

Symbols, Images and Metaphors of Women's Oppression in *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor

Diome FAYE

Cheikh Anta DIOP University, Dakar Sénégal

Email address: fayendiome@yahoo.fr

Abstract— Gloria Naylor, in her masterpiece *The Women of Brewster Place*, denounces the state of suffering and humiliation reserved to African American women. She portrays with realism the story of seven women coming from diverse backgrounds, belonging to different generations and social strata. The use of symbols, images and metaphors as a narrative technique accurately shows the daily life of the African American woman with her sentence quota. Symbols, images and metaphors also illustrate the physical, economic and sociological constraints that constitute real obstacles to the freedom of action and dignity of African American women.

Keywords— Symbols, images, metaphors, woman, African American, oppression, wall, street, weather, climate.

I. INTRODUCTION

In reading the *Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, an African American female writer, we notice that the denunciation of the conditions of African American women made of suffering and humiliation is the core of the texture. Almost all the female characters are oppressed, disabused, soured, and frustrated by the ill-treatment unjustly inflicted to them and the sufferings borne.

Gloria Naylor has chosen to focus her novel on women by working with symbols, metaphors, and images. And this literary technique shows Naylor's romanticism which can almost make her seem to be a latter-day Nathaniel Hawthorne. Her originality lies on her ability to personalize things, giving them soul to live and removing it afterwards to make them die. She gives each word a symbol that conveys a message about the thing it symbolizes such as the wall, the plants, the rain, the rat, to name but a few. The latter stand for the narrative techniques used by the author to display promptly the oppression the inhabitants, and especially the women of Brewster Place are confronted with during all their lives.

II. SYMBOLS AND IMAGES DEPICTING WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

The trope of the wall that characterizes Naylor's writing in the *Women of Brewster Place* underscores the despicable spaces that African American women occupy in the urban cities. The novel portrays the women's attempt to claim a space in the modern metropolis. Indeed, with the image of the wall, Naylor inscribes an urban landscape that marginalizes, frustrates, suffocates and oppresses women.

Symbolic of a dead-end street that the women have reached in their lives and also symbolic of the discriminating alienation of the black urban poor from mainstream America, the wall blocks all opportunities to the community of Brewster Place. A parallel can be established between this wall and that of the Berlin one which prevented east countries to benefit from any support during the cold war. Mattie's plants have to fight one another for sunlight to which the wall prevents them from access. The apparition of the wall as a screen before Mattie's apartment portends the bleakness of Mattie's future existence on Brewster Place.

Etta Mae Johnson sees the wall as a hungry mouth waiting to devour the determined spirit of a young rebellious girl. Kiswana Browne, a Black Nationalist young girl, cannot surmount the wall of mistrust and contentiousness that harbors disunity, a wall that bounces back to her the frustrations of trying to ennoble and empower the impoverished community on which *Linden Hills* and the rest of America have turned their backs. In addition, the two lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa, are unable to surmount the wall of homophobia, which claims not only Lorraine's life, but that of Ben.

In fact, the wall in the *Women of Brewster Place* illustrates how social structure limits opportunity and represents the relationships between structure and culture. The characters in Gloria Naylor's novel live on a dead-end street that has been closed off by a brick wall. The wall separates Brewster Place from the rest of the community. This stage of women's lives in Brewster Place makes us recall the notion of the "veil" and "color line" William Dubois points out in *The Souls of Black Folk*. According to Dubois, African-Americans live in the land of the "color line" where the shadow of the veil is upon their shoulders. He asserts that Blacks are obliged to live within the veil. That is the reason why he says that there is something which separates blacks and whites in the United States and this situation make them be in a state of rejection from the world. He says: "*I am shut out from the world by a vast veil*". As a matter of fact, the wall of Brewster Place shuts out light to apartments; it creates a dark and unprotected area where destructive activities occur, and its presence suggests that there is only one way out. The wall of Brewster Place is a powerful symbol of the ways racial oppression, sexual exploitation, and class domination constrains the life expectations and choices of the women who live there. In a nutshell, the wall creates barriers, limits opportunities and

constrains choices. In other words, the wall is a symbol of oppression.

In the process of describing Brewster Place, Gloria Naylor strongly lays the stress of the stereotype of black urban women as sexually profligate mothers of children born out of wedlock, a fixture in the urban landscapes as imagined in the American consciousness. Naylor shows her skills as an artist thanks to the personification of the street of Brewster Place. Right at the beginning of the novel, she first introduces it to the reader as a child out of wedlock. Brewster Place as a city itself, is “the bastard child” [1] of corrupt political machinations, conceived in a damp smoke filled room and emerging from the “consummation of their respective desires”, though “born” in the city legislature, its “true parentage is hidden”. The sexual imagery conveys the idea that both place and people are portends of a self-serving exploitative society.

The author seems to follow the conception of the street from the copulation of its parents passing through its embryonic state and foetal development to the delivery moment. Even the span of time of its mother’s pregnancy is precisely mentioned “*It was born three months latter*” [2]. The rhetoric has followed a childbirth metaphor and words like “conceived”, “parentage”, “born”... are used to depict where the street comes from. Brewster Place gives the women a refuge when they have nowhere else to go. The street is also maternal essence, it is “*fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home*” [3]. It is also presented as a woman in widow’s weed as it mourns “*It had lost children to the call of a more comfortable life*” [4]. And also as an old woman when it has grown with Mrs. Fuelli and the few others who refuse or are unable to leave.

Gloria Naylor continues her personification of the street at the dusk part, obviously as any living character, and the street is supposed to come across death. But in raising the difference between a street’s death and a person’s death, Gloria Naylor makes use of death related to vocabulary indicated by words such as “coffin”, “organ pipe dingers”, “eulogy”. Indeed, when the lexical side of the prologue is accentuated by words pregnant with birth messages, the epilogue is characterized by funeral metaphor. The outstanding description of the street’s birth and death makes Gloria Naylor become an omniscient and omnipresent writer. She is present at any stage of the street’s existence from the beginning to the end. Indeed, she is a creator of that street as a person as she has the capacity to create life where there is no possibility to have one. From this standpoint, Gloria Naylor seems to be endowed with God’s power that gives birth and death to its creatures. Her personification of the street is so striking, as she knows the right moment to give soul to the street and the appropriate one to remove it. One never imagines the life and death of a street by Gloria Naylor does, by doing so, she becomes a great creator.

In Etta’s chapter, to show the difference between Brewster Place and the other well-kept cities, Gloria Naylor compares the black children with trees. She sheds light on this comparison when she writes:

Children bloomed on Brewster Place during July and August with their colorful shorts and tops plastered against gold, ebony, and nut –brown legs and arms; they decorated the street rivaling the geranium and ivy found on the manicured boulevard downtown [5].

Indeed, the absence of trees is a symbol of a place without greenness and oxygen meaning without life and hope. Brewster Place is choking with the lack of oxygen that should be provided by trees existence. However, while the trees no longer need care as they have already grown up; the children of Brewster Place really need to be nurtured. Though they represent hope for Brewster Place through this companion with trees; the children find their future mortgaged by lack of opportunities to succeed in life. The shadow of deep disappointment rests upon the inhabitants. They have even no game field to enjoy themselves but the street. It is in this same vein that Dubois, in the *Souls of Black Folk*, illustrates the might have beens of African-Americans. Dubois writes: “*The nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found freedom in his promised land*” [6].

The rat in *Brewster Place* is very symbolical. Usually, rats live in underprivileged areas. It nourishes and grows fat or aged buildings decayed matters. The rat is repulsive, it produces fear in women and children and Mattie and Basil are not an exception to this rule. Mattie witnesses that the rat eats human flesh when in their dingy block a rat gnawed her son’s chin.

She abandons the place for a safer shelter in order to protect her son. But does she forget that there is another rat bigger than the first one which is lurking whenever they settle. This rat symbolizes the white man who enters directly or indirectly, undermines and thwarts the African American existence. He cannot successfully get over the hurdle according to the set pattern of the maze. Being unable to meet her mother’s expectation, he betrays her and flees.

Naylor prefaces her novel with Langston Hughes’ poem about deferred dreams. In that prefatory poem, the author wonders about the outcome of a dream which does not come true. This wondering is shared with readers who encounter many question marks at the poem’s lines as if they are asked to bring their own answers to the questions. It means that the novel will not only be marked by many dreams but its characters’ dreams and objectives will also not be achieved.

Hence, Gloria Naylor opens Cora’s section with the following words;

*True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy [7].*

The word “dream” belongs to the core subject of the book and is an indication that the *Women of Brewster Place* is a novel about African-Americans’ dreams in general and African-American women’s in particular. Each female character has her own dream. But the dream has no luck to be real one day. It is rather destined to vanish. For instance, Kiswana places her dream on the black figure which fly to no one knows where and when it will set the dream down.

*She places her dream on the back of the black bird
and fantasized that it would glide forever in*

transparent silver circles until it ascended to the universe and was swallowed up. But the wind died down, and she watched with a sigh as the bird beats its wings in awkward, frantic movements to land on the corroded top of a fire escape on the opposite building [8].

The vocabulary used by Naylor in these lines shows that the pigeon will be corroded like the fire escape where the bird lands and will vanish. Such is the lot reserved to the characters' individual dream.

In fact, Mattie dreams that her son Basil will be the first black president in the USA but like many young black men he has to stay in jail. Etta herself thinks that one day she will be the wife of an important black figure and finds herself abused by priest. Kiswana is a strong believer of a united poor black community but does not succeed in creating an atmosphere of understanding and harmony between the tenants as their meeting ends in a violent dispute. Ciel herself has always hoped to find her husband back and to have a united family but Eugene leaves and does not even attend their daughter's funeral. Cora Lee's dreams are confused, she is not ready to say what her dreams are about and she does not know if they will be materialized or not. And Naylor writes: "*I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit man to say what dream it was....*" [9].

Indeed, Cora Lee is a great dreamer; her life is shadowy since she is after both the thing that feels good in the dark and a real baby. However, in the light, the thing no longer feels good and babies grow up and should become adults like her. Lorraine has been sanguine to be accepted by the community of Brewster Place. However, she is considered by this same community as scapegoat hence her bloody death. Theresa endeavours to convince Lorraine to assume her choice as lesbian but her efforts will be of no effect, as her partner will always believe that she is not different from the others.

Moreover, beyond their individual dreams the women of Brewster Place share the same common dream of freedom. Naylor underscores this common dream in the block party section where too much rain sunk the women in a deep sleep. Indeed,

Every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of the cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of fitful sleep [10].

Even if both men and women are aware of Lorraine's death, Naylor willingly specifies the authors of the dreams, meaning women not men. In fact, women are imagining that their can end like Lorraine, victim of men's violence. The dreams of Lorraine bring reminders of collective victimization to the women since their understood that their lot is within men's hands and wonder when this cohabitation with threat will come to an end. As such, they feel concerned about their freedom. However, even Ciel who is at San Francisco has the same dream as those women of Brewster Place. That is to say, the concern of women's freedom goes beyond the black community of Brewster Place and touches any black women wherever she is. The fact, Ciel cannot make a real distinction

between herself and the woman in her dream means that every black woman should find herself in the character of Lorraine.

Besides, the women's common dream finds a liberating continuation in Mattie's hopeful dream of a joyous party. Mattie's dream represents the promise of a fruitful collective endeavour to improve their community. In her dream the women work together to dissemble the bloodstained wall, passing bricks from hand to hand, chipping away at the wall with their hands, bathing themselves ritually with torrential rains. It can be noticed that the bustling preparation for the block party, to raise legal fees for their battle for decent housing, contrast with the tensions of the previous tenant meeting. In fact, Mattie's dream in the block party can help one to give an answer to the question of the beginning about the destiny of a deferred dream. Indeed, a deferred dream can be renewed and as far as a dream is possible, hope will exist. And whenever there is hope one can think about life continuation. That is why there are some hopeful notes in Mattie's dream.

Ciel has recovered from the heartbreak. Also in this dream, integration between black and white is possible as Ciel has succeeded in finding the right man from the white community and projects a mixed marriage. Etta has become more realistic, is no longer being caught up with what a man is not, she has realized it is what a man is that counts. She starts to have faith in God and become a prayer like her friend Mattie. Freedom is not so far off since the women knit together to remove the bricks of the wall. To a certain extent, the crumbling of the wall is synonymous of freedom as it represented seclusion from the rest of the world. The dream also presents Kiswana as the only reasonable character apart from Mattie. She is the only person who is convinced that the block party will be interrupted by the rain. The unsuccessful endeavour to sensitize the others about that is a clue that indicates she will never succeed in her project of uniting all the black community to improve their living conditions. She appears very upset at the end of the dream, with her voice dissolving into tears since she has failed in her battle.

III. THE USE OF METAPHORS AS A ARTISTIC DEVICE

Gloria Naylor's use of time in the *Women of Brewster Place* is implicit. She seems to compress the entire stories of African American women between dawn to dusk. The novel starts at dawn and comes to an end at dusk. One may consider that the stories last a daytime span. In order to show how women are oppressed, and how their future in gloomy in the United States, their stories start at dark time and end at dark time, that is to say from "can't see" to "can't see". However, Naylor, thanks to her remarkable skills as an artist who fuses together man and nature, uses climate change and the elements of nature to introduce some of her characters to the reader. For instance, Mattie and Etta's introductions, even Ben's are done with the announcement of the prevailing weather. Mattie appears in winter with a snowy time and a grey atmosphere. The description of the weather goes with a light research by Mattie and her community. Indeed, not only does the weather

not allow access to light but also the wall is a great obstruction to brightness. Gloria Naylor explains:

The sun's dying rays could be felt rather than seen behind the leaden evening sky... the wall reached just above the second floor apartments, which meant the northern light would be blocked from her plants [11].

Etta Mae Johnson appears in summer time as a spirited, hot blooded and rebellious southern girl. Her introduction within a scating weather allows Gloria Naylor to show that Etta is a character full of fire and live who is able to take initiatives to reach her target, that is to say to succeed materially in life.

Moreover, Naylor uses the weather for more than introducing her characters. The novel opens with a dim atmosphere, with people fighting for light and it also ends with the same want for brightness to enlighten the darkness that prevails in Brewster Place at the preparation of the block party. A snowy and heavy weather create indeed the darkness at the beginning of the novel. It is the author's scheme to depict death in life or death agony as Brewster Place and its children are endeavouring to stay alive but unfortunately a closely examination shows that they are closer to death than to life. Also the greyness of this passage indicates how sad and unworthy their life will be, likes ashes blown by the wind and scatted about no one knows where. Naylor depicts the sadness of the context with the following full of grayish mentions:

The moist grey air was as heavy as the sigh that lay on her full bosom. The ashen buildings were beginning to fade against the gentle blanketing of the furry gray snow coming from the darkening sky [12].

In the chapter of the block party, the darkness is caused by a cloudy sky that provides a non-stop rain for an entire week. The rain is accentuated by a one-word sentence. Actually, in putting the emphasis on the rain in the last chapter, Naylor creates an opposition with the snow of the beginning chapter, thus announcing the improvement of the life of the black community of Brewster Place. In fact, after too much blood shed with Lorraine and Ben's death, the symbolical rain comes to clean the black town from its entire blot. However, while in Mattie's section the snow does not prevent people from doing small trips in and out of Brewster Place,, in the block party the rain confined them in their houses, leaving

them unable to make the distinction between day and night time. So, compelled to stay in their flats, the tenants of Brewster Place must retreat in order to find the light that was missing on the street. Naylor describes:

The corner bar did not record business that week, and electric bills rose sharply as portable heaters, televisions, and lamps stayed on night and day as Brewster Place tried desperately to bring any kind of warmth and light into their world [13].

The light is not only missing on the street but also in their minds. The struggle for light is their struggle for freedom and to a large certain against the oppression that has characterized their lives for many years.

IV. CONCLUSION

At the end of our analysis, we realize that Gloria Naylor, through the use of symbols, images and metaphors as artistic devices in *The Women of Brewster Place*, has given more indications about the situation of African American women. Gloria Naylor points out the inequalities between men and women making almost all the female characters go through a score of obstacles and traps that waylay their itineraries. Implicitly, there is a call for protest against women's predicament in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. Naylor upholds a mirror in which inequality and injustice towards women are reflected for men to see.

REFERENCES

- [1] ANGELOU, Maya. 19884. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, London, Virago Press.
- [2] Bâ, Mariama.1981 *Un Chant écarlate*, Dakar, Nouvelles Editions Africaines.
- [3] De Beauvoir, Simone. 1947. *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris, Gallimard.
- [4] Dubois, W. E. B D. 1953. *The Souls of Black of Folk*, The Blue Hero Press, New York.
- [5] Emecheta, Buchi. 1979. *The Joys of Motherhood*, George Brazillier, Inc, New York.
- [6] Jaone, M Braxton. 1989. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition*, Urthin, Temple University.
- [7] Jean Rhys. 1966. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, London, Penguin.
- [8] Naylor, Gloria. 1988, *Mama Day*, New York, Penguin books;
- [9] Schwartz-Bart, Simone. 1972. *Pluie et Vent sur Tumélee Miracle*, Paris Editions du Seuil.