

The Problem of Individual and Group Identity among Afro-American Women in the Novels of Marshall and Naylor

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the problem of self and identity in the novels of Marshall and Naylor, the significance of identity in the two writers' works, and the relationship between the individual and collective Black identity among AfroAmerican women. To achieve the above-mentioned goals, three novels of the two writers are examined to reveal the quest for the Black identity among AfricanAmerican women. *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and *Mama Day* are the novels that have been discussed in this paper.

1. Introduction

The realistic style of composing among the early Black women writers was not adequate for challenging the new oppression faced by the Afro-American community. The early Black women writers didn't mention the challenges of racism, gender, and class. They just duplicated the White writers. The new generation of Afro American writers including Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor challenged whatever kept and limited the life of Black women in the US. Mary Helen Washington accepts that the new generation of Afro-American writers "worked to create a feeling of international solidarity among women of color, and they placed Black workingclass women at the focal point of their interests" (194). One of the subjects that engrossed the considerations of Black women writers completely is the character of the Black individuals in the US. Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall like a large portion of the African-American writers present their readers with a personality that has a place just with the Black individuals of the US. Although African-American community incorporates many ethnic groups from various origins, yet somewhat, Marshall and Naylor have been effective in illustrating such a personality for African American individuals. The idea of self and personality among Blacks cannot be viewed as the same as among the Whites, especially in the segregated society of the US. "Black women's activist works portray African-American women as individuals and as a group battling toward empowerment inside an overarching matrix of domination" (Collins 203).

Carol E. Henderson explains the association between individual character and group personality in the accompanying lines: "The aggregate emphasis placed on developing 'weblike strands' that interface individuals to their networks and assist work with peopling's relationships amongst themselves forms the basis of the redemptive potential outcomes of communal renewal and affirmation" (1001). Philip Page in *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction* also explains the job of the Afro-American women writers in associating this individual character to their Black community:

Like Legba, the West African god who interfaces the human and the celestial, they are ready at the crossroads where postmodern ideas meet issues of

race, the subdued American past, and contemporary Americans' awakened consciousnesses about themselves. Voicing such crossing points, they are enacting deconstruction as America. Their fiction gains its special force because it offers voice to these national concerns, because it risks opening the nation's character and the Politics of Movement in African American Fiction (qtd. in Henderson 1001-1002).

The pronoun [they] at the start of the subsequent line gives a depiction of Afro-American writers. The job of the Black writers in the US is to lead their kin's anxiety in the correct way towards their actual personality. Since Black Afro-American writers voice the assessment of the mistreated Black women, the deconstructive job of the Black women writers turns out to be more important than that of their male friends do. Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor are classified as the pioneers of this deconstructive movement. Right now, books of the two writers will be examined to reveal the journey of Black personality among African-American women. *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day*, are the books that will be firmly investigated to demonstrate that: 1. The journey for oneself and Black character is inevitable for Black women and 2. This character and oneself, exhibited in these books are in contrast with others, however these are regarding family and the Black community. DeVaux explains this association: "You have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the individual who is near you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups." (qtd. in Collins 112)

This organic entire that NgugiWaThiong'o characterizes as a personality and compares it to a human body that the development of it is because of the concordant capacity of its parts, is clearly apparent among the Black women of the African American community. The works of Marshall and Naylor, similar to those of the other Black women writers, mirror the Black community, especially the female Blacks. Although Marshall delineates her characters from among the wealthy and effective Black women and Naylor's are from the poor, the well-picked characters are the best examples of the Black personality questers. In all the four above-mentioned

books, an upward moving pattern, or advancement takes the place of the character's ignorance and dynamically changes her from an individual evading her Black community into a trailblazer opposing any sort of oppression. The best example of such a dynamic character is Selina, the daughter of the Barbadian immigrant parents in "Brown Girl, Brownstones."

2. Brown Girl, Brownstones

The relationship of a Black female individual and her locale is portrayed in the behavior and sentiments of Selina, the protagonist of the novel, toward other individuals and her locale. The first and the most important individual that molds and impacts Selina's character and shapes her individuality is Silla, her strong and solid mother. Silla's clear idea and sound judgment in facing Selina's desire for development makes Selina unable to reason or think with understanding and knowledge. Selina's mother is unable to legitimize herself to her daughter and to communicate through affection and delicate emotions. "If I somehow happened to hear single word outta you 'session what I said here today I gon kill you. You hear? I gon kill you despite the fact that you's my kid and I endured bounty pain to bring you ...'(64). This is the first run through in the novel that she is threatening Selina to be dutiful and observe the guidelines of the mother who is wearing the pants, however, not the last time:

On the trolley the mother's rage joined the wheels' clatter and the trains' thunder overhead. 'I racket want to show my hues in front those White individuals in the office,' she was saying, 'that's the reason I commotion lick you down in that spot and then. In any case, I got a brain to do it now. You's too claim way. You's excessively womanish!' She almost screamed; her hand shot up and Selina shrank against the window. 'Patrolling the streets this season of night taking trolley out to this damnation opening making my heart turn over reasoning something happen. I tell yuh, I wun dare strike you currently 'cause I'd overlook my quality and kill you' (86).

The talk and sort of language that Silla Boyce is confronting her daughter with, doesn't appear to be a dialog between a mother and a daughter. Rather, it is by all accounts a conversation between two foes. The woman dramatized here as Silla, is representative of all Black women before 1970's and before the appearance of current Black women's liberation. These mothers had a place with the more seasoned generation of Blacks and didn't know about the new generation's desires for self-actualisation and individuality. Moynihan states that the "Black mothers were accused of failing to train their youngsters, of emasculating their children, of defeminising their daughters, and of retarding their kids' academic achievement" (qtd. in Collins 173). This calmly objective and dispassionate behavior of Selina's mother persuades all her distance from her mother and even from her family and set up her individuality. Selina's parents were native Barbadians, yet Selina was raised in the capitalist society of the US. She cannot accept, and adopt the standards of the Barbadian people group as her mother gives her a tangible and unmistakable structure. These intense sorts of emotional and mental conflicts that Selina faces in her everyday life make a strong character out of her. The way she is making a decision about the issues between her parents as ten years old young lady establishes reality that

she thinks more seasoned than her age, although her mother accuses her of partiality with her father: "Gracious I know. I realize I am not to do a thing against your beautiful-terrible father. He's Christ to you. Be that as it may, wait. Wait till I finish with him. He gon be Christ killed." (64).

A gander at the definition exhibited at the start of this chapter about personality makes one imagine that what these characteristics are having a place with an individual like Selina, or any other character that goes up against and challenges the Black people group. An individual in the White society of the US is allowed to have her individual personality with no commitment to the society or individuals around her to take up her time and vitality. On the off chance that Selina had been a White young lady, she would have not experienced such conflicts and challenges from her mother and her kin. The issue arises when Selina chooses not to be constrained by her mother, to be autonomous, and self supporting. "In spite of the fact that for a great part of the novel Selina remains uncertain of the values she wants to replace materialism with, she is certain that she wouldn't like to fit the form that the network appears to have cast for her" (Japtok 308). This typical belief system contrasts her with the Association and her mother's standards for achieving greater social obvious importance. This state of question and anxious inclination isn't constrained to the Barbadian people group. This may work out for any Black individual encountering life in a White dominant society although Marshall's characters challenge each other in imaginary environment, "the acknowledged strain among network and individual in the fiction of Paule Marshall surpasses past the edges of any imagined nation" (Macpherson 75).

It isn't only Selina that discovers conflicts with the powerful requirements of her mother and the Barbadian people group. Any Barbadian who doesn't adhere to the standards of the network and doesn't think or lead in a socially acceptable course is viewed as a pariah. This untouchable can be "Suggie, one of the tenants in Silla's home, she, as well, completely adheres to Barbadian culture and affectionately recalls the island however she, as well, is regarded as a pariah by the network because of her promiscuity" (Japtok 309). Selina's father, Deighton, has the same issue; however he has a place with the original of Barbadians and has experienced the Barbadian culture in Barbados. In any case, the network and his better half, for moving from materialism to spirituality, have dismissed him. MacLeod expresses: "I also want to propose that the novel's primary male figure, Deighton Boyce, is attacked by his own locale for failing to stifle the mediocrity of his own characteristic alterity, for failing to be a 'real-real Bajan man'" (171). Silla behaves Deighton as her youngster and denies him from all his duties and his job as a father. She has sold his real estate parcel in their native place with a clandestine plan and is going to purchase another house in the US without thinking about him as the proprietor of that property. Be that as it may, he won't hold resentment against her. "I told you that I was one man never hold resentment against a spirit. And I told you something different. 'He pointed at her back, his eyes narrowed.' I said what's done will be done" (102). Although Deighton is attempting to keep peace, Silla is irreconcilable and resolute with Deighton and wants to control him in any capacity that is conceivable.

3. The Women of Brewster Place

Gloria Naylor debuted with her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, in 1981. She was awarded the American Book Award for this novel. A large portion of the pundits praised Naylor lavishly for her first novel. Judith V. Branzburg explains that "the achievement of novel is in her rendering in rich, exotic, musical language, a feeling of the reality of AfroAmerican women's lives while including genuine examination of racial and sexual governmental issues" (Branzburg 116).

The Women of Brewster Place is a fictional account of a progression of important events in the life of seven Black women taking place in the fictional place of Brewster Place in an unnamed northern city. Naylor, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, situates her female characters under uncontrollable circumstances that affect the life of these Black women. In contrast to Marshall, who places her characters in an immediate contact with Whites, Naylor in *The Women of Brewster Place* cuts a place off her Black characters. This isolation doesn't mean that these Black women are not under the impact of racism or patriarchal powers, rather the opposite is valid. The goal or essential significance passed on by anguish and pains of these seven Black women, without adequate social contact with Whites and Black men, shows the mistreatment they are tolerating harshly and naked of all pretensions. The interactions of the Brewster Place are the naked truth of the Black people group. *The Women of Brewster Place* creates an aggregate web for helping each other. Since, in their endeavors, to conquer their issues, they result in these present circumstances acknowledge that they need each other to have achievement or achieve the dreams that have been conceded by the society abuse. Naylor in all her books, especially right now, the standards of Maria W. Stewart, her Black women's activist antecedent, protesting the bad form of the situation:

"Maria Stewart challenged African-American women to dismiss the negative images of Black womanhood so unmistakable in her occasions, bringing up that race, sexual orientation, and class persecution were the fundamental causes of Black women's neediness. In a 1833 discourse she proclaimed, "Such as King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the sanctuary, yet got the praise; so also have the White Americans gained themselves a name. . . while in reality we have been their principal foundation and backing." Stewart protested the bad form of this situation: "We have sought after the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have played out the labor, they have gotten the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the products of them" (Richardson 59)".

Therefore, the unfair and vile treatment of Black women is a major theme in *The Women of Brewster Place*. The bad form of situation is completely dramatized in Brewster Place by a representative wall that forestalls the normal working of the Black people group. "The individuals of Brewster Place have a wall forced on them by White city officials who want them separated from increasingly "respectable" folk" (Christian 109). The dead finish of the Brewster Place is a dead end for the Black women who free themselves and escape from the captivity and confinement of their families and the Black

patriarchy. Marie-Josée Chapleau explains the dead finish of Brewster Place and the impact of such persecution on the women on Brewster Place as the accompanying: "In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Brewster Place has the same impact: it is an unpropitious dead end road, which serves to emphasize the neediness and viciousness that are an integral part of the ghetto. In addition, the wall serves to remind the inhabitants that they have reached the stopping point and that there is no place left for them to go" (Chapleau 10).

4. Mama Day

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* creates an environment for Afro-American women to encounter their Black culture ethnicity. Naylor illustrates the cultural contrasts of the Black people group and the White dominant society by separating Willow Springs from the mainland White pilgrims. Although the separated island has been extremely near the mainland, the modernization impact has been practically nothing. The two major characters of the novel, George settling in New York, and Ophelia in Willow Spring, show the cultural contrasts of the two parts of the wooden extension which interfaces the island to the mainland. Larry Andrews explains the contrast: "In *Mama Day* the rural South, alternating with New York scenes among George and Ophelia, offers a setting for a healing network with establishes in female folk tradition and nature" (287). Naylor's aim in creating such a fictional island is to connect Afro-American people group to her past and her cultural heritage. Like a large portion of her books, notwithstanding, the ladylike atmosphere that helps the achievement of this goal is more significant than the others. This ladylike atmosphere which Larry Andrews calls it "female folk tradition" helps the Afro-American people group to have a recuperation under the weights of Western modernization and authority. "Mama Day displays an imilar preoccupation, with the crucial contrast lying in Naylor's conviction that traditional ways and the networks that maintain them have the versatility to endure and adapt to temporal and social changes" (Lamothe). Gloria Naylor brings into reality the fictional island as a memory for the Afro-American people group to protect the African underlying foundations of female tradition in going up against the mistreatment. Although this dream island as a large portion of Afro-American people group, experiences the dominant patriarchy, the resistance that the female network of Willow Springs appears toward the authority and control of the Western imperialism compensates for the shortage and allows a space for the female Black awareness to characterize it. The female Black people group of Willow Springs demonstrates its resistance to the incredible waves of Western culture whose aim is to efface the African traditions, by managing to understand their culture and practicing it. Kubitschek in an essay called, "Toward a New Order: Shakespeare, Morrison, and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*" explains the symbolic significance of African traditions in saving their Black aggregate personality.

"Mama Day vouches for two fundamental characteristics of African American culture: the past's steadiness in the present, the present's participation in legend and archetype. For example, the devastating hurricane in *Mama Day* travels a naturalistically accurate course from Africa west to Willow Springs over the Sea Islands to the mainland US-that is, the course of the Middle Passage. The tempests are the heritage

of slavery, periodically ravishing the land; the novel's point of view perceives no division between their literal physical being and their symbolic meaning (76)"

The above-mentioned words appear how the cultural impacts from the Western authority to Afro-American people group can be switched. This turn around backward movement has just been conceivable by Black women's firm hold to the African traditions. The best example of such turn around backward movements that served to the freedom of the island and it was an important new development in the life of the islanders is "when Bascomb Wade deeded all his property to his slaves, thanks to the persuasive endeavors of the Sapphira Wade, the slave who captured his heart. In lieu of Christmas, the islanders hold an annual "candle walk" to respect the slave who verified her opportunity and theirs" (Madison 73). Not at all like the other islands associated with the mainland of the US, or around the mainland, there has been no slavery since 1823, and this is because of the endeavors of an individual Black female slave who benefits the interests of her locale over her own advantages. "The island is mythic in that it is a place of almost complete political, cultural, and financial autonomy, raising an effective resistance to Anglo-American cultural supremacy and monetary imperialism" (Lamothe). The job of the Black women in bringing into reality such autonomy is

significant. The job of Mama Day, compared to others, is progressively important. She is envisioned as an influential woman skilled in magic, herbal healing, and midwifing. This supreme elderly person acts Mattie, in *The Women of Brewster Place*. She causes everyone and battles to characterize a new aggregate Black personality for the Black female islanders. This feeling of obligation toward other Black women affirms her job as a griot among the Black women of the network. A few men even have accepted her as a spiritual leader and healer both for soul and for body. Kathleen Puhr has noted, "in *Mama Day* as well as her other books, Naylor follows both Morrison and Maya Angelou in delineating women with the ability to heal both body and soul" (qtd. in Madison 78).

5. Conclusion

It very well may be reasoned that the Black women of Triunion, similar to all other women of Afro-American diaspora, have always been facing two major wellsprings of oppression. Patriarchy and racial discrimination have applied an excessive amount of weight on Black women to be tolerated individually. Subsequently, the most ideal way to resist oppression is by creating an aggregate personality those capacities as a help to all individuals.

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