



NAYLOR'S TREATMENT OF MOTHERHOOD IN HER NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Gloria Naylor (January 25, 1950 – September 28, 2016) was an American novelist. Gloria Naylor's fiction illuminates black experience in contemporary American society from various perspectives. Critical reception to her works has been positive, applauding her brave sensitivity to the struggles of her characters. Most reviewers also cite her virtuosity in a mixed genre-an often poetic prose that strives for universal meanings while grounding the narrative in realistically portrayed incidents and figures. Her writing has been compared with the magical realism of the Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The settings and characters are set in a romantic mode that sometimes verges on the melodramatic or gothic.

In all her novels, Naylor writes about the black women characters representing various sections of society. The study attempts to analyze the bond that exists between the women characters, and Naylor's treatment of motherhood through her infinite variety of characters. A study of Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day* reveals the special bond that can exist between women characters, including the women of different generations. In these novels, Naylor presents the feminine atmosphere of life, and how far motherhood ultimately devours all her passions and desires. This motherhood nurtures all her sensibilities to live in a marginalized society where women can never be independent. The prospective interpretation is on the aspect of the horror of motherhood which is overprotection.

Key words: Motherhood, Women Characters, Overprotection, Horror

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INTRODUCTION

Naylor calls herself a wordsmith, a story teller. Her novels contain pieces of her personal life and familial past in the form of names, places, and even stories, and are linked together. She refers to characters and places in one text that becomes insignificant in the next text. Influenced by her involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses, she also draws extensively on the Bible. She has an affinity for apocalyptic images and

events, and uses them in her novels. Her works reflect a moral and spiritual sensibility. She creates corrupt fictional worlds in which characters must find some sort of sanctuary to be safe.

Naylor has written essays and screenplays as well, most notably adapting her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* into a popular miniseries both starred and produced by Oprah Winfrey in 1989. The miniseries was nominated for television, Naylor began her own independent Multimedia company called One Way Production in 1990, with the aim of expressing her images to a larger audience. Since then, she has received a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship for screen writing and participated in Robert Redford's Sundance Institute as a Sundance Fellow to work *Mama Day*, the feature-length script based upon her third novel. In addition, she has adapted Bailey's café for a reading at Lincoln center and for a performance at the Hartford Stage Company. She also edited an anthology of black short stories entitled *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to the Present*. Naylor presents the finest African-American short stories of the last three decades. Arranged in four thematic sections – "Remembering," "Affirming," "Revealing the Self Divided," and "Moving on" – the thirty-seven short stories in these actions brilliantly capture the various facets of the black experience in America.

The settings have heavy but obvious symbolic meanings that are derived from literary references: Brewster place is a dead-end street. Linden Hills is a modern version of Dante's Hell, and Willow Springs recalls the magical blend of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The weather and numerous details also carry symbolic freight, almost as much as they do such an emblematic writer as Nathaniel Hawthorne. In addition to literary influences, the symbolism seems to draw on Hollywood, particularly Hollywood's gothic genre, horror films; for example, in *Linden Hills*, the character Norman Anderson suffers from attacks of "the pinks" – imagery blobs of pink slime – while the rich Luther Needed locks his wife and child away in the basement. In all her novels, Naylor writes about the black women characters representing various sections of society.

Ashly Montagu, author of *The Natural Superiority of Women* (1967), Ellen Pect, author of *The Baby Trap* (1971), and Marcia Ann Gillespie, author of *The Myth of the Strong Black Women* (1982) have researched the area of women's role in society, past and present. These authors are unanimous in that the role of women is traditionally thought to revolve around sisterhood, wife, and motherhood. Montagu asserts that the traditional view of a married woman is that of "the wife of her husband; her duty is to minister to his needs and to those of their children . . . it is the wife's (duty) to look after the family" (166). Pect argues that woman is "regarded as a means to an end (propagating the species), "(161) and that the media have depicted woman as one who does not want this role of wife and mother negatively:

Writers, doctors, priests, society in general have viewed with suspicion the girl who didn't want to go through the birth bit. They've viewed her as though there were something selfish, immoral, or wrong about her choice to remain childless.(79)

Gillespie, more contemporary than Montagu and Peck, also believes that man moulds woman into the specific role of a mother:

We were taught that a good woman marries early, has children for whom she assumes primary responsibility, and keeps her marriage going. She must be prepared to make the sacrifices in any situation. (60)

Many contemporary women are not satisfied with these societal assumptions and conditions. They have begun speaking out against the mould they are being asked to fit into. The role-mould, however, is difficult to break because of tradition. The tradition, Montagu states, has been around for centuries and will continue to exist, but women can change it with "progress and invention in the area of the woman's place in the world... The changes will come gradually but inevitably" (165).

One of the ways in which women attempt "progress," "invention," and "change" is through literatures. Naylor's writing is not to just the elite or the highly educated, but to all. She makes her works accessible to the public. Through her stories of minority women breaking from their "mould," the common reader also seems the need and way to break from the societal moulds surrounding gender and roles. The

characters make mistakes. Through the struggle and human fallibility of these women, the woman reader glimpses light at the end of the tunnel of her own struggle to break the mould of the mother.

Women have allowed themselves to fall into marital roles and also into maternal roles. Often the second results from the first, though not always. Throughout history to the present, motherhood has often been the sole responsibility of the woman. This responsibility has many times created horrifying results. Motherhood signifies the presence of horror within this role. Some mothers murder their children and others are so overprotective of their children which sometimes results in the children running away from the family. But, Naylor, in her novels, presents an aspect of the horror of motherhood which is overprotection.

Mattie and Ciel from *The Women of Brewster Place*, Willa Prescott from *Linden Hills*, and Bernice from *Mama Day* represent the horror of motherhood due to overprotection. These mothers are over protective of their children and their care is more that they live their lives for their children. As a result, when the children run away from the house or when they die, the mothers feel desperate, and they no longer feel a need to live.

When Mattie, in *The Women of Brewster Place* becomes pregnant, her father kicks her out of the house. Realizing she cannot marry the unborn child's father, she leaves the family-home to live with a friend in another state. Mattie is determined to make a good life for both her child and herself. Instead of becoming dependent upon others, Mattie sets out to find a job. She has little money left after paying for her sister, rent, clothes, and food. But she is happy with her little child Basil. She walks thirty blocks on her lunch break every afternoon to see him: "She had just enough time to rush in, pick him up, see if he was wet or marked in some way, and then go back to work" (*The Women of Brewster Place* 24). Mattie is a good mother and she loves her role, even if it is difficult.

In the novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, Mattie's over protective motherhood is visible everywhere. Naylor presents one such incident in which Mattie does not have any second thoughts in spending on her baby who is bitten by a rat. Mattie does not hesitate to spend her savings to take the baby to the hospital. Mattie returns to the apartment, packs, and leaves. She is unwilling to allow her child to live a dirty, unsafe condition. She walks from early morning to early evening searching for a suitable place for her child.

When Basil grows up, Mattie cannot say no to her son. Her love for him is so powerful that she crosses the line between healthy love and unhealthy love. Mattie does not realize that she is harming her child and not protecting her child. She trusts him completely and believes everything he tells her, even when he kills a man in a barroom brawl. She does not care how much money it will take up for a bail. Basil, afraid of spending his life in prison, is too afraid to put his life in his mother's hands, even though she assures him everything will become all right. He knows that he is guilty, so skips bail, and finally Mattie loses her home and her son.

Mattie's love for her son becomes unhealthy when she lets herself spoil Basil. Basil knows very well that his mother believed every word he speaks and, that even if she does not approve of his actions, she would never punish him. Basil cannot trust his mother's words that all will be fine, because he knows that she could never see any wrong in him. Mattie, too, finally realizes that her unhealthy and overprotective love has spoiled her son: "She saw it now. There was a void in his being that had been padded and cushioned over the years, and now that covering had gone impregnable" (*The Women of Brewster Place* 52). Naylor has given a picture of motherhood that appears to be good, but also discovers the dangers underneath it.

Like Mattie, Ciel too represents the same horror of motherhood. She loves her daughter Serena so much that she will accept her good for nothing husband every time he returns. She knows that Serena needs a daddy. The last time she accepts Eugene back, is when she becomes pregnant. Ciel is very happy, for she wants another child. But her husband does not. They fight until he finally convinces her to have an abortion. Reluctantly, Ciel goes through with the operation, believing her life will become better, even though she feels that the abortion has stolen part of her identity:

The next few days Ciel found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world. Everything seemed to have taken on new textures and colors. When she washed the dishes, the plates felt peculiar in her hands, and she was more conscious of their smoothness and the heat of the water (*The Women of Brewster Place* 95).

To recreate the lost part of her identity, Ciel becomes over possessive of her daughter: She refused to leave her alone, even with Eugene. The little girl went everywhere with Ciel when someone asked to hold or play with her, Ciel sat nearby, watching every move. She found herself walking into the bedroom several times when the child napped to see if she was still breathing (*The Women of Brewster Place* 96).

Ciel cannot lose the rest of her identity, so she holds on to it as closely as possible. But one day she and Eugene quarrel over the abortion. To spare the child from witnessing the scene, Ciel makes Serena to sit comfortably in the middle of the floor with some blocks and goes to the bedroom to fight with her husband. Left supervised, Serena starts chasing a small bug and eventually crawls into an electrical outlet. The child used a fork to dig the bug out of the socket and it is electrocuted.

The people around Ciel believe that she is in shock over the death of her child. Ciel is really grieving not only the loss of two of her children, but also the loss of herself. "She was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her" (*The Women of Brewster Place* 101). First, when she aborts her second child, she feels that God has given her as a reward for being a good mother to Serena; next, she loses her first child to a fatal accident. Now she gives up her life to a trance created by her grief. She has lived, like Mattie, for her children, not for herself.

In *Linden Hills*, Naylor portrays the same picture of motherhood as she does through Mattie and Ciel in *The Women of Brewster Place*. The story of Willa Nedeed, the wife of Luther Nedeed, is full of horrors, which is a direct result of Luther Nedeed's misconceptions about black women and their lives. Like other Nedeed women, Willa's is a story of progressive depersonalization.

Willa is a graduate, self-sufficient, and an employed person. However, she is conditioned to believe that a woman is incomplete unless she gets married. Out of this social conditioning she marries Luther Nedeed and starts losing her own selfhood. Luther Nedeed marries her because she suits his need. The family tradition of Nedeed is to produce the Nedeed clan.

However, this tradition is broken by the child of Willa and Luther Nedeed. Willa is dark skinned but bears a fair son. Nedeed considers the child a bastard, and to punish his wife, he locks her and the six-year-old boy in the Morgue-basement of their home with a limited supply of cereal and water. The son, who is actually a Nedeed, carries the light-skinned genes of his maternal ancestors. Due to the ill-treatment inflicted on him the boy dies. However, Willa survives for quite some days. During her imprisonment in the basement morgue, she understands her problems and her destiny. Her future is nonetheless different from that of her predecessors. In her forced stay in the basement she learns the history of all the previous Nedeed women such as LuwanaPackervilleNedeed, Evelyn CretonNedeed, Priscilla McguireNedeed, and others.

Confinement in the basement forces Willa to confront the truth about her life. The basement provides Willa with the missing information which helps her to know her situation. The record, left for her by former Nedeed wives, reveals how badly she has been exploited by social conditioning. When Willa analyzes her own relationship with Luther, she becomes aware of the previous choice she had made. Her expectations of a happy married life end in vain. Luther never listens to her words. Only when Willa is locked in the basement mortuary with her starving child Willa does examine her life and thus become aware of the dangers of conforming to social expectations without questioning them.

Two days before Christmas, Luther intends to bring her out of the basement on the Christmas day. But by then, Willa has come to the following conclusion: She knew she was dying. Sitting back on her heels with the album in her lap, she could feel it happening: the passage of air through lung tissues that disintegrated a little with each breath; heart muscles that pumped and weakened, pumped and weakened with each surge of blood through the body; blood moving through each loosening vein, each tightening artery, nourishing cells that split and divided towards a finite end hidden by her

skin. The cold that settled around her and the emptiness within her helped to give the process a clarity that would have been lost if she'd had the freedom of the outside world (*Linden Hills* 266).

In the very place where Willa knows that cold fluids have coursed through the veins and arteries of the dead, she discovers her own morality and humanity. The information she discovers is as mentally chilling as the embalming fluids, yet her knowledge has the potential of preserving life as the embalming fluids preserve the dead flesh.

Once she understands the very process and intricate strategies the Nedeed have used to annihilate the self of other women, she examines and evaluates herself. She realizes that she is responsible for her life and that she is imprisoned in the cellar not because of Luther, but because of herself. Willa realizes that she had made wrong choices. Luther might have led her to the basement steps, but she has walked down herself and can walk up whenever she develops the will and courage. This knowledge gives her "strength" and "power," but she gets exhausted and falls asleep. Later on, on waking up, she accepts who she is, where she has been, and she takes charge of where she is going. She is determined that nothing will hinder her from putting her life in order. Hence, she tries to start her life again.

In *Mama Day*, Naylor represents the same picture of motherhood as she does through the characters of Mattie and Ciel in *The Women of Brewster Place* and Willa in *Linden Hills*. Bernice and her husband Ambush have been trying to have a child for quite some time. Bernice begs Mama to help her become pregnant and later decides to go across the bridge to Dr. Smithfield's for fertility drugs. Mama asks her not to resort to that path but to let nature take its course. A couple of months later, Ambush comes to fetch Mama because Bernice is extremely ill. Mama learns that the young woman, after being told by Dr. Smithfield that she could not use drugs, stole pergamon from the drugstore where she works. Bernice has taken over dose of the drug and as a result cysts have formed on her ovaries. Bernice is frightened:

Mama Day, you mean, I done taken them pills and sterilized myself? I ain't never gonna have a baby? The way she says it, all quiet, frightens Miranda some. It would have been better if she had cried and argued . . . fought back in some way . . . Bernice just curls herself up in bed, holding her sides, and shivers. It's too much for her, Miranda thinks, the body pain and now the head pain where in the blazes is Ambush? (*Mama Day* 76)

Bernice wants to become a mother so badly that she is willing to against professional advice for a chance of motherhood. Until she conceives she does not believe that she can be a complete woman to Ambush. Now that she realizes she may have injured herself permanently. Bernice is devastated.

However, several months later, Bernice finally conceives. She, like Mattie, becomes protective of little Charlie. She straps him into the car seat with two sets of buckles, even though she is driving no more than seven miles and no faster than twenty. She still carries him when he is four, seldom allowing to walk on his own. She sews an outrageous amount of clothes for him, buys him four pairs of shoes at a time, and changes his clothes and shoes twice a day, whether he is dirty or not. When Charlie dies, at the young age of four, in a hurricane, Naylor removes Bernice out of the story, probably suggesting that Bernice died along with the child. She struggles so hard to have the child, so hard that she has almost sterilized and killed herself. Bernice's idea of motherhood, like Willa's Mattie's, and Ciel's is dangerous and unhealthy.

Sometimes Naylor gives a positive picture of motherhood. Mattie loses her son because of her over protectiveness. When she comes to Brewster place, she has two choices – to isolate herself in her room and pity herself, or, as she chooses, to become a surrogate mother to the women in the apartment building. Mattie, an overprotective mother to Basil, could easily have become attached and overprotective to these women, especially to Ciel, her "adopted" child. Willa and Luther become locked in a death struggle that turns the Nedeed home into an Inferno. Having concurred with Mrs. Nedeed that "this house couldn't still be standing if there was a God" (*Linden Hills* 93), Willa serves as an agent of divine retribution, vindicating the lives of wives and mothers. Bernice had lived her life to become a mother, and when she finally does, she becomes extremely overprotective. When the object of her affection dies, she, like Ciel, loses her identity. After the funeral, Bernice disappears from the novel. Naylor's message about the unrecognized dangers of motherhood is scary.

The women of these works form a composite of mothers and motherhood. Mothers love their children; many even state that they love their children more than life itself. They would sacrifice themselves and possibly their children for the health and well-being of their offspring. Mothers make mistakes, a normal human characteristic. The good mother can recognize the mistakes and correct them whenever possible and will not try to give birth to a child to be a mother.

However, the black women must come to grips with three distinct aspects of herself: her color, her gender, and her need for female bonding. Female bonding does not unnecessarily mean that the relationships between women must be sexual; some of the relationships in the novels are sexual but most are not. The black woman's survival relies partly on her capacity, her willingness, to turn to her own gender for love, support, and understanding.

Andre Lorde, a contemporary black poet, in his article "Scratching the Surface : Some notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," states that black women have traditionally "always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily, and in the face of whatever other allegiances which militated against that bonding" (22). She argues that black women come together in a common bond of sisterhood for "wisdom, strength, and support." (22)

The novels of Naylor also devote considerable attention to the special bond that can exist between women characters, including women of different generations. The novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, his bond derives its power from the women's previous sense of isolation, from their mistreatment by men, and from their regenerative discovery, through suffering, of the saving grace of a shared experience. In the other novels, the power comes from the folk-tradition, from fore mothering, and from nature, as Naylor moves into the realm of matriarchal myth making. At its best, bond among women confers identity, purpose, and strength for survival. But although it is dramatized in her novels as clearly desirable, the success of the female friendship of the black women remains limited and potential.

Conclusion

Naylor's novels proclaim that a special bond exists between the women characters. Naylor eulogizes motherhood through her infinite variety of characters. She presents a feminine atmosphere of life and shows how motherhood ultimately devours all the passions and desires of a woman. Mattie and Ciel in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Willa Nedeed in *Linden Hills*, and Bernice in *Mama Day* are emblematic of such a motherhood. All these women want children, and when the children are born, these women devote their lives to bring up those children. But, when the children run away from the house or when they die, the mothers feel desperate, and do not want to live any longer. In addition to love, affection, and warmth, motherhood also includes horrors such as unhealthy love, ill-treatment, and overprotection. The type of horror of motherhood that Naylor presents in these novels is overprotection.

Nevertheless, Naylor's novels specify the emphasis on motherhood, sisterhood, race, color, and the feminine experience of suffering. A reading of her novels makes it clear that woman all over, no matter of what race or creed, experience similar situations. The black women of Naylor's novels serve as a metaphor for all women. They face the "patriarchal" definition of "women": weak, wives, mothers, subordinates, and slaves. Whether or not a woman chooses to remain in that role depends upon her willingness. The role also depends upon her ability to recognize the problems of the patriarchal definition, her willingness and ability to accept the fact that many men and women believe that definition and her willingness and ability to fight for change, not through just words but also through actions. Many of the black women in Naylor's novels have broken the confinement placed upon them as women and black women. They raise themselves to the level of challenging some of the stereotypes of the patriarchal definition of womanhood.

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