

The Portrayal of Women Characters in the Women Of Brewster Place by Gloria Naylor



Literature

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ABSTRACT

The origin of African American Literature, its growth, development. Kiswana Browne is a young revolutionist who works to bring a change in the lives of her people. Kiswana's mother helps her to get good education and fine job to help her people of their community. Kiswana Browne is the representation of black women in Africa. Ciel is the grand daughter of Eva Turner. She leads a very happy life with her husband Eugene and daughter Serena. Etta is forced to leave the place and search for a dignified life and descent life partner. Lorraine and Theresa are middle class lesbians. They are not accepted in their society and at last ends their life in Brewster Place. They are still not able to avoid the pointing fingers and dirty looks of their community. Naylor's portrayals Kiswana Browne, Ciel, Etta Mar Johnson, Lorraine and Theresa are the representatives of black women.

African-American Literature is a kind of literature produced in the United States by the writers of African descent. The genre traces its origins to the works of such late eighteenth century writers as Phillips Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, reaching early high points with slave narratives and the Harlem Renaissance.

During the period of nineteenth century, African American Literature's main focus was to erase the negative impression of Blacks in the world. Trails were made by these writers to be accepted into the mainstream of white American society. At this state, the standards followed by the black writers were the standards of whites. The themes and issues explored in African American Literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, sexism, slavery, and equality. Today, African American Literature has been accepted as an integral part of American Literature.

"Speak to the deeper meaning of the African-American presence in this nation. This presence has always been a test case of the nation's claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all". (Raboteau)

African American women writers have taken a special effort to portray their women in their novels. Heightened interest in the women's issues makes these writers famous throughout the world. The themes discussed by these writers are racial oppression, sexual abuse, impact of western culture, complex relationship between women themselves, and Black heritage. Jesse Fauset, Nella Larson, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor are some of them who prefer to talk about the inner struggle of Black women in their works. Gloria Naylor deals with the same in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983). She talks about seven women whose lives are completely shattered and the result they get sheltered at Brewster Place.

Gloria Naylor was born in Harlem on January 25, 1950, a month after her parents, Alberta and Roosevelt Naylor, arrived to New York City. Her parents were sharecroppers from Robinson Ville, Mississippi. Her mother's determination to give the best education for her children was the reason behind their migration. Even as a farm worker Alberta Naylor used some of her meager wages to buy books that the segregated libraries of Mississippi denied her. When Gloria was old enough to sign her name, her mother began to take her to the library that made Naylor to become a fervent reader even at young age.

Kiswana Browne is introduced to the readers as a young revolutionist, who works to bring a change in the lives of her people. She is born in bourgeois family of Linden Hills, a place where Blacks lead a comfortable life with a fine job, house and all the facilities at the cost of their race and culture. Kiswana does not want to lose her identity as a Black, so she leaves Linden Hills and stays at Brewster Place where she is able to lead a life with her people.

She is proud to be a Black and she has never forgiven her brother Wilson, who even refuses to be referred as an 'Afro'. She even

adopts an African name, hairstyle, and décor in order to put her Black Nationalist belief into practice. She fights with her mother for remarking the black as 'them'. "What do you mean, these people. They're my people and yours, too Mama. We're all black. But may be you've forgotten that over in Linden Hills". (*The Women of Brewster Place* 83)

Kiswana's mother, Mrs. Browne a middle class bourgeois woman, tries to convince Kiswana to get education and a job to help her people in a better way. But Kiswana, clear minded girl refuses to get arrested for four to five years by white brainwashing institutions. She leaves her home to live in Brewster Place. Her mother visits her house, at that time Kiswana tries her best to prove her mother that she is a grown up, matured woman who can deal the problems of society.

Mother- daughter relationship is skillfully sketched by Naylor in the chapter of Kiswana. Mrs. Browne when she realizes the firmness of her daughter in her decision, not to spoil her dignity and not to discourage her, without her knowledge places an envelop on the cushions and goes. "Kiswana had closed the door and turned around. She spotted an envelop sticking between the cushions of her couch. She went over and opened it up; there was seventy five dollars in it". (*The Women of Brewster Place* 88)

Naylor gives a graphic picture of Kiswana's efforts to bring the women of Brewster Place together to find solutions for their boarding problems. Kiswana Browne is the representation of young population of black women in America. She wishes to find her roots and likes to be a supportive agent for them and tries to help them in their immense pains.

Lucielia Louise Turner (Ciel), the grand daughter of Eva Turner, is partly brought up by Mattie Michael. Ciel leads a humiliated life with Eugene with a false hope that he will become an affectionate husband as well as a loving father to her daughter Serena. Eugene wants to desert her whenever a responsibility is added on him. It continues when Ciel announces her second pregnancy. Ciel even undergoes an abortion in order to please him and keep him with her, but there is no use of it. Thereafter Ciel's only solace lies on Serena, her only daughter. The hands of curl fate takes her away is an electric shock. Ciel has come a long way and crossed the limits of her endurance.

Ciel's problems cause her immense pain and it is a common framework of black women in America: dreams shattered by the men in their lives. However, it is only Mattie who supports and helps Ciel, when she loses her hope and life in the hands of Eugene. The healing touch of Mattie gains confidence in Ciel's life. Naylor vividly portrays Mattie's efforts to bring back the dying Ciel to normal. Mattie's determination to bring Ciel to normal state is an example of the relationship of Black women. Like a mother who helps a sick child to get back a **strong physique and mind, Mattie nurses Ciel.**

Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked

her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink forth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floor. (The Women of Brewster Place 103).

Mattie is sure that Ciel's tears will end and she wants Ciel to have a happy life. Ciel flies over to Sanfransisco, to be away from her child's reminiscences and works there in an insurance company. Ciel's devotion to Eugene, the great pain she undergoes as the result of it, loss of her child, after loosing everything, raising up from the ashes are the scenes where Naylor's lyrical language mesmerizes the one who reads it.

Etta Mae Johnson, Mattie Michael's friend is, a young Southern girl. Their friendship tolerated no secrets. They share all the gains and pains. Etta's teenage years are spent at Rock Vale, where a woman is expected to abide all the scales of obedience unquestioningly.

Etta spent her teenage years in constant trouble. Rock Vale had no place for the black woman who was not only unwilling to play by the rules but whose spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist. (The Women of Brewster Place 59).

Etta's sprit challenges this. She reserves her 'sirs' and 'madams' for the people who deserve. So she is forced to leave the place. Later she realizes that rules are the same at Memphis, Detroit, Chicago and New York. Etta's long lasting struggle, in search of a dignified life and a decent life partner, is one of the common problems of most number of black women. Naylor has taken pains to shape the character Etta Mae Johnson.

Lorraine and Theresa are daring portrayals of Gloria Naylor in the novel The Women of Brewster Place (1983). Both are middle class lesbians. Among them Lorraine is thrown out of her family when she refuses to lie about being a lesbian. They are not accepted anywhere in their society and at last ends at Brewster Place, but in vain. Theresa and Lorraine are still not able to

avoid the pointed fingers and dirty looks of their community.

Lorraine is a frail and quite light skinned woman who seems to want nothing more than to fit in with the rest of the women at Brewster Place. Lorraine even tries to integrate herself with the rest of them by going to a tenants meeting where she is insulted by Sophie, an inquisitive neighbour of her. Theresa is the bolder of the two. She never cares what the neighbours think of them. She doesn't understand why Lorraine cares. Lorraine feels the rejection from both by her neighbour and by Theresa. She finds comfort in talking to Ben, an old alcoholic handyman of Brewster Place. She plays the role of his little girl whom he had lost. Ben tells Lorraine, "you reminded me lots of my little girl" (The Women of Brewster Place 147). who also suffered repeated rape of white Boss. This sexual exploitation of Ben's daughter by white-boss emphasizes the inaccessibility of white patriarchal power. A black man is not able to break it. This exploitation takes place in the south, where Ben cannot earn enough money to support the family; but north is also not an exception of this.

Black women are not only prey for white men; but also for their own men. The gang rape of Lorraine brings it to the center. The gang rape of Lorraine at the dead end wall shows a helpless state of women in African American Community. She is attacked by a gang of teenagers. After the boy leaves her batter and bloody, the other one mercilessly sponges her. A black woman is smashed by her own men. At the end, early morning, she drags a loose brick towards the figure and bashes the person in the face, without knowing it is Ben and not the gang men who destroyed her completely.

Conclusion

Thus Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place traces Black women's migration from slavery to freedom and submissiveness to self assertion. The characters Kiswana, Ciel, Etta Mae Johnson and Lorraine are samples of many African American women who still struggle to find a place of their own.

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