

VIOLENCE, AN EMBEDDED DISCOURSE OF MULTICULTURALISM IN GLORIA

NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

SmritySonal¹ & Rajni Singh²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology,
Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology,
Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

Received: 10 Feb 2018

Accepted: 17 Feb 2018

Published: 24 Feb 2018

ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism can be illustrated on dual social reception, both being realistic and utopian simultaneously. Highlighting its former negative discourses, the African American author Gloria Naylor sets her novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* on an extensive multicultural background, creating a mixed, socio-cultural environment. Apart from highlighting the predicament of women, implicitly, the paper delves into the various dimensions of multiculturalism, the multi-social issues, existences and experiences of the coloured folks, concerning the black women in particular. It also probes into the studies that become a necessary offshoot of the concept of multiculturalism particularly in an African American context, governing the issues related to identities, sexualities and psychological degeneration.

KEYWORDS: *Multiculturalism, Violence, Black Women, Gloria Naylor*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of multiculturalism is governed by a multiplicity in viewpoints. Some critics, following an optimistic view towards it, see multiculturalism as a compatible intermingling of different cultures under one single roof, while, others view it as an utopian delusion that consistently breaks the national coherence and secularism thereby fostering racial, cultural, ethnic or color differences. Rejecting the former discourse, the concern of this discussion is solely grounded on the latter aspect of multiculturalism that talks about its undesirable effects in a particular socio-cultural group and to a larger multicultural nation. Unlike Canada where multiculturalism has successfully survived, the nations like Germany, Yugoslaviana or United Kingdom have largely experienced the latter, negative impacts of multiculturalism. However, the discourse of multiculturalism has attracted many writers from different parts of the world and in particular those living in these multicultural nations itself. Its impact, direct or indirect, is seen through their writings. Our discussion tends to study multiculturalism in an unfavorable ground, portraying it to be something that hinders the true assimilation of a nation thereby leading to its balkanization. Thus, this discussion shall solely focus on how multiculturalism leads to violence and destruction.

The United States, being a multicultural nation is interpreted as a "Salad bowl". Its history of the institution of slavery, doctrine of racism and implementation of racial segregation has throughout prevented what is called the 'true assimilation' in this nation. The African American novelist Gloria Naylor, in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) while

dealing along with the dominant feminist themes of the life and experiences of black women also deals with the issues of violence that seem to pose its intricate roots on the adversities of multiculturalism. In the novel, the issue of violence is seen manifesting itself through the complexities of multiculturalism, viewing its adverse effects that led to psychological distortions, identity crisis and physical abuse among the people of a particular ethnic group. The author thus, by creating a fictional setting of Brewster place is capable of successfully dealing with the real life issues, retelling how the stings of racism and wounds of segregation has divided the human race, leading to destruction and degeneration. In one of her interviews with Angels Carabi, Naylor talked of her personal experience of racism and segregation which was felt in a direct manner in the South while in the North it was disguised in the air of subtlety, as she says "Racism here was more subtle" (1991, p. 24). In another interview with Ashford, speaking on the racial segregation of her nation the author says "I think we're still struggling under the scars of slavery, and I think that the Civil Rights Movement did not work. The country is almost as divided as before" (2005, p. 74-75).

"[...] worse than life, worse than death": The trauma of psychological abuse

In the novel, one of the cases of intense psychological damage is witnessed in the character of Kiswana Browne, who is born of a white father and a black mother, a condition that pulled her still closer to experience a continuous clash of culture, both within and around her. Though she is an outcome of the union of black and white parents, she is always drawn towards the black. She celebrates negritude and her being a black. Though she knew that Black is something to do with negativity, yet she overlooks the fact and takes pride in everything that would contribute to her identity as a black. Regarding such obsessions with one's own identity, Amartya Sen in his book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* proclaims, "A sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence" (Sen, 2007, p.1). Kiswana bears a light complexion with straight hairs. She often complains her mother for her physical dissimilarity with her race that does not project her as a black. In college, she participates in all sorts of revolutions for the emergence of black republicans. She tries to curl her straight hair in order to resemble a 'negro' and changes her original name Melanie to adopt a name that sounds more African—'Kiswana'. Kiswana's rage and her hidden psychological turbulence is reflected even in her conversations with her black mother, when she says:

"Oh, God, I can't take this anymore. Trying to be something I'm not—trying to be something I'm not mama! Trying to be proud of my heritage and the fact that I was of African descent. If that's being what I'm not, then I say fine. But I'd rather be dead than be like you—a white man's nigger who's ashamed of being black!" (*TWBP*, 1983, p. 85)

Sen, also while discussing the negative aspects of such identical obsessions writes, "And yet identity can also kill—and kill with abandon. A strong—and exclusive—sense of belonging to one group can in many cases carry with it the perception of distance and divergence from other groups" (Sen, 2007, p.1-2). This proves to be true in the case of Kiswana. Her strong sense of belonging with the 'blacks' fosters her rage and incompatibility towards the whites or any other racial or cultural groups. While her physique prevents her from identifying herself with the blacks, eventually her psyche refrains her from relating herself to the whites as well. It manifested itself into a state of "identity disregard" according to which an individual is seen continuously "ignoring" or "neglecting" any sense of identity with others (Sen, 2007, p. 20).

Gloria Naylor, also through her male characters like Fuller and Woods tries to portray the ever-persisting psychological turbulences of what she calls it, to be a "scarred psychology" (Ashford, 2005, p. 86). These characters of color in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, seems to be deeply affected by the prevailing adverse notions of

Colonialism and Euro-Centrism. The notions which, since ages have developed a negative impact on the minds of a black, colonizing their psychology and accordingly streamlining their thoughts. Thus the thought of a man of color regarding himself and his physical appearance is always shaped on negative grounds, generating a kind of shame for himself and his entire race. This is the result of the deep-seated psychological upheaval taking place among the blacks as a result of racism. Apart from the “scarred psychology” of Kiswana, this implicit form of long-condensed and genetically-transmitted psychological abuse is seen in the daily conversations and dialogues of these male characters like Butch Fuller and also in the prayers of Reverend Woods. For instance, in a conversation between Mattie Michael and Butch Fuller (in the 1st section of the novel entitled ‘Mattie Michael’), while they were walking under the scorching sun of April and Fuller was trying to protect his skin from getting dark in the sun, he asserts, “Too much sun on the main road, [...] And since black means poor in these parts—Lord knows, I couldn’t stand to get no poorer”(p. 12). A similar outcome of the deep seated psychological violence is cited in the speech of Reverend Woods when he, while in the process of preaching delivers these lines, “Yes, Lord—grind out the unheated tenements! Merciful Jesus—shove aside the low-paying boss man. Perfect Father—fill me, fill me till there’s no room, no room for nothing else, not even that great big world out there that exacts such a strange penalty for my being born black” (p. 65).

This way, Naylor extends the Euro-centric notions of blackness through the dialogues and thoughts of her characters that are so much burdened with the load of such notions in the form of psychological violence that they are bound to reflect through their daily conversations and psychologies. Here violence resulting from racism in the form of psychological destruction is seen as a driving force for the generation of dialogues in the novel.

Fall of the “unstrung puppet”: sexual violation as an outcome of racism

In the novel, the problem of multiculturalism is subtly dealt with a biangular discourse in section entitled “The Two”. While the first angle is grounded in the context of the differences in skin color of ‘the two’, the second is fueled by the uncanny sexuality shared between ‘the two’ women. Here, “The Two”, stands both as a suitable title for a particular section in the novel as well as for the lesbian couple—Lorraine and Theresa. Naylor is very particular in her description of the external features of these two characters. She describes Lorraine as “the lighter, skinny one” who was “readily accepted” (p. 129) by the women of Brewster Place. Theresa on the other hand, is described as “the short dark one—too pretty, and too much behind”, for whom “breaths were held a little longer” (p. 129). The phrases apparently tend to be describing the physical attributes of the two ladies. Though at a deeper level, it is a more racist approach abusing the doctrine of multiculturalism. The bodies of these women, therefore become a reflection of one’s own (racist) perception, the stereotypes governing human existence, as it is truly said that, “women’s bodies [the black women in particular], in patriarchal societies, are fashioned into conventional notions of femininity, and if the body resists the disciplining process, “subtle coercion” is exercised” (Ghosh et al., 2017, p. 219).

Lorraine’s “lighter” skin color and “skinny” body type associate her more to a white occidental woman than to a black woman of color. On the other hand, Theresa’s “dark” complexion and “short” body type with “too much behind” associates her with a woman of color, thereby projecting her as the typical oriental women of the East. A more realist approach of the portrayal reflected racism when the author describes Theresa pertaining to the stereotypical norms of a black female body objectifying and presenting it as something that the black feminist critics like Hooks term it to be “transgressive”, “promiscuous” or “sexually deviant” (Hooks, 1982; Young, 2007), when Naylor further writes, “And she

insisted on wearing those thin Qiana dresses that the summer breeze molded against the maddening rhythm of the twenty pounds of rounded flesh that swung steadily down the street” (p. 129-130).

Apart from their opposing physical appearance both Lorraine and Theresa participate equally in the bond of homosexuality that exists between the two. Lorraine, because of her skin color and body type that resembles the occidental woman is viewed as an ‘other’s-other’ in the conservative black society of Brewster Place. In relation to the multicultural context, Lorraine is viewed under two lights, one as an ‘occidental’ and the other as a ‘lesbian’, where both sets her culturally out of the mainstream. Even though Theresa’s black body is stereotypically viewed as something that Hooks calls “expendable” with its “accessibility” and “availability” (Young, 2007, p. 13) the trauma of rape befalls solely upon the shoulders of Lorraine, assuming her to be the most suitable victim. By violating Lorraine’s “tall” and “yellow” body, C.C. Baker and his friends consider that they have culturally overpowered the “others”. This ironical ideology of cultural overpowering is reflected through the dialogues of Baker when he persistently abuses Lorraine while raping her,

““I am gonna show you somethin’ I bet you never seen before.” C.C. Baker takes the back of her head, presses it into the crotch of his jeans, and jerkily rubs it back and forth while his friends laugh, “Yeah, now don’t that feel good? See, that’s what you need. But after we get through you, you aren’t never gonna wanna kiss no more pussy” (TWBP, 1983, p. 170).

Such abusive lingual addressing reflects a faulty cultural overpowering of patriarchy over heterosexuality (lesbianism) where the former tries to restore his lost hegemony over the latter through sexual violence. This idea of violence against gay and lesbians is dealt with in one of the sections (entitled ‘*Violence against Gay and Lesbian People*’) in Beckett and Macey’s essay *Race, Gender and Sexuality: The Oppression of Multiculturalism*. According to this analysis, the society and its people (in particular those adhering to the *Qu’ran* and the Bible) “see it as their duty to physically harm people who are not heterosexual” (2001, p. 313).

While regarding the physical (ie., the racial and color) context, the rape of Lorraine reminds us of the episode of the rape of Lynne in Alice Walker’s *Meridian*. Like the rape of Lynne, Lorraine’s rape too, can be read as a black man’s fallacious act for his “need to liberate himself from white oppression by taking revenge upon white women” (Lauretqtd. in Tanritanir and Aydemir, 2012).

The other female characters in the novel, like Ben’s daughter Etta, and Mattie too, endure sexual violations in the garb of either slavery or marriage or may be through the expression of momentary love. While Ben’s daughter embraces sexual harassment by a white master as a compromise at the hands of her poverty, Etta is used for physical gratification by Woods suggesting false intentions of marriage. Also, Mattie is made to offer her virginity to Butch just to fetch his thirst that always lusted for her “full round breasts” (p. 17) and “high round behind” (p. 9).

In all the cases of rape and sexual assault of these women of Brewster Place the root cause of violence is seen to be arrested in issue of multiculturalism that attacks the harmonious cultural hybridity of a society nurturing racism and intolerance. While Lorraine’s rape was a result of racial intolerance, the sexual use of Ben’s daughter, Etta and Mattie depicts the racial segregation of black women projecting them as what Hooks calls the most “undesirable” yet the most “accessible” beings as per the established Euro-centric norms (Hooks, 1982). Black men tend to rape their own women in their own frustrations as a result of their “scarred psychologies” that generates from these cultural differences. While dealing with the atrocities inflicted on the black women, the writer intends to “touch(es) upon the larger black feminine

sensibilities. She narrates the lives of these women with a purpose— to legitimize their female self, its history and culture. In the process of unraveling the hidden histories of the characters, she invents a new poetics” (Sonal and Singh, 2017, p.209).

CONCLUSIONS

According to critics like Markus, Plaut, Wolsko et al., the notion of multiculturalism was established to stress on the importance of cultural diversities, the recognition of diverse ethnic, racial and cultural groups and the explicit valuing of this diversity in the mainstream settings. This traditional ideology, though many a times seemed to fail in achieving its proposed goals. According to Plaut's unfavorable concept of multiculturalism, it is defined as something that stands in contrast to the so assumed concept of 'color-blindness' that overlooks any existing differentiation in terms of one's skin colour. Multiculturalism thus celebrates differences, intolerance and violence. A report on multiculturalism under the study of American Nationalist Party, read by the heading, 'Multiculturalism, Racism, Violence and Balkanization', attacks its ideology of racial differences claiming multiculturalism to have been at its strongest when racism is at its best. It also proclaims that multiculturalism is the highest form of racism. Writers have taken this issue as a nexus for their discussion to portray one's historical, social and personal predicaments. In the case of some of the black female writers and black women in general, it goes "indisputable that their own victimization has led these women towards social activism" (Das and Singh, 2016, p. 219). Though, multiculturalism projects its diverse discourses both good and bad, Gloria Naylor still finds herself and her entire race struggling under the scars of racism and slavery (Carabi, 1991). Her novel *The Women of Brewster Place* thus projects the problem of multiculturalism that degrades the larger human race necessarily leading to violence, thereby portraying violence as an embedded discourse of Multiculturalism.

REFERENCES

1. Ashford, Tomeiko R. (2005). "Gloria Naylor on Black Spirituality: An Interview". *MELUS*, 30(4),7387. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029635>
2. Beckett, Clare. and Marie Macey (2001). "Race, Gender and Sexuality: The Oppression of Multiculturalism". *Women's Studies International Forum* 24(3/4), 309-319.
3. Carabi, Angels. (1991). "Interview with Gloria Naylor." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*.n., 23-35.
4. Das, Ankita. and Rajni Singh (2016). "Empowering Lives: The Journey of Jaycee Dugard, Elizabeth Smart, and Mukhtar Mai". *Journal of Dharma* 41(1), 201-220.
5. Ghosh, Soumya M. and Rajni Singh. (2017). "Violated Bodies and the Reclamation of Female Subjectivity in Usha Ganguli's *Ham Mukhtārā* and Maya Krishna Rao's *Walk*". *Archiv Orientalni* 85,219-252.
6. Hooks, Bell (1982). *Ain't I A Woman: Black Woman and Feminism*. Pluto Press: London. Print.
7. Naylor, Gloria. (1983). *The women of Brewster Place*. U.S.A: Penguin books.
8. Niru Sharan, *Violence Against Women and the Laws in India*, *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature (IMPACT: IJRHAL)*, Volume 5, Issue 7, July 2017, pp. 197-202

9. Sen, Amartya. (2007). *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. U.S.A: Penguin Books.Print.
10. Sonal, Smrity.and Rajni Singh (2017). "Black Female Bodies and Resistance in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*".*Rupkatha: Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*9(2),203-211.Retrieved from <https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v9n2.21>
11. Tanritanir, Bulent C.and Y. Aydemir (2012). "The Suffers of Black Women in Alice Walker's *Novelsthe Color Purple and Meridian* and Toni Morrison's *Novels Beloved and The Bluest Eye*".*The Journal of International Social Research* 5(23),437-444.
12. Rajesh Kumar MD, *Domestic Violence Against Women in Indian Context: Causes and Impact on Family*, *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Applied, Natural and Social Sciences (IMPACT: IJRANSS)*, Volume 5, Issue 8, August 2017, pp. 27-34
13. Young, Tiffany Ann (2007). *Rape in Contemporary American Literature: Writing Women As Rapable*.(The Florida State University)Electronic Theses, Treaties and Dissertations. Paper 868.