

Beyond the Confines of Colour and Landscape: A Reading of the Select Novels of Gloria Naylor

D.Priyanka

Research Scholar

P G and Research Dept. of English

St. John's College

Palayamkottai

priyankagopi83@gmail.com

Gloria Naylor (1950-2016) occupies a unique position in the magnificent array of African American women writers of fiction. Quite specifically, she is much known for her unique presentation and discussion of the African American Community. What is historical specific in Naylor is always clean. That is, she has been aware of the eternally oppressive black superstructure which creates the undesirable condition of African American society. This paper, entitled *Beyond the Confines of Colour: The Affirmations of Sisterhood in the Select Novels of Gloria Naylor* is confined to the study of Gloria Naylor's select fiction. And for which, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* are taken for discussion. Obviously, Naylor's fiction is not patronized by the anti-white sentiments. Instead, her fiction more broadly expands with a new transcendental orientation which erases colour. Hence the novels move beyond the confines of colour politics only to expand on the arena of humanism. Hence consequently the novels gradually begin to assimilate the womanist precept in such a way that they form the centre of her novels. She is recognized for her outspoken female characters whose rights are denied and suppressed by the male society. She also projects the society within the society i.e she focuses the segregated African American society with the larger American Society. Naylor's attention is African American women, culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom and equality. Though Naylor settles in New York, she is an African woman by birth and tradition. Emily Dickson says "... she (Naylor) writes- and speaks- with the solid, decided vigour of someone who has given her subject its thoughtful due" (1).

Naylor addresses the issue of the African women subjugated by the white power structure. Her unique way of apprehension of life brings forth the gender issue as crucial to the country's wellbeing. They have to live as a suppressed house hold women. Just like her contemporaries Naylor asserts feminism as her theme but her style is unique and different from others. Naylor's novels highlight the Setting as a prior thing and serves as the title of the novel. She takes special care on settings which projects the concept of the novel. Even the opening lines of her novels

describe the background in detail, rather than a plot or a character. The intertextuality is another style in Naylor's novels. Hence the geographical connection is possible among her novels.

Naylor's fiction reflects the theme and characters on the basis of the settings. The African American backdrop plays a predominant role in her works. Her works include six novels, an edited collection of short stories, two theatre projects, and numerous articles, essays and notes. Among them four novels are titled in the name of the settings such as *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Baileys Cafe*, and *The Men of Brewster Place*. The mainstay of the novel is a woman. Naylor shows her keen concern on the landscape too. Because of her personal experience of emigrating from Mississippi to New York. She has developed a sense of place. And here her reactions to an interviewer warrants mention:

For various reasons, I am drawn to this sense of community. What makes a writer do what he or she does derives from so many rivulets of influences. I come from a very large, close-knit, and extended family... Besides, family and class community is my communal history as a black American. Our survival today has depended on our nurturing each other, finding resources within ourselves. The women in Robinsonville, Mississippi, who dealt with herbs, for instance, played a crucial role in our community. (24)

Hence Naylor shows enthusiasm in fixing landscape as a unique backstage for her novels. Naylor's fantasy is splendid in designing the setting for her novels. Meanwhile the setting impacts plot and character. The first two novels of Naylor *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* are taken into account to prove the predominant nature of settings in her novels.

Naylor has created "The Brewster Place" aptly for her fictional world where she asserts the seven series of black women's strength, struggles, and hardships of their life. She depicts the nature of the settings in the very beginning line of *The Women of Brewster Place*.

As quoted in the novel:

Brewster place was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company. The business and political dealings of alderman, "As an afterthought, they agreed to erect four double housing units on some worthless land in the badly crowded district" (*The Women of Brewster Place*, 1) [hereafter referred to as *WBP*]

Brewster Place is also shaped by the politics of prejudice. Although it was to become part of the main artery of town, the surrounding people were offended by the pungent smells of strong cheeses and smoked meats of the Mediterranean residents. "So the wall came up and Brewster Place became a dead –end street" (2). The wall off street is not so decent, though it holds the geography of the North. The life of African American in the South is worse than the North. So Naylor is very much concerned with the geographical world of the materialistic North urban town and sets it a right home for her migrated women characters from the South. The subjugated women cling, "to the street with a desperate acceptance that whatever was here was better than the starving Southern climates they had fled from" (4).

The protagonist is Mattie Michael. She belongs to Tennessee who ruins her life by a disdain man Butch Fuller and finds her settlement in the North urban region. Mattie cannot afford a comfortable place for her son and herself because of the northern economic barriers. Her settlement in North urban town pulls her out of home. Her son Basil is taken care by a baby sitter. Mattie's search for a new place after the rat bite of Basil reflects the socio economic basis of discrimination based on race, class and genders.

After countless attempts, she learned that there was no need in wasting her energy to climb to steps in the white neighborhoods that displayed vacancy signs, and she even learned to shun certain neatly manicured black neighborhoods. As Naylor puts it, "Where's your husband?" "I ain't got one." "This is respectable place" (*WBP* 29-30).

Mattie finds comfort in the hands of Eva Turner at last and owns a home for a temporary period. Again Mattie's journey proceeds to own a home because of Basil's unruly behavior. When Mattie arrives at Brewster place, she realizes the drawbacks of this place. As she feels, "Her eyes trailed slowly along the cracked stoops and snow filled gutters until they came to her building. She glanced at the wall and with an inner sigh, remembered her plans (in the sun porch) again" (54).

This squalid neighbourhood is the home of Mattie at last. Other women too share the scrawny neighbourhood. They are prescribed by their economic states. Hence, they are slowly turning out to be victims of the local Black power structure which is basically Chauvinistic. Naylor says that Brewster Place symbolizes the underlying racism which permeates the American society. Naylor says in one of the conversation with William Goldstein, "It was put up to keep apart the people who are down and out ... And despite the differences of their backgrounds, all of the women in the novel share the fact that they all live with this wall. And for me, that the wall

symbolize, simply, racism in this country” (5). Beyond racism, Naylor feels that *The Women of Brewster Place* namely Etta Mae Johnson, Mattie Michael, Kiswana Browne, Luciella Louise Turner, Cora Lee and the Two (Lorraine and Theresa) face the problem of womanhood in the Brewster place where they are undervalued and abused. The wall is the boundary of the Brewster place. The wall is the transparent confinement of race, class and gender to all the women characters. Etta Mae Johnson’s broad way ends at Brewster at last in the hands of Mattie Michael. Cora Lee’s small apartment is the confinement to children’s activity and Ciel’s world narrows within the walls of her apartment when she is instructed on the process of abortion and at Serena’s funeral. Hence the wall is a dual confinement for physical and psychological destinations.

Naylor’s women especially the protagonists attempt to transcend confinements. The sisterhood between Mattie and Etta overcomes the limitation of space. The motherhood between Mattie and Ciel has helped to recover from Ciel’s psychological confinement. The female characters of the Brewster Place share their love, affection, warmth among themselves. In the case of Lorraine, there is no woman in the block to help her when she is in trouble because she is a branded lesbian. Community has it leaning towards Christian orientations. As Naylor speaks out:

“The thing is, Lorraine wasn’t raped because she is a lesbian, the raped her because she was a woman. And,”... “regardless of race, regardless of social status, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience. When you reduce that down in this society even to something as abysmal as rape, there is no difference between women.” (*WBP* 5-6)

It shows that the women community excludes Lorraine and Theresa because of their lesbian relationship. Even the soft and sweet creature Mattie is not ready to accept these two girls. “... I can’t help feelin’ that what they’ re doing ain’t quite right. How do you get that way? Is it from birth?” (141).

In *Linden Hills*, the landscape is the affluent urban North. Even Naylor describes the historical significance in many aspects. She represents the setting as a powerful media against white people in this novel. As usual Naylor begins her first line of the novel about the landscape. As she writes:

“There had been a dispute for years over the exact location of Linden Hills... The original 1820 surveys that Luther Nedeed kept locked in his safe deposit box stated that it was a V shaped section of land with the boundaries running south for one and a half miles from

the stream that bordered Putney Wayne's high grazing fields down a steep, rocky incline brier bush and linden trees before curving through the town's burial ground and ending in a sharp point at the road in front of Patterson's apple orchard" (*Linden Hills*, 1) [hereafter, referred to as *LH*]

In this novel, Naylor shows her aspiration for black community and their superiority over the white America. The setting Linden Hills is the modification of Toni Morrison's "Sula" where the white farmer tricks his slave to accept the land. Similar to this aspect, Mr. Nedeed owns the entire land from the white farmers which is utterly futile for cultivation. Everyone laughs and teases Mr. Nedeed at first. But Luther Nedeed has built the cemetery and the small wooden shacks on the Linden Hills instead of farming. The development of Linden Hills is controlled by generations of African American, the Luther Nedeeds. Each Nedeed resembles exactly like the father. The second Nedeed plans to make the Linden Hills only for black people "Wad of spit- a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eyes of America" or "an ebony jewel that reflected the soul of Wayne County but reflected it black" (9).

Linden Hills plays vital role among the characters. Roh's description of the way in which the painter Schrimpf approaches landscape is highly illustrative.

As the novelist puts it:

(He) insists that the landscape has rigorously to be a real landscape, which can be taken for an existing one. He wants it to be "real", so that it strikes us as something ordinary and familiar, but, however, he intends it to be a magical world, that is...that even the smallest weed can refer to the spirits. (18)

The suburb's affluent black community is alluring and deceptive. Landscape is purely imaginary, though she offers perfect geometrical horizons and boundaries. She creates the setting favorable for her own community. Unlike the Brewster place, Linden Hills is prosperous and well settled. Linden Hills is not several hills but only a part of the hill side connected across by eight streets that curve around and down the slope. The African Americans' opulence is a distant dream. But in Linden Hills, it is a windfall or God send. Linden Hills cover the first Crescent Drive to Tupelo Drive. The residents of the bottom terrain are affluent and those living uphill are the poor and the weaker section.

Linden Hills is separated from the residents of poor Putney Wayne who are not allowed to cross over into Linden Hills. The separation of the lower class people from the Linden Hills has made the environment sterile. As Doreen Massey states, "All attempts to institute horizons, to

establish boundaries, to secure the identity of place, can be seen to be attempts to stabilize the meaning of particular envelopes of space time” (LH 5). The people are recycled in the static landscape of Linden Hills when they move closer to Nedeed. In the novel, “Whenever anyone reached the Tupelo area, they eventually disappeared. Finally, devoured by their own drives, there just wasn’t enough humanity left to fill the rooms of a real home, and the poverty went up for sale” (17-18). Luther Nedeed has the sole authority to make settlements in Linden Hills and has the strict control over boundaries because he is the president of Tupelo Realty Corporation. “Was terribly selective about the types of families who received mortgages... only ‘certain’ people got to live in Linden Hills” (15). In order to own a house in Linden Hills, one should follow a pattern established by Luther Nedeed. The property right can be discarded by Luther Nedeed at any time while the conditions get modified.

The sub plot asserts the rigid and villainy nature of Luther Nedeed to the readers. The self negation is the most prominent in Naylor’s presentation of Winston and David. Winston is forced to marry Rosalyn Tyler in order to get a mortgage on Tupelo Drive and deny his relationship with David. Therefore it shows the setting has the power to dominate the character and the plot. The individual’s identity is controlled by the background.

Luther sits and observes silently at the bottom of the V shaped section of the land but he is responsible for all the happenings above him. His patriarchal power limits women’s boundaries. He never cares for least respect in the aspect of women. He treats women totally suppressed and damaged. He is responsible for Laurel Dumont’s death. When Laurel argues, “We’re in the twentieth century up here at Seven Twenty-Two Tupelo Drive. And I have as much to say about the future of this property as he does,” Nedeed replies, “you’re in Linden Hills Mrs. Dumont. Read your lease...Howard Dumont has decided that there are to be no more Dumonts at Seven Twenty-Two Tupelo Drive, and.....that’s how things must stand” (LH 244-5).

To conclude, the novels *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* show the setting as predominant as the plot and the characters. Naylor has established perfect setting in the above novels which influence the race and gender issues among the African American society. The setting of *Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* metaphorically characterizes community. Hence Naylor’s landscape plays a predominant role.

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