

A Patchwork Quilt: Short Story Cycle in Gloria Naylor's the Women of Brewster Place

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Abstract

Gloria Naylor, a celebrated African American novelist, presents in *The Women of Brewster Place* the struggles and hopes of seven women who choose to live in Brewster Place for some reason or the other. Though of different age and from different background, the women reach out to each other and together find the strength to resist oppression. Through short story cycle, Naylor establishes that however ordinary her life might be, in each woman there is something to admire and something to honour or remember. Its structure is an advantage to the writer to give voice to as many women as she desires. Moving away from the traditional form and linear narrative, Naylor has made use of short story cycle which suits her attempt to retrieve the lost 'her' stories and bring to light the experiences unexplored and excluded even by the male black writers.

Keywords: Deferred Dreams, Ignored Voices, Short Story Cycle, *The Women of Brewster Place*

1. Introduction

Gloria Naylor, one of the distinguished novelists of the century and ranked along with Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, represents the voice of the African American women hitherto neglected and misrepresented, through her writings. Her powerful portrayal of women and their struggle against racist and sexist society springs from her strong desire to depict women as they really were in life. Naylor explains to Toni Morrison in an interview, "I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a black woman and my perspective as a woman in general had been under represented in American Literature"¹. It is this lack of representation that made Naylor to write about women and the pain and untold sufferings in their lives because of race, class and gender and also the strength and pride they demonstrate to overcome them.

Naylor in her very first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) presents the struggles of seven women illuminating the diversity of the black female experience. The reason why she has so many women in her novel is because, as she admits to Angela Carabi, "I am attempting to create a

microcosm of the black female experience in America. ... People tend to talk about "the black experience," lumping it all as one mass searching but there is no one thing that can stand for that experience because it is indeed so rich and so varied"². Naylor's women are highly sensitive and their emotions are vibrant and undisguised.

Looking for the best way to explore her women's myriad experiences and their complex emotions, Naylor uses Short Story Cycle which has provided the writer with ample opportunity to portray the women, their subjugation and strength very effectively. In this paper, an attempt has been made to show that Gloria Naylor's choice of the Short Story Cycle is judicious as it helps her in exploring the marginalized stories of African American women especially in her first and the most famous novel *The Women of Brewster Place*.

2. Short Story Cycle

The short story cycle, also called the short story sequence, novel in stories and composite novel, is a collection of sto-

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ries that are simultaneously interrelated and independent. Forrest L. Ingram defines short story cycle as, "a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others"³. According to Karen Castellucci Cox, a story cycle "must contain text-pieces discrete and whole as singular works of fiction but together creating a fictional universe larger than any single narrative, centered in a multiplicity of characters and perspectives that belie a singular textual vision"⁴. The essential features mentioned by Ingram and Cox give the short story cycle an unusual structure that combines the features of both a novel and a short story. *A Novel in Seven Stories* is the subtitle of *The Women of Brewster Place*. This suggests that Naylor purposely wanted it to be considered simultaneously as a novel and a collection of short stories. She sought the advantages of both the forms for her book.

3. Seven Women and their Stories

There are seven separate stories in *The Women of Brewster Place* and each story is about a woman and her deferred dream. The cyclical form allows the writer to concentrate on one story and within it one moment or event, as in any short story, that was a turning point in the life of the particular character, emphasizing the importance of each woman and her experience. The novel form highlights Naylor's belief in community. Each story, though complete in itself, is a part of a larger story like chapters in a novel. This demonstrates the fact that no individual however unique her experience might be is alone in her sufferings. There are other women with different experiences but with the same intensity of pain, struggling to fulfill their dreams. The women draw their strength and sustenance from the love and support they get from the community as a whole. The novel form of the text asserts how important it is for the women to come together or bond together as a community to confront the oppression from different quarters. This community formed within the Brewster Place with Mattie as the surrogate mother to all the women in Brewster Place is an alternative to a patriarchal community where women have no place.

4. Independent and Intertwined

Susan Garland Mann discussing the essential characteristics of the short story cycle in her study, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, says that "the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them with-

out going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand...the ability of the story cycle to extend discussions – to work on a larger scale – resembles what is accomplished in the novel"⁵. Each story in *The Women of Brewster Place* has an end providing some sort of closure making it an independent story but some of the issues are left open without any solution being offered since it is also one of the chapters of a novel. The reader has to move to other stories, the other chapters in the book, one after the other till the final chapter, just like a novel, to find the answers to the questions raised in the independent stories.

"The Block Party" is the last story in *The Women of Brewster Place* and it is also the last chapter of the novel since all the loose ends from the individual independent stories are tied up neatly and a satisfactory closure is given just like a novel. Etta who had returned to Brewster Place disillusioned and dejected after her disappointing affair with Rev. Woods, is happy and is seen taking part in the communal activity alongside Mattie cheerfully, suggesting that she no longer is in search of an ideal life partner. Ciel who was seen grieving inconsolably for her daughter in "Luciella Louise Turner" informs Mattie in "The Block Party" that she is going steady with someone and is thinking of marriage. "I'm ready to start another family now"⁶. Naylor could not have portrayed women of such variety with indomitable spirit and determination in a traditional novel with just a heroic individual as the protagonist.

5. Eponymous Protagonists

Short story cycle is an ideal device for Naylor to present a variety of women with different problems that lay bare the individual characteristics of the woman and her dream. Each story is worth listening to and every one of them is significant is clearly indicated in naming each chapter after the woman whose life is pictured therein. The first chapter or the first story in *The Women of Brewster Place* is about Mattie Michael and is appropriately titled "Mattie Michael". The chapters or stories that follow have the names of the central characters as titles, except the last one "The Two" which is about the lesbian couple Lorraine and Theresa. This title is also significant as it suggests that the two women do not have individual existence like other women in Brewster Place. One cannot live without the other. They exist only as a pair⁷. Each story or chapter with the name of the protagonist as its title prevents them from being viewed as shadowy or insignificant members of families⁸.

The women seek the shelter of Brewster Place, a dead-end street cut off from the rest of the city by a wall, after suffering some kind of loss in their lives. The problems

the women face vary from one person to another. Mattie comes to Brewster Place when she loses Miss Eva's house, her home for thirty years. She had put it up as collateral and Basil, her son, on trial for manslaughter, jumps bail. Etta Mae Johnson returns to Brewster Place and Mattie, her childhood friend, when Rev. Morel and T. Woods uses her as a one-night stand and shatters her dream of marriage. Ciel, the granddaughter of Miss Eva, burdened with an arrogant and selfish husband needs Mattie and her maternal protection after she loses both her children. Cora Lee, a single mother with six children, living on Government charity coupon can afford only Brewster Place. Lorraine and Theresa move in believing Brewster Place would leave them alone to live their life. Kiswana is the only exception who comes there to live with them and work to alleviate their condition. Thus, the short story cycle allows enough space to the writer to record the dream and disappointments of seven women from different backgrounds. Once in Brewster Place, the women bond together and find the strength to survive. Though each has her own personal problem collectively they share the problems of being a black, urban and above all a woman.

6. Linking Devices with a Difference

The stories in a cycle are generally connected to one another through one or more of these linkers: common setting or protagonist, recurring characters, common theme, and narrative style. The structure of the short story cycle, with its individual and independent stories coming together to form a novel, lends itself to experiments in form and content⁴. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor uses not one but all these linking devices and with a difference too.

7. Other Mothers

The individual stories in *The Women of Brewster Place* are connected and become a whole when the protagonist of a story appears in others' stories providing support in their struggle to realize their dream or to hold on to it. Ciel seen as a small baby in "Mattie Michael" has a chapter of her own where she is a mother, with an irresponsible husband struggling to hold the family together. She also appears in the last chapter where she is seen discussing her plans for the future with Mattie. Mattie Michael has her story told in the very first chapter of the novel. She appears in Etta's story to provide the emotional support when her friend, wounded and miserable, returns home after Rev. Wood rejects her. She is also present to rock Ciel back to life in

Ciel's story. Mattie is in Cora Lee's story as well advising her to stop adding to her family every year. Mattie and Etta appear in "The Two" to make it clear to everyone in Brewster Place that the love between Lorraine and Theresa is as natural as the bond between them. The presence of a woman in one or more stories other than her own ascertains the truth that no individual exists alone or in isolation in a community. Naylor has drawn this idea of special bonding between women and taking care of each other at the time of crisis from the African American tradition of 'community othermothers' who share mothering responsibilities with bloodmothers.

8. Parenting

The independent stories are brought together as a single unit through themes like parent-child relationship, and oppression or betrayal of women by men in their lives. But, "Issues discussed in one chapter are presented in later chapters, though in altered forms" (58)⁵ and Naylor once again illustrates that each woman has her own story of survival. In the chapter "Mattie Michael" Naylor presents two types of parenting - Mattie's relationship with her strict father and Basil's with his lenient mother - and shows that both do no good to the child concerned. In Cora Lee, Naylor presents a mother who is interested in the child as long as he or she remains a toddler and grows weary and indifferent once the child grows up. Ciel's chapter highlights a father who disappears whenever the going gets tough but returns to claim his position in the family once the woman has sorted it out. Kiswana's mother, Mrs. Brown, is the only parent who bridges the gap between the mother and the daughter, and makes Kiswana understand that she is a part of her and the source of her strength.

9. Men, The Antagonists

The seven women suffer, both physically and emotionally, because of the men in their lives. All the three men - father, lover and son - in Mattie's life bring her pain and misery. Butch deserts her, after getting her pregnant, to face the fury of her strict father all alone. The father beats her almost to death and her son, just like his father, disappears refusing to accept responsibility for his action. Ciel, to realize her dream of an ideal happy family- father, mother and children- is ready to do anything to make Eugene, her husband, stay with them. She even aborts to mollify him when he complains of expenses, when she informs him of her pregnancy. All the women experience intense heartache and humiliation at the hands of the men they love and the

short story cycle allows Naylor to focus on each woman and her unique problem.

Naylor's stories differ from the traditional narratives in that they are situated not in a geographic area but specifically in a building - 316 Brewster Place- that serves as a haven to these women. The authorial narrative voice gives way to the voice of the woman when it comes to the telling of her story. Each woman is given her own voice and Naylor's desire to give their women the freedom and the right to tell their story the way they want it is fulfilled. But the narrative pattern varies from story to story. Mattie's story is presented through flashback that comprises thirty years of life to a moment; Etta Mae's story uses blues lyrics; and Kiswana gets only thirty minutes, the duration of her mother's stay in her room, to tell her story.

10. Patchwork Quilt

The stories may appear disjointed but they are connected to each other not only by the presence of Mattie or the narrative voice. The sequencing of the stories is important and carefully done so that each story is connected to the stories on either side. Discussing the works of African American women writers, and the writings of Gloria Naylor, Jia opines that they form a patchwork quilt. "The literary patchwork quilt of these remarkable women had been growing since Phyllis Wheatley laid the first piece down and since then, the different novelists, poets and dramatists have been contributing their pieces from a rainbow spectrum of colours and textures"¹⁰. She says, "Naylor's novels contain characters which link all the separate novels into a world of their own, just as patterns of the double-ring quilt "had to twine around each other"¹⁰. Applying this metaphor to her individual works, it can be said Naylor's text *The Women of Brewster Place* is like a patchwork quilt- pieces stitched together to form a larger pattern. The stories are like pieces in the quilt, separate but linked together, forming a world of her own, peopled by women who continue to struggle with hope, looking to better their lives.

11. Conclusion

Naylor has opted for short story cycle because its structure offers her freedom to tell stories of women hitherto

silenced and marginalized and at the same time focus on the bond they develop not with men but with other women in *Brewster Place*¹¹. Short story cycle is an appropriate form to recount the myriad experiences of different women and it has helped Naylor to fulfill her desire to give them a voice. Naylor brings in one story after another, each with its individual colour, complementing the stories on either side just like the distinct and separate pieces in a quilt that form a perfect design as a whole.

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