

The Power of Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*

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The central theme of all her novels, as Gloria Naylor herself reinstates, is women's love and support for one another. She is of the opinion that Black women, irrespective of how diverse they may be cannot escape the pangs of racism and sexism. Her feminist impulses find expression in her writings and there is no denial of the fact that Naylor under the stronghold of liberal feminist ideology strongly affirms, "Feminism is for me the simple belief that all human beings, regardless of gender are equal. But to be female centered is to see the world through the eyes of a woman. Women have to operate differently because of the way the power structure is... to be female centered is more of a cultural term, a humanist term." The novel *Bailey's Cafe* is a collection of deeply moving personal stories of women who find refuge in Eve's boarding house and live there oblivious of their degraded past. Naylor reveals an extraordinary ability to imagine, create and relate the stories of half dozen people nearly destroyed by their pasts, yet getting a glimmer of hope in Eve's boarding house. This paper makes an attempt to analyze the power of sisterhood that enables them to break the patriarchal structures and establish a matriarchal world of their own.

Key words victimization, dehumanization, sisterhood, matriarchy

From time immemorial women have been considered second to men who have exerted complete domination over women. Since society has been patriarchal, women have been relegated a secondary position which they have genetically imbibed and accepted as their status in family and in society. The status of African-American women is no exception to this. The multiple victimizations to which women have been subjected to can be traced back to their transportation from Africa to America as indentured labourers. The Black women's rites of passage from Africa to America was marked by a plethora of events full of inhuman cruelty and dehumanization of the women, being starved, raped and separated from their blood-ties. Black women find themselves in a double jeopardy of race and gender and their progeny even worse as they had undergone dependency and repression. Their goodness was not recognized but dehumanized.

Amidst such a life of privation, the women started giving expression to their suffering through their speeches and autobiographies. In doing so, they not only revealed the atrocities of life in the South, but challenged the North's claim of *freedom and justice for all*. Despite the obstacles that stopped the sufferers from giving expression to their experience, some Black men and women began writing their

harrowing experience of life in slavery. The Black women have suffered more due to the hegemonic attitude of the males. So their writing is definitely a distinctive medium of self-expression, where strategies of survival and success against tortures implemented to overcome these inhuman sufferings are clearly made. This creative response of novelists is mainly due to a kind of bonding they share with their own sex along with an awareness of gender bonding. To affirm this, the point made by Audre Lorde is quite authentic, “I write for whom a voice has not existed or whose voices have been silenced” (Singh230). It is evident when one reads how the essence of womanhood is brought out in Alice Walker’s writings after having personally struggled with pregnancy that has brought her close to the subject of death. She expresses this understanding of , “how alone woman is because of her body (Russell 119)”, in interviews with Black Writers. This imposed reflection prompts her to appreciate the need for unity among women.

Gloria Naylor, a contemporary African American Writer, winner of the American Book Award for *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) in 1983, has women’s love and support for one another as the central theme of all her other novels also namely: *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Baileys Café* (1992) and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). Her work *1996* (2005) can neither be categorized as a total work of fiction nor as non-fiction but a blend of the two genres. Her novels are marked by portrayal of women who are engaged in a fierce struggle for asserting women’s independence in an environment of poverty, prejudice and an almost crushing adversity. The links with other women in their community, a dependable sisterhood make the African-American women courageous and self-supporting. Gloria Naylor’s women are desperate, determined, resilient and assertive. In her novels, Gloria Naylor explores the relationships among women and provides insights into the importance of bonding among women. The various types of bonding observed are sisterhood, motherhood and friendship.

The Encyclopedia of Feminism defines sisterhood as,

The bonding together of women in love, solidarity and recognition of shared oppression, the first step towards liberation. Although the concept is similar to fraternity, it is not simply the feminine counterpart of brotherhood. Mary Daly has argued that it is in fact totally different, because women in a patriarchal society are conditioned to mistrust, compete with and betray each other for men, female friendship can be a form of rebellion. Many women have always instinctively recognized the importance of bonds between women. Feminism gave this a name and made sisterhood a major political goal (Lisa Tuttle *Encyclopedia of Feminism_1986* : 302).

In the novels of Gloria Naylor, the women characters try to break away from the societal moulds which the society is trying to fit them into. Right from the first novel, Naylor insists on the necessity of sisterhood among Black women as a key to successfully tackle the tyranny imposed upon them. In her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) which is subtitled – *Novel in Seven Stories*, she reveals the special bonding that exists among women characters who belong to different generations and backgrounds. Naylor focuses on seven women, struggling to survive in a world which rejects them, but

never feel dejected at moments of disappointment. Their sense of community and sisterhood enables them to deal with every day mishaps in their lives they face in the patriarchal society. In *Linden Hills*, Willa refuses to be a victim striking off her passivity. Larry R Andrews says “Her contact with these women through their documents is a genuine if indirect experience of black sisterhood” (CLC Vol.156:102). He further reaffirms the indispensability of bonding thus;

The conclusion of Willa’s journey to self-discovery is a dead end, but she has brought to an end the Nedeed dynasty. She has achieved self hood and poetic justice with a strength derived from recognizing the accumulated suffering of the Nedeed women. Thus a kind of sisterhood has been established over time, between Willa and her dead predecessors who haunt this house. She is restored briefly to life and strength only through her recognition of a common bond with these other women. (CLC Vol 156:103)

While Gloria Naylor hails the spiritual kinship in *Linden Hills*, in *Mama Day* (1988), she emphasizes generational or historical sisterhood. *Baileys Café* (1992) is a collection of deeply moving personal stories of women who are deeply scarred by life. The novel shows her continuing experimentation with patterns of narration, definitions of reality, and depiction of the supernatural. Centered on the New York City restaurant of its title and set in the late 1940s, the novel is orchestrated by the unnamed café owner, who is called Bailey. Just down the street from the café is Eve’s place, a brothel that only takes fresh flowers for payment. Presided over by Eve, who has suffered unspeakable abuse from her godfather in Louisiana, this establishment only accepts the particular women whose horrific backgrounds Eve can relate to. One of its residents, Peaches, is so haunted by her own beauty that she slashes her face in order to curb unwanted male attention. Another inhabitant, Jesse Bell, is a bisexual heroin addict whom Eve helps, recovers by means of brutal, hellish temptation. Gloria Naylor reveals an extraordinary ability to imagine, create and relate the stories of half dozen people nearly destroyed by their pasts, yet getting some glimmer of hope in Eve’s boarding house, where they have arrived at via Bailey’s Café. Naylor portrays the lives of women who have reached a point of hopelessness in their lives. Gay Wilentz in her review of the novel comments,

Bailey’s Café – a broad spectrum of the female African-American experience is more literary than polemical bridging ancient stories and modern problems to create a context for the mutilations women have suffered and a space for curing their (our) souls. (BC 15-16)

The partially dispossessed women of the novel subvert the authority that the patriarchy legitimizes. The oneness among the culturally diverse group reflects in the voices of women which stand unified in the ritualization of George’s (Mariam’s son) arrival. George’s long-awaited birth marks the hopeful beginnings for the pluralistic group present.

Eve, the first customer to arrive at Bailey’s Café though has had a very gruesome childhood, emerges to be a mother of all the oppressed.

It is in her highly symbolic trek from Pilottown to Arabi to Bailey's Café that Eve, who emerges as a strong yet sensitive woman with an acute business sense and a love for well-kept gardens, manages somehow to escape the tragic fate towards which she seems destined. Her emergence to that of an epitome of womankind has been forced upon her to provide for herself amidst dire economic circumstances. She is assertive and has control over life and successfully recreates herself, however in preparation for her role among a community of outcast women. She is the daughter of the rich delta soil with no clear-cut parental ties, and she claims that "Godfather always said that he made me, but I was born of the delta" (BC 90). Eve's song is replete with references to Louisiana delta soil. The name 'Eve' means "mother of all living things" which implies that she is self-generated and is what Karla Holloway, an American critic, describes as "the ancestor". Her songs also reveal a freedom from imposed gender-specific labels.

And the only road that lay open to me was the one ahead and the only walk I could walk it was the way I was. I had no choice but to walk into New Orleans neither male nor female – mud. But I could right then and there choose what I was going to be when I walked back out (BC 91)

Eve, after being thrown out of Godfather's paradise in Louisiana, finds her own Garden on this New York City Block and sets about helping other lost and abused women. The women find refuge in Eve's boarding house and live there oblivious of their degraded past.

All the women characters like Eve have experienced pain and loss, yet their perseverance and love sustain them. . The sustenance and enhancement of their lives is possible because of the company they find in Eve's boarding house .Eve is essentially a healer, for the residents whose wounds have been inflicted by men of different kinds. She is a redemptive figure for women like Jesse Bell, whose marriage is a failure eventualizing in the misrepresentation of her divorce. Eve cures Jesse's addiction to heroin in less than a month.

Esther, another victim of the evils of patrilineal ownership, speaks out her heart only to Eve as Eve is already acquainted with the life of Esther. Eve helps Esther to take control of her life, by providing an atmosphere imitating the physicality of her former abuse. She offers the basement room with the bulbs removed. Esther sets the rules in meeting, her customers, who must bring only white roses. In the space provided by Eve, the self-sacrificing Esther, who has been oppressed becomes a symbol of liberation. She has indeed moved a long way from a life of silent mortification to one of self-definition and self-intact. The abused woman Mary takes a long journey to end up in a place where women like her can go.

Wherever women like me go – and I'd turn my full face to him and raise my veil.

Sometimes it was embarrassment. Sometimes it was disgust. And many times, pity. But each time there was *the* question but without rubbing salt in the wound, Eve never asks her questions but, gently removes the veil to see the scar and murmurs "Beautiful" (BC 112).

Eve instills in Mary a confidence to accept no less than what she deserves, a man special enough to understand what the woman upstairs is truly worth. Mary is assertive that she does not respond to the cries of her father and rejects his invitations.

Mariam, who gives birth to George, is looked upon as one who gives birth to the future. Mariam, an outcast mother is a bridge, between the past and the future. Though Mariam herself is victimized, her presence marks an arrival of hope and life. Eve assumes the role of midwife at George's birth. Her tragic account formulates a vital sisterhood among women of colour from various backgrounds. Like in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor creates a community experience with lights everywhere, and everyone is present to celebrate the moment, and the whole community joins in song. Paula Barnes in her article "Blues Symphony" describes the event thus, "The various songs of the characters blend to create a blues symphony that culminates in the "good news": The women who are considered to be an international community of outcasts, join together to celebrate the birth of George "the child of God" (BC 225).

Anybody ask you who you are?

Who you are?

Who you are?

Anybody ask you who you are?

Tell him – you're the child of God.

One voice joined in. Another voice joined. And another. (BC 225)

Their voice united in a call-response pattern that expresses the hope for world peace.. "Naylor's expansive vision of humanity moves beyond racial, gender and ethnic boundaries as she affirms miracles, life, survival, wholeness, and redemption" (CLC Vol: 156 :129). Gloria Naylor has presented bonding of women not for claiming equality but for establishing a matriarchal world of their own.

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