

(Re)organizing the Lives of Women: 'Self' and the 'other' in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract: African American women writers have time and again highlighted the necessity for women to re-organize their lives in order to develop new attitudes as well as new systems. The culture of sharing and nurturing among the women evident in the novels of Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and many other women writers reflect the need to be together in days of isolation and fracture of the family as happened right from the days of plantation slavery when the men were not available for protection and nurturing. Both Naylor and Walker have insisted on the possibility of black women's empowerment through a community of sisters. The quest for self-identity and self-empowerment is made possible when Naylor and Walker's women are able to free themselves from all forms of limitations – physical, material, emotional and social.

Keywords: patriarchy, sisterhood, community, self-awareness, self-empowerment, black motherhood, lesbianism, liberation.

The term sister, has a deep old meaning – it was valid, never secondary. Black women had to be real and genuine to each other, there was no one else.... There was a profound and real need there...for survival. (And) there is such a thing as 'the other'...The friend that is the other, and women must hang on to that.... What was valued was their friendship...it was spiritual, of first order priority. - **Sandi Russell**

From time immemorial, the lives of women in all ages, cultures, and countries have been organized and manipulated by the dominance of patriarchy. Whatever patriarchy demands of women has in most of the cases been very different from what women want for themselves. The practice of women relying on one another for direction and strength to re-organize their lives crops up with notable regularity in the novels of African American women. During a 1993 talk in St. Louis, Nikki Giovanni had asserted, "Black love is Black wealth" (Giovanni 58-59). The culture of sharing and nurturing among the women evident in the novels of Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and many other women writers reflect the need to be together in days of isolation and fracture of the family as happened right from the days of plantation slavery when the men were not available for protection and nurturing. The women had to band together and re-organize their lives to fill up the absence. These novelists bring forth a new picture of relation among women, of female friendship, sisterhood, and community to protest against racial, and more importantly, gender discriminations. They draw their idea of

bonding among the different women in their novels, who in most of the cases, are not even related by blood, from core African notions of 'everyone is family' and 'community othermothers'. What is being highlighted in these novels is the importance of traditional cultural values and communal bonding for the African American women in an attempt to re-organize their lives and also as resistance to oppression from different sources. Since the early seventeenth century, the time since when the African American people were fighting the political battle of regaining the lost sense of identity, the community as an entity has been the buffer against any and repeated attempts at disrupting continued existence. The paradox of slavery, reconstruction, and the experience of segregation have been that when the 'other' was comparatively focused and sharply defined in terms of binary oppositions, the construction and sustenance of the sense of the bond of community beyond the individual and the familial was more focused and hence, achievable. The representation of the community in the various categories of oral modes of black expression and the slave narratives establish the urge of the slaves to associate with each other to protest against the trauma of shame, pain, suffering, and the struggle for survival and thereby, overcome the sense of loneliness. This urge for bonding in a quest of self-identity, self-awareness, and self-empowerment was all the more felt by the women who were the victims at a dual level – race and gender.

The 1960s and 70s in the African American scenario was a decade of dramatic social upheaval and the political implication of the Civil Rights Movement. This in turn gets related to the movement of the Black Muslims. Black people in America, according to Black Nationalists of the 1960s, had to redeem themselves, and the Black Muslims presented an agenda in which African Americans would undertake their own economic, moral, social, religious, and political regeneration as a nation within a nation in America. The writings of Malcolm X and the Black Arts Movement, particularly the fiction of Henry Dumas plays a significant role later on to be followed by the writings of Amiri Baraka. One important collection of works dealing with the African American community is Mari Evans' "I Am a Black Woman" and also her popular television show "The Black Experience" (broadcast in 1960s). In this she focused on the tension, the problems faced by the black community in the context of the Black Power Movement and the Black Aesthetics. The excavation of black history and literature from the perspective of African Americans resulted in scholarship that created the foundation for important literary works. In the early 1970s, historical studies, such as, John Blasingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* and Garde Learner's *Black Women in White America* revised the understanding of the roles of the African Americans in American history. The 1960s and 70s was a period where black cultural nationalism took on a concrete shape in the Black Aesthetics, a literary programme essentially political in nature; it is a discourse which consolidated around the concept of race and seemed detrimental towards accepting any complication of a unitary conception of the black experience. In many

cases the emphasis on the use of oral forms led to an affirmation of a communal vision, which, however, foregrounds unitary uniformity at the cost of the divergences and differences which would have determined the real. The representation of the community in the works of the black women novelists of the 1970s was distinguished by an encounter between the oral and the fictional mode. The Black Nationalist discourse during the Black Nationalist Movement concentrated on a basic opposition between the individual and the community. This opposition intended to position the radical difference of Black Nationalism against the white US capitalist ideology. The economic, political, and aesthetic programme of Black Nationalism was committed to the black community, which was theoretically conceived in sharp contrast to the white US ideology of individualism. At the economic level, the co-operative collective basis of black power may be opposed to the individualist competitive basis of white US society. Despite the inability to establish an economically separate and self-contained black community, the black cultural nationalists did succeed in promoting a powerful sense of cultural unity and independence among the black community. Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton wrote that the goal of national separatism from white US society was to create a cohesive, distinctly black cultural community. (Carmichael & Hamilton 39) Black Nationalist Aesthetic theory reiterated this emphasis, declaring that black art must derive its power and meaning from the black community and must counter the Western Aesthetic privileging of the individual artist. One important point of difference arises from the reaction of the black women writers, such as, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, and Ntozake Shange who regarded the Black Aesthetic as gender biased, essentially masculine. Black women novelists in this period respect the communal emphasis of Black Aesthetic theorists, but question the specific model of community propounded by these theorists. In these novels, black feminine identity is invariably located within a communal frame; employing multiple points of view and structurally interweaving various narrative strands concerning different characters, these novels formally challenge the very notion of a central individual protagonist. While retaining the communal frame, however, these novels split the black community along gender lines, thus, threatening the unified racial community projected in Black Aesthetic theory. Black women novelists are accused of portraying gender divisions at a time when Black Nationalism required literary affirmation of a cohesive racial community. The splitting of the black community along gender lines in the works of the African American women writers threatened the idea of the unified racial community which was constructed on a traditional hierarchical structure of gender differences. Black Aestheticians who had valued black women's fiction as detrimental to the interests of the community projected the black women writers as taking not the correct side in the politics of race. But in the 1970s the novel was the predominant form of expression. These novelists emphasized the importance of black oral performances and a novelistic

vision of community emerged in the linguistic interplay of differences as noticed in the novels of the prominent women writers of that period.

The manner in which contemporaries, such as, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Ntozake Shange, and others negotiate the representation of the African American women's position provides the context in which Naylor and Walker's achievement may be postulated. In her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor shows an inner city neighborhood suffering the frustrations of poverty and the determination of the black women to survive despite the oppressive marginalization in terms of race, class, and gender. In this novel, "a friendship based on the shared experience of black womanhood exists sometimes in the form of the mother-daughter relationship." (Andrews 287) Naylor here presents a new picture of relation among women, of female friendship, sisterhood, and community. As Barbara Christian puts forward:

(p)artly because of the matricentric orientation of African peoples from which they were descended, partly because of the nature of American slavery, Afro - American women had had to bond with each other in order to survive. Afro-Americans as a race could not have survived without the 'female values' of communality, sharing and nurturing. (Christian 118)

An alternative to the unquestioned patriarchal family structure is offered by the novelist in her representation of the federation among the women in the street, headed by Mattie Michael. These women rely on one another for survival and for psychological support in combating the forces of oppression and isolation. Each of the woman has come to Brewster Place after some sort of a personal tragedy: Mattie Michael, who put her house up for collateral and lost it when her son jumped bail; Etta Mae, the attractive but aging blues singer, no longer able to permanently attract with her sexual favours a "promising rising black star" (*TWOBP* 60) who "could move her...off of Brewster Place for good" (*TWOBP* 66); Ciel, a caring and devoted mother, burdened with entire responsibility of the family because of her faithless husband; Cora Lee, the single mother of six, trapped in a cycle of poverty and despair; and "the two" after being ostracized wherever they lived together. The only exception is Kiswana who has by her own choice come to Brewster Place to live with the poor people to improve their condition. Each leaves the world she recognizes as a dead end and enters a world that is literally dead-ended. These women, once they come to Brewster Place, become neighbors, then confidantes and finally sisters. Their world, Brewster Place, becomes a microcosm of the black community in general. Each woman and her experience are part of the experience of the community at large. Because each woman has different skills, insights, and experiences, their needs can be met by someone or some group. *The Women of Brewster Place* brings to mind the fact that the black woman's survival relies on her willingness to turn to her own gender for love, support, and understanding. African American communities have

always recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, "other-mothers" (Collins 129) – women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities – traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood. Collins says that the "notion of Black women as community othermothers for all Black children traditionally allowed African-American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families." (Collins 129) This idea finds poignant expression in the novel in Mattie Michael, who demonstrates an almost magical ability to mother the other women. The world of Brewster Place is constructed around Mattie, the community's central mother figure. Mattie is the community's stabilizing force whose influence is boundless, and one of the distinguishing features of African American fiction is the presence of characters like Mattie who are "sort of timeless people whose relationship to the characters is benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom." (Evans 343) Even though the first half of the book presents all possible positive strategies for survival as a means of protest, like mothering and mutual supportiveness, the last part of the book presents a complex picture of the slowly disintegrating community that regards the two lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa, as a challenge. The role of the men, throughout the novel, is more towards the destruction of a positive African American family and community. The changing political and economic scenario of Naylor's time may be viewed in the novel through the subtle hints of class differences among the women. All these negative forces act together to break down the communal ties among the women of Brewster Place. Even the breaking down of the wall, which may be regarded as a collective activity, is accomplished only in a dream sequence. What Naylor seems to be highlighting at, in this novel, is the importance of traditional cultural values and communal bonding for the African American women as a resistance to oppression and protest towards different sources.

Walker's Pulitzer Prize winner novel, *The Color Purple*, is considered to be one of the most controversial novels of African American literature since Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Both the epistolary form and the theme of the novel deserve much appreciation. The novel voices forth the story of Celie, a poor, black, ugly, uneducated, beaten-down woman, in her own language with no authorial interference whatsoever. The story is about the trials and tribulations that Celie encounters in her life to be reunited with her sister Nettie. Even though they were separated, their love was enduring and it proved itself against all odds. The canvas of this novel is extensive as compared to Walker's previous novels, because here she deals with certain taboo subjects, like lesbian relationship. Celie's relationship with Shug Avery – her arch-rival and her husband's mistress – is not only limited to the physical intimacy that they share; Shug is more of a friend and a sister to Celie and plays a crucial role in the development of Celie as a person. Walker here gives an interesting twist to the story by indicating that the 'other' woman need not always be the enemy of the wife as has been traditionally portrayed in literary representations.

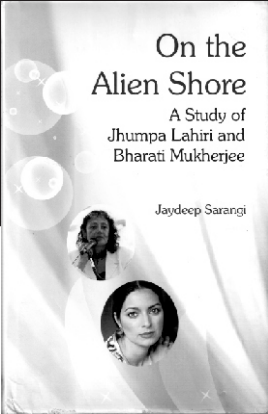
Celie's liberation begins with the help of three strong women: Shug, Nettie (Celie's sister), and Sophie. This motif of liberation through other women is not only explored in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Walker's *The Color Purple*, but also in Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo*, Morrison's *Beloved*, Andre Lorde's *Zami* and many other novels written by African American women novelists. Walker similarly has used the main characters to show how oppressed women can come together and find their inner strength and prevail against all odds. These women suffer oppression from the men in their families and furthermore from their husbands. Instead of coming home and rejoicing in the wonders of family life, the black men depicted in the story come home and physically, mentally, verbally, and spiritually abuse their women. This is the vicious cycle which goes on throughout most of the story. This is pertaining to the overall theme, which is the self-destruction of the black community at a time when they should have been united against the common evil of racial discrimination. Against such a depiction of the community, the novelist depicts the federation among the women to be one of restoration and freedom, and emphasizes the importance of female friendship in the black community - a theme which assumes great importance in highlighting the attempt made by African American women to re-organize their lives. The protagonist Celie ultimately manages to overturn the traditional notion of good and evil in relation to women by emphasizing that she exists primarily for herself and not merely as a mother or a lover or a daughter. Celie is able to fight against sexist and racist definitions of herself and ultimately enables the other women to realize that the entire black community's attitude towards women needs to be revised and re-organized. Another interesting fact to note in *The Color Purple* is Celie's unconventional attitude towards religion. She begins with confiding her situation to God, but when her repeated requests to Him go unheard, she explodes saying that ultimately the God that she has been praying and writing to is after all a man. Further in the novel, Shug enlightens Celie by saying that God does not differentiate between love and relationships of different kinds, meaning the uncommon and unconventional relationship between women. Thus, Walker attempts at broadening religious attitude, not sanctioned by traditional practices and norms, and include new religious dimensions from the point of view of the women.

Both Naylor and Walker have insisted on the possibility of black women's empowerment through a community of sisters. In both the novels it is interesting to note that the women rise from the condition of nothingness to the position of self-empowerment. This change is not projected as something miraculous, but a gradual re-organization brought about mainly by an association with other women. The quest for self-identity and self-empowerment is made possible when Naylor and Walker's women are able to free themselves from all forms of limitations - physical, material, emotional and social. *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Color Purple* ultimately bring to mind that women need to re-organize their lives to develop new attitudes as well as new systems.

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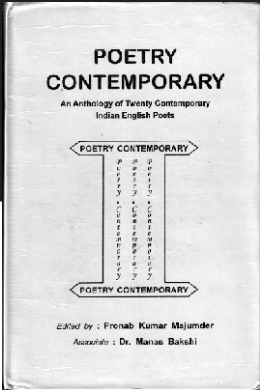
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