



MOTHERHOOD IN THE NOVELS OF GLORIA NAYLOR

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses one of the most integral components of African American female writing which has its roots from ancient African traditions which is Motherhood. Renowned Black female authors have all treated motherhood in various forms in their novels and stressed the important role it plays in strengthening their lives and that of the society. The authors themselves have looked up to their literary foremothers for inspiration for their works of art. They have tried to defy the stereotypical portrayal of a woman as mammy, domineering, Jezebels and Sapphires and even went to the extent of negative portrayal. The article stresses the importance Motherhood has gained over the back drop of slavery, Patriarchy and racism and how it counters the social ills. Gloria Naylor acknowledges the crucial role of motherhood in her novels and that it does not limit to blood relationship alone but has a wider scope which acts as a salvation for the women and provides her with the inner strength to not only fight it out for a living but also achieve higher entities in life.

KEY WORDS: Motherhood, African American female writers, Gloria Naylor

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INTRODUCTION

African American writings began as a response to the belief that only whites are capable of higher thoughts and producing great works of art. A series of African American writers began to flourish during the Harlem Renaissance though they faced problems in getting recognition. Their subject revolved around slavery, racism and their economic and social suppression. The black women had even more tougher time being exploited by their own men in addition to all the other suppressions they faced as a community. The women felt a need to be heard as a result of which African American female writings also grew rapidly producing a multitude of

works of all types mainly revealing their condition. The sufferings of one woman can be related and understood by another and thus they had only each other to support themselves. Mothers and motherhood play a very important role in African American writings which draws its inspiration from the age old African tradition of mothers playing a central role in their family arrangement.

African American writers themselves often call on their foremothers for motivation and guidance in producing great works of literature. The tale of Alice Walker looking up to Zora Neale Hurston for courage and inspiration long after her death is a proof of the above statement. It was

because of this, Hurston became popular and is remembered even now while all those women writers of Harlem Renaissance are forgotten. All modern black women writers look up to their literary foremothers for guidance. Coming under the cannon of these female writers is Gloria Naylor, who also was first inspired to write after reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Betty Thompson in her paper quotes Morrison from her essay, *Rootedness: The Ancestor as foundation* as saying that "the ancestors found in African American writing are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective and they provide a certain kind of wisdom." (178).

Popular writers as Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison have main theme as motherhood in their novels. Gloria Naylor is no exception to this tradition where motherhood plays a vital role in strengthening the lives of women and making them victorious. Motherhood though considered by blacks as precious, the society has labelled them as stereotypes of low caliber whose role is confined to play as sacrificing mothers and not capable of anything else. To break free these typical roles assigned to them, writers like Morrison and Walker portrayed mothers who don't fit into the usual role of a kind mother and have aspirations more than just raising a child. This is to break free the traditional idea of a supermother formula and ascertain her independent position in society through the literary world. Naylor's novels also involves motherhood as a leading theme which enriches their lives and emancipates them and earning them self-respect.

In an interview with Mickey Pearlman and Katherine Usher Henderson, she talks about motherhood being her prominent theme thus: "in finding out what it means to be a woman, you either accept or reject what the mother represents. A mother's influence is so strong, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes unacknowledged, that the mother-daughter conflict is going to show up in books written by women. I don't see how it cannot.." (72). Though she was skeptical about the treatment of motherhood in her novels because of

her own inexperience as a mother, she has had the privilege of enjoying the benefits of a wonderful childhood owing to the love and support of her mother who opened her up to the world of writing. According to Annie Gottlieb: "Ten or 12 years ago, the vanguard of the women's movement began exhorting the rest of us to pay attention to our relationships with other women: mothers, daughters, sisters, friends" (3). Through these relationships, women share common burden, lend and receive support and fortify themselves.

Motherhood in African American literature has a wide scope as in ancient African traditions where it does not stop with biological mothering alone. Any woman who offers the kind of love and support as a mother becomes a foster mother also called as earth mothers, other mothers and community other mothers. These other mother relationships are sometimes more fruitful than actual family. It also helps in bridging the void created due to the absence of a real family. Other mothers play major roles in Naylor's novels where they act as the strength of sustenance and source of joy in their morbid lives. The principal character, Mattie in *The Women of Brewster Place* acts as a surrogate mother to all the other women offering them love, support, advice in all ways possible and plays a heavy role in their redemption. Mattie saves her foster child, Ciel from destroying herself after the death of Ciel's baby daughter. Michael Awkward in his essay *Authorial Dreams of Wholeness: (Dis) Unity, (Literary) Parentage, and The Women of Brewster Place* opines thus: "Mattie's rocking allows Ciel to connect the pain of her own maternal losses with an apparently timeless—and, in a sense, equally gainless history of maternal pain" (54). It is not only the motherly instinct to run and save the daughter in distress that prompted Mattie to run to the rescue of Ciel, but it is also the loss of motherhood that connects their pain as Mattie herself lost her son, Basil who ran away from home. Loss of motherhood is a common problem stated in many African American writings arising because of patriarchy and matriarchy serves as a counter foil to the ills thus caused. Mattie's mother though not a strong character gives her utmost support in times of utter adversity. When Mattie was burdened with

an unwanted pregnancy and beaten by her father, it was her mother who steps in to console her thus in *The Women of Brewster Place*: "Ain't nothing to be ashamed of. Havin' a baby is the most natural thing there is" (20). The importance and spirit of mothering is instilled in her by her mother who stands up to her in difficult times. When Mattie was homeless, it was Miss Eva who shared her house with her and gave valuable mothering tips which would have saved Mattie her home and son had she paid heed to it. Mattie in turn mothers Ciel, Miss Eva's granddaughter and saves her life when in the verge of dying. Mattie's light hearted conversation with Cora Lee to stop producing so many babies shows her concern as a mother because Cora Lee's children are left uncared as they grow up.

Another earth mother created by Naylor is the principal character Mama Day from *Mama Day*, who is a matriarch to the whole town of Willow Springs, an imaginary island. She herself has no children as she was busy dedicating her whole life to serve the citizens. While Mattie possesses a magical touch of healing in Brewster Place, Mama Day possesses real magical powers of healing in Willow Springs. After the death of her sister Peace, she took care of her depressed mother and sister Abigail earning the title "little mama". "Being there for mama and child. For sister and child" (88). Mama Day is the great aunt of Cocoa but more than that, she mothers her along with her sister Abigail. Together, they make the perfect mother,

—I guess, in a funny kind of a way, together they were the perfect mother (58). Mama Day nurses Bernice when she falls sick and is even acknowledged by medical doctor, Dr. Smithfield himself as possessing knowledge of human body and medicine. Amy K. Levin in her *Metaphor and Maternity in Mama Day* traces the maternity and female headship back to West African women's traditions. She also denies the charges accused on black women that the matriarchs distort their children, who in turn disrupt society as given in the Moynihan report. But instead the novels set in small town communities "often combine two elements: a positive

model of maternity (or female leadership) and a trace of magic or the supernatural (78).

Mama Day derives her supernatural powers from her ancestral foremother, Sapphira Wade, who had extraordinary powers and controlled the whole of the island with her witch craft and sorcery. Naylor's use of magical realism is commendable as it lends an aura of mysticism and super power to the woman as removed from the typical portrayal of black women. Eve from *Bailey's Café* also acts as other mother to the women who come to her boarding house but wields a tough love because she hadn't got any motherly affection. She rehabilitates the women who come to her in a tough way due to which she is called "an icy icy mama" and restores their sanity and self-respect after which they decide to do whatever they see fit with their lives. She cures Jesse, one of the women who come to her out of her heroin habit. She takes in Peaches who has mutilated herself and gives her time and place to get herself cured and even tells her father that she will return his daughter whole. In a way, Mattie, Mama Day and Eve are all matriarchs and other mothers who support their foster daughters and save them from near destruction. While Mattie is a practical person offering others wisdom, Mama Day is magical and supernatural and Eve is pseudo real. Thus Naylor chose to portray strong women who refute any stereotype. Motherhood is portrayed in descriptive detail without being labelled as stereotypes, which empowers the mother, revives the daughter and fortifies the commune boasting of positivity to all concerned.

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