

## **The Self in Society: Exploring Cultural Embeddedness in Gloria Naylor's Fiction**

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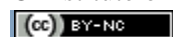
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**ABSTRACT**

*A most significant development that has taken place on the global literary scene during the last few decades or so is the dramatic emergence of African-American voices as a distinct and dominant force. Along with Toni Morrison scores of African American Fiction writers, poets, playwrights, autobiographers, and essayists have mapped bold new territories; they have firmly entrenched themselves in the forefront of contemporary American Literature. This article retraces this exciting literary phenomenon in the context of the lives, works, and achievements of Gloria Naylor and her contemporaries. Naylor discovered feminism and African American Literature, which revitalized her and gave her new ways to think about and define herself as a black woman.*

**Key Words:** Apocalyptic Images and Events, Feminism, Identity, Racial Harmony, Dantesque View, Self –exploration, Empowerment, Community.

“Gloria Naylor is a strong voice, and a compassionate one,” said Brad Leithauser, Emily Dickinson lecturer in the humanities.” “She writes-and speaks-with solid decided vigour of someone who has given her subject its thoughtful due.” (College Street Journal) Naylor believes herself to be a wordsmith and a storyteller. There is a reflection of her personal life and familial past in the form of names, places and even in the stories in her novels. Her novels are “linked” together. She refers to characters and places in one text that becomes significant in the next text. Naylor also draws extensively on the bible, which is influenced by her involvement with the Jehovah’s witnesses. She was an affinity, as do the Jehovah’s witnesses, for apocalyptic images and events and uses them in her novels. Her work reflects a moral and spiritual sensibility. She creates corrupt fictional worlds in which characters must find some sort of sanctuary to be safe.

The emergence of Gloria Naylor on the American literary scene was sudden- the Women of Brewster Place (1982) was her first novel and intense, as Naylor added her voice to those of few black women who write about real African Americans. For her “writing is 99.44100% generalous and race less” (A California Newsreel Release, 1992). Furthermore Writing for Naylor is a way of defining identity as Naylor relates with her 1985 “Conversation” with Tony Morrison, in her creative writing class she learned that in order to write good literature, one had to read good literature . She is the first black Afro-American writer to read her predecessors .The list included Tillie Olson, Henry Jones and Toni Morrison but it was Morrison’s The Bluest Eye that had a singular significance:“Time has been swallowed except for the moment I opened that novel because for my memory that semester is The Bluest Eye and is the beginning. The presence of the work served two vital purposes at that moment in my life. It said to the young poet, struggling to break into prose, that the barriers were flexible; at the core of it all is language, and if you’re skilled enough with that, you can create your own genre. And it is said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth in this society, not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song” (Whitt, 1999, 6). Of race relations in the United States, Naylor has said, “I think the best way to increase racial harmony is to get to know each other. Blacks and Whites in this country now live in separate neighbourhoods, worship in separate churches, etc. with people so isolated from each other, it is difficult to get tolerance. The first step is simply to get to know each other” (College Street Journal).

Naylor’s novels (The Women of Brewster Place- 1982, Linden Hills- 1985, Mama Day-1988, Bailey’s Café-1992, The Men of BrewsterPlace-1998) offer one way to bridge that gap of ignorance and isolation. Her companion novels about a block of tenement housing on the fictional Brewster Place, for example introduce privileged Americans to the struggles of those who will never see the American Dream, those for whom victory is survivalitself.

“Naylor sees herself as a filter through which her characters come to life” (Whitt, 1999, 7) She has expressed disappointment, for example, that George in Mama Day turned out to be a football fan, which required of Naylor hours of research on a sport that did not interest her. Also, she was not pleased that in Linden Hills Willa Prescott Nedeed came out of that basement with her dead child prepared to clean the house: “what that woman finally came to, after that whole travail, was that she

was a good wife and a good mother and that she could go upstairs and claim that identity. That is not what I thought Willa would do, but Willa was Willa” (Whitt, 1999, 7). In what she calls her psychic revelations, her characters assert themselves, and she feels obliged to honour those images. Characters in a book not yet written appear to her and are only later that she knows what to do with them. As an example she tells this story: “one image that kept haunting me from even before I finished *Linden Hills*: a woman carrying a dead male baby, but I knew her name because the old lady said, ‘Go home, Bernice. Go home and bury your child’” (Whitt, 1999, 8). Several years later when she was working on *Mama Day*, it occurred to Naylor that Bernice’s baby, the one she had gone to such extremes to conceive, was going to die. Naylor acknowledges that while she is not slave to those images, she does feel compelled to honour them.

Catherine C. Ward offers a fine analysis of Naylor’s intensely moral vision and highlights Naylor’s appropriation of Dantesque view of hell to launch a devastating attack on the spiritual barrenness and political vacuity that Naylor sees at the core of the African American upper-class life. Sherley Anne Williams believes that Naylor “is a mature literary talent of formidable skill” (Pryse, 1985, 70). Each of the four novels was to be a voice representing some part of the black community. *The Women of Brewster Place* was meant to “celebrate the female spirit and the ability to transcend and also to give a microcosm of black women in America- Black women in America who faced by a wall of racism and sexism” (Whitt, 1999, 8-9). In this quartet Naylor provides stories in octaves, themes in refrain, and characters in repetition. With the addition of her fifth novel, Naylor’s pattern of character and geographical connection continues. Told by multiple narrators about vastly different individuals, Naylor’s novel operates on the principle that “there are just too many sides to the whole story.” (MD, 311) Naylor herself has become what Marjorie Pryse terms a “metaphysical conjure woman,” (Pryse, 1985) a medium who, like Morrison, Walker, and others,” makes it possible for...readers... to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, root workers, and women who write autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors”. Like her contemporaries, Pryse notes, Naylor highlights “connection rather than separation,” transforming “silence into speech”. (5) Her healers connect and they certainly speak. Through their healing and conjuring they demonstrate, in the words of Pryse, “the power to reassert the self and one’s heritage in the face of overwhelming injustice” (16). While contemporary novelists vary in their optimism and Gloria Naylor is one such author; issues of self –exploration, empowerment, and community are central to each of her novels. A variety of pressures within the fabric of given text may limit the extent to which Naylor’s characters construct a positive sense of self, but Naylor is committed to exploring paths towards empowerment, for both her female and male characters.

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, her first novel, won her the American Book Award for best first novel in 1983. Naylor uses the seven different notes of a musical scale to convey seven different stories. *Linden Hills* also has seven stories; the grace notes of shorter, quicker stories attached sound the various alarms- losses, one by one, of everything that was once held most dear: love, food, religion, music, athletic endeavour, family, and the connection with the past. As a celebration of love and magic, *Mama Day* explores a “brave new world that has such people in it,” (Whitt, 1999, 9) as Shakespeare reminds the reader in *The Tempest*. For here, characters that are dead talk without words to characters that are alive and listening. The romantic love story is embraced within a familial love that resonates with magic, orchestrated by *Mama Day*’s hands that move to and with a tempo which alone hears. In the final novel of the quartet, *Bailey’s Café*, Naylor presents its seven stories of female sexuality through the blues, best delivered by jazz. Each character is a living embodiment of pain so deep that the movement away from its source, a recurring motif in the blues, is an urgent necessity. The black man’s blues is the pulse of *The Men of Brewster Place*, and the novels last line offers a possible prediction of Naylor’s future direction: “the music play son... and on...” (MBP, 173).

Therefore it can be concluded that Naylor’s novels have earned her a secure place in contemporary American writing. Along with many other gifted African American women writers of her generation, she has helped redefine the directions of American literature in final two decades of

the twentieth century. There is more than some delicious irony in this impressive phenomenon that the voices of African American Women, once ignored and repressed should emerge with vengeful eloquence on the international literary scene during the last twenty years or so. Gloria Naylor's voice strikes a singularly graceful note in that sweet chorus.

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