

GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE MEN OF BREWSTER PLACE* – NOT JUST THE OTHER HALF, BUT AN EXQUISITE EXPLORATION OF THE MEN'S WORLD.

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an attempt to study the wondrous world of the men folk in Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place*. The men who played less prominent roles in Naylor's most prominent *The Women of Brewster Place* have carved a niche of their own in the present novel. Naylor herself would have, indeed, thought of doing some justice to the men folk, and would have given a voice of these varied profiles that complement her women folk. Be it Basil or Brother Jerome; Eugene or Moreland Woods; C. C. Baker or Cliff Jackson, each of them, despite their inherent weaknesses, follies and dreams thwarted, do have a world of their own. They explore their paths, struggle hard, attempt to establish their identity, and make their presence powerfully felt by dint of their doggedness and self-styled approach to life even in confronting failures, misfortunes and disappointments. Naylor, with her simple as well as powerful straight language, has really delved deep into the minds of these men which would have really been a tough exercise. Ultimately, the product, *The Men of Brewster Place* proved her potential. Hence, the novel is not just the other half but turns out to be an exquisite exploration of their men's world. Touching a brief note upon the origin and development of African American Literature as well a note on the chosen writer and her works, the paper proceeds to picture the men of Brewster Place.

The realm of African American Literature has undoubtedly added a rich storehouse of remarkable milestones to the larger canvas of world literature. Rooted out from a long standing legacy of tradition and culture, unique in every possible way, the Africans hailing from the nook and corner of their native continent have imported their talents in art and literature. It has often been misunderstood that, just going by literary outputs, the onset of literary creativity found its way for the Africans during the sixteenth or seventeenth century. But, the seeds had already been sown in their native land itself in various forms of art and creativity. John Henrik Clarke rightly observes, 'The Africans were familiar with literature and art for many years before their contact with the Western world.'

It will not be an exaggeration to find the literary men to place African creativity on par with English or American creativity. Ann Tibble had a foresight to bring in an appropriate remark, 'African literature and English literature, on the only possible basis, that of equality, have much to offer each other.'

Perhaps they always will have. Either one does not believe at all in the possibilities of such cross-fertilization; or one believes in it deeply.' The subject has gained momentum in today's world and almost all the reputed western universities have included it as a subject of study in their literature major. There are a number of men and women scholars and writers; some are real geniuses, collectively shaping the kaleidoscope of African American writing.

The magnificent array of African American writers includes, Booker T Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Martin Luther King Jr., Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou, Tony Morrison, Alice Walker, Rita Dove, Gloria Naylor etc. This list is not exhaustive, for there are so many others who also have adorned the bandwagon of African American creativity. Each of them has tried his/her hand in recording their myriad experiences through their prose, poetry, drama, fiction and other forms.

The second half and the close of the twentieth century brought in the popularity of the distinguished writer, Gloria Naylor to the limelight. Tony Morrison had a compelling impact on Gloria Naylor. Naylor has authored several works viz, *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, *Bailey's Cafe*, *The Men of Brewster Place*, 1996 – a non-fiction. She has also edited the anthology, *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers*.

Naylor has been very popular with her *The Women of Brewster Place* – a virtual journey recording the life and experience of black women at the small ghetto named Brewster Place. The other works like *Mama Day*, *Bailey's Cafe* are also commendably good and continue to sing her popularity. *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor's fifth novel, has given her the opportunity to see the other side of the coin. The men who played less prominent roles in Naylor's most prominent *The Women of Brewster Place* have carved a niche of their own in the present novel. Naylor herself would have, indeed, thought of doing some justice to the men folk, and would have given a voice of these varied profiles that complement her women folk.

Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place*, the counter part of her most successful novel, '*The Women of Brewster Place*' is a world of itself, though it is the other world, the orb of their men--the men of the women. This is not extraneous, strange or out of place. But it is a mirror of their men's (of course, their women's too) mixed missions, commitments or simply their goings. For a few of these men, it turns out to be a mirage, not a motley mirage but a mirage of myriad colours.

In fact, the world of men as portrayed in *The Men of Brewster Place*, as stated above is a convenient complement. Be it Basil or Brother Jerome; Eugene or Moreland Woods; C. C. Baker or Cliff Jackson, each

of them, despite their inherent weaknesses, follies and dreams thwarted, do have a world of their own. They explore their paths, struggle hard, attempt to establish their identity, and make their presence powerfully felt by dint of their doggedness and self-styled approach to life even in confronting failures, misfortunes and disappointments. These seven men who get enlisted and sandwiched between the 'dusk' and 'dawn' (deliberately different from the 'dawn' and 'dusk' as framed in *The Women of Brewster Place*) and just atop 'The Barber Shop' both individually and collectively contribute their own mite to build the wonderful world of black men beautifully portrayed by the artistic and realistic touch of Naylor.

It is usually opined that delving deep into the psyche of a woman will be a tough task or a futile attempt. Fine, it is also equally or even more difficult to unravel the mystery in the minds of men. To that end, Naylor has excelled in her exploration of getting into the caverns of the labyrinthine psyche of men. That is the success story of Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place*. These men can be called the essentials of the enclave. They do have their own say. Undoubtedly, they make their presence felt, meaningful, purposeful, and above all useful to the women folk, children and invalids.

Well, there would have been aberrations in the character of their men, may be owing to their reckless habits, malediction of forced social co-existence and other external conditions that make men the men they are. Negative forces have their say in a few women characters too. No reader of the novel will be forgetful of Evil Elvira and Keisha. Gloria Naylor believes that only around one third of their men come under the 'bad guy' category. Commenting on the nature of the black men, Naylor herself has stated in one of her interviews, "but two-thirds are trying to hold their homes together, trying to keep their jobs, trying to keep their sanity, under the conditions in which they have to live." Despite these deviations, they are the essentials of the enclave. The first chapter christened, 'Dusk' appropriately reflects the same through Ben's musings:

When a She was leaning over the windowsills, calling for somebody to fetch a Dollar's worth of cheese or a loaf of bread from the store, it was most likely a He who got up from the stoop or from a game of dominoes to rattle around in his pocket for the spare change to manage it. And I myself done helped many an old lady carry groceries up these rickety steps; young ones too if they was far gone pregnant or it was kinda late and I felt it just wasn't safe...They(the women) cursed, badgered, worshipped and shared their men...But, their men loved them too. (TMBP, 3 & 4)

Sociologically and psychologically speaking, there would always be gender differences in any human co-existences. There will be so many situations in which men and women have to come together,

work together, move together and such a living-along is inevitable. Surely, there will be adjustments and maladjustments in the social intercourse between men and women. It is a question of adjustment and understanding. From time immemorial, the women folk have stood the testimony of goodness, softness and tenderness and above all delight in extending a helping hand and of course, taking care of the elderly and children.

At the same time, men have to explore the external world, establish their masculinity in all positive as well as constructive way by performing tasks not suitable for the so called tender women folk. Modernity and feminism will certainly be against these views. But the point of discussion here is different. One cannot simply ask who are greater, men or women? Who can answer such a question? A decent line can be drawn this way: men and women are equal. A noted psychologist observes:

‘Men are more apt to be viewed as having traits involving competence, such as independence, objectivity and competitiveness. In contrast, women tend to be seen as having traits involving warmth and expressiveness, such as gentleness and awareness of others’ feelings. Because, our society traditionally holds competence in higher esteem than warmth and expressiveness. The perceived differences between men and women are biased in favour of men.’ (Feldman, 359)

Naylor would have understood these socio-psychological implications of men and women co-existence despite the gender differences stated above and would have considered a justice--one may call it an equal justice which would have given birth to *The Men of Brewster Place*. It is observed that the men maintain a fugitive tendency when life poses problems of reality. This would have been the case of them with regard to their existence and circumstances in *The Women of Brewster Place*. But, it is certainly not so in *The Men of Brewster Place*. Take the case of Basil, he doesn’t escape, instead willingly takes up the responsibility of being the loving custodian of those two fatherless boys Jason and Eddie. It is an act of benevolence with a sense of commitment which even a woman may be hesitant to take up. Basil gets committed saying:

We keep talking and talking about the situation with young black men. They’re an endangered species; they’re a lost generation; on and on...I can’t solve the problem of a whole generation; but there are two little kids right here who I can help. So, Why not? Why couldn’t I stay in their lives forever? (TMBP, 56 & 57)

Considering the role of Moreland Woods, it is obvious that he is a power monger and craves for getting placed high in the society. But, he has his own dreams and to realize them, has worked hard to

come up, though he does have his weaknesses. Such things will never brand him a negative character through and through. As a clergy, he preaches what his folk wanted:

he could be so comfortable at the altar...he enjoyed preaching...with a silver tongue. The man who could make heaven feel high and hell low. But above all, a man who could give them respite from lives that were over worked and underpaid; lives that no one seemed to care about except them and the Lord—and Reverend Woods, of course. (TMBP, 56 & 57)

But for the single character C. C. Baker, none of the men here in this novel can be branded as resolute rogues or rascals. Even when one is forced to draw darker streaks on their character, one realizes that they are the victims of circumstances. Further, the earlier part each of these men's lives would have had frustrating moments, thwarting incidents blocking their individual freedom to an insurmountable degree.

The Barbershop is the centre of these men's meeting and gossip. This retreat reveals the neighbourhood, their men and women and everything that happens in their life. Greasy, the one who has a quest for identity craving to be become a 'man', is one among the visitors. But Greasy's unexpected and unfortunate suicide here at the barbershop towards the close of the novel touches every heart. Jackie Thomas states:

'It is through Greasy's death that the Black men notice that, they are all the same, that their problems are also the same ones that Greasy once fought on a daily basis. They are all men who are hurting, struggling, coping, and trying to make the best out of what is left of their lives. Naylor uses these characters as an attempt to touch upon all issues that Black men face.'

To sum up, one can believe that in *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor has created a unique world of men with different hues and distinct nature, but all with their individual traits, hopes, desires and dreams. Ben has come alive to relate the story of each of these men; Brother Jerome, though retarded, through his piano blues seems to tell stories untold; Basil turns a new leaf, understands his responsibility; Eugene walks away from the normal course of life; Moreland Woods works well to woo power and glory, but gets pulled down at last; C. C. Baker remains as he had been with his reckless acts of violence and Abshu entertains the reader though in a lighter vein, sets the stage to dethrone Woods, for the preacher's going up would render many of them homeless.

Therefore, in addition to Naylor's other popular works, *The Men of Brewster Place* stands a class apart. Maxine Lavon Montgomery rightly comments: 'in Naylor's efforts to (re)create a literary space for the black man's story...the novel offers a much needed glimpse into the inner life of black men from a black woman's perspective and thus represents an important contribution to contemporary African American letters'.

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