lesbian was neither being talked about nor written about. Since the White woman writer can't write about the Black woman, it left only the Black female writers to deal with and portray the image of the Black lesbian.

Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* has been the focus of many studies by many researchers due to the various issues that can be traced within such a novel. Laura Nicosia in her "Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*: Evolution of a Short Story Cycle" (2007) represents a further development of the genre where "linear plotting is much more pronounced in almost all of the works ... and the individual, if not individualized, protagonists more frequent." (13) While the stories may not have a strict cause-effect linearity, a foundational temporality regarding the block's

“birth” and “death” does frame the text. Time may not be strictly linear in Brewster Place, but it certainly exhibits forward-moving thrust. Brewster Place’s use of several individual and individualized protagonists represents yet another evolution of the genre from its earliest literary traditions.

“The Woman-Identified Women” is a ten-paragraph manifestation, presented by the Radicalesbians during their protest in New York City in 1970. It is one of the major documents of the lesbian feminist movement presented by Rita Mae Brown, Lewis Hart, and Ellen Chomsky who calls for woman's identification and liberation. They argue that lesbians are at the forefront of the fight for women's liberation because their identity with other women challenges traditional definitions of women's identity in terms of male sexual partners. The manifesto defines that the priority of women in relation to women, to women who create a new awareness of each other and with each other.

Pooja Kukreja (2014) in "Female-centered' Diversity: Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place" attempts to read Gloria Naylor's novel as an expression of the heterogeneity of the black women's experiences. The novel anticipates the focus on the diversity of women's lives and the women of color, that were to become the defining features of third-wave feminism.

Deepa K. in "*The Portrayal of Women Characters in the Women Of Brewster Place*" (2013) addresses the growth of the African American Literature. Deepa tackles the character of a young revolutionist Kiswana Browne who does her best to place a change in her community. Her mother helps her get a fine job to improve the lives of her people. Deepa portrays different African black women. Ciel , Lorraine, Theresa and Etta are all presented to search for a better life for self-fulfillment.

N. Keerthanadevi in her "Significant Projection of women in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*" expresses that Naylor has reliably delineated through her vision of the world in which individuals stand up to insidious and existence of fantasy and misery. She is properly perceived for standing up to the privileges of ladies and other social issues. Naylor sensibly depicts the shifted lives of African Americans, especially her minority and a lady in a Caucasian, male-dominated society. *The Women of Brewster Place* depicts the predicament of the extraordinary trying lady of the century, yearning to break out the cramping part in the public eye and content with her male partner. The characters of Naylor consummately fit in the picture of a struggler and survivor.

Nasser Maleki and Lalbakhsh in their article "Black Woman, Indoctrination of The Male, And Subversion of the Patriarchy in Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*" (2012) dealt with the marginalized personalities as a result of sexual persecution and their relentless quest to create their own identities away from harsh males.

Black Women's Diaspora in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*.

The literary silence surrounding the black woman literature aggravated by the non-availability of an accompanying black feminist movement led to an abundance of stereotypical caricatures. They were labeled as "too ugly to get a man", "women who have been disappointed in love and turn to women", "man haters" and "man-women physically" (Shockley 85). Blacks

made very few attempts at understanding and educating themselves regarding women who were black. This total lack of understanding further fuelled the fire of hatred and homophobia in the black community. Ann Allen Shockley in her influential article "The Black lesbian in American Literature: An Overview" sums it up to say that "just as whites were because they did not know them, so Blacks have entrenched biases against lesbians for a similar reason" (1983, 84).

No efforts have been made by individuals who could relate to a black woman's identity, to counter their stereotypical myths with the truth. According to Shockley, the ideology of the black movement of the sixties promoted the image of the Black male to which, naturally, the independent women-identified-women the black women poses a serious threat. These fallacies, myths, and phobia, and the threat of being labeled as a lesbian prevented many African American women writers from taking up a lesbian subject in their work. "Heterosexual Privilege", writes Barbara Smith (1983), "is usually the only privilege that Black Women have" (182). According to her, none of them have social or sexual privilege and most of them don't have a glass sphere which allowed so few Black women to renounce their sole privilege of heterosexuality. This takes up a different position regarding the origin of homosexuality. The question of the genesis of homosexuality has surfaced again and again in this century. It registers in the nature debate between the essentialist and the social constructionist position. The essentialists believe that one is born a lesbian or comes to realize her predominant same-sex urges early on in her life. Havelock Ellis' theory of the "congenital invert" shares commonalities with the, more recent, essentialist view. Both suggest that homosexuality is innate or inborn in nature and nothing can change a born lesbian into a heterosexual.

Essentialists hold that homosexuality is 'natural' to those who are born homosexuals just as heterosexuality is the natural sexual expression of heterosexuals. The social constructionists, on the other hand, believe that certain social conditions were necessary before the lesbian could emerge as a social entity. According to them homosexuality or lesbianism is not an inborn phenomenon but a result of social or circumstantial causes. Lillian Faderman documents that while the lesbian feminists do not deny the existence of primary lesbians, they encourage women to become elective or existentialist lesbians by consciously choosing lesbianism over heterosexuality.

The Women of Brewster Place suggests that lesbianism is an innate or inborn phenomenon. Naylor's novel takes up the essentialists' point of view regarding the origin of lesbianism. Both Lorraine and Theresa are born lesbians who become aware of their predominant same-sex urges very early on in their life. Lorraine is shown to be acutely aware of her homosexuality even during adolescence. She has an affair with another girl with whom she frequently exchanges love letters. Her candid disclosure of her sexual proclivities to her father reveals that by the age of seventeen she had already begun developing a strong lesbian sensibility.

Unlike Lorraine, Theresa takes time to identify with her same-sex leanings. Despite being aware of her unique sexuality she gets involved in a series of heterosexual relationships. She tells Lorraine "you've never with a man, but I've been with quite a few some better than others" (138). However, this period of bisexual experimentation is short-lived and she comes to realize that her sexuality is an overwhelming aspect of her personality and in denying it she would be, in fact, denying an integral part of her identity. She states this in her conversation with Theresa as she says:

"you can take a chocolate chip cookie and put holes in it and attach it to your ears and call it an earring or hang it around your neck on a silver chain and pretend it's a necklace- but it's still a cookie. A chocolate chip cookie," Lorraine said. "Uh-un." Theresa put the cookie in "her mouth and winked. "A lesbian." (BP 138)

The cookie becomes apt, though unlikely, a metaphor for a lesbian who, however, she may deny or pretend otherwise, can't ignore her true sexual orientation. The law of nature, like the law of gravity, has got to come into play sooner or later. For Theresa, as for Lorraine, such a love orientation refers to their instinctive identity. So this leads to say that Theresa and Lorraine, are primary lesbians. Dennis Altman observes that in spite of the inborn nature of sexual drives, there is at least sometimes an element of deliberate choice in the adoption of homosexuality. The choice lies in the decision to come out and thereby reject the conventional sexual role prescribed by society. Theresa and Lorraine may be "born" lesbians but they consciously opt to come out and make a life together and therein lies their choice. Such a love relationship between Theresa and Lorraine is dictated by the law of nature.

The Women of Brewster Place is the manifestation of the collective voice of the colored daughter of Brewster Place. It depicts a community of Black women:

Brewster place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place they came, they went, grew up old beyond their years. Like an

ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story. (BP 5).

Walled off from the rest of the world, this congregation of colored daughters endeavors to forge sisterly solidarity based on their similar situation and shared experience. The most remarkable thing in this novel that readers could notice is that the success of female friendship and Black sisterhood remains limited and potential in this novel. Naylor's novel ends Mattie's grief-inspired dream of yet unrealized Black sisterhood. Their failure at achieving sisterly solidarity is concretized in their rejection of their lesbian sisters which ultimately results in Lorraine's brutal victimization.

This novel portrays what is called female-identified as the entrance to real love, solidarity, and a manifestation of mature understanding among women. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the community homophobic rejection of Lorraine leads to her sexual violation. She is mercilessly gang-raped and rendered insane, a direct consequence of her being cut off from the protective female nexus. The final scene depicts the unified effort of women to tear down the blood-stained wall, thereby purging their guilty souls which had sinned against Lorraine's spirit. Naylor presents a realistic conceptualization of lesbianism. Her authentic depiction of the meanings and repercussions of assuming a lesbian identity lends credibility to the characters of Theresa and Lorraine.

Homophobia, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, is depicted as the scare label by society to act as a divisive force among women. It separates the lesbians from their straight sisters, keeping them from forming any primary attachment among themselves. The novel reveals the extent to which the myths and fallacies surrounding the image of a lesbian poison the mind of the society leading it to condemn and persecute a whole minority. Naylor

shows how the male culture conditioning and compulsory heterosexuality leads women to oppress their sisters much as they themselves have been oppressed by men.

Further, the relationship between Theresa and Lorraine involves more than merely sexual attraction. They are painfully aware of their stigmatized identity. They seek each other out to find answers to their tangled lives. Disowned by society, alienated by their straight sisters, they strive together to create a life in the face of rampant homophobia. They extend personal and political support to each other in disengaging themselves from male-defined, socio-sexual roles and creating a women-defined identity. As lovers, allies and friends, they embody the ultimate commitment of women to women. The Women of Brewster Place seem unable to approach even the idea of sexual love between women, partly, because so many of them have been involved in a close relationship with women at some point in their lives. Mattie puts the community's fear into the following words:

Mattie was thinking deeply, "well I've loved women too. There was Miss Eva and Celie and... I've loved you practically all my life." Mattie said, "maybe that's why some women get so riled up about its cause they know deep down it's not so different after all." (*BP* 141).

This is the point that Naylor seems to be making which is not so different after all. In fact, it signifies one more way for a woman to love a woman. It marks the sublimation of love, the rich inner life, and the romantic friendship between women which can be traced back hundreds of years. Lorraine and Theresa are indeed born in that way. But as the lesbian feminists argue, actually all women are born 'that way', which is to say, all women have the capacity to become lesbian, it is not so different at all.

The women of Brewster Place remodifies the female sexuality and her identity via looking at it from a lesbian perspective. This re-conceptualized female identity via a woman's sexuality is neither straddled with procreation nor limited to compulsory heterosexuality. Transmuting its female identification it extends into vistas of creativity and spirituality, signifying female sexuality for its own sake. Debunking the earliest male-defined model of female sexuality provides a female-defined model. Michele D. Dominy (1986) elaborates on the importance of re-conceptualizing female sexuality from an essentially female point of view as he says:

I think sex is the key. And when I say sex I mean it in every sense of linking/ harmonizing one woman with another... I think women respond sexually in all ways, genitally, sexually, emotionally, psychically, intellectually, spiritually in way we have no words for and which many of us have not yet recognized, remembered or discovered in ourselves. To me, sex ... means identifying with life, with the circle, the cycle, with being female. To me, that is pure authentic lesbianism. (281-82).

The lesbians, Theresa and Lorraine, signify autonomous sexuality which explains why C.C Baker with his phallus-centered identity feels threatened by their presence. In contrast to female sexuality which seeks to connect and communicate, male sexuality is shown to be imbued with images of control and domination. In this novel what is called rape is negatively described as a symbol of continuous victimization of women by men.

In Gloria Naylor's novel, Theresa's aggressive independence and Lorraine's passive dependence seem uncomfortably close to the sex roles on which heterosexual relationships are built. In spite of their homosexual relationship, they appear to have evolved into a functioning couple of dichotomous individuals, one dominating the other. It should be noted that

they do not bear any resemblance to the Butch/femme behavioral pattern found in the lesbian subcultures during the 1950s and 60s. Their behavioral differences seem to stem from their natural, temperamental differences as two distinct individuals. Moreover "there is a big difference between being personnel direction for the board of education and a first-grade teacher" (BP 142).

Theresa's tendencies to dominate becomes apparent when Lorraine retaliates, "you and I don't talk Tee. You talk – Lorraine listens. You lecture – Lorraine takes notes about how to dress and act and have fun. If I don't see a thing your way, then you shout – Lorraine cries" (BP 164). Theresa is unable to cope with Lorraine's burgeoning sense of independence, which is the result of her relationship with Ben. Theresa feels threatened because "Lorraine wasn't deferring to her anymore. And she wasn't apologizing for seeing things differently" (BP 154). This novel seems to serve and undermine the myth and stereotypical caricatures associated with the 'lesbian' in media and popular action. As Ann Allen Shockley points out:

The stereotypical fallacies surrounding Black lesbians under the the guise of "facts" are ludicrous. Black lesbians are labelled "too ugly to get a man"; "women who have been disappointed in love and turn to woman"; "man haters"; and "man woman" physically. (BP 85)

This myth fogs up the image of a lesbian obscuring her true identity as a normal person. This novel documents the truth over myth via its authentic image of lesbian women. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Lorraine and Theresa are "women whose primary emotional, intellectual and erotic relationships" are with each other (Aptheker 87). They love women because of women and not as a negative reaction.

Lorraine's friendship with Ben and Theresa's series of heterosexual involvements also undermine the fallacy that lesbians are man-haters. Lesbians are women who try to discover their true selves and inner self-realization and refuse to submit to male dominance. In fact, C. C. Baker's and his gang's merciless rape of Lorraine reveals that a woman's desire for independence and autonomy doesn't translate into hatred. The *Women of Brewster Place* reveals that the label "man-haters" actually rises from deep-seated hatred for such kinds of women who deviate themselves from their sisters who followed the traditional ways of their society.

The manifestation of Radicalesbians (1970) declared that lesbians challenge the traditional definitions of women's identity in relation to male sexual partners. Furthermore, the primacy of women's definition with respect to other women, is for women who create a new awareness of each other. *The Women of Brewster Place* delineates the toll that homophobia takes on a lesbian on a day-to-day basis. The anti-homosexual propaganda and the stigmatized image of lesbians feed antipathies towards them. The lack of comprehension regarding the true meaning of a lesbian identity only serves to add to the misinformation about them. All these factors aggravate the homophobic attitude of society. The paralyzing fear of disclosure and the inevitable persecution make the lesbian silent regarding her unique identity. In Gloria Naylor's novel, Lorraine's expulsion from her home, and later, her job teaches her to fear visibility and adopt a massive silence as far as her homosexuality is concerned. Aware that an integral part of their life must be camouflaged at all times, "the two" are forced into leading a dual existence. This split between the public and the private self is a continuing weight that a lesbian is made to endure throughout her life. Theresa copes with this burden more easily because she seems to have accepted the inevitability of

her situation. She takes up a bold stance by proclaiming her unique social and sexual identity, even flaunting it, in the face of society. Lorraine, on the other hand, finds herself wedged between the gay and the straight world. Oscillating between the two, she can neither relate to her so-called "difference" nor be accepted by society. Her inability to come to a sense of self becomes her vulnerability, and her silence leads to her tragic end. Her silence, born out of her fear of visibility, proves to be futile armor, for she is not spared by the hostile world. As Gloria T. Hull quotes Audre Lorde :

Your silence

Will not

Protect you..

Our speaking is stopped

because we fear the visibility

without which we can not really live..

Whether we speak or not,

The machine will crush us into bits
and we will also be afraid". (Ivii)

While Lorraine's silence and fear lead to her tragic end, Theresa survives on her self – understanding coupled with her capacity to face society. "she wanted someone who could stand to with her and be willing to slurp it out at times. If they practiced that could turn back and beat the hell out of the world for trying to invade their territory" (BP 136). This seems the only way a lesbian can live truthfully in this world, without being afraid.

The prevalent notion regarding homosexuality is "deviant" and therefore "unnatural". This assumption serves to rationalize the homophobic attitude of society towards homosexuals. Naylor, in this lesbian novel,

suggests that deviance lies in the eyes of the beholder. An analysis of the heterosexual relationship in this novel brings out an intensity of violent, physical, and sexual abuse that Black women have suffered from. It is not homosexuality that is deviant but as David F. Greenberg puts it when he says that "it is beliefs that homosexuality is evil, sick, or Undesirable – and the corresponding efforts to punish, Cure, or prevent it – that makes homosexuality deviant". (1988, 2) Also, in his radical re-reading of Freud's view regarding homosexuality, Jeffrey Weeks points out that Freud believed in the constitutional bisexuality of all human beings. Starting with a notion of the original undifferentiated nature of the libido, Freud argues that homosexuality is the peculiarity of object and choice and not a perverse instinct. Taken within the context of Freudian belief in the polymorphous perversity in the infant, both homosexuality and heterosexuality may be understood as two ways of channeling the infant's bisexual potential. The cultural predisposition to view heterosexuality as the only form of sexuality or the natural outcome of human sexual development has assigned centrality to heterosexuality thereby marginalizing and negating homosexual behavior. Moreover, the need for procreation not only justifies heterosexuality but also renders it more desirable than the alternative. It is the compulsion of heterosexuality that gives birth to homosexuality. And the rigid heterosexual roles dictated by society give rise to a homosexual identity. Until the sexually repressive culture acknowledges the essential bisexuality of human beings and accepts homosexuality as a form of normal human sexual expression, it will continue to prevent whole categories of people from being fulfilled and happy. This novel presents this need for such transformation via which Black women will be able to live and practice their sexual needs away from the societal constraints.

Conclusion

The Women of Brewster Place tackles a very meticulous issue of Black women's affairs as an alternative to what they dislike to acclimatize with. It shows the black woman's urgent need to join in order to heal. This novel highlights a critical stance towards the politics of heterosexual relationships as prevailed in the social communities. Its main interest was to concentrate on the black woman's attempts to create her own world away from the common traditional laws crossing all social boundaries and breaking all that is socially forbidden. Naylor, through Theresa and Lorraine, explores the concept of woman-identified and reciprocal love as a means of establishing and redefining the black woman's character and identity. She envisages them in relation to the straight world and, by making the invisible visible, she brings Black lesbian women within the representation framework and celebrates them as a valid social-sexual identity.

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