



# Gloria Naylor: Black Ecstasy or Agony

Jyoti Dutt

Padamshri Padama Sachdev PG College for Women, Gandhi Nagar, Jammu

Date of Submission: 02-04-2022

Date of Acceptance: 16-04-2022

## ABSTRACT

In view of the already published secondary criticism on Gloria Naylor as a novelist and her individual works, the present study incorporates all the major works of Naylor, analyses these in the perspective of *avowed* depictions of feminist stances about African-American women personages as portrayed in the novels of Black American feminist writers. The primary works of Naylor incorporated in the study are *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988) and *Bailey's Cafe* (1992). An attempt has been made to analyse these individual works with an itinerant focus upon the central female characters in every novel, taking into consideration the rubrics of plot — narrative, characterization, theme and imagery. The basic approach employed while analyzing the individual work included in the study is largely sociological with special emphasis upon the *alazon-eiron* existential syndrome as it operates within the plot-matrix of the included novels.

## I. INTRODUCTION TO NAYLOR'S INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY

Gloria Naylor's mother wanted Gloria to seek quality education and provided her access to various libraries in New York City during her schooling period. While undergoing graduation, she also served as a missionary for Jehovah's Witnesses in Florida, North Carolina and New York. Naylor recognized her interest in literature, and went to Brooklyn College, to study English where she published her first short story titled, "A Life on Beekman Place", in the journal *Essence* and later converted the story into her first full-fledged novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982. The novel was awarded the American Book Award for the best new novel in 1983. Naylor got her B.A. degree from Brooklyn College in, 1981 and her Masters in African-American studies, from Yale in the year 1983. The same year, she also received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. Besides practicing her writing skills, Naylor taught literature and even lectured at several American Universities,

including New York University, George Washington University, the University of Pennsylvania, Boston University, Cornell University, and the University of Kent in Canterbury, England.

## II. DESCRIPTION OF GLORIA NAYLOR AS A MULTI-FACETED PERSONALITY

### 2.1 A popular women centric novelist of Afro-American stock

Naylor infuses female bonding in all her novels. She is recognized for her moving stories of African-American women, particularly in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). Her lyrical prose and her skillful infusion of the mythical and the magical in her novels made Naylor quite realistically popular as a novelist of Afro-American stock. She portrays the varied lines of African-Americans, particularly deep insights about being a woman in a male-oriented society. Infusion of images from Dante's *Inferno* in *Linden Hills* (1985), those of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in *Mama Day* (1988), and from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in *Bailey's Cafe* (1992) can be interpreted as Naylor's creative expertise at transcreating influx of literary motifs from the works of great writers like Dante, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Naylor also draws on African-American literary and creative traditions in her novels. Novels like, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey's Cafe* (1992), successfully project the Afro-American fictional female as an individual, who metamorphoses her identity as an identity of womanhood, a womanhood which eventually becomes an inexhaustible repository of strength, assertion all well as inspiration.

### 2.2 An invariant of western philosophy of human values

Gloria Naylor disregarded the normal western philosophy as well as the white-dominated American hegemonistic appropriation of human values and culture. As an Afro-American woman



writer, Naylor believes that Blacks have been made to serve as scapegoats for the problems of whites. The contempt for the “Niger” was always there, triggering every kind of prejudice besides creating confrontations. Naylor tackles the subject of Black-White relations historically, politically as well as economically, and envisions this relationship as a stepping stone to establish more connections between class, race, and gender. Critically, Naylor’s works have been identified as reflecting the ability to portray the lives of African-American women without reducing them to stereotypes or claiming to have represented “the” African-American experience.

### 2.3 A creator of a geographical world of fiction

Naylor’s own feminist reading of Black literary tradition made her dramatize the, “convoluted hierarchy of class, race and gender distinctions in America”, and she began to, “create a geographical world in her fiction, as varied and complex as the structure of our society.” Christian describes the way in which Black “progress” and the creation of a Black middle class is negotiated separately and explores the complexity of Naylor’s treatment of gender in relation to class. Catherine C. Ward observes that Naylor patterns *Linden Hills*, after Dante’s *Inferno*. She finds that the choice of Dante as a model lends a moral seriousness and a universal mythic dimension to her story of Black middle-class “success” and its price.

### 2.4 A rewriter of Renaissance

Interestingly enough, Black American women writers like Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison have rewritten and reinterpreted the renaissance as a major strand in the criticism during the 1980’s, reconsideration of English and European Renaissance of the 16th and 17th centuries got exemplified by a collection titled, *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Differences in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Margaret W. Ferguson. In this critical work, three American versions of Renaissance have been reconstructed, and even F.O. Matthiessen’s classic work, *American Renaissance* has been challenged by a series of critics. In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison applies the term renaissance to contemporary Black women writers: “it’s a real renaissance. You know we have spoken of renaissance before. But this one is our’s, not somebody else’s.” Both Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison use Shakespeare as a canon for the discussion of race and racism as done by the master,

dramatist in *Othello*. Responses to Shakespeare by a later Black writer such as Gloria Naylor seem to be quite relevant. Naylor’s series of novels especially the first three works: *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day* are argued with the premise that Naylor “employs” Shakespeare, to thematize the split between white male and Black female literary traditions. Besides the widening gulf between “White” high culture and “Black” everyday experience. It is further argued that in these three novels, Naylor has a “set of internal cross-references to characters and places.” Actually, these set of internal “cross-references”, in relation to characters and locales provide to the reader a vantage point of an emergent tradition in which Naylor herself becoming a participant. Naylor’s inventive and fertile art puts into play and tests positive as well as critical attitudes toward Shakespeare.

### 2.5 A crusader of colour based discrimination against women

Colour has been an issue, Black women have been living with, since they first arrived on the North American continent as slaves to the white men. The colour factor as a component of debasing racism is predominant in African-American writings, that a “Black” women is often denigrated and downgraded, either as a slave or a servant. The injustice which Black women face at the hands of Black men forms another unexpected factor. The women of Naylor’s novels serve as a metaphor for all women, who conform to the stereotypes of the patriarchal definition of woman: as weak individuals, obsequious wives, and fawning mothers, subordinates and “slaves”. Naylor rewrites the gender-equation and depicts Black females in her novels as breaking the male-induced shackles by emerging out of confinements placed upon them as women and as Black women. It has been rightly argued that Naylor displays a fine talent both as a story-teller and a prose stylist, with a poetic feeling for the English language, folk speech and the contradictory nuances of personality.

Naylor’s prose is the key to understanding the distinctly different personality of her each female character thereby, making language a powerful instrument of personality exposition and narrative virtuosity. Illustration of the feminist theme, of female relationships or sisterhood, becomes an added grace in the novels. Although men are, for the most part, absent from Naylor’s novels yet many of the women suffer due to their relationships with their male counterparts. The reader is sought to be convinced that when faced



with violence and degradation, Black women, through courage and sturdiness do fight against, and at times, overcome the travails coloured women are subjected to in the racially-oriented and ethnically impoverished American postmodernist ethos of dehumanization and deculture.

## 2.6 A re-creator of female identity

As a focal point of difference *vis-à-vis*, Toni Morrison in the visionary approach toward the depiction of Black women characters in her novels, Gloria Naylor concentrates more upon the abiding concern of her novelistic personages to give a new and meaningful definition of female identity. Independent of conventional expectations and prejudices in order to sustain one's self-dignity in a world of growing alienation, absurdity and moral decay. Naylor's women characters nurture and foster individual self-esteem in a hostile and discriminatory social climate. Naylor shows that women are merely object to gratify carnal desires of both white and Black men. A revealing long comment in this connection becomes quite interesting.

## 2.7 Unraveller of complexities and diversities of man-woman relationship

Naylor explores the complexities and diversities of man-woman relationship by employing new dimensions and perspectives. The female experience about oppression and exploitation by Black men forms the main gamut of presentation in the novels. Larry R. Andrews argues how Naylor in her first three novels, *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day* discusses female-bonding which takes place among women protagonists, including the women of different generations. This bond among women confers, "identity, purpose and strength for survival."<sup>25</sup> Naylor moves away from an exclusive focus on females, to an exploration of the relationship between sisterhood and the resolution of male-female conflicts. Evolving themes of folk tradition, history, magic and nature become the focal issues that Naylor analysed from the thematic point of view.

## 2.8 A visionary black feminist writer

Naylor's admirers as well as detractors agree about the fact that this Black American women writer has one thing dear to her heart and which is the totality of the predicament the coloured women suffer and undergo in the course of their lives whether is the rural or urban landscape. Naylor's gentle ironies become painful ones, as she

strongly poses the subject regarding the relevance of American ethnicity and race-relations with a predominantly feminist stance.

Consensually, critical opinion has reflected the assessment that the novels of Gloria Naylor are empowered by her ability to carry the readers into the bitter-sweet conditions of contemporary life. Naylor has the added visionary quality of depicting the complex and paradoxical admixture of tragedy and joy among the lives of African-Americans. Naylor leads her novelistic protagonists and her readers into, "the ambiguous but strangely satisfying realm of the *differences*, into the life not in avoidance of the abyss but at its edge." Use of the highly revealing and symbolic expressions like "abyss" and "edge", again confirm the crucial observation that Naylor as a Black feminist writer, has been more eager to interpret the gendered socio-political-cum-economic equation as existentially, heading toward the slope of nothingness and "the renunciation of objective standards of truth and validity." The societal ethos of postmodernism adds further to the problem of coloured gendered relations, in the works of Gloria Naylor. All actions, choices and judgements exhibited by the novelistic characters as Black individuals, appear "non rational and contingent."

## 2.9 Depicter of complex subject-status occupied by Black women in America

The history of Black women in America, as a history framed by racism and sexism, constitutes the sonum-bonum of Naylor's works. Thus, her novels have contributed to the development of a language that reveals Black women's consciousness within a specific racial and gendered context. What is explored is the potential of the complex subject-status occupied by Black women in America. The contradictions of Black female experience become predominant. Naylor's work, suggests that the patterns of plot, characterization, and attitudes toward language persist to the present. The society which Naylor portrays has an "infernal mix of uncaring bureaucracies and male violence, a society whose fragmentation is indicated by the work's structure."<sup>30</sup> The use of myth, magic and the elements is shown to be an attempt to recover the vital connection to reclaim the roots and salvage the strong community of Blacks, especially the women-folk. The salvation of the repressed, ostracized and exploited coloured female, could only come through a redemptive renaissance of ethnicity gender equality and a resurgence of societal awakening.

## 2.10. A formidable story teller



What no committed reader of Naylor can ignore is the truth that this woman writer incorporates, “the complexity of character into a marvel of a tale,” for she is foremost, “a story teller, attempting and sometimes succeeding to capture the gestures and tones of the folk.” Her heroines don’t just belong to New York City, more important is the fact that they move in that mythology of the South, a mythology which eventually gets transcended fictional as a revelatory spectrum of race, culture, sexual behaviour and ethnic tribulations. The roots of the characters are still laid in the place where the Black culture of the previous century was and has reached a particular place, though this culture is undergoing changes in the North. Naylor, emphasizes generational or historical sisterhood even more, reflecting what Susan Willis calls the predominant theme of contemporary Black women writer as the, “journey (both real and figural) back to the historical source of the Black American community.” Yet, at the same time, she links its success increasingly to the resolution of tragic tensions between men and women, and within the community as an organic whole, besides the outside influences that threaten its values.

### 2.11. Demonstrator of female power and wisdom

Female power and wisdom are vividly incarnated in the portrayal of Naylor’s women protagonists. The fictional images of African women conceived by Naylor may not “eradicate the material impoverishment of Black women, their articulation provides a security” against continued silencing. Her female characters are role-models who struggle to survive, and the picture that repetitively emerges as “women relying on one another for direction and strength....”

### 3. Critical argumentation

Though Kaveney praises Naylor as a gifted writer, yet he avers that *Bailey’s Cafe* contains “some structural flaws.” Rifkind says, that Naylor has “characteristic highs and lows”, in her novel, *Bailey’s Cafe*. He further says that this is, “no ordinary writing” and it also gives us an impression that she has already distinguished herself as a formidable novelist, besides the idea that “Gloria Naylor’s best work has yet to be done.” Naylor’s expansive vision of humanity moves beyond, “racial, gender, and ethnic boundaries as she affirms miracles, life, survival, wholeness and redemption.”

Michael Awkward discusses, *The Women of Brewster Place* as the, “disparate stories of individual women, come to form a community characterized by both cohesion and diversity.”

Awkward argues for a, “noncompetitive model of creative misreading,” which he finds in recent African-American writing. Another critic, Laura Annner, believes that, Naylor’s naturalism breaks with literary convention by portraying the rape in, *The Women of Brewster Place* from the perspective of the victim. Further, she says that Naylor’s temporary restoration of the objectifying gaze only emphasizes the extent to which her representation of, “violence subverts the conventional dynamics of the reading and viewing process.” The critic, Celeste Fraser defines Naylor’s art in, *The Women of Brewster Place* as a presentation of the living diversity of Black female experience in context of the women who are struggling to survive in the ghetto. Naylor is also accused of undermining conservative stereotypes of Black poverty. Most of these preceding critical estimates about Naylor’s conceptualization of Black Afro-American female experience, seem to overlook the fact that the woman writer in Naylor was making an honest, transparent and sincere attempt to bring to life and popular attention, a sizeable segment of American population, hitherto ignored and largely misunderstood.

Critical argumentation also revolves around Naylor’s use of female imagery as a pointer to a new direction in contemporary literature. Such a paradigm shift is mostly attributed to Black female writers. It is also viewed as a culmination of a search for literary revision, besides producing works of rare beauty, impact and honesty. It won’t be an exaggeration to say that Naylor’s novels, problematize story listening in relation to racially separate Southern communities. The position of any listener or reader becomes difficult as well, he or she must transcend racial and cultural boundaries to embrace the stories of different folk groups. Naylor exploits the strategies which blur the distinction between “present” and “absent” story-listeners in order to position readers for the reception of personal narratives from across cultural and racial boundaries.

Her first two novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, indeed embody profound implications for readers, illustrating how acts of listening and reading may be complicated by the race aspect. Cross-cultural events, grounded in ethnic and class diversities within the Black community context put Naylor’s readers, within the creative fictional cosmos of racial and cultural characteristics including gendered disequilibrium and sexual as well as economical exploitation. Male characters are pictured as abusers, murders, sadists, rapists, hyperpotent and good-for-nothing fellows.





Such projections of Black male identity have mostly been the outcome of much of the Eurocentric social science research and media presentation. The experience of Black men is analysed by focusing on a new interpretation of Black masculinity, besides the social and historical realities of Black people and is the womanly commitment to the survival and wholeness of Black people.

The experience of Black men is analysed by focusing on a new interpretation of Black masculinity, besides the social and historical realities of Black people. In contrast to the attitudinal peculiarities of Black fictional men in Naylor's novels. The female counterparts embody not a category of characters, "but rather a way of qualifying *adverbially*, the many things we do and are ...." The women appears more conscious and responsible characters with a gendered commitment to the survival and the wholeness of the Black people, their culture, traditions and inherited conventions of race, ethnicity and class.

### III. CONCLUSION:

Gloria Naylor has established herself as a visionary women centric novelist and a crusader of colour based discrimination against women. She is a demonstrator of female power and wisdom. She is a formidable story teller gripping the readers in her plot of novels. The critics of her novels have praised her for her credentials as a novelist championing the cause black Afro-American women.

### REFERENCES

- [1]. Barbara Christian. "Black Feminist Criticism". *Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (University of California, Berkeley : Pergamon Press, 1986) 8.
- [2]. Barbara Christian. "Naylor's Geography : Community, Class and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*". *Gloria Naylor : Critical Perspectives Past and Present*; ed.,
- [3]. Celeste Fraser Delgado. "Stealing B(1)ack Voices : The Myth of the Black Matriarchy and *The Women of Brewster Place*". *Gloria Naylor; Critical Perspectives Past and Present*; ed., Henry
- [4]. Donna Rifkind. "Eatery at the Edge of the World". *Washington Post Book World* (1992)
- [5]. E. Pease, Sacvan Bercovitch and William E. Cain. In their various writings published during the years 1982 to 1988. The Black American Renaissance including the Harlem Renaissance is interpreted in terms of an alternate Non-Shakespearean tradition.
- [6]. Helen Fiddymment Levy. "Lead on with Light". *Critical Perspectives Past and Present*; ed., Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York : Amistad, 1993) 140.
- [7]. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York : Amistad, 1993) 107.
- [8]. Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmayer, ed. *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indian University Press, 1993) 4.
- [9]. Janet Witalac. *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Thomson Gale, 2002) 97.
- [10]. Larry R. Andrews. "Black Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor's Novels". *CLA Journal XXXIII* 1(Sept, 1989) 1-25.
- [11]. Laura E. Tanner. "Reading Rape" from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah, *Gloria Naylor; Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York : Amistad, 1993) 72.
- [12]. Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York : Amistad, 1993) 90-105.
- [13]. Margaret W. Ferguson, ed. *Rewriting the Renaissance : The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Matthiessen's theory about the American Renaissance in his famous book of the same name has been thoroughly changed and criticized by a number of critics which includes Walter Benn Michaels and Donald
- [14]. Michael Awkward. "Authorial Dreams of Wholeness: (Dis)Unity, (Literary) Parentage and *The Women of Brewster Place*". The New York Times Book Review from *Gloria Naylor's; Critical Perspectives Past and Present*; ed., Henry Louis Gates, Jr and K.A. Appiah (New York : Amistad, 1993) 40.
- [15]. Neena Arora. *Gender Oppression in Gloria Naylor's Women of Brewster Place and Linden Hills*, R.K. Dhawan ed; Afro-American Literature (New Delhi : Prestige, 2001) 31.
- [16]. Paula Barnes. "Blues Symphony". *Bells Letters* 8, 3 (Spring 1993) 56.
- [17]. Peter Erickson. "Shakespeare's Black?" The Role of Shakespeare in Naylor's Novels. *Gloria Naylor; Critical Perspectives Past and Present*; ed., Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York : Amistad, 1993) 231.
- [18]. Philips Page. *Living With, The Abyss in Gloria Naylor's Bailey's Cafe* (New York : Pergamon, 1985) 24.



- [19]. Puhr Kathleen M. "Healers in Gloria Naylor's Fiction". *Twentieth Century Literature*; 4, 4 (Winter, 1994) 518-527.
- [20]. Roz Kaveney. "At the Magic Diner" (Times Literary Supplement: 4659, 1992) 20.
- [21]. Susan Willis. *Specifying: Black Women Writing, The American Experience* (Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 1987) 57.