

## **A Feminist Reading in Gloria Naylor's Select Novels**

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### **Abstract**

*Gloria Naylor's novels are the transcendence of boundaries. Forever challenging the arbitrary limitations that society imposes on the individual, whether racially motivated, gender – driven, or caste – generated, she demanded that her characters question their circumstances in order to change them. Naylor uses several mini-plots that highlight the lives of the individual women. The Women of Brewster Place examines the concept of human survival in all of its manifestations: the strategies human beings adopt to survive, the mistakes made, and the lessons learned. Linden Hills examines the destructive effects on, and the fragmentation of, the black psyche when, at the expense of everything humane, African Americans focus entirely on re-creating a black version of the American dream. Naylor tackles many different issues in Bailey's Cafe, the theme that consumes much of the work is marginality. In short, Naylor forces us to reconsider these characters only in the context of their individual lives.*

**Key Words:** *Human Survival, Fragmentation, Black psyche and Marginality.*

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## **Introduction**

African-American Literature dealt with the theme of black people and explored the issues of slavery, racism, colour discrimination, marginalization and so on. Gloria Naylor's novels are the transcendence of boundaries. Forever challenging the arbitrary limitations that society imposes on the individual, whether racially motivated, gender – driven, or caste – generated, she demanded that her characters question their circumstances in order to change them. Believing that attempts to circumscribe human movement and human interaction result in ultimate dehumanization, Naylor argued for vigilance in dismantling any and all imprisoning forces. Naylor uses several mini-plots that highlight the lives of the individual women. In this way, Naylor focuses more directly on characterization than on narrative movement. She still spins an entertaining tale, her methods are less traditional but more compelling.

*The Women of Brewster Place* examines the concept of human survival in all of its manifestations: the strategies human beings adopt to survive, the mistakes made, and the lessons learned. As part of this investigation, the novel focuses in part on parent-child relationships. Because parents want so desperately for their children to enjoy a life better than the one they have endured in the face of racism, economic oppression and political machination, they often overindulge their children materially or overprotect them in compensation for voids imposed by society. When Sam Michael discovers that daughter Mattie is pregnant, he is highly disappointed in part because he had cherished such high hopes for her and in part because he blames himself for having protected her so tightly from interaction with other young people, especially boys. He believes that Mattie succumbed so easily to physical temptation because she had been allowed practically no latitude for social interaction. Racked with guilt, Sam thinks now that he should have been more lenient with Mattie. The added irony to this particular story is that Mattie, responding to her own upbringing, becomes too lenient as a mother and, as a result, helps to create a disastrous situation with an adult Basil. Partly in defiance of her father and partly in need to prove something to herself, Mattie sacrifices herself, effacing her complete identity, in exchange for Basil's welfare: in short, she spoils him miserably. Both Sam and Mattie sacrifice for the betterment of their children, but their efforts go awry.

The issue of racism is presented in the novel, but it does not take centreposition. Since the novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, is well aware of its pervasiveness, Naylor resists the temptation to overexpose race. And to some degree, she preserves for her characters some sense of agency. Had Naylor made race a

major focal point, she would have run the risk of objectifying and thus perverting the characters. That these economically disadvantaged blacks live on a dead-end street within a stone's throw of a major thriving thoroughfare is proof enough of the prevalence of institutionalized racism. But instead of focusing on the sources of such bias, Naylor attends to the black response to these circumstances. Again, black resistance and survival are the focus.

*Linden Hills* examines the destructive effects on, and the fragmentation of, the black psyche when, at the expense of everything humane, African Americans focus entirely on re-creating a black version of the American dream. In this novel the dream becomes a nightmare. For several generations the Nedeed family has attempted to counteract the effects of institutional racism by constructing a neighbourhood so well maintained and envied that even some whites want their adjacent communities associated with Linden Hills. Ever since the original Luther Nedeed purchased in 1820 the extensive parcel of land that would become Linden Hills, the Nedeed family has carefully and methodically chosen the various residents who would make up this planned community. And every generation of Nedeeds has stamped out any perceived threat to this vision: removing any black family who defies the dream; registering Linden Hills as a historical landmark to protect it from encroachment by the white neighbourhood nearby; and in the case of every Luther Nedeed since 1837, seizing full control for raising the next heir to the Nedeed fortune as well as, for the most part, severing emotional ties between mother and son.

Naylor addresses the theme of psychological fragmentation in its full complexity, never reducing it to simplistic or convenient explanations. On the one hand, it would seem that everything connected to the Nedeeds is evil and insidious and that the residents of Linden Hills are misguided pawns in one family's psychotic game of domination. On the other hand, the Nedeed dream is presented as an appropriate response to institutional white racism in its attempt to provide blacks with a sense of security, self-definition and purpose. The paradox implied here is the focus of the text. If blacks succumb to racism, they are doomed; yet when they resist oppression they are fated for pain as well. Very subtly Naylor suggests that when fighting the evil of racism, by whatever means, one is destined to partake of a measure of that evil, especially when one loses focus on the purpose of the fight.

The attendant results of fragmentation and the pursuit of the unnatural, also engenders domestic abuse of women, a theme addressed in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Naylor grapples with the notion that black women ultimately become sacrificial lambs when black men battle the demons of white racism outside the home; they

receive the brunt of the anger that black men, for various reasons, cannot vent on white men and a larger racist society. In *Linden Hills*, even when the black man has achieved a level of success, sustaining that success renders him, in his own estimation, more vulnerable to the punishments of racism, and his concern becomes obsession that expresses itself negatively in a decided detachment from, or even anger toward the black woman. The bizarre nature of the emotional disturbance is made poignant in the Nedeed men's choice for wives. Every generation chooses a light-complexioned woman, yet each man wants her to produce a dark-skinned male like him. The Nedeed men want to prove the potency of blackness over any complexion less than black, but at the same time, they are placing the women in the position for blame if this potency is not proven. The woman finds herself in an impossible situation, harkening back to slavery days. When Willa Prescott Nedeed produces a light-skinned son, her husband accuses her of adultery, but if she, like the other Nedeed brides, is of light hue, then a lighter strain is could easily reveal itself. That such has not occurred in previous generations is no guarantee that it cannot happen in the present day. But the present-day Luther will not consider that fact. So just like black women during slavery, Willa is doomed to criticism and abuse no matter her action. In the slave woman's case, if she tries to reject the sexual overtures of her white owner, she is beaten or raped; then if and when she produces a child as a result of the attack, she is victimized again by her black husband or companion when he deems her blameworthy. It is this history of black female victimization that Naylor addresses here, a history that always has at its core white male machinations or the machinations of the larger white patriarchal society.

Naylor tackles many different issues in *Bailey's Cafe*, the theme that consumes much of the work is marginality. In every aspect, and on every level of the novel, Naylor explores the idea of defying boundaries and discarding labels. From the characters she chooses to create to the circumstances she crafts for them, Naylor embraces marginality as a suitable condition for real people who lead real and poignant lives. Naylor would write an entire novel that addresses the plight of the downtrodden shows an appreciation for those who are, and for that which is, decidedly different. Peopling the drama is a transvestite, a heroin addict, a bordello owner, a wino, and a nymphomaniac, among others. Each, however, has an important story to tell, one that taps into the pain of human suffering and touches the heart of all who hear it. Though they may be called misfits when perceived from an assumed position of normalcy, within the confines of the work each is as normal as his or her circumstances allow. In short, Naylor forces us to reconsider these characters only in the context of their individual lives.

Naylor's focus on marginality is a deliberate attempt to reestablish a commitment to the inclusion of all kinds of people. As a means of succeeding in this goal, Naylor must also impel us to question their understanding of what is normal or standard. No better example of the challenge exists than Bailey's attitude concerning the holiday season; he refuses to decorate for a Christian holiday that would exclude so many people. A largely Christian country like America assumes that Christianity is the standard religion or, if not, that it should be. Bailey puts us on notice that such a perspective is quite arrogant given the reality of the global numbers. It is this kind of awareness that Naylor tries to effect. Naylor blends several themes – marginality, change and transition, and respect for others' reality in an effort to encourage compassion and sensitivity for difference.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), she creates a surreal setting by blurring the distinction between illusion and reality, a signature trait in all subsequent texts. In the last chapter, the women initiate a plan to coerce their absentee landlord to authorize improvements in the otherwise neglected Brewster tenement. The chaos that has defined their past lives seems to be supplanted with a new sense of balance and direction. Only when one nears the end, we realize that the chapter was, in fact, a dream sequence.

The challenge to reality is also evident in Naylor's sophomore novel *Linden Hills* (1985). The Linden Hills community serves as the residence of upwardly mobile blacks whose very reason for existence seems to be further material advancement. Luther Nedeed, owner of all deeded tracts in the neighbourhood, takes pride in having established a black community that rivals many prestigious white communities. His life mission has been, in fact, to refashion the outside perception of black people. This pursuit of the American dream for the black community becomes a nightmare, however, when the majority of the Linden Hills residents seek material acquisition at the expense of emotional stability. Because practically no one in Linden Hills lives authentically, everyone risks losing sanity. This nightmare is inevitable when one considers the dehumanization required by material acquisition.

*Bailey's Cafe* is consumed with psychological fragmentation. The patrons who enter the cafe have recently suffered stifling traumas that have rendered distorted personalities. Not one of them finds easy answers to these dilemmas. Functioning primarily in a haze of confusion, frustration, and malaise, they are left to their own devices as they try, not necessarily to reverse their circumstances, but merely, to survive. Set in 1948, a year that marks an important moment in American race relations with the recent integration of major league baseball by Jackie Robinson in 1947, the novel anticipates the future of the African-American dream.

Naylor's novel details the struggles of several black women abject lives result in part from dysfunctional relationships with men. Naylor does not deliberately attack black men, although she does in fact assail the patriarchal institutions that belittle women, black women in particular. It was her desire to interrogate the interior lives of everyday black women and present a realistic portrait of these women while dismantling gender or racial stereotypes. Dismissing the caricatures of the mammy, the spitfire, the religious zealot, and the trollop, Naylor chose instead to consider substantive lives rather than surface images.

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