Black Female and Male Images in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place*

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Resumo

O presente artigo se concentra na análise textual de duas personagens tipo femininas da obra The Women of Brewster Place *(1982) e de dois personagens tipo masculinos da obra* The Men of Brewster Place *(1998) da escritora afro-americana Gloria Naylor. Ao se engajar ficcionalmente com a representação das experiências da mulher afro-americana, dentro de uma sociedade patriarcal altamente discriminatória e opressiva, Naylor se insere como uma escritora contemporânea de importância dentro de uma tradição literária relegada à margem do canône norte-americano. A escolha de Naylor em dar voz e visibilidade ao homem afro-americano demonstra sua preocupação política com a questão raça.*

Palavras-chave: *mulheres/homens afro-americanos, patriarcado, opressão.*

Abstract

The present article focuses on the textual analysis of two female type characters from Afro-American writer, Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place *(1982) as well as of two male type characters from* The Men of Brewster Place *(1998) respectively. By engaging herself fictionally with the representation of Afro-American woman's experiences within a highly discriminatory and oppressive society, Naylor inserts herself as an important contemporary writer within a literary tradition relegated to the margins of the American canon. As for the representation of the Afro-American male, Naylor's objective seems to be that of giving the black man voice and visibility and it shows her political concern with the question of race as well.*

Key words: *Afro-American women/men, patriarchy, oppression.*

AFRO-AMERICAN MALE AND FEMALE IDENTITY - A SOCIOLOGICAL READING

Naylor's first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* as well as her latest *The Men of Brewster Place* are representative of a fictional universe of black women and men, whose lives are subordinated to interlocking systems of oppression which condemn them to living at the periphery of American society. Hence, a brief socio-historical panoramic framework will be drawn, with the aim of illuminating the

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construction of Afro-American male and female identities in the United States, in response to the literary representation of these identities as perceived by Naylor in the novels previously mentioned.

When considering the plight of Afro-American women within the family and in American society as a whole, it is possible to affirm that Afro-American women have been forced to live with the stigma of being inferior compared not only to whites but also to their male counterparts, considering that in a capitalist society, with a heritage of slavery, one's worth is closely related to one's looks, skin color, and social position, among other factors. Clearly, black women suffer distinct and significant prejudice and oppression for both race and gender reasons- two features which deem them doubly oppressed and invisible. The problematic of having been born with a double burden, or as W.E. Dubois calls, "two souls warring in one body" (1990, p. 8), leaves black women, especially those from low social classes, at the mercy of complex mechanisms of racism and sexism. Hence, the experience of being black and female has a different connotation from that of a Western white woman since being the Other of the Other implies that her social status in American society, with all its implications, is far from being on a par with a white woman's.

By looking back at a significant event in American history- slavery- it is possible to say that it has played a crucial role in shaping Afro-American women's identity. Black feminist theorist Barbara Christian claims that, "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of [North-American] society's Other" (1985, p. 160). As a result, pejorative stereotypical images of Black women such as the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, the Jezebel, and others were created, all of which have definitely affected Afro-American women's lives in a negative way, in addition to "provid[ing] ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression" (Collins, 1991, p. 68).

To Patricia Scott," the matriarch myth, for instance, has been the one myth which contributed significantly to all black women being "ostracized and labeled as doubly deviant, masculine, and unnaturally superior" (1982, p. 87). In addition, according to Collins, black matriarchs have also been accused of being "bad" mothers who "emasculate their lovers and husbands" (1991, p. 74), contributing to the myth of black male emasculation which defines black men as, "deviant, effeminate, and passive" (Scott, 1982, p. 87). In reality , the historical availability of jobs for black women, even after slavery, while black males were not able to readily find steady employment, served the means of reinforcing the myth of the black matriarch. The black woman was unvoluntarily granted the burden of keeping the house, economically supporting her kids as well as being responsible for their education, which resulted in the dependence of the black child on his mother who, in turn, assured the continuity of the family. As a consequence, unlike their white counterparts who were socialized to be dependent on their husbands or fathers, black women's economic independence forced them to develop a self-reliant and sturdy character in order to ensure their own as well as their children's survival. To Robert Staples, the matriarch myth may be defined as "a cruel hoax" affecting black womanhood since, although black women hold a priviledged position in the black family, in reality, they are economically exploited along gender and race lines (1977, p. 174). Jean C. Bond and Pat Peery claim that the myth of the black matriarch was in great part made up by whites with the racist intent of further demasculinizing the black man (1971, p. 143).

Barbara Christian contends that the institution of slavery also played a strong role in shaping not only some elements of racism but also of sexism, which have contributed to defining black women's sexuality as negative (1985, p. 161). The fact that black women had to perform male slaves' field work served as means of demeaning black womanhood, since society's definition of femininity entails women being perceived as delicate, refined and passive. In addition, having to keep the house and serve as surrogate mothers to their masters' children as well as giving birth to children for potential enslavement and being valued for it, were also positions which female slaves were unwillingly submitted to, and which differentiated them, in a negative way, from white womanhood. Finally, female slaves had to submit to their masters' sexual coercion and exploitation which contributed to the alleged myth that black women were highly

sexualized and promiscuous, when the prevailing norm for white women was to be demure, passive and virginal, confining their sexuality in terms of reproduction. Staples contends that this image assumes mythical and factual proportions since sexuality must be understood in sociological as well as physiological terms (1973, p. 36). Still according to Staples, black women's sexual morality was deeply affected by the repeatedly unvoluntary violation of their bodies, which caused them to place little value on virginity (1973, p. 42). Beth Day also speculates that since blacks had, "no direct background in puritanism, [they] were less apt to be self-conscious and restricted in their sexual behaviors" (1974, p. 113).

In Black Women in White America, Gerda Lerner claims American society created "a complex system of supportive mechanisms and sustaining myths," to maintain the sexual exploitation of black women even after slavery. When referring to the "bad" black woman myth, Lerner asserts,

> By assuming a different level of sexuality for all blacks than that of whites and mythifying their greater sexual potency, the black woman could be made to personify sexual freedom and abandon. A myth was created that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily 'loose' in their morals and, therefore, deserved none of the consideration and respect granted to white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology; therefore, to assault her and exploit her sexually was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal sanctions against such behavior (1972, p. 163).

Another derogatory image of black womanhood is that of the welfare mother, which Collins contends is, "an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery" (1991, p. 76). Collins further asserts that the welfare mother, "violates one cardinal tenet of Eurocentric masculinist thought: she is a woman alone" (1991, p. 77). The absence of a male figure to financially provide for the family serves as a means of demeaning single mothers' value in society and supporting the idea that they are unworthy. Hence, a single mother is generally perceived by society at large as a sexually promiscuous and immoral woman who strives for an easy life and/or is too lazy to find a job. As a result, she is blamed for her impoverishment.

To Ladner, black women have had to face a double ordeal: "to fight against the stereotypes of 'female dominance' on the one hand, and loose morals on the other hand, both growing out of roles forced upon them during the slavery and its aftermath" (1971, p. 594).

When considering black manhood, as far back as slavery, the established class hierarchy based on race and sex defined, "white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last" (Hooks, 1981, p. 52-53), privileging white supremacy, which reads- males, assuring them improved chances of advancement in life, of entering the labor market and of obtaining better and more dignified jobs than members of minority groups. The outcome of this social ranking has also had a strong implication in forming Afro-American males' identity. Robert Staples argues that the Afro-American enslavement played a strong role in, "socially castrat [ing] the Black male" (1971, p. 19). The moment the Afro-American man was denied the natural privileges granted to white men, such as obtaining good jobs, having financial stability to support a family, enjoying psychological and physical well-being and, ultimately, socializing, he was left the sole role of breeding children for slaveownership which resulted in black masculinity being closely defined with the black male's sexual and procreative ability. To black psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, the allegation that black men are sexually superior to whites has contributed to their reputation as studs which black males have used to their advantage, and as a symbol of their masculinity, since, by having to live within American society's racist and discriminatory rules, they are unable to compete with whites in other ways (1972, p. 113). Black scholar Franklin Frazier claims that,

> For the Negro male, sex has often been the means by which he has asserted and maintained his masculinity. Much of the sexual promiscuity of Negro males has been due to this, rather than any great sexual energy or powers that overrode. Their sexual prowess has been a means of overcoming

> their inferior social status, not only in family relations, but in relation to the white world (Frazier apud Staples, 1973, p. 56).

Being aware that society considers him inadequate and inferior in relation to his white counterparts, except for his sexual prowess, the black male's interpersonal power relations within the family and in society as a whole are deeply affected. He feels impotent as far as his subjectivity is concerned because he lacks opportunities to financially support the family due to irregularity or lack of employment, and yet he lives in a society where economic standing yields a person status. As his identity is shaken, he becomes torn between being a man, defined by the patriarchy as powerful, all-controlling and superior, a role he is not allowed to exercise, and his race. Undeniably, his race becomes a factor he cannot change since, because of his skin color, society has branded him as inferior and inadequate and made sure, by means of slimming down his chances of acquiring economical independence, to maintain his inferiority. To Kenneth Clark, one way the black man has sought to gain self-esteem is by showing,

> a kind of behavior that tend[s] to support a stereotyped picture of the Negro male- sexual impulsiveness, irresponsibility, verbal bombast, posturing, and compensatory achievement in entertainment and athletics...The Negro male was driven to seek status in ways which seemed either antisocial, escapist, socially irresponsible (1971, p. 124).

As a result, feeling limited in the possibilities of exerting power in society, black men turn to reversing the situation by dominating the group the patriarchy has damned as even more inferior, black women. Therefore, out of a need to exert some kind of power, black males identify with white men's oppressive behaviors and attitudes, surpassing race and/class barriers, by physically and/or mentally abusing their women. Besides physical battery, one form of physical or mental abuse which takes place is by sexual imposition on women against their will within or out of the family unit. As Hooks asserts, in a patriarchal culture, "men are encouraged to channel frustation, aggression in the direction of those without power-women and children" (1981, p. 105).

In sum, it is undeniable that the effects of slavery played a major influence in forging the identity of Afro-Americans as a whole. While Afro-American females have had to "bear a heavy burden of male frustation and rage through physical abuse, desertions, rejections of their femininity and general appearance" (Staples, 1971, p. 143), Afro-American males have had to live with the image of "shiftless, irresponsible, do-nothing; a manchild on whom no one can depend" (Poussaint, 1972, p. 117). To Bond and Peery, the myths of black male emasculation and of the black female matriarch resulted in, "black men and women placing ultimate blame for their subjugation on each other" (1971, p. 141). Considering that relations of power within the patriarchal family are commonly based on the economic dependency of the female, it is possible to say that since low-income black families rely mostly on the mother's earnings, even if precarious, the power relations between black males and females within the family are significantly constrained. In reality, the blatant racism and discrimination which permeate American society in relation to Afro-Americans have been the greatest cause in keeping black males and females apart, serving the need of the dominant society in keeping the oppressed subjugated and at the margins.

BLACK FEMALE IMAGES

By considering the typology of the characters as they are presented in *The Women of Brewster Place*, we can say that each female character presents problems in the construction of her identity, her perception of herself, her attitudes and behaviors. In Ciel's narrow perception of love, she fails to realize that the links that bind her to her husband rest only on the fulfilment of his sexual needs and that these needs are not a measure of love. Theresa's and Lorraine's homosexuality causes them to be socially discriminated, a factor which affects Lorraine's acceptance of herself. Hence, as these women engage in sexual relations, they become part of a scenery where mechanisms of domination and subordination are played out.

Lucielia Louise Turner: The Housewife-Ciel, is a young Afro-American woman who lives in constant inner struggle - torn between the love for her man, Eugene, the father of her child, and the anguish of living under oppressive circumstances. She lives in a run-down building in an all black urban neighborhood with her young toddler, Serena, and with her not so frequent live-in husband, Eugene. Having come from a disfunctional Southern family, the only source of love and care Ciel had ever experienced came from her grandmother, Miss Eva, who brought her up, and has now passed away. Having no family to emotionally and financially support her, Ciel is left to cling to her man with all her might. Due to Eugene's low status in society, that is, poor and lacking in skills, he is not able to hold down a job for very long, thus, Ciel depends solely on welfare tickets for her own and her daughter's survival. Eugene, perhaps out of male chauvinism and power struggle over who the head of the family is, does not allow Ciel to get a job. Therefore, Ciel is trapped in an oppressive frame, through the relations of power which she has established with her husband and with society as a whole, that alone she has no means of contending. Not having any choice or perhaps conforming to her situation, Ciel accepts her devaluation as black woman as well as the hostile environment she is inserted in because she has, to a great extent, internalized the classist, sexist and racist beliefs of the dominant society.

Ciel is part of a system which does not grant her means of improving her life. Society keeps her at the margins for being poor, black and a woman. Hence, she is entrapped in the role of a housewife and has no consciousness of what she can do to break free from the mechanisms of oppression tying her to a life of mental abuse and poverty. Her expectations and desires do not go beyond being loved and cared by the man she chose as her child's father, expecting to find through him her means of self-affirmation. She does realize that her marital arrangement does not work as she wishes, but, at the same time, she is unable to see possibilities of changing it. Her feeling of inadequacy and that she is somehow to blame for the way he treats her, keeps her from finding strength within herself to free from his hold. Being independent and responding for her future without Eugene is something she is unable to consider.

Right from the outset of Ciel's story, the idea of Afro-American men bonding together as accomplices against their female counterparts is well-epitomized. The scene takes place on the day of Serena's funeral and concentrates on a short conversation between Eugene and Ben, the janitor of Brewster Place. Eugene seeks in Ben the male figure who will not take a stand against him and with whom he can find commiseration for not going to his daughter's funeral. Ben is the perfect accomplice for a man like Eugene, due to the fact that in the past he was also unable to fulfill his role of parent, economic provider and caregiver when he failed to help his own daughter, allowing her to be sexually abused by her boss. Eugene, having a weak character and a distorted view of what is really meaningful in life, does not mourn over the loss of his child, but over social appearances. He believes that appearances can provide him with the social power which he otherwise does not or cannot hold, so he does not want to let go of them so easily even if it means being absent from his own daughter's funeral. His male ego plays a stronger role when it comes to family matters- he cannot accept Ciel, his woman, even though she is in a very painful position as any loving mother would be, to be in the spotlight instead of him. The child's death as well as Ciel's grief do not seem to affect him at all, and it is even possible to say that Eugene has completely detached himself not only physically but emotionally from the whole distressing situation, "I ain't got no clothes for them things. Can't abide 'em no way- too sad- it being a baby and all" (p. 90). In his ignorance and selfishness, Eugene can only see clearly the social role of a mourning father which he is missing out on. Apparently, the pain of losing a child means nothing because Eugene prefers not to see or is unable to see himself as the child's father- his role is simply that of a procreator. In addition, alone Eugene is not man enough to face Ciel's friends and does not even consider the possibility of defending himself from harsh criticism coming from them, "I mean, I should be there today with my woman in the limo and all, sittin' up there, doin' it right. But

how you gonna be man with them ball-busters tellin' everybody it was my fault and I should be the one dead? Damn!" (p. 90).

As for Ciel and Eugene's marriage, Ciel's low self-esteem prevents her from seeing the dynamics of her relationship with Eugene. Unable to see any other way out for her life or perhaps it is easier for her not to, Ciel internalizes the prevailing ideology that she is inferior and undignified, submitting to the frustation and humiliation imposed on her as a black woman. She mistakenly resorts to finding faults in her own behavior and attitudes to explain what to her is unclear, that is, why Eugene blames her for getting pregnant, for their poverty, for his being unemployed and his inability to support his family. Ciel does not realise or perhaps denies to herself that Eugene transfers his guilt for being a marginalized black man, who is unable to care for and support his family, on her alone, his closest and easiest victim.

Living in a world of frustation and confusion, Ciel resigns to the belief that she alone is to blame for their marriage's failure and, in so doing, she does not have to question her own position in face of the power relations established in their marriage, "Ciel was trying to remember exactly when it had started to go wrong. Her mind sought for the slender threads of a clue that she could trace back to-perhaps -something she had said or done" (p. 92). Ciel does experience mixed emotions of love and hatred towards Eugene's abusive behavior, and yet, she passively and, to a certain extent with some relief, accepts him back whenever he decides to come home.

As for Eugene, his selfishness and internalized sexism blind him, enabling him to percieve Ciel as a worthy woman and loving wife who would do anything in order to be by his side. He refuses to accept his role of head of the family and the economic responsibilities which come with it, and, perhaps, due to the lack of black role models in society to show him otherwise, he can or only wants to perceive Ciel, as a burden who gives him babies to support and bills to pay, "with two kids and you on my back, I ain't never gonna have nothing" (p. 95). Due to Eugene's male chauvinism, he can only perceive Ciel's sexuality as a locus of domination which grants him self-worth, virility and phallic power; a means of asserting his manhood. He takes advantage of the fact that, in her passivity, Ciel has become completely dependent on his physical presence and, therefore, subjects herself to his wanton behavior.

In truth, Ciel's own sexuality is also a means of oppression, serving as an instrument of securing her at her husband's side. Her own sexual needs interfere with her ability to disassociate romantic love from physical contact and sexual desire . She attaches herself to the notion that the sexual pleasure, "the raw urges that crept uninvited, between her thighs on countless nights" (p. 91), obtained from having sexual intercourse with Eugene, is alone a sign of love. Not knowing any better, Ciel's idea of love is limited to the very act of sexual intercourse since the relationship Ciel and Eugene have established in their marriage is one of complete lack of reciprocity in terms of complicity, protectiveness and sharing. She is the only doer of sentiments such as love and caring since Eugene does not allow room for intimacy, thoughtfulness and companionship which are essential components of a stable marital relationship. In reality, Ciel does not seem to expect them or, perhaps, because of her marginalized position, is not even aware they exist. In addition, by fantasizing in a sentimental way with the Southern past she left behind, "when she laid her head in the hollow of his neck there was a deep musky scent to his body that brought back the ghosts of the Tennessee soil of her childhood" (p. 92), Ciel creates a mental barrier, blinding her to the real truth in relation to their fragile relationship. In sum, she simply serves as an object of his lust and physical needs which grants him some kind of power and a superior position in relation to her, which, by other means, society prevents him from having.

Eugene's male chauvinism does not allow him to break free from the oppressive ties he has established with Ciel. He has internalized the racist and sexist ideology that black women are undignified and inferior and, thus, exploits Ciel in the only way he has learnt, that is, sexually. His manhood and pride are what matter the most to him, and the only way he has of diminishing his failure in being unable to financially support his family is by passing on the responsibility of parenting to Ciel. The

moment he disassociates himself from the family unit and the responsibilities which come with it, his manhood is "saved" and he can go on with his life.

Gradually, Ciel does start a slow process of inner awareness of her relationship with Eugene. In a scene in which Eugene announces in an accusingly way of having been dismissed from his job, Ciel is portrayed as coming to understand the reality of her life with Eugene as she performs a routine task such as washing rice, " The water was turning cloudy in the rice pot, and the force of the stream from the faucet caused scummy bubbles to rise from the surface. Each bubble that broke seemed to increase the volume of the dogged whispers she had been ignoring the last few months" (p. 94).

Through the analogy of washing rice with Ciel's reviewing aspects of her life, Naylor wants to show that just like the rice water which refuses to become completely transparent no matter how many times Ciel rinses it, Ciel herself has refused to face the real truth, "the dogged whispers", characterized by Eugene's repeatedly verbal abuse and accusations as well as his constant drifting in and out of her life. And yet, even though tormented by the disturbing marital arrangement she and Eugene have, in which his role as a father and husband is not clear, Ciel chooses to maintain the muddled situation rather than to face it. We can infer that having to confront her own personal weaknesses and frustations as well as Eugene's would perhaps mean taking a step towards independence, a step which Ciel may not be ready or is very much afraid of taking.

Ciel's own motherhood is shaken the moment she decides to have an abortion to please Eugene. Fooling herself with the idea, or in an attempt to convince herself Eugene would stay by her side if she had an abortion, Ciel, much against her will, and, in an act bordering insanity and utter despair, has one. Not only is the abortion an extreme violation to her physical body, but also of her innermost beliefs in what it means to have a family, that is, having babies, being happy, and fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother. In order to go through with the abortion, Ciel allows that part of herself, which belongs exclusively to her womanhood, that is, her womb, to be violated. The moment the grounds of motherhood are about to be aggressively scraped out of life, Ciel, unable to go through the pain of physically and mentally hurting herself, resorts to disattaching herself from her emotional being. In so doing, her mind shuts off and she can pretend another woman is having the abortion in her place. Only by the act of splitting her self, is she able to go through the abortion since she is unable to face up to a decision which deeply affects her being, "all the activities of the past week of her life were balled up and jammed on the right side of her brain, as if belonging to some other woman. And when she had endured this one thing for her , she would push it up there, too, and then one day give it all to her-Ciel wanted no part of it" (p. 95).

Only then, even if momentarily and in an illusory way, does Ciel put aside the guilt, the mental turmoil and pain she was enduring. Perhaps, the mental suffering caused by Eugene's abusive behavior is not as great as being aware that she can cause herself pain simply to please her man and this Ciel cannot endure alone.

For Eugene, though, Ciel's abortion does not affect his life at all. Due to his alienating behavior, he is able to disattach himself completely, as usual, from emotional ties with the family unit. Perhaps, due to ignorance itself or just plain selfishness, he is unaware or does no care about the emotional involvement and physical pain Ciel goes through in the act of aborting their baby.

The moment Eugene announces he is moving on, leaving her behind once again, and saying her love is not enough to make him stay, Ciel is finally able to see Eugene as he really is, "a tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness twisting his mouth into a strange shape" (p. 100). The harsh awakening Ciel faces makes her come to her senses, "the poison of reality began to spread through her body like gangrene" (p. 100). Just like gangrene, which destructively stops the blood from circulating, Ciel's love for Eugene turns to intense rage, repulsion and resentment. Finally, she acknowledges the real meaning of her life with Eugene, something that she had refused to do the moment she denied to herself, or, perhaps, conformed to the fragility of her marriage.

However, it is Serena's death, immediately following Eugene's abandonment, that causes Ciel's world to desintegrate and make her reach a state of utter madness,

> people had mistaken it for shock when she refused to cry. They thought it some special sort of grief when she stopped eating and even drinking water unless forced to; her hair went uncombed and her body unbathed. Ciel was not grieving for Serena. She was simply tired of hurting. And she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her (p. 101).

By refusing to go on living, Ciel seeks not only to punish herself for all the mental hurt she had suffered in silence, but also for being able to inflict so much pain on herself for the benefit of a relationship that did not grant her any kind of return whatsoever - whether be it financial or emotional. She realizes that she cannot hide anymore from what she grimly chose to make of her life.

Having no family to give her emotional support, Mattie Michaels is the person available to serve as a mother figure, "like a Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young" (p.103), and who refuses to let her die. Ciel's rebirth takes place when Mattie goes through an actual cleansing of Ciel,

> Mattie drew a tub of hot water and undressed Ciel... And slowly she bathed her. She took the soap, and using only her hands, she washed Ciel's hair and the back of her neck. She raised her arms and cleaned the armpits, soaping well the downy brown hair there. She let the soap slip between the girl's breasts, and she washed each one separately, cupping it in her hands. She took each leg and even cleaned under the toenails. Making Ciel rise and kneel in the tub, she cleaned the crack in her behind, soaped her pubic hair, and gently washed the creases in her vagina-slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn (p. 104).

Mattie's presence comforts Ciel and helps soothe the pain and ends up saving her from death itself. The cleansing ritual not only cleans Ciel physically, but it is also representative of being metaphorically reborn. After experiencing a catharsis, Ciel is spiritually purified and able to bathe away all the anger at herself for being unable to change her life and at the world for marginalizing her because of her race and gender, to wash away all the hate and the resentment towards Eugene and the sorrow and pain of losing a child, "the only thing [she] ever loved without pain" (p. 93).

Having been born in an oppressive society, characterized by interlocking systems of domination, without any kind of support and having to undergo years of suffering from lack of self-esteem, emotional support, and poverty causes Ciel's body to internalize the pain and the only way she has to cleanse herself emotionally is to let her physical being react and physically drive out of her system all of its excruciating agony.

As Mattie's dream at the denouement of the novel suggests, with her rebirth, Ciel closes a cycle of her life and is free to create a new life for herself in a less oppressive relationship. Surprisingly, Naylor chooses to have Ciel relate to a white man instead of a black one. Perhaps, this option suggests that because of the internalization of sexism on the part of the low-class black man in relation to his female counterpart, he is unable to act differently towards his female counterparts. So, the same destructive pattern of relationship Ciel had with Eugene would recur if she chose to relate to a low-class black man again.

Lorraine and Theresa: The Deviant Couple: Lorraine and Theresa, a lesbian couple, make Brewster Place their home because Lorraine believes that living in a place where she can go incognito, just an anonymous person, she can be safe from sexual reproval and discrimination. Having been cruelly kicked out of home by her father, upon his discovery of her homosexuality, Lorraine's own existence lies on being accepted as a 'normal' person regardless of her sexual orientation. In other words, being shy, submissive and a highly sensitive young woman, Lorraine constantly seeks in other people's approval, the conviction she is 'normal'. Lorraine's self consciousness and guilt about her homosexuality force her to live with the constant fear of being found out and, consequently, of being singled out for it. She is unable to accept the idea that because of her

homosexuality society sees her in a different light, so Lorraine tries to fool herself that she is not any different from other women. In order to assert herself as a person, she is eager to please and seeks in other people's acceptance her own means for self-affirmation. Lorraine lives in a world of denial of her homosexuality since she does not feel comfortable among gay people nor does she identify with their attitudes and behaviors. Her refusal to be compared to homosexuals shows the biased position she holds against them which she fails to see. Hence, her sexual orientation brings her great emotional suffering.

Theresa, on the other hand, being older and wiser, is well aware that society perceives homosexuality as a deviation from the conventional sexual behavior. She has clear views on how her sexual orientation singles her out in society and does not fool herself into thinking that she is considered a 'normal' person. In addition, due to the fact that she is more experienced and has a strong personality, she does not care about what other people think of her and openly challenges her neighbors' biased behaviors in relation to her person. Unlike Lorraine, she does not need to have her existence endorsed through other people's approval of her homosexuality. For her, the ultimate need to exist and be loved as a person comes from being with the one she loves- with Lorraine.

Lorraine's anxieties as for her homosexuality are a source of conflict in her relationship with Theresa. While Theresa is comfortable with her sexual orientation and open about being a homosexual, Lorraine dislikes the fact that being a lesbian makes other people see her differently as if being gay meant being different or some kind of freak. To Lorraine being accepted in the community as a 'normal' person is of extreme importance, since she, "just want[ed] to be a human being - a lousy human being who's somebody's daughter or somebody's friend ..." (p. 165), and not be labeled a lesbian. Lorraine honestly believes her homosexuality in reality does not make her less feminine- it is just an aspect of her being and does not categorize her as a whole. As when she assertively tells Theresa,

> Do you see this? There are two things that have been a constant in my life since I was sixteen years old- beige bras and oatmeal. The day before I first fell in love with a woman, I got up, had oatmeal for breakfast, put on a beige bra, and went to school. The day after I fell in love with that woman, I got up, had oatmeal for breakfast, and put on a beige bra. I was no different the day before or after that happened (p. 165).

Theresa, on the other hand, cannot understand Lorraine's naivety and, perhaps, even stubborness in believing that her sexual orientation does not make her different from other women. She fiercely tells Lorraine, "[people] wouldn't understand-not in Detroit, not on Brewster Place, not anywhere! And as long as they own the whole damn world, it's them and us, Sister-them and us. And that spells different!" (p. 166).

Interestingly, from the outset of their story, Lorraine and Theresa are described as "nice girls" due to the fact that their behavior is not that which is expected from young single women who are usually loud and boisterous. However, Brewster Place is not any different from the other neighborhoods Lorraine and Theresa had lived in, since the good girls' image automatically changes the moment public displays of affection, considered inappropriate behavior between two women, are noticed by the female neighbors. Upon the suspicion of their homosexuality, Lorraine and Theresa become a source of great prejudice,

> But [Lorraine] noticed that some of the people who had spoken to her before made a point of having something else to do with their eyes when she passed, although she could almost feel them staring at her back as she moved on. The ones who still spoke only did so after an uncomfortable pause, in which they seemed to be peering through her before they begrudged her a good morning or evening (p. 133).

The neighbors' homophobia in accepting the couple's homosexuality perhaps comes from their own deep fears of a behavior which is beyond their understanding since they are brought up with the idea that the only acceptable form of marital and/or sexual relationship is a heterosexual one. Any behavior which does not conform with the conventional one, represents a threat to the family unity, or perhaps, the fema-

le neighbors must deny to themselves the existence of homosexuality out of fear that somehow they are not immune to this behavior,

> Out of necessity they stitched all of their secret fears and lingering childhood nightmares into this existence, because even though it was deceptive enough to try and look as they looked, talk as they as talked, and do as they did, it had to have some hidden stain to invalidate it- it was impossible for them both to be right. So they leaned back, supported by the sheer weight of their numbers and comforted by the woven barrier that kept them protected from the yellow mist that enshrouded the two as they came and went on Brewster Place (p. 132).

For the local gang leader C.C. Baker, Lorraine's homosexuality is also viewed as puzzling and unnatural. He cannot accept the fact that black women dare to outright defy the community, which can be observed by the gang leader's apprehensiveness in relation to the lesbians,

> C.C. Baker was greatly disturbed by the thought of a Lorraine. He knew of only one way to deal with women other than his mother. Before he had learned exactly how women gave birth, he knew how to please or punish or extract favors from them by the execution of what lay curled behind his fly. It was his lifeline to that part of his being that sheltered his self-respect. And the thought of any woman who lay beyond the lenght of its power was a threat (p. 161-162).

As Lorraine and Theresa's story unfolds, their homosexual relationship becomes more troubled. The moment Lorraine starts to relate emotionally with Ben, she starts to gain more confidence and be more assertive in her relationship with Theresa. She is able to speak out her mind and openly acknowledge not only to herself but also to Theresa that she hates the gay clubs which Theresa enjoys so much, something that she wasn't able to admit before. Theresa, on the other hand, becomes confused and irritated with her change, even though, contradictedly enough, Theresa had always complained about Lorraine's lack of assertiveness and submissiveness,

> There was something else that had been turning uncomfortably in her mind for the last few weeks, and just today it had lain still long enough for her to pinpoint it- Lorraine was changing. It wasn't exactly anything that she had said or done, but Theresa sensed a firmness in her spirit that hadn't been there before. She was speaking up more-yes, that was it - whether the subject was the evening news or bus schedules or the proper way to hem up a dress. Lorraine wasn't deferring to her anymore (p. 155).

Theresa starts to feel less at ease and even threatened by Lorraine's new way of being as if somehow she would be less powerful and lose the grip she had over Lorraine. For, until then, Theresa had been the stronger partner in their relationship while Lorraine played the role of the dependent and submissive partner. Hence, the same facets existent in heterosexual relationships where one partner, commonly the male, is more domineering and exerts more control while the other member is more dependent and less influential in the relationship, are reproduced in Lorraine and Theresa's homosexual relationship.

Lorraine's need to assert herself as a human being is cut short, though. She ventures to go to the gay club alone, but once there, feeling miserable and out of place, she decides to walk home and meets her fate. Lorraine's vulnerability both as a woman, being physically weaker, and without the support of a male figure, makes her an easy victim of C. C. Baker and his gang's sexism and prejudice.

Living in the margins of society and having no socio-economic nor intellectual way of making themselves visible, "when they stood with their black skin, ninth-grade diplomas, and fifty-word vocabularies in front of the mirrors that the world had erected and saw nothing, those other pairs of tight jeans, suede sneakers, and tinted sunglasses imaged nearby proved that they were alive" (p. 161), C.C. Baker and his friends lack healthy means of asserting their manhood. Because of their inability to show they hold some kind of power, they constantly have to reinforce their existence. Hence, being, "human males with an erection to validate," C.C. Baker and his gang resort to the only means of action available: violence.

Naylor poignantly shows the horri-

fying details of the brutish and animalistic experience of rape in which Lorraine undergoes in C.C.'s and his gang's hands,

> Her thighs and stomach had become so slimy from her blood and their semen that the last two boys didn't want to touch her, so they turned her over, propped her head and shoulders against the wall, and took her from behind. When they had finished and stopped holding her up, her body fell like an unstringed puppet. She didn't feel her split rectum or the patches in her skull where her hair had been torn off by grating against the bricks. Lorraine lay in that alley only screaming at the moving pain inside of her that refused to come to rest" (p. 171).

Clearly their wish of possessing her sexually is not so much for the sexual pleasure it can grant them, but with the intent of cruelly hurting her not only physically but, in the process, silencing her and also destroying her integrity and self-esteem. This is well epitomized through Lorraine's murmuring the word "please", showing her meekness, submission and object-like position in face of C.C. and his gang's ruthless violence.

In addition, once again, Naylor realistically focuses on how Lorraine's body responds to the excrutiating mental as well as physical pain. Being physically unable to resist the attack made on her, Lorraine's inner organs are also silenced,

> Then she opened her eyes and they screamed and screamed into the face above hers- and the face that was pushing this tearing pain inside of her body. The screams tried to break through her corneas out into the air, but the tough rubbery flesh sent them vibrating back into her brain, first shaking lifeless the cells that nurtured her memory (p. 170).

Unable to retaliate, and left to agonize, Lorraine's reaction comes in the form of more violence. Unable to think clearly, a weak Lorraine mistakes Ben for her rapists and, gathering all the strength within herself to protest against the violence inflicted on her for being a homosexual, ends up crushing Ben's head and killing him. Ironically, Lorraine kills the man who stood for her surrogate father, indicating perhaps that Ben is also condemned for condoning the sexual abuse his own daughter had suffered in the past.

The rape scene is remarkably descriptive of the horror, humiliation and degradation as well as physical pain Lorraine undergoes in the act of being raped. Naylor makes use of graphic language and images, aiming at showing rape as a terrorist practice with sexist implications in which men subject women to patriarchal authority in order to subjugate and humiliate them and, in so doing, maintain the ubiquitous power imbalance between men and women.

Lorraine's and Theresa's homosexuality does not conform to the acceptable sexual codes dictated by the patriarchy, which surpass the white/black racist and sexist barrier. Being lesbians, both women outright defy these rigid sexual codes prevailing in society since heterosexuality is the only natural and acceptable way to live one's sexuality so, "punishment" is allowed for. Lorraine must not only be physically but also emotionally humiliated for being an individual with a deviate sexual orientation, seeking sexual pleasure with another woman, trespassing a male territory, in short, challenging the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

In Mattie's dream, at the end of the novel, the female residents of Brewster Place get together to tear down the blood-stained wall. Naylor seems to suggest that Lorraine's death served the purpose of making the women aware of the need to struggle against the mechanisms of oppression they face since only by acting as subjects with needs, desires and goals they will make themselves visible. The moment they acquire a degree of consciousness, even if minimal, of the possibility of showing resistance to the oppression coming from outside, they liberate their inner selves as well, gaining autonomy and agency. Hence, through unity, black women have the chance of gathering the power within themselves to definitely alter their lives' destiny, reaching or, at least, aiming at independence from the oppressive manacles of racism, sexism and classism offered them by American society.

BLACK MALE IMAGES

In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor specifically seeks to give an alternative reading of the male characters, in relation to its counterpart novel, by rescuing their stories and allowing them to be heard. If in *The Women of Brewster Place* gender plays a significant role in keeping black women at the margins of American society, in *The Men of Brewster Place* Naylor clearly attempts to show race as a determinant factor affecting black men's lives. Naylor shows, through the fictional construction of her narrative, how black men's socio-economic and historical reality limits their capacity of relating to their women and to society as a whole. Hence, the protagonists of *The Men of Brewster Place* are depicted as male characters with socio-psychological traits which bear relationship with the lived experience of black men. Their lives are definitely determined by racism and class oppression, by their power-structured relationships with their women, allied to their own personal weaknesses and identity crisis. Similarly to their female counterparts, the male characters are depicted as men with low self-esteem and a lowly status. Being trapped in their typical roles, these men's desires, beliefs and dreams are definitely deferred. When taking account of the typology of the protagonists, as they are presented in *The Men of Brewster Place*, it is possible to say that each character presents problems in the construction of his identity, specifically in regard to affirming manhood. Eugene's homosexuality is a source of intense conflict and mental anguish. C.C Baker holds a distorted view of human life, and of social and moral values. Hence, as these men engage in power relationships with their female counterparts and with society as a whole, their manhood fails to develop as a positive experience, leading to their affirmation of manhood through negative experiences such as mental anguish and violence. The fact that societal forces conspire to maintain their lowly status reinforces the alienation and the sense of inadequacy they feel.

Eugene: The Homosexual: In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor portrays Eugene as a young black man who is inserted in a quasi-conventional family unit, but who is unable to carry out his roles of father and husband due to his erratic behavior of constantly deserting the family, and, in so doing, failing to give them emotional or financial support. Hence, in *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor grants Eugene the opportunity to explain the reasons for letting down his family. Eugene's story is told from the first person point of view.

In order to realistically show Eugene's genuine wishes to redeem himself in face of Ciel, his wife, Naylor chooses to have Eugene send a letter directly to her, "I've been running around in circles, not knowing where to begin. There's so much to say to you, Ciel. So much to explain. But before I begin, you must believe that I did love you and Serena" (p. 68). In so choosing this rhetorical move, Naylor shows Eugene in a more human light and in a position of opening up his heart, allowing him to fully express his regretfulness and painful ordeal, as people usually do when writing letters.

In the introduction to Eugene's story, Ben, the narrator, asserts his presence as a person who sees and knows all about Brewster Place's residents' lives, he firmly declares, "Nothing much gets past the super of any building. Like me, he sees 'em come and go. I get up a little past dawn... [b]ut after I've got my garbage set out and the gutters swept, it's time for me to sit on my 'throne' and watch the action in the streets" (p. 67). The fact that he is not directly involved in the other protagonists' lives validates his opinion as being true. Considering Eugene's reason for constantly leaving his wife, Ben concludes, "Eugene isn't a womanizer" (p. 68). By this remark, Ben acts as an accomplice, trying to defend Eugene's behavior as well as arousing the reader's curiosity as for the nature of Eugene's behavior.

Eugene is a man in conflict with his manhood. On the one hand, he genuinely loves Ciel, a woman he has known since he was fourteen, when they became friends; on the other hand, he cannot understand his homosexual tendencies. Eugene sees the world of his self as divided since in society's sex-gender system, as a man, Eugene is supposed to love and relate himself sexually and emotionally only to women and he does love Ciel. However, as he comes upon the world of gay bars, his sexual identity is shaken for he considers himself 'normal',

but is it normal for him to love a woman and be erotically attracted to other men? Is he weird? The awareness that there is something wrong with his sexual orientation causes Eugene great mental anguish and disequilibrium. Having internalized the dominant social norms for appropriate sexual conduct, Eugene perceives his homosexuality as a deviation from society's normal sexual patterning. So, Eugene lives with the constant fear of being found out and having his maleness contested.

As Eugene tells Ciel his story, he recollects the day when his life takes a definite turn. His boss, Bruce, invites him to play basketball and they end up in a gay bar, the Bull& Roses. Unknowingly to Eugene, Bruce had discovered, by chance, Eugene's deepest secret, " Sometimes I watch the crowd. Sometimes I check out the street. And that's how I knew. You almost came through the door last week. But the weeks before that, you'd walk past, turn around and come back; walk past, turn around and come back. It ain't took no genius to figure it out" (p. 78).

With Bruce's support, Eugene is able to take a step which alone he lacks courage and which has a definite impact on his life. After being, "Welcome[d] to the sisterhood" (p. 78), Eugene's sexual identity is affirmed. However, Eugene becomes tormented not only by the idea that Ciel might find out about his homosexuality, but also by his failure in accepting himself,

> But I wasn't like Bruce, I was afraid of what you would think of me if I walked into our apartment that very night to tell where I'd been and- more important -to tell you why. I decided, right there, for both of us, that you would hate me. I couldn't bear to think of the contempt that would be in your eyes. I was a man, and you would no longer see me as a man-your man- but as some sort of freak. Yes, Ciel, I decided right then and there that you hate me as much as I hated myself. And so the lies began (p. 82).

We can infer that Eugene's fear of Ciel's finding out about his homosexuality, in fact, concurs with his own inability to unmask himself and accept his homosexuality. Deep down, Eugene perceives his homosexuality as negative and destructive; his identity is torn between being the man of the house, Ciel's man, in other words, masculine, strong and virile, qualities that a man in society's gender system is expected to have, and his sexual desire for other men which defines him as effeminate, passive and weak, female-related traits. He cannot accept the fact that as a man he can feel sexual attraction and desire for someone of the same sex.

At the Bull & Roses, Eugene comes across Chino, "an island unto himself; his own country; his own god" (p. 79), a transvestite, who addresses himself as 'she'. For Eugene, Chino represents what he very much fears ending up, as he tells Ciel, "This is what you think of me. This is what I might become" (p. 79). Chino's freaky appearance scares Eugene so he transfers his fears to Ciel and, in so doing , Eugene does not have to look inwards and face his own personal identity conflict. In fact, Eugene tries to convince himself that he is a real man by comparing himself with the other men who attend the Bull& Roses,

> For the longest time I never picked up a man there or allowed myself to be picked up. I went there more to relish the possibilities; to convince myself that the guy in the vest and gray suit was normal. The guy in the plaid shirt and jeans was normal. So I, with my sweaty hands wrapped tightly around a bottle of Coors, was just normal. You're looking at men, Eugene, I kept telling myself, nothing but men. They aren't freaks. So why did I feel so freaky inside? (p. 83).

It is possible to infer that Eugene seeks in external things such as appearance- clothes, jewelry and physical gestures, the means of possibly affirming his manhood. He desperately needs to resolve this personal conflict he is experiencing, so he tries to convince or prove to himself that he is a man. He fails to see that his inner feelings and desires are also part of his self which he cannot suppress.

As Eugene explains in his letter to Ciel, he cannot avoid the feelings of sadness and despair he experiences upon returning home from the gay bar,

> I would go home, kiss you hello, and then go into the bathroom to put my head down and cry. I turned the water on full force in the sink to cover

> the sound of my crying. Proof again that there was something wrong with me. Sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, acting like a goddamned baby. Acting like a goddamned... (p. 83).

In addition, Eugene tries to diminish the sense of dirtiness and the repulsion he feels towards himself by going through a cleansing ritual the moment he gets home after being at the gay bar, " I always ended up getting into the shower and washing myself, rubbing hard with the cloth from top to bottom; shampooing my hair, even using a pumice stone on my feet. All of it like my thoughts had become dirt on my skin. Dirt I could send down the drain as long as the water was running (p. 83). By washing himself thoroughly, Eugene makes a futile attempt to cleanse not only his body but also his thoughts and desires, which make him feel dirty and immoral. He fails once again to perceive that external elements do not have the power of changing his inner feelings since it has to come from within himself.

As a result of his internal conflict and inability to live a 'double' life, Eugene opts to leave Ciel. He believes that being single and away from the family unit will make him feel less guilty and more honest. In fact, he tells Ciel,

> I could go to the Bull & Roses and ask myself, 'How does all of this feel now that I'm a single man?'I didn't make the excuse, like many married men, that it wasn't really cheating; the same secrecy, the same lies. But it felt so right, Ciel. The first time I went home with another man from that bar, it felt so complete. At least, for a short while until the guilt of what I was doing to you came back to wrap itself around my chest and tighten into an iron knot (p. 84).

Although Eugene tries to reason that as a single man he is not cheating on Ciel, and that it is alright to be sexually involved with another man, at the same time, deep down Eugene is aware that he is fooling himself since he cannot completely disregard Ciel's existence and his own inner guilt.

Upon Eugene's discovery of Ciel's pregnancy, Eugene returns home, thinking that perhaps a baby would bring him some relief from the pressure he was experiencing, "I named her Serena because I was begging God for peace" (p. 84). But, in fact, Eugene cannot stay home nor away from it, "But why did I come back the second time? The third time? For the same reason that you never changed the lock on the door: We were meant for each other. So God help us both" (p. 84). Eugene's constant drifting in and out of Ciel's life, granted that his love for her is real, suggests that he is unable to disassociate his idealized idea of love for Ciel, which completely lacks in sexual desire, from what it means to be emotionally involved with someone, which also implies complementing the relationship with sexual desire.

The moment comes when Eugene, distraught and sad, realizes that he cannot keep on living a double life, "But a man gets tired of hating himself, Ciel, and I began to accept there was no way out" (p. 85). And yet, even though Chino also tries to warn him, "Divorce her, Eugene... If you love her and the kid, divorce her" (p. 86). Eugene is emotionally unable to completely break free from the last ties that bind him and Ciel together. Finally, upon being laid off, Eugene deliberately starts to quarrel with Ciel, seeking to make her take the first step, "We both knew what I wanted you to do, but neither of us had the courage to spell it out. But I was praying for you to find enough courage, Ciel, to throw my ass out of the door- a door with new locks" (p. 88). Eugene's inability to face the truth as for what he really wants to make of his life gives proof of his weakness and cowardice, in the sense that he expects Ciel, the supposedly less powerful partner in society's sex-gender system, to take the first step and resolve the situation,

> I wasn't good enough for you to wipe your shoes on. And I saw my prayers answered when I looked into your eyes and saw all my lies; all my leavings; and the baby you gave up. She'll hate me soon, I thought with my heart breaking. She'll hate me very soon and finally change the damn locks on the door (p. 89).

Upon Serena's death, while staying unattended in the kitchen in the midst of their quarrelling, Eugene is finally set free from Ciel but becomes captive of intense mental anguish in relation to the guilt of indirectly causing

Serena's death. Eugene, once again, is incapable or unwilling to act, "And waited. And waited. Surely, if there were a God, He would answer my one prayer: Take the rest of my life in exchange for only the last forty-eight hours. Don't let them bury my baby yet-just give me back the last forty-eight hours" (p. 91). The fact that Eugene expects an exterior power to undo what has happened, epitomizes his utter failure in standing on his own two feet and facing his life. Since death does not come to him nor does Serena return from death, Eugene resorts to finding in Chino's whip the redemption he otherwise cannot find,

> "I have them made of silk ribbons, he said. I have them made of rope. But you didn't come here to play.
> He led me into a small room that was tiled from floor to ceiling-all gray tiles.
> It's easier for washing off the blood, he said. Assume the position. And so I pulled off my shirt and went to my knees. He whipped me until his arms grew tired, specks of my blood covering everything but the tiled ceiling.
> Enough, Sweet Water?
> No.
> Please...
> No.
> So he kept on trying to stomach the work that was replacing my pain. Little by little replacing it.
> Chino...
> Surely, it's enough, Sweet Water.
> No, I said through a throat that was like sandpaper. I'll tell you when to stop... I'll tell you when to stop..." (p. 94).

Eugene seeks in being cruelly whipped the punishment he perhaps deserves for failing to fulfill his role as a man, for being weak, and not acting in time to save Serena. In addition, perhaps because of his homosexual tendencies, Eugene chooses to succumb to someone else's will, Chino's, in order to depict his utter passivity and submission in relation to another man as well. Through the sadistic ritual he goes thorough, Eugene hopes to find atonement for his lack of courage and for the mental anguish of losing his daughter, and, in so doing, continue with his life.

C.C. Baker: The Hoodlum: Naylor's shrewd portrayal of C.C. is harsh and violent. From his family life, the reader learns that his father is a disabled Vietnam veteran who, "keeps his Purple Heart framed and on the living room wall: to remind him that his country ain't worth shit as he fights the V.A. to raise his disability pension" (p. 123), a fact that forces C.C.'s mother to hold a full time job in order to help support the family. Despite his parents' efforts to keep C.C. off the streets, they are forced to resign to their faith, "the streets call to him as well with the promise of everything he sees missing in his father's life; money, power, and respect" (p. 123).

C. C. Baker's universe is not only limited geographically to Brewster Place and its surroundings but also in personal terms. Being nineteen years old, poor and black, C.C. is unable to critically see a decent way of making a living within the oppressive environment he is inserted in. With a ninth grade education and no job perspectives, he resorts to, "mak[ing] his money from petty hustling: snatching a bag or two, running messages between a lady and her pimp; dropping off dime bags for mid-level drug dealers" (p. 122). However, C.C., like any human being, desires for more, "he dreams of so much more, he dreams of escape. He doesn't want to be a punk all his life. And the way out of the ghetto is to be taken on by Beetle Royal- a top-level dealer who keeps his business tight and his lieutenants in good cars and good clothes" (p. 122). Ironically, C.C.'s dream involves an upward spiral in the crime hierarchy. A fact which clearly epitomizes his failure in distinguishing between right and wrong moral values. In his short-sightedness, he is incapable of considering other means of survival besides crime-related ones.

C.C. 's relationship with his limited universe of people, including his family and fellow gang members, is one of complete disattachment and distrust. Although, "[the gang members] are bad and they know it. Bad and they love it. Bad and always looking for a way to prove it" (p. 124), and together they act in solid unison, C.C.'s sole partner is clearly himself, as the narrator astutely states, "He runs with a gang but when he looks in the mirror he sees the only face he can trust" (p. 124). C.C. perceives the world he is inserted in as one of fierce competition for

power and status, so he knows he can only count on himself. He is also aware that his only chance of making himself visible and standing out among the others is to prove he is smarter. So, the moment he is recruited to be a lieutenant in a drug lord's army, C. C. has no second thoughts about violating his own home and hiding drugs there.

The fact that C.C. Baker's parents do not question him as for the source of the money he brings home causes C.C. to look down upon his father,

> Cripple-ass motherfucker- any fool knows that McDonald's doesn't pay you in hundred-dollar bills. Better to say, Son, I know you're dealing and thanks for the help. Or Son, I know you're dealing and keep that shit out of my house. But it's only some punk-ass, jive-ass who can't look you in the face like a man and face the truth. If anything, C.C. never lies to himself. He wouldn't last a month on the streets if he did. No make-believe, no damn fairy tales: He is dealing and proud of it. And he wants his old man to be proud of it too (p. 125).

Once again C.C. Baker's twisted values are underscored. Although he feels great disgust and resentment towards his father, the authority figure in the family unit, for failing to position himself in relation to his wrongdoings, in a contradictory way, C.C. is unable or unwilling to perceive his own guilty behavior. He expects some kind of reaction from his father, although, clearly, he does not consider suppressing his criminal manifestations. Perhaps, ultimately, he wants to transfer the responsibility to his father, who is unable to financially support the family, for his crimes.

From the conversation with the two detectives, the reader learns that C.C. Baker is being questioned on the murder of his step-brother- Hakim. C.C.'s attitude towards the detectives is one of complete disrespect and irreverence,

> "Have a seat, C.C., this won't take long.
> I'm not saying a motherfucking thing until I get a lawyer.
> No one's accused you of anything; Detective Price and I just want to have a little chat.
> So why the fucking cameras?
> Insurance. Later we might disagree on how you were treated. But the video never lies. What goes down here is on the straight and narrow.
> Good. So give me a straight fucking lawyer.
> Do you wanna be charged? It can be arranged.
> I ain't done nothing.
> So talk to us.
> Fuck you" (p. 121).

Actually, C.C.'s total disregard for hierarchies, law and order is an outright challenge to society's institutionalized organizations. He vehemently believes that his position in a drug dealer's army grants him power and respect, so he demands to be given his rights. Being an irrational person, the moral values and beliefs he holds are those which he himself creates within his limited capacity for discernment. In his selfishness, and to a certain extent, immature way of being, he believes he is a self-sufficient person, as he tells the police officers, "You see me sitting here-this is my fucking family. I owe nobody nothing" (p. 124). Driven by his motto, "Do unto others, hard and fast, and through so the fuckers think twice before doing it back to you" (p. 125), C.C. reveals the extent to which his survival instincts play in making him the person he is within his oppressive context.

The description of the scene in which C.C. Baker is waiting to kill his step-brother shows C.C's coldness and utter disregard for life. Although he remembers moments of complicity between the two, he does not wince once despite their family ties, "the fucker deserves it. Nobody messes with Royal-he's The Man. And Hakim is just another punk that needs to be taught a lesson" (p. 128). Clearly, his alliance lies with whomever can help him achieve his goal of attaining power and money, showing his complete indifference to his family- a presumably sacred bond.

Ironically, C.C.'s needs in confirming his existence as a man involves juxtaposing a sacred element such as praying, "God, let me do this right. Give me a chance- for once-to be a real winner" (p. 129), with the desire to succeed in committing a capital sin such as killing his own brother. Evidently, it epitomizes a disturbing and gruesome view of how to succeed in life.

In sum, there is nothing in C.C.'s nature that characterizes him as a human being. He

lacks basic feelings such as love, faithfulness, respect and compassion. His survival instinct is of destruction and violence. As he acts in an irrational way, he is capable of striking anyone who comes between him and his goal of attaining a powerful status and money. In other words, C.C.'s biggest weakness lies on the low value he puts on human life. As the denouement of his story shows, after he viciously kills his step-brother, C.C., in a moment of great irony, cries not for having taken away a human life but for the weather conditions, "C.C. runs and runs until he's crying from the cold wind whipping his face as he thanks God for giving him the courage to do it. The courage to be a man" (p. 129). C.C. is an ultimate example of failure in affirming manhood, showing how his moral values and judgements are all distorted since his sense of identity comes through the elimination of the Other.

Naylor's shrewd portrayal of C.C. Baker implies that his sense of self is partly a result of the appalling living conditions he is part of, which fail to offer minimal opportunities for personal growth and advancement in life. In other words, C.C. is a product of his oppressive environment, allied to his own personal weaknesses and limited discernment of good and evil. Compared to the other male protagonists, who are also representing the marginal side of society, C.C. epitomizes a fragmented human being in terms of beliefs, values and dreams.

CONCLUSION

Considering Gloria Naylor's portrayals of male and female protagonists as oppressed and marginalized people in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place* respectively, it is possible to say that her literary representations, from a female perspective, reveal the crisis of the Afro-American woman/man, resulting from mechanisms of oppression grounded on a power system marked by gender, race and class. By fictionally depicting the harsh reality of Afro-Americans in the sixties, Naylor is making a political statement and levelling her critique at American society for failing, through its blatant mechanisms of oppression, to concede its Afro-American citizens equal opportunities of attaining the "American dream" of upward mobility. In a society where all people are supposed to have equal rights and to be free from racial discrimination and class oppression in order to pursue a better quality of life for themselves, poverty-stricken Afro-Americans are not granted minimal socio-economic or political support. The fact that they are socially discriminated and economically exploited leaves them little autonomy of movement to improve their living conditions.

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