Sisterhood as Redeeming Power in Gloria Naylor’s  
The Women of Brewster Place

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Abstract: Sisterhood connects women in the way that they share, care and dare to face the challenges together. It is the emotional support by a woman to another woman which makes both of them stronger and more potential to question the dictates of the society. Sisterhood encourages women to join their hands and fight against the repressive and oppressive system. It is the celebration of similarities and cheerful accommodation of differences. The confidence in one is at rise when one knows that one is being seen, heard and understood. In the context of black women, the concept of sisterhood is even more important because they have been suffering silently for long. Sisterhood is a healing herb that balms the agonized souls of women by making them feel a special individual. This paper searches sisterhood as redeeming power in The Women of Brewster Place written by Gloria Naylor.

Keywords: Oppression, Redeem, Suffering, Sisterhood, Dictates, Accommodation.

1. Introduction

Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place is a story of seven women who have been victimized by the oppressive system of the black society. It is through their unique sisterhood that they redeem themselves from the terrible hell of suffering and decay. Sisterhood acts as redeeming power for these black women which provides them with ability in the face of crisis.

Gloria Naylor succeeds in depicting the black women’s survival and sufferings through her works. As a critic, Audre Lorde says, “If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others” (45). The earliest influence on Gloria Naylor was of her mother. She herself had little education but even then, she encouraged Naylor to read and keep a Journal. During the interview with Donna Perry, Naylor says, “I think I kept writing as a child because I had my mother as a model... I think I kept going through her” (219-20).

Long years of oppression, brutal slavery and sufferings taught the black women how to face the society. Bell Hooks has rightly observed that black women must make use of their marginality “to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well to envision and create counter-hegemony” (15).

Gloria Naylor attained immense fame in 1983 when her first novel The Women of Brewster Place was published. She became a crusader of black feminism who wanted an equal place for the blacks and particularly the black women in the free American Society. The society in general and the literary world in particular appreciated Naylor’s fervour for reformation and upgradation of black women. In the beginning of the novel, Naylor describes Brewster Place as the bastard child of numerous secret meetings between the politicians of the respective districts and the Managing Director of Real Estate Company. In this novel, Naylor has vividly portrayed the lives of seven black females who fight for their social status, freedom and equal position in society. These women are fiercely independent and they fight for economic and political freedom even in adverse conditions. These females display great feelings of camaraderie for each other in difficult times. Charles E. Wilson, a prominent modern critic remark:

Described on the cover as a novel in seven stories, “The Women of Brewster Place” chronicles the lives of seven black women as they struggle to survive in a rapidly deteriorating neighborhood… Naylor uses several mini-plots that highlight the lives of the individual women. (37).

In the portrait of Mattie Michael, Naylor presents a very wise and helpful woman who brims with the feeling of sisterhood for all the women of the Brewster Place. She is the most dominating character whose presence from beginning to end acts as a unifying link in the novel, she may even be regarded as the lady ‘Tiresias’ in the novel. Her father, Michael loved her greatly and she was very happy. Her happy and peaceful life is disturbed when she is infatuated towards a local guy Butch. Her father continuously cautioned her to keep away from Butch but she does not pay heed and establishes sexual relations with him and gets pregnant. She had to leave her parents and town to begin her arduous journey. It shows the cruelty of the black men to the women of their society. Dorothy Wickenden, aptly says:

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There are men who live here too, of course. They visit their women like nightmares, leaving behind them babies and bile. But Gloria Naylor’s women, much like those of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are daunting even in desolation. Most of them find that through laughter and companionship they can make themselves impregnable. (37)

It is a fact that most black women left the South to escape from oppression. Mattie, too, leaves this place to attain sense of individuality. Hine remarks, “many black women quit the South out of a desire to achieve personal autonomy and to escape abuse at the hands of Southern white men as well as black men” (127). Mattie becomes a single mother and dotes on her son Basil. As luck would have it, Basil grows into a spoiled son and makes her mother homeless and wretched. After losing her son and her home, she ends up in Brewster Place as a victim of male hegemony. She is helped by Etta-Mae- Johnson and Miss Eva who offer her sisterly love and care.

It is a fact that all the female characters in the novel have come to Brewster Place as victims of oppression. The exception may be Kiswana Browne and the two, who came there on their own volition. Brewster Place provides all of them shelter but in no way guarantees them peace and happiness. Kiswana considers herself a rebel. Describing Kiswana, Annie Gottlieb rightly finds her “idealistic daughter of middle-class parents, who has moved to Brewster place to be near my people” (4). She has left her parents and moved to Brewster Place merely to assert her color and existence as a black. She is a reformist and wants to fight for all the blacks. After Mattie, it is Kiswana who dominates the plot of the novel. She wants to ensure the wellbeing of black women. She was also very supportive of the issues that were central to Afro-American experience. She did not like her mother’s views on Black Nationalism. Korenman, very aptly, presents Kiswana’s assessment of her mother in the following words, "Kiswana regards her mother as a bourgeois reactionary whose material prosperity has cut her off spiritually as well as geographically from the majority of her people” (151). Kiswana is well aware of her mother’s spiritual bankruptcy. But it cannot be denied that there exists a deep bond between the mother and the daughter as Mrs. Browne visits and helps her daughter despite all their differences.

The two Lorraine and Theresa have moved to Brewster Place to escape biting comments and criticism from the residents of more elite and posh residential areas, which they could easily afford. They are lesbians and realize that the contemporary society was not ready to accept their relationship as normal and natural, and so they moved to Brewster Place. They are lesbians and as they live in 1980s, they cannot reveal their relation before the society. Thus, Lorraine and Theresa have been moving from one place to another because of their relationship. Lorraine is a school teacher and always lives in awe of losing her job if people come to know about them. Theresa is bolder but is cowed down because of her partner’s apprehensions. They end up in Brewster Place after a lot of running here and there. She does not care how the other people behave with them or how the other residents of Brewster Place interact with them.

Brewster Place brings about a notable change in the Lorraine-Theresa relationship; while earlier on Lorraine was subdued and played second fiddle to Theresa. This change comes when she begins spending time with Kiswana and Ben. Lorraine begins to attain confidence due to feelings of care shown to her by Mattie, Kiswana and some other women. As Lorraine grows more confident, she speaks for herself and is no longer worried about Theresa’s opinion. Delving deep to look into their relationships, Charles Wilson observes, “Their heated debates about the role of sexual orientation in defining one's identity provide some of the most compelling scenes in the novel. And as a means of making them both dynamic characters, Naylor show cases the validity of both women's point of view” (51).

Gloria Naylor’s women suffer from sexual and racial oppression. Alice Walker says, "because of their double identity, black women are the victims of both sexual discrimination and racial victimization… black women are oppressed beyond recognition-oppressed by everyone”(149). Naylor also underlines the fact that these women need each other to sustain in their sufferers and torments. Barbara Christian affirms, "Women mothering other women are consistent throughout this novel as they hold each other in survival” (113). In case of Lucielia Louise Turner or Ciel, again it is Mattie who extends warmth of affection to Ciel. Naylor has delineated a very pathetic figure in the character of Lucielia Louise Turner. She suffered immensely because of her husband Eugene. He never loved her and was looking for an excuse to leave her. He does not even love his daughter Serena. He leads an unstable and unsuccessful life, rarely finding a permanent job. He vents out his frustration and anger on Ciel. Mattie is highly concerned about her. Her support helps Ciel face the hardships that life offers to her. When she loses her daughter, Mattie relieves her saying, “Child I know how you feel, but don’t do this to yourself. I lost one too” (WBP 102).
It is conspicuous that the lasting emotions of sisterhood come out as a great force and help them survive amidst the crisis. Mattie supports Etta and Ciel and Miss Eva serves the role of mother. Again, Kiswana helps Cora Lee and her children, motivates her and guide her; she even comes to the rescue of Lorraine when she is troubled and taunted by C.C. Baker. However, Lorraine dies because of her bonding and friendship with Theresa had weakened. In Brewster Place the women depend on each other for survival and for psychological support in fighting against the forces of 'oppression and isolation'. Therefore, the necessary condition for survival and negotiating sufferings is unity and bonding. The old saying 'united we stand end divided we fall' is very much apt and true in this case. Annie Gottlieb greatly appreciates the women of this novel for unique connection they share. She finds, “the bonds between women are the abiding one” (11).

Women in The Women of Brewster Place are able to trace friendship, support and hope within their locality, colour and sex. All of them are coming from different backgrounds, are of different age and react differently to their colour and to men. The example of sisterly love is obvious when Mattie says, “But I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man (141). This is really true that their bonding with each other is their perennial source of strength. Black feminism actually concentrates on such thoughts which are against racism, elitism and sexism. Bell Hooks in her book “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1981) explains the feminist consciousness in the following words: “We black women who advocate feminist ideology, are pioneers. We are creating a past for ourselves and our sisters. We hope that as they see us reach our goal - no longer victimized, no longer unrecognized, no longer afraid - they will take courage and follow” (196).

The end of the novel vindicates Naylor's point of view. In the 'Block Party', it is through Mattie's dream that Naylor gives a free flight to her imagination. When the torrential rains cannot wipe the blood stains from the Brewster Place wall, the women of Brewster Place take out the bricks one by one with their bare hands and finally bring the wall down. The falling down of the wall is symbolical of the fact that the women of Brewster Place have finally arrived on the scene. They have created a space for themselves in the society and no longer need any recognition from others because they have grown so powerful that they are a society within themselves. The wall was actually a sort of tool to cordon off the Brewster Place from the more civilized, more respected sections of the society. The women of Brewster Place mistook it to be built for their safety and security. The dismantling of the wall by the women with their own hands strongly suggests the new-found courage and mettlesome spirits of these women. Charles Wilson again says: “When the women decide to dismantle the wall at the end of their dead-end street, they are working collectively to liberate themselves, both physically and mentally” (55).

Women getting together and bringing the wall down is significant because it shows their team effort and self-belief. It would also be apt to add that in all ages and times humans have only survived by virtue of their valour and determination coupled with unity and bonding. Sisterhood in these women makes them look and turn to each other to help, guide and care for one another. This is exactly how the women of Brewster Place protect themselves from their oppressors and tormentors. Every one of these women rises to the occasion and faces the challenge and succeeds in picking up the loose strands of their life after every disaster.

2. Conclusion

Together the women challenge the restriction of the amorphous white male political system responsible for Brewster’s creation. The women defy the fate to which they have been consigned. It is through the sense of sisterhood that they redeem themselves from a terrible hell of suffering and decay. So, Gloria Naylor is very much successful in depicting life-like portrayal of her female characters that inspire not only the contemporary generation but may also continue to motivate the posterity. Naylor has created these characters to outline the fact that black women are self-reliant and sufficient and they do not even need the company of black or white males to survive in the world. The virtue of sisterhood motivates these women to deconstruct the stereotypes and distorted images assigned to them.

References

