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From Margin to Centre: Reading Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*

Anurag Kumar, M.A. and Smita Jha, Ph.D.



Gloria Naylor

Abstract

Bell Hooks begins the preface of her benchmark book, *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* as “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (Hooks, ix). The statement comprises of the whole lot of black feminist theory which bears the marginality in the overall discourse of feminism as a genre. Though black feminism is a part of mainstream feminist discourse, it has been pushed into the margins because of its peculiar but crucial issues of race and class. Black female writers have contributed to the separation of black feminism from the mainstream white feminism by portraying such characters that are constantly used to question the issues and strategies of white feminism by putting them into a context of racial and class conflict in order to make realize the importance of margin to the center.

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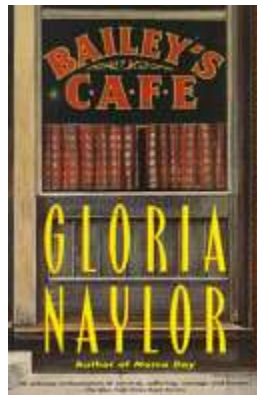
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The works of Gloria Naylor are quite relevant in this tradition as she carefully chooses her characters from the edge of the world where they have to constantly struggle to support themselves and one another to survive in a racial, communal and sexist world. The present paper makes an in depth analysis of Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* and assess how this novel makes a shift from and resistance against mainstream white feminist concerns. It also explores as how racial and class conflict present in the society further aggravates their problem.

Key Words: Marginality, Resistance, Feminist Discourse, Black Feminism



Valorizing Western Literary Canon?

Karen Schneider in her article, “Gloria Naylor’s Poetics of Emancipation” defends Naylor from the allegations labeled against her as “disparaging representations of black male characters, reliance on Western cultural narratives, and even valorization of Western literary canon” (02). She finds Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café* as “destabilize[ing] absolute ontological boundaries defined by genre, gender politics, class, and cultural/literary tradition” (03). Thus, she transcends from what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called “discursive indenture” (1989, 25).

Tar, Coal and Ugly

Karen also points out that in her revision of Judeo-Christian mythic discourse, Naylor modifies the contents and scope, “infusing it with feminist and African American significance” (10). She gives an example of the character of Esther. “Unlike Queen Esther, whose beauty gains her permission to speak and to act, Naylor’s “Tar. Coal. Ugly” (95) Esther finds herself in a dark, silent paralysis, sealed by betrayal and complicity” (Schneider 10).

In her article entitled, “Africana Womanist Revision in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and *Bailey’s Café*”, Dorothy Perry Thompson points that there are critics who find Naylor constantly referring to western literary classics such as Chaucer and Shakespeare and using western literary theories such as Derrida which the critics trace have come from her education in western academia. However, Dorothy claims, Naylor presents “discursive practices of an “Other” culture” and since “as gendered ideology that does not separate itself from that culture” her approach cannot be simply termed as “feminist” (Thompson, 89).

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A Womanist Approach

Comparing Naylor's novels with Walker and Morrison, Dorothy proves that her approach is more womanist than these two writers as Naylor's *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Café* contains such elements as "the ancestor/goddess of African tradition, necromancy, ritual, spiritual exploration/investigation, communalism, and general celebration of culture" along with discursive strategic elements as "multiple-voiced narration, conflation of temporal and spatial realities, linguistic appropriateness, and a matricentric focus" (92).

Need for a Different Kind of Feminist Approach

What is common in both the above discussed papers is that they want to indicate that a different approach altogether is required to understand Gloria Naylor as a black feminist writer. Continuing the tradition, this paper explores the peculiar lives of seven black women portrayed in Naylor's *Bailey's Café* to assert the need of a different kind of feminist approach to understand and analyze the lives of black women rather than relying upon mainstream white feminist discourse. It also faults the white feminism for being narrow to the extent as not been able to penetrate into the discourse of black women's concerns. The novel appears to be revolutionary in the sense that it puts the black women at the center of feminist discourse who have previously been pushed into the margins in the mainstream white feminist discourse and that marks the black women's move from margin to center or what Montgomery says:

The liberation Naylor fictionalizes is to be global in scope and will include men and women worldwide. Naylor's texts imply that routine tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and mothering can be means of furthering the cause of freedom, and her novels chronicle an expansion of her artistic and political vision as women move—without moving—from margin to center. (Montgomery, 55)

Assertiveness as an Essential Element

As the above passage puts, Montgomery demonstrates Naylor's commitment of the assertiveness of black women's work as a means of survival and resistance in the white, patriarchal society of America which brings these women from margin to center without letting them move from their domestic space.

In the United States, the mainstream feminism is identified with the movement defined by white, middle class, college-educated women. Betty Friedan's *Feminist Mystique* (1963) is often cited as the first book of this second wave feminism. This book expresses the frustration and exclusion of white middle class women from the positions of power and privilege occupied by white males in American society. The book also gained sympathy of the women who were the victims of sexism within their family and personal lives. The agenda that Friedan proposed is to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society which would, in turn, end the

discrimination against women on the job, in the home, and in all areas of women's lives. Equality of opportunity was the objective and sexism was the enemy.

Not Addressing Their Concerns

For a number of reasons, black women did not see this as addressing their concerns. Consequently, a number of critics reacted against it, for instance, Francis Beal in her essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (1970) criticized white women's movement for its limited focus. She says, "Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black Women's struggle" (Beal, 98).

Bell Hooks, one of the most eminent and articulate spokespersons of black feminist thought, has pointed out that black feminists are concerned about economic survival and ethnic and racial discrimination as well as sexism, and she faults the mainstream white women's movement for failing to speak to these issues.

Speaking of the movement, Hooks says:

White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politics, of the psychological impact of class, of their political within a racist, sexist, capitalist state. (1984, 04)

Shoulder to Shoulder Against Racism

Another reason for Black women not joining the white feminist movement was that they find black men closer to them in identity, in spite of their sexist behaviors, in opposition to white women. These men stand beside her in their struggle against racism. Black women were of the opinion that class differences were greater than differences between the sexes within the same class. Historically, since the days of slavery, the white woman – sometimes even more than the white man – has been responsible for the mistreatment of black women, thus, to find herself in competition with white women for the only men usually available to her as partners severely damaged any fragile chance for a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between black and white feminists. Thus, in an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed.

On Defining Womanism

Alice Walker has coined a new term, 'womanism' to address black feminism in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: A Womanist Prose* (1983) and states that a black feminist as womanist talks back to feminism, brings new demands and different perspectives to feminism, and compels the expansion of feminist horizons in theory and practice. The term further provides a voice to a large number of African American women who have been

trying to define themselves outside the white dominated feminist movement. Patricia Hill-Collins defined Black feminism, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), as including "women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society".

During 1970s and 80s, there emerged a plethora of African American women writers who dared to write about the topics that were taboo and constructed such characters, themes, and plots that are often untouchable for mainstream writers. In their writings, generally a black woman appeared as a protagonist who not only carries the stigma of being a woman and thus being a marginalized class in the hierarchy of gender but also as a black struggling to achieve a kind of identity in a racial, sexist, and male dominated America society.

Influential Black Women Novelists

One of the most powerful novels of the times is Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) which articulates the urge of a black girl for blue eyes which is symbolic of all sorts of racial privileges that white world carries. She is unaware of the fact that achieving white beauty is impossible and so are their privileges. Through the portrayal of her characters, Morrison has depicted the world wide gender and racial disparity. All the black women characters in the novel are abused by both white women & men, as well as by black men.

Gloria Naylor is yet another distinguished black women writer who emerged on literary scene with her award winning novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982. She received the motivation of writing anything creative after reading Morrison's *the Bluest Eye* as she expresses in one of her interviews: "It said to a young poet, struggling to break into prose, that the barriers were flexible.... And it said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth...not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song" (Maxine, 11).

Naylor's *Bailey's Café*

Naylor's *Bailey's Café* (1992) emphasizes the strength of African American women and the effect of racism and sexism on their lives. The novel makes a move apart by placing black women at the center of analysis of race and racism to demonstrate how gender and race form a lethal combination in the lives of these women. What Naylor tends to portray here is that the lives of black women can never be analyzed in isolation from race and class. In other words, if one tries to analyze the lives of black women from the perspectives of white feminism, he/she would land as a failure.

Margot Anne Kelley in her article "Framing the Possibilities: Collective Agency and the Novels of Gloria Naylor" demonstrates that Naylor in her *Bailey's Café* is making "the marginal become center" by using different frames for the representation of different women "that had previously been unrepresentable" (135). She puts her characters in a natural environment and

empowers them without uprooting them from there, making true to what Culler says, “the marginal becomes central by virtue of its own marginality” (Culler, 196).

Seven Marginalized Women

In *Bailey’s Café*, Naylor takes the stories of seven marginalized women and tells their unheard stories which are previously missing from the mainstream feminist discourse.

Naylor’s central character, **Eve** in *Bailey’s Café* is a reaction against the notion of Black feminists being lesbians which was popularized by white feminist, in fact, she is a perfect example of what Rich calls “Lesbian Continuum” which she defines as ‘the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, and the giving and receiving of practical and political support’ (1993, 239). She could not be easily classified and explained in white feminist discourse which generally deals with bourgeois women sitting idly at home complaining their boredom with all possible facilities (Hooks, 02).

Eve’s resistance to fit into an image of a woman white feminism is meant for stems from her peculiar socio-political conditions—her journey ‘from east of the delta to follow the riverbed north...a long walk in a dry winter through the manes part of Louisiana’ (89) which equates 1000 miles, the world’s intense support to patriarchy that reflects in no-help from anywhere once she is thrown out by her grandfather, and hostile behavior of the society towards a black woman. Her character is further marked by her resistance against patriarchal authority which is evident in her efforts to control her sexuality and setting up a boarding house for the women torn apart by racial and gender discrimination, against all odds.

Sweet Esther is a character who is full of hatred which “stems from the commodification of Black Women within the context of a rural economic system” (*Maxine*, 5). Esther is subjected to the sexual exploitation of her husband perpetuated by nobody than her own brother. Initially, she seems to surrender before the demands of her husband, as she always goes down the cellar whenever she is called and allows him to do whatever he likes. She is empowered within the arena of her life experiences. Though even after coming to Eve’s boarding house, she continues doing the same, in the same darkness of the cellar, what brings her to center is her control and assertion of self. At Eve’s place she has certain conditions, “men must only visit in the dark. And they must bring me the white roses. And they must call me *little sister*. Or I no longer come” (*BC*, 99).

Through her experiences, **Jesse** discovered that men only want to control and enjoy sexual activities with a woman and never take her seriously which is not a case with a woman as a lover, ‘So, yes, I went to... her. And I cried in her arms, never talking much sense and drunk lots of the time. She’d really become, as my husband called her, that special friend’ (128). So she goes to control her own sexuality. But she has to pay for controlling her sexuality because her husband and Uncle Eli belong to such a patriarchal society where, “a woman can be only one kind of wife and mother. Any deviation in terms of sexuality is ostracized” (Ivey, 89). As a result, Uncle Eli “used every bit of influence he had to make sure my name hit the newspapers

and stayed in the papers, throwing dirt on everything about my life, just digging, digging, until they dug up my special friend” (131) and she found nobody who could support her not even her husband, “...nobody was interested in my side of story, not the reporters, not the neighbors, not the divorce court, nobody, cause everybody was standing like vulture looking at me fall fall fall, waiting for me to smash my brains on the pavement, yeah, waiting for me to lose my mind” (131-132). Living marginalized in such a condition for quite a long time, when she comes out, there was nobody to receive her than Eve, who empowers her through a strange way of healing taking her to the hell and with a place where she could feel at home and a sense of identity. Here she could give ‘a good dose of verbal and physical abuse to her gentlemen callers’ (117).

Miss Maple’s clothes “come to represent his marginality in the white working –class world” (Kelley, 84). Miss Maple’s case is that of a disguised identity. He bears female dresses which take people to think that he is a homosexual which is, in fact, he is not. Society controls the gender of a person by attributing certain kind of dresses, language, behavior et al. His taking of female dresses could be interpreted as a resistance against gender stereotyping. He sends a message to the world that though he is wearing female dresses, he is still a man. The conflict arises between how he perceives himself and how the world perceives him. As a result, “it does no good to tell him (Sugar man and the likes of him) for the thousandth time that Miss Maple isn’t a homosexual” (163).

Peaches is a character who is subjected to her father’s obsession to protect her daughter’s sexuality from the other boys of the street which, in turn, makes her feel suffocated and confined that finds expression in the form of her other self. Consequently, she runs away after an extended drama of being locked in her room for her sexual initiatives and became a whore taking every kind of man, ‘any son of any man was my savior’ (106). Much to her chagrin, wherever she went, she discovered the same kind attitude in herself. As a result, she took his razor and ripped her face apart as a mark of protest against his patriarchal practices. Wheresoever she goes, people ask her why and how she has got that scar. Eve’s is a place where she is taken because of that scar which symbolizes her journey from subjugation to self assertion and is taken in the woman’s sanctuary where whatever she does ‘she is doing it feeling beautiful’ (114) in whatever condition she is:

Eve never asked *the* question. Gently she removed my veil, and she lifted my chin in her hands to trace her thumb down along the path I had taken in front of the mirror. I saw only the scar reflected in her rimless glasses as she felt each jagged curve, each section of twisted flesh. And it was only the scar that was reflected in her eyes when she murmured, Beautiful (112).

Female Solidarity – A Bond among Themselves

Further, it is the bond shared by these women that has enabled them to survive and in a way helps them to begin an altogether new life at Eve’s place. The center of this female solidarity is Eve who attracts women torn apart by racial and gender conflict of American society. This racial and gender conflict prevailing in society tears these women apart and pushes

them to the edge of the world where they have to survive on their own. In such a dilapidated condition, the least support and care they received comes from the women only. It helps them to have a bond among themselves and, hence, strengthens a sense of community and cooperation. This is provided with certain amount of freedom, a strange employment, and a sense of self-fulfillment. Eve represents the collective bond between all these women. Her boarding house acts as a place of solace and comfort for them. They get healing from Eve who acts “as a matriarch and guide for most of the characters” (Ivey, 89) on the one side and feel free from patriarchal jaws that has crippled their lives, on the other.

Healing through Bonding

Perhaps the best example of the existing female bonding is the healing scene in which Eve heals Jesse Beal and let her have a new life. Eve takes Jesse to hell as Jesse describes:

Imagine, she said, that you’re speeding along at, say like, seventy miles an hour. No car, no nothing, just your body, seventy miles an hour. And suddenly your whole body slams right into this brick wall. But you don’t go unconscious, so you can feel crushed pieces of your skull stabbing back into your brain, your lungs collapsing in, each snapping and crumbling, your inside busting open as your guts rip apart. That’s how much it hurts. Now, imagine, she said, that your body gets slammed into that same wall again and again. Red-hot bricks one time. Block of ice the next. Imagine it going on for four straight days. And imagine, when it was over, that bitch put me through it all again. (139)

Helping Mariam

Yet another evidence of Eve’s care and supportiveness manifests when she helps Mariam deliver the child. Eve transforms herself into a real African mother. When it were almost the last days of Mariam to deliver the child she was “crying for days, asking for her mother. And Eve had told her she was going to her village again, and in a way she was” (224). This also brings other women of the boarding house to unite for this cause.

And Mariam’s delivery could be looked as a perfect example of female solidarity and bonding as “...everyone who lived on the street was gathered inside. And I mean everyone, even strange little Esther. She’d squeezed herself into the darkest corner of the room, sitting on the floor with arms wrapped around her bent knees... It went on for four hours... Then we heard the baby’s first thin cry—and the place went wild” (225).

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