

# Reading Discourses of Violence in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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**Abstract** The paper examines the narratives of violence in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. The black women characters are presented as fragile bodies and easily available commodities not only for the white men but also for the men of their color. The rape episodes in the novel suggest the vulnerability of the women whose bodies are considered as holes "or containers: fragile, static, open, waiting to be filled with everything from semen to language" (Hite 133). Violence is a dark reality for the black women. It comes to them in the form of rape, sexual abuse by partner, domestic violence, verbal abuse, slavery and racism. While investigating the nature of violence in *The Women of Brewster Place*, the attempt is also to probe into the lives of Black women characters to showcase their material and psychic realities — pain, trauma and their resilience to fight back.

**Key words** Violence; Black female bodies; Gloria Naylor; Racism; Sexism

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## **Introduction**

Violence is a primordial issue that persists ever since the existence of mankind. Bound with notorious explications in its interpretation, this equivocal term, can be documented as the execution of some vicious act involving extreme-force, destruction, pain or suffering or can even denote the idea of widespread fighting.

The literary discourses on violence do not posit it as a constant entity as theorists believe that the term itself has undergone ‘democratization’<sup>1</sup> in temporal terms. Violence is often seen as “any uninvited but intentional or half-intentional act of physically violating the body of a person who previously had lived ‘in peace’” (Keane 6). Foucault considers violence as an act of “confinement” or “imprisonment” something that is “privatized,” “sanitized” or “camouflaged” within the four walls of a prison, an asylum or a hospital for one’s “improvement.”<sup>2</sup> While talking of violence within the psychological framework, academicians like Nathan Dewall, Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman have asserted violence as a product of “aggression”<sup>3</sup> that has its goal of “extreme physical harm, such as injury or death” (Dewall et al. 246). Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* renders the element of violence, which acts as a “unifying force”<sup>4</sup> in the lives of the seven women. These women live in a dead end street of Brewster Place. They are shaken by their ordeal which is dark, dreary and full of violence. Brewster Place becomes “a common prison and a shared home” (*TWBP*, Back cover) for them to rediscover their self, their community and home. Their lives are woven together in such a way that “Not one woman lives alone; no one loves too long in vain; no one mourns alone” (G. D. Kendrick 390).

### Violence against Black Women

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1 The term “democratization” is used by John Keane in *Violence and Democracy* in order to denote the changing connotations of violence that was experienced since the middle of the eighteenth century. Keane refers to three additional attributes conferred to the meaning of the term: i) broadening of its “scope of application” ii) it’s becoming “heavily context dependent” and iii) its variability in “space and time” (Keane 30).

2 Idea extracted from Michel Foucault’s notion of violence which is explained in a concise way in John Keane’s *Violence and Democracy*, ch 3. “Thinking Violence” (Keane 37) here, Keane while discussing the ‘anonymous’ and institutionalized nature of violence refers to Foucault’s case analysis dealing with the privatization of violence deploying it from “public sites of punishment.”

3 Dewall, Anderson and Bushman are the professors of psychology. They have given their own theories of violence conducting experiments on diverse individuals outside the laboratory in their essay entitled “The General Aggression Model: Theoretical Extensions to Violence.” As per their analysis it is ‘aggression’ that acts as the basic source for any sort of violence.

4 Fanon has used the expression “unifying force” in his postcolonial discourses of violence that was also borrowed by B.K. Jha in his article entitled “Fanon’s Theory of Violence: A Critique.” Jha has discussed the various elements of Fanon’s thoughts, laying special stress on his unique interpretations of the issue of violence (Jha, 1988).

Violence though was never a product of gender, yet records<sup>1</sup> suggest that women are (or have been made) more liable to endure violence than their male counterparts, who equally embody a possibility of getting globally victimized by acquaintances or strangers as much as they embody the reality of getting domestically victimized by their intimates that is husbands or boyfriends which is ten times more than such infliction of violent crimes on men (see R. Bachman's survey under "Violence against Women: A National Crime Victimization Survey Report," 1994) Brittney Nichols in one of her works dealing with intimate violence against women broadly classifies abuses endured by women under three major subheadings: physical abuse<sup>2</sup>, sexual abuse<sup>3</sup> and emotional abuse<sup>4</sup>. Distancing oneself from the predicament of women in general, the women of color suffer beyond the casualties and penalties of womanhood. It has been established that "Black and Hispanic females had a higher risk of experiencing a crime of violence than white and non-Hispanic females" (R. Bachman 2). These women in their tender age groups, or having a status of being unmarried/never married/divorced/separated, or having lower education levels with lower family incomes were the "most vulnerable to becoming the victims of violent crime" (Bachman 1) than males, or their white and non-Hispanic female counterparts. Probing forth exclusively on the sufferings of black women, one witnesses them to have been victimized since history, as slaves, slave breeders, undergoing the brutalities of rape, lynching, physical and psychological tormenting

1 See articles under the edition *Intimate Violence Against Women: When Spouses, Partners, or Lovers Attack*.

2 Nichols says abuse includes: "slapping, hitting, kicking, burning, punching, choking, shoving, beating, throwing things, locking a person out of the house, restraining, and other acts designed to injure, hurt, endanger, or cause physical pain" done to a woman (Lundberg et al. 5).

3 For Nichols, sexual abuse comprises "sadism and forcing a person to have sex when he or she does not want to; forcing a person to engage in sexual acts that he or she does not like or finds unpleasant, frightening, or violent; forcing a person to have sex with others or while others watch; or forcing a person into acts that make him or her feel sexually demeaned or violated. Sexual abuse may also include forcing a woman into reproductive decisions that are contrary to her wishes or forcing her to have sex without protection against disease or pregnancy" (Lundberg et al. 5).

4 While emotional abuse for Nichols includes, "consistently doing or saying things to shame, insult, ridicule, embarrass, demean, belittle, or mentally hurt another person." It, "may also involve withholding money, affection, attention, or permission; destroying property; forcing a person to do thing she or she does not want to do; manipulating; hurting or threatening children or pets; threatening to either abandon a person or take his or her children away. It may also include refusing to help someone who is sick or hurt; ridiculing a person's valued beliefs, religion, race, heritage, or class; or insulting a person's family or friends" (Lundberg et al. 6).

as well as enduring brutal deaths. Their sufferings have not come to an end with the abolition of the slave tradition. Violence still penetrates and manifests in their lives through the practices of 'sexism' and 'racism' while at a deeper psychological stratagem they are "still struggling under the scars of slavery" (Ashford 74). Apart from sexual and racial violence in the lives of these women, violence that operates at the level of class deepens their scars. Thus the black women are evidently the "doubly" and "triply" oppressed ones, who silently "suffer and struggle" (Anna Cooper qtd. in Hooks, *Ai't I a Woman* 2).

### **Sexual Violence: Rape and Date Rape**

Sexual violence is a "global problem" which is "ubiquitous; it occurs in every culture, in all levels of society and in every country of the world...Sexual violence takes place within a variety of settings, including the home, the workplace, schools and the community" (WHO, 2003 1). Such kinds of violence, being independent of one's sex and sexual demarcations (that is irrespective of the victim being a male/female/child/adult/homosexual/heterosexual/asexual and so on), in its definition, carries "a wide range of behaviours, from rape at gun-point to sexual coercion under a threat of dismissal" (WHO, 2003 6). Sexual violence, like other forms of violence, mostly victimizes women. It befalls upon them in the form of sexual assault, marital rape, date rape and rape. In the case of black women, as per the reports of R. Bachman, sexual violence, like any other forms of violence becomes more obvious than that for a white woman. Black women's (like those of the Hispanic women) probability of being raped, or getting sexually assaulted, or being forced into sexual activities in both the domestic and public sphere is still more common than a white or non-Hispanic women.

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor touches upon the multiple shades of violence that are characteristic of systematic oppression of the black women. Through her characters she not only voices the sufferings of the "invisible black females" (Carabi 26), but also speaks for the entire experience of woman as a whole, in different class and age groups. Naylor's narration of the rape episode of Lorraine by C.C. Baker and his friends in the dark alley of Brewster Place is one of the most excruciating scenes of violence. By raping Lorraine, Baker and his friends exercise the "violent (re)assertion of the legitimacy of the masculine universe" thereby leading to the "dehumanization of the female sex and the feminine symbolic" (Toit 88). Rape is a vengeful act and the frustration and anger involved in it depicts the male psychology in terms of dealing with a woman. Men rape women for several reasons; most frequently as a

punishment for being uppity, for getting out of line, for failing to recognize one's place, for assuming sexual freedoms, or for behavior no more proactive than walking down the wrong road at night in the wrong part of town and presenting a convenient, isolated target for a group of hatred and rage. (Brownmiller 254-55)

In the case of Lorraine, all these reasons stand instrumental, but her homosexual orientation becomes one of the major causes for her rape. Taking up the issue of homosexuality in contrast to the women's experience, Naylor wanted to probe deeper into the various aspects of "female sexuality," to exhibit the different modes of oppression; she says: "The worst thing a woman wants to be called is a whore. A whore or a lesbian. Women get scared of those two words. So, therefore...I wanted to look that. I wanted to look at female sexuality" (Ashford 83). Lorraine's rape can be read as an outcome of the hatred of the entire patriarchy as a whole that is directed towards a woman who is not driven by *their* imposed masculinity and instead chooses homosexuality over heterosexuality. This act of sexual violation is not just an outcome of a momentary offense, but of that long-condensed deep-seated insult of rejection that patriarchy faces when it witnesses the very women around them (their wives, daughters, friends or any female) rejecting *their* manliness. Complying with the thoughts of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists on the 'Political Lesbianism' that views a heterosexual-couple to be "the basic unit of the political structure of male supremacy"<sup>1</sup> where the act of 'penetration' becomes symbolic of the 'oppressor' entering into the body of the 'oppressed', Caroline Gonda writes that the personal choice of heterosexuality of a woman reflects her willing participation in her own oppression at the hands of the patriarchy. In order to put an "end" to this "male supremacy," Gonda considers Berson's arguments of a woman's "political choice" of "becoming woman-identified" (Jackson & Jones 1). Here, rape of a homosexual woman depicts the intolerance of the rapists for women's freedom to choose a sex partner. The fear of losing male supremacy, of being castrated leads them to a sense of humiliation. Therefore, by violating a homosexual woman *he* tries to reassert *his* lost supremacy and control (what Berson calls the "male supremacy" or what Kitzinger and Wilkinson have termed "heteropatriarchy"). This point is best illustrated in the lines when C.C Baker abuses Lorraine just before the rape:

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1 The Leeds Revolutionary Feminists on political lesbianism and the hegemonic connotation of heterosexuality say "every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of our sisters and hinders our struggle."

I'm gonna show you somethin' I bet you never seen before." C.C. Baker took the back of her head, pressed it into the crotch of his jeans, and jerkily rubbed it back and forth while his friends laughed. "Yeah, now don't that feel good? See, that's what you need. Bet after we get through with you, you ain't never gonna wanna kiss no more pussy. (*TWBP* 170)

After forced vaginal intercourse, the rapists take Lorraine "from behind." Molly Hite associates female sex organs like the vagina with — "law, convention, society... and with women" while the anus, in contrast "is aligned with the forbidden" (Hite 126). Lorraine's forced vaginal and anal intercourses are not only symbolic of the violation of law and social order, but also the violation of the forbidden. Like the anal intercourses, homosexuality is also seen as a taboo, something which is against the law. The male rapists in Lorraine's case try to re-assert the idea of the punishment given to a woman, especially to the one who violates the heterosexual norms, leaving the idea that — violation of the forbidden (forced anal intercourse) shall be the best punishment for attempting the forbidden (female homosexuality).

Describing the transcendence of the victim's physical suffering to the eternal psychological one, Naylor writes:

Lorraine was no longer conscious of the pain in her spine or stomach. She couldn't feel the skin that was rubbing of her arms from being pressed against the rough cement... it was all one continuous hacksawing of torment that kept her eyes screaming the only word she was fated to utter again and again for the rest of her life. Please. (*TWBP* 171)

Leading to her "humiliation and pain," Lorraine's rape not only reduces her body to flesh denoting her availability, but also kills her "spirit" seizing her ability to "project herself in the world." Regarding such materialization of the female body Tiot comments, "the reduction of the woman's body to mere flesh and sheer availability is *needed* as a foil over against which masculine sexual subjectivity as the superior opposite of female sexuality may be established real" (Tiot 88). The rapists stuff her mouth with a paper bag, a commanding gesture to "shut up" thereby putting her voice in his service who "wants to hear her cry, beg, moan and plead... not employing her voice to assert and defend herself, but rather to affirm the rapists sense of power" (Tiot 89). Rape leads Lorraine to the "silencing of her voice" choking her spirit through "threats, gagging and suffocation." Lorraine succumbs

under the pressure of brutality. Her helpless plea and refrain go in vain. On the contrary, for the rapist, rape becomes a kind of “re-creation” that “rejuvenates” and “invigorates him, “swelling his sense of being alive” thereby “affirming his superior power” (Toit). His “coupling of sex with violence and aggression” projects him as high as a “conqueror” or an “invader” (Toit). It is the “man’s structural capacity to rape” and the “women’s corresponding structural vulnerability” (Brownmiller 13) that posits her weakness and helplessness to her opposite gender. So, woman becomes materiality and the rapist becomes the conqueror who belittles the woman equating her to an object. The dynamics of gang rape, on the other hand, is viewed as a “ritualistic aspect” that conveys the idea of “male bonding” where a woman becomes “the vehicle for the interaction of the men amongst themselves” (Toit 87-89). On the other hand rape for a woman, particularly for a lesbian traumatizes and brutalizes the already existing pain and fear that she undergoes daily in her life- be it at school, workplace, or within her society. She has to live with so many “theys” (*TWBP* 166) who keep blaming her, setting her culturally out of the mainstream.

Moreover, both physical and Verbal abuses crush the victim’s soul from within. While dealing with the different types of abuses, Brittney Nichols categorizes verbal abuse under the broad heading of emotional abuse which pertains to “doing” or “saying” certain things to “shame, insult, ridicule, embarrass, demean, belittle or mentally hurt another person” (Lundberg et al. 6). Emotional abuse is often considered as the “worst kind of abuse” where “one individual systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another” (Lundberg et al. 15). Moreover, calling the victim by names like “dyke” or “lesbo” turns out to be much intense and traumatic for the sufferer. Such “name calling” and “criticism,” as Grotheus and Marmion believe is a means to demean a woman making her feel “powerless,” “useless” and dehumanized (Lundberg et al. 25).

Date rape is another kind of sexual violation of a woman forcing her to engage in a sexual intercourse that does not take her consent. Generally, such kinds of rape are conducted by the rapist during the process of dating a woman wherein both the victim and the rapist are known to each other (Smith 54). The sexual violation of Etta by Woods is yet another instance of patriarchal violence in the form of a date rape. The episode depicts the social irony highlighting Clergymen like Reverend Woods as a symbol of deceit, who view woman no more than a sex toy and for whom the sex act is a “business”; Woods admits: “Well... that’s the nice part about these worldly women. They understand the temporary weakness of the flesh and don’t make it out to be something bigger than it is” (*TWBP* 73).

Both Lorraine and Etta are raped by their own community people. In the



case of the former, it becomes a vengeful act while the latter becomes the victim of male sexual fantasy. Rape, therefore, becomes the “male fantasy of totalizing the phallic power, highly reassuring to patriarchy” (Baines 89). Talking about the black male’s uncanny inclination towards sex, bell hooks in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* says, “Sex has been all the more addictive for black males because sexuality is the primary place where they are told they will find fulfillment. No matter the daily assaults on their manhood that wound and cripple, the black male is encouraged to believe that sex and sexual healing will assuage his pain” (Hooks, *We Real Cool* 69). For the black males, hooks believes sex to have become “the ultimate playing field where the quest for freedom can be pursued in a world that denies black males access to other forms of liberating power” (Hooks, *We Real Cool* 69). Since they lead their lives in the fear of “white racism,” “humiliation” and “black women” they do not hesitate in becoming the “beast,” and interestingly, the mainstream culture “requires” and “rewards” them for “acting like brutal psychopaths” and for “their will to do horrific violence” (Hooks, *We Real Cool* 69).

Another instance of sexual assault is seen in the master slave relationship of Ben’s daughter and her white master Mr. Clyde which is also reminiscent of Lutie’s assaulting in Ann Petry’s *The Street*. Both, because of their colored bodies were promiscuously considered as “prostitute” by their white masters, who perceive their bodies as “available sex objects” (Hooks, *It’s I a Woman* 58). Narrating her predicament, Naylor tries to look deeper into the act of sexual assault which is solely bore by young black girls who are forced to earn livelihood for their family selling their black body which is already labeled “transgressive,” yet at a deeper level we examine that the load is equally shared by helpless fathers like Ben, who are left to endure the stings of this violence in their psychologies throughout their life.

In the cases of Etta and Ben’s daughter, the black female body, as hooks, Sielke and others believe, is viewed by the opposing gender as “transgressive” and “sexually deviant” when hooks states, “Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant” (Hooks, *Black Looks* 65-66).

### **Domestic Violence**

Statistics have confirmed that “violence occurs in one quarter of all marriages” (Menjivar & Salcido 899). Domestic violence, thus, refers to the acts of violence practiced within the domestic domain usually in a marriage or cohabitation. Such



abuses are carried to gain control over the victim, proving one's supremacy to their intimate partners. Violence manifesting at domestic level can be stratified into all its possibly prevalent forms of physical, sexual, emotional, verbal or economic abuse, including acts of intimidation, isolation or any sort of controlling behaviour inflicted by one partner (dominating) on the other (dominated). Considering the plight of females alone, concentrating on the predicament of immigrant women who seem to be "pathologically prone to violence" (Menjivar & Salcido 902), the rate of domestic violence is witnessed higher among these women. For them life becomes even more challenging as they have to face "multiple challenges" when they "resettle in a foreign country." Narrating the plight of the immigrant women and the infliction of violence upon them, Naylor in *The women of Brewster Place*, subtly takes up this issue of domestic violence, weaving it along the narrative of Ciel and Eugene. She not only tries to depict violence through their unhealthy relationship, but her main concern lies in exploring the cons of such abuses that engulf the victim, her home, her child, her sanity, condemning her to a lifetime isolation.

Ciel is a victim of domestic violence. Her husband Eugene "who cannot give her any kind of support, emotional or economic, and the anguish of the death of a child" (J.V. Branzburg 117), abuses her physically, emotionally and verbally. She is also forced to undergo abortion against her will. Domestic violence and frequent quarrels have been a reality in a black woman's life. It was so obvious in the life of Ciel too that she could pre-hand acknowledge her upcoming fight with Eugene even in her thoughts, "He wants to pick a fight, she thought, confused and hurt" (*TWBP* 93). Domestic violence in most prevalent cases is followed by the child abuse or child neglect cases at times exhibiting serious harmful effects on such children (see Findlater & Kelly). These effects are mostly psychological. While dealing with the story of Ciel, Naylor diverts the narrative from Ciel's domestic violence to her eternal suffering caused due to the loss of her only child Serena in one of such quarrels. She was only interested in discussing a mother's life-long curse of enduring a life that was "worst than lifeless-worst than death" (*TWBP* 102). The setting of domestic violence provided a background to Naylor in order to reveal the sufferings of a childless mother, her insanity and her isolation, that seeks refuge under the companionship of other similar women who make Ciel believe that "It would heal" (*TWBP* 104) and "the tears would end" (*TWBP* 105).

### **Racial Violence**

Racism is a crude reality in the lives of the blacks, no matter where they come from or no matter where they migrate to. They run from the South, where racism was explicit, so as to find solace in the North; however, the shift of the

geographical space, the dislocation/relocation does not bring any change in their living conditions. Therefore, in a disillusioned state, they build up their own community. Brewster place is a home to that community which bears the mark of their blackness, of differences, of inferiorities, and of impurities. Their bodies and minds are continuous reminders of their being black and being different, unfit for the mainstream. Violence arising from racial atrocities is the core concern behind most of the violations endured by the characters in the novel. Though the characters reside in a totally segregated black community, they never cease to suffer the adversities and damages of racism done to them. From physical abuse of Lorraine to psychological abuse of Kiswana, all these incidents can be seen as an implicit outcome of racial violence. Even the male members of Brewster Place are not left untouched by its dominating influences.

Naylor's description of the external features of "*the two*" characters — Lorraine and Theresa is subtly coded with the notorious implications of racism. She describes Lorraine as "the lighter, skinny one" who was "readily accepted" by the women of Brewster Place. Theresa on the other hand is described as "the short dark one- too pretty, and too much behind" (*TWBP* 129). While the overt phrases describe the physical attributes of the two ladies, they also carry undertones of racism that abuses the doctrine of multiculturalism and breeds separatist tendencies<sup>1</sup>. Lorraine's "lighter" skin tone and "skinny" body associates her more with a white occidental woman. On the other hand Theresa's "dark" complexion and "short" bodily stature with "too much behind" associates her with a woman of color

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1 In the views of critics like Markus, Plaut, Wolsko et al., the notion/discourse of "multiculturalism" was established to stress 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 concept of multiculturalism, it is defined as something that stands in contrast to the so called "color-blindness". Thus multiculturalism celebrates differences, intolerance and violence.

thereby projecting her as an oriental woman of the east<sup>1</sup>. Apart from their opposing physical appearances, both the women participate in the bond of homosexuality. Lorraine's skin color and body type make her the "other's-other" in the conservative black society of Brewster Place. She can be examined from two angles, first as an occidental and second as a lesbian. These two characteristics set her culturally out of the mainstream. Even though Theresa's black body is stereotypically viewed as something that bell hooks calls "expendable" with its "accessibility and availability," the trauma of rape befalls solely on Lorraine, making her a suitable victim. By violating Lorraine's "tall" "yellow" body, C.C. Baker and his friends culturally overpower the "Other." Here the victim "is regarded involuntarily, not as subject whose 'otherness' is recognized and respected but rather as mere object potentially worthy of bodily harm or even annihilation" (Keane 36). This kind of ideology governing the violent act of rape is catalyzed by the Eurocentric notions<sup>2</sup> (obsession with the phallus) where rape is based on racial differences, as in Walker's *Meridian*, where the black rapist Tommy Odds, after raping the white Lynne, justifies the act as his only way to liberate himself from white oppression. The same ideology results in the case of Lorraine, where Baker being a black tries to

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1 The point is illustrated in terms of the bodily representations of the oriental women, as per the exaggerations of the occidental male gaze. A black woman or the Oriental women of the East, apart from being labeled as "sexually deviant," carrying a body that is "transgressive" and "expendable," is simultaneously projected as a woman who is also "immoral" and "sexually loose" in terms of her character. These kinds of spurious representations of black women thereby contribute to her erotic or pornographic projection in all fields of discourses including literature and media (like in movies, magazines cartoons etc.). Throughout literature or in early films for instance, the black woman is depicted concealed within the stereotypical image of a "tragic mulatto," or in fashion magazines, the black models are erotically depicted as something "less human" that resemble more a "robot" or the "mannequins," thereby always being projected as a thing that encapsulates within itself the "danger of asserting sexual desire." Such kinds of representations regarding the bodily stature of black women further promotes the Eurocentric notions of the representations of the occidental white women, contrasting and carving her out as a 'goddess', her white body being symbolic of The Virgin Mary, "pure," virtuous," "innocent" being "not sexual and wordly" (Hooks 1982 and 1992).

2 Louise du Toit in his book, *A Philosophical Investigation of Rape*, discusses Jean Baudrillard's concept of the western sexuality that is obsessed with 'phallus' and therefore lives under the 'repressed' fear of castration, that shall seize away his masculinity. Baudrillard also projects the "naked female body" being representative of the phallus as well as a "castrated" body with "holes" that has to surrender itself to the phallus (Tiot 2009).

liberate himself from white oppression by raping the “tall” “yellow” “lighter skinny one”—Lorraine. Unfolding the secrets of interracial rapes as that of Lorraine or Lynne, hooks defines such rape as the converging point of the tussle between the long debated issues of “racism” and “sexism” (Hooks, *Ai’t I a Woman* 82). Beyond such racial oppressions, the black male is also witnessed to be burdened with the question of his masculinity, where his “inability” to distinguish his “male role” due to the “most damaging impact of slavery...that did not allow the black male to assume the traditional role” as a “protector and provider” (Hooks, *Ai’t I a Woman* 88). Finding no connections with his eastern-traditional roots of black masculinity, he turns towards the west looking forward to the Eurocentric notions of masculinity and manhood that is completely phallogocentric in nature. Therefore, a man of color is throughout eager to prove his masculinity to a woman (particularly a white) in order to prove his equality with or even superiority over the sexuality of a white man, proving that he is “jest as good as any white man” (Sielke 35).

The characters of color in *The Women of Brewster Place* seem to be deeply affected by the prevailing adverse notions of Colonialism and Euro-Centrism, which, since ages have developed a negative impact on the minds of the black, colonizing their psychology and streamlining their thoughts accordingly, when they “were often unable to let go the idea that whites are somehow better, smarter, more likely to be intellectuals, and even that they were kinder than the black folks” (Hooks, *Black Looks* 10). 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.

This implicit form of long-condensed and genetically-transmitted psychological abuse can be identified apparently in the daily conversations and dialogues of the male characters like Butch Fuller and in the prayers of Reverend Woods, and also in the dialogues of female characters like — Kiswana Browne. While talking to Mattie Michael, Butch Fuller says, “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” (*TWBP* 12). Similarly, Reverend Woods psychological turbulence is reflected in his prayers: “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”<sup>1</sup> (*TWBP* 65). Kiswana’s physical appearance does not support her to identify herself with the blacks. If her soul resembles the black, her body resembles the white. But deep within, she finds herself more as a black. Her obsession with her black identity becomes a source not merely of “pride and joy” for her, but also of “strength and confidence” (Sen 1). This kind of uncanny love for “otherness,” as hooks states “offers a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (Hooks, *Black Looks* 21). This is what happens in Kiswana’s case. Her strong sense of belonging to the blacks fosters her rage and incompatibility towards the whites or any other racial or cultural group. While her physique prevents her from identifying herself with the blacks, her psyche restrains her from relating herself to the whites. It manifests 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 20).

Regarding the futile nature of such racial notions, Brooks and Hebert assert, “Race can no longer be seen as a biological category, and it has little basis in science or genetics” and the “Identifiers such as hair and skin color serve as imperfect indicators of race” (Brooks & Hebert 297). Such colonization of minds leads to the psychological upheaval of the characters, seizing their personal identities and their sense of belongings, shaping their notions on negative grounds regarding themselves and their entire race as a symbol of shame. hooks calls this phenomena as “black self-hatred,” where the blacks try to imitate the whites in every respect so as to “attain whiteness” (Hooks, *Black Looks* 10). Such kind of racial segregation leads to psychological violence which is even more fatal than the physical ones, to which hooks says, “sexism was insignificant in the light of the harsher, more brutal reality of racism” (Hooks, *It’s I a Woman* 1).

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1 These lines of Woods are reflective of the cruel history of slavery that charged the blacks for their being black. According to Robert H. Walkup’s testimonies, the blacks were, in those days being so severely put through the wringer that they cried “NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN! NOBODY KNOWS BUT JESUS!” Thus, Lord Jesus was their only savior and the blacks looked upon His mercy. Christianity was not just viewed as a release from violence but was also treated as a means to maintain black oppression. This can be studied simultaneously with Volanda Pierce’s writings on the autobiographies of the African American Slave Narrative tradition that speaks of the Christianity and the authoritative role of the Bible when he writes “White desires the liberty to speak directly from the bible, because to preach from this sacred text is to speak from a position of authority” and to “allow a slave or former slave to take bible in hand and speak a message that is applicable to everyone is to give him, an “African,” power” (Fisch 95).

## Conclusion

In its final analysis, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* takes up the various discourses of violence to study the predicament prevailing in the black society. She writes for the "invisible black people" (Carabi 26), basically focusing on the sufferings of the black women and subtly weaves it with the adversities of racism that was present in Brewster Place, despite being "untouched by whites" (Brantzburg 117). Though Brewster Place is a fictitious cartography, yet through her vivid portrayal of the characters' plight and agony, she makes it a real one. In the novel, violence becomes both a source as well as an outcome for most of the actions. It is also employed as a tool to depict the social irony. Confining it within the parameters of gender and sexuality, violence brutally casts itself through the rape of Lorraine, sexual abuse of Etta and Ben's daughter's reducing of the female body into merely holes "that makes women preeminently vessels or containers: fragile, static, open, waiting to be filled with everything from semen to language (Hite 133). It also portrays the black female body as "sexually deviant," "available sex objects," "prostitutes" and "sexual savages who are unfit for marriages" (Hooks, *Ai't I a Woman* 58). Through Ciel's narrative, Naylor projects the atrocities on women in the domestic domain. Thus rape is a heinous crime that emanates from suppressed aggression of black masculinity and reflects "failures" (Hooks, *We Real Cool*) in all dimensions of manhood. Violence as an outcome of racial segregation can be seen penetrating within the physical parameters of the body, transcending deeper into the psychological domain, clinging and corrupting it. Hindering the process of the decolonization of black minds, violence runs through the characters' thoughts, actions and is reflected through their speech as well.

While looking at the lives and predicaments of these black inhabitants of Brewster Place one is reminded throughout that sex, race and class are all firmly bound to one another in such a manner that one finds violence simultaneously operating at all these levels for a systematic oppression of black women. Thus, by "attempting to create a little microcosm of a certain experience" (Carabi 27) Naylor voices the experiences of Black women who speak a 'simultaneity of discourse', where "the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors" (Smith, qtd. in G. Lewis 28).

Thus, Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* presents the dark and uncanny experiences of the black women characters, their trauma which emanates from the violence inflicted upon them, and their everyday tactics of survival and resistance. The stories of the women of Brewster Place unfold "the discourses through which

black women constitute their multiple selves, give meaning to the content of their lives and define the parameters within which their ‘experience’ is produced and lived” (G. Lewis 28). Weaving together the stories of seven women, Naylor brings forth their experiences, sufferings, struggles, resilience, hope, and their desire to live with dignity. While narrating the discourses of violence in the lives of black women, Naylor intends to present their struggle, as she says in an interview, “As a writer, I’m going to tell you that it’s more interesting to write about people who have struggled” (Rowell 184). Though these suffering souls come from different corners to Brewster place with a hope to have a better life, unfortunately they continue to suffer at the hands of their people. Nevertheless, trauma is the wound of the mind, these characters manage to create “an untrammelled female space” for themselves which is “rife with potential” (Stave 266). Despite their knowledge of their material reality, of their fate which is as dead as the streets of Brewster Place, they try to seek a way to survival through the shared feeling of womanhood “in a community pieced together bit by bit, torn apart and mended again” (Kulp 9). It is through their strong will and passion to move ahead in life, these women build “a community of women...sustaining, enabling, and enriching the lives of each other” (Khaleghi 131). Violence, thus, being an inevitable reality of their lives also becomes their unifying force.

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