

# The Depiction Of Women Oppression: Across Analysis Of The Social And Cultural Oppressive Forces In Gloria Naylor's *The Women Of Brewster Place* And Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*

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**Abstract**—Gloria Naylor and Mariama Ba, in their masterpieces, vehemently denounce the social and cultural forces that oppress women in the United States of America and in Senegal. Social and cultural oppressive forces that take the form of divorce, patriarchy, widowhood, social stratification, racism, sexism and abandonment. In depicting the excruciating conditions of African American women and Senegalese women through their autobiographical novels, they also display their own sufferings and plead their own causes. *The Women of Brewster Place* and *So Long A Letter* are pretexts for the authors to deal with the social and cultural hindrances that prevent women from enjoying the different opportunities that the freedom of action and thought provide with the individual in society.

**Keywords**—Women, society, cultural, oppression, social, racism, sexism, gender, tradition, customs.

## Introduction

Gloria Naylor and Mariama Ba highlight the oppression of women in their respective societies by laying the emphasis on the social and cultural aspects. The two novels lay bare women's plight in the United States of America and in Senegal as a consequence of a racist, gender-centered and oppressive society on the one hand, but on the other hand, a society sellotaped in a tradition and customs that deprives women of the possibilities to fully enjoy their dreams.

The purpose of this paper is to show that in *The Women of Brewster Place* and in *So Long A Letter*, women are victim of social and cultural conditions that take away women's freedom of action and choice as they are subjected to the whims and dictates of a chauvinistic-male-oriented societies.

## THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL OPPRESSIVE FORCES IN THE TWO NOVELS

Any society or community needs a certain number of rules or values set by its inhabitants in order to live in peace and harmony. These codes regulate the

conduct of the members of the community and generally provide guidance in the relationships between its members and the rest of the outside world. Therefore, as there is an interaction between social forces, that is to say the demands of society and the needs and desires of human beings, these rules may never stand the test of time. From this point of view, they can be oppressive forces that jeopardize some people's lives or the whole community.

Gloria Naylor and Mariama Bâ show that women are oppressed in their respective societies. For the former, oppression stems from racism and mostly from women's partners, that is to say men. For the latter, oppression is due to tradition and customs.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* women are violently oppressed by men. And in some cases, it is their parents who are the authors of the predicament inflicted upon women. In fact, Mattie has experienced violence from her father whose special established rules and longings make her daughter go through an ordeal. She falls in love with a boy called Harris but cannot marry him just because according to her father, "Fred Watson is the only man in the church her father thought good for her" (Naylor 13-14)

In other words, one can say that her father has given her permission to be only in close contact with Fred Watson whom he considers as a model of husband for her. As such, Mattie is denied the right to choose the man she loves and her father, Sam Michael goes beyond limits when it comes to exerting his rules and wishes. Through a scheme by which he demands unquestioned obedience from her daughter, he goes so far as to oblige Mattie to spend "*boring evening with the deadpan Fred Watson*" (Naylor13). In doing so, it is obvious that Samuel has an oppressive way of handling her daughter's life and his attitude reminds us of Montesquieu, the French philosopher, when he sums up the temptations of power in the following terms: "*Experience in all ages has proved that everyone who possesses power is inclined to abuse it. He goes on exercising it until he comes up against the limits.* (Aron 263)

As a result, in refusing her to get married with Harris, the man she loves, she falls in the trap of Butch Fuller, the cock of the wall, who seduces women, including married ones. Butch Fuller, the good-for-nothing whom all people avoid like the plague lures Mattie and impregnates her. Being a responsible and respectable father who wishes her daughter a happy future, it is clear that Sam Michael is seriously wounded in his pride. But if we take into account that moderation is good in all things, we can bear out that Sam Michael excessive love and longing for dignity and respectability turn him into a real oppressor. Samuel violently beats Mattie when he learns that Butch Fuller has impregnated her. In this situation, he vents his anger on his daughter ignoring the seriousness of her pregnancy and mindlessly beats her to death. Gloria Naylor explains:

Mattie's body contracted in a pain spasm each time the thick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach. He would repeat his question with each blow from the stick and her continued silence caused the blows to come faster and harder and Sam Michael was sweating and breathing so hard he couldn't talk anymore, so he just grounded the whimpering girl on the floor (Naylor 23).

Besides, Mattie's experience of violence is similar to that of Miss Eva Turner, whose father was dead set against her first husband. Naylor's comparison of the two events, which occur in the life of two women from two different generations, displays a certain continuation of men's abusive authorities on women, particularly male parents on their daughters. Through Miss Eva Turner's words, it is obvious that suffering is a very common fact that a woman is supposed to experience in her life. Miss Eva Turner relates her story, showing her father's tyrannical way of handling his own daughter's life:

Child, I know about what you talking' about. My daddy was just like that too. I remember the night when I ran off with my first husband, who was a singer. My daddy hunted us down for the three months and then drug me home and kept me locked in my room for weeks with the windows all nailed up. But soon as he let me out, Virgil came back and got me, and was off again (Naylor 34).

As a general rule, a daughter under her father's authority is entirely at his mercy and should obey him as a pet obeys his master. She has not the authority to decide and her father will always make it for her. As such, a daughter is a father's property. Maybe, that is the reason why Mary Chestnut sustains the idea that "all children and girls who live in their fathers' houses are slaves"(Chestnut 77). However, it is worth mentioning that the oppression black daughters go through in the United States of America is not different from that of their sisters in Africa.

In *So Long a Letter*, Binetou and Nabou nearly suffer from the same predicament Mattie Michael and

Miss Eva Turner encountered when they were living with their parents.

Little Nabou is a young girl adopted and raised by her aunt old Nabou who dominates her by the strength of her character. Described as a sheep, she is at her aunt beck and call as far as her future married life is concerned. Therefore, people unanimously accept that marriage is the sacred union between man and woman. It is the social agreement on which husbands and wives must be faithful and helpful to each other for the best and for the worst until death separates them. Marriage must be based on love which is a physical and sentimental impulse that leads a human being towards another one. In this thread of thoughts, it stands to reason that nobody has the right to choose for somebody else his or her partner for life without asking his or her opinion. The couple must be given the time and opportunity to know each other and with a free conscious mind make a choice. Then, deciding someone else partner for life can be in a certain extent a source of oppression simply because what is suitable for the decision-maker may be different from what other people want. And as the saying goes: "*beauty is in the eyes of the beholder*". If we take into account these parameters, it is clear that old Nabou is an oppressor since she makes Little Nabou get married with Mawdo without mutual consent. Marriage is a reciprocal agreement over a life's program.

But we deem it interesting to pause here and explain that this oppression is indirect since the oppressed is unaware of her situation. And even if the young girl does not feel the drawbacks of the attitude of Old Nabou, the latter must be blamed for her actions simply because arranged marriages have many bad effects in the Senegalese society. In making little Nabou obey her unquestionable orders, she shows at the same time that little Nabou's freedom of choice is completely taken away from her as she is subjected to her whims. Her power and authority urge her to be the only one to examine the advantages and disadvantages of her daughter's marriage.

Being a writer whose main concerns are the issues women are faced with in society, Mariama Ba cannot help denouncing the arranged or shotgun weddings that are taking place in the African societies in general and particularly in Senegal at a time when emancipation has been much debated throughout the world. She is conscious of the role she must play as a writer like La Guma who declared in the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference held in Stockholm in 1967 that

South African literature, I am prepared to say, is that literature which concerns itself with the realities of South Africa (.) when we sit down to write a book, I or any of my colleagues around me, we are as writers face with the reality that 80 percent of the population lives below the bread-line standard; we are faced with the reality that average daily population of prisoners

amount to 70000 persons. We are faced with the reality that half of the non- white people who died last year were below the age of five. We are faced with the fact that in South Africa today people are not allowed to develop their minds along the lines which they prefer (La Guma 1967)

In addition, Binetou is victim of the same parental authority Nabou encounters but with a slight difference. The first one's plight is due to the extreme poverty of her parents. And as the saying goes, "*there is no reasoning with a starving man*". Binetou can be seen here as a mere object for her poor parents to have a comfortable life. As a human being, she stands here for an object of transaction simply because her parents are only attracted by the trip to Mecca, the villa, the car, jewels and the monthly allowance Modou promises. From this point of view, it is clear that his morals are not taken into account by her parents. In this respect, she is not given the possibility to be at ease and make a choice. Her parents put pressure on her because for them, marrying Modou is making the most of the opportunity.

Apart from the fact of forcing her in marriage, her parents oblige her to drop out of school a few months before the Senegalese examination called 'bac'. In doing so, they really become oppressors because they deny their daughter an education in order to satisfy their financial needs. And it is well- known that education is of paramount importance not only in the training of the individual but also for the development of the whole community. In the purpose of showing the importance of education, an Algerian Muslim reformist, Sheikh Abd Al-Hamid Ben Badis asserts: "*Educate a boy and you educate one person, Educate a girl and you educate a nation*"

In contrast, at the end of the novel, Mariama Ba puts forward a marriage built on love by depicting besides these arranged or shotgun weddings where union is based on the agreement of the two partners. Ibrahima Sall and Daba are real lovers opposed to these two traditional ways of marriage. A close look at their married life shows that solidarity and understanding underlie their relationships. They identify with each other, discuss everything so as to find a compromise. Ibrahima Sall is not interested only in the flesh because he says "*Daba is my wife. She is not my slave; nor my servant*" (BA.73). His love for her is reflected by his moral and little financial support when his girlfriend was pregnant.

Besides the abusive parental authorities, women are also oppressed by the customs in Mariama Ba's society and by racism in that of Gloria Naylor. As a matter of fact, polygamy in *So Long a Letter* stands for a real source of oppression due to the bad consequences it inflicts upon the protagonist.

As opposed to monogamy, polygamy can be defined as the fact of having more than one wife. It is an old practice acknowledged by some religions especially Islam. From a traditional point of view, polygamy is a practice related to wealth because it

enlarges the members of the family. African societies being mostly agrarian ones, the main concern of heads of families is to have as many children as possible. This is equivalent to having more valuable hands which would serve as an important labour force, hence, the richness of the family.

From an Islamic point of view, polygamy is institutionalized by God the Almighty who says in the Koran: "*Marry women of your choice, two, three or four if you fear that you shall not be able to deal just with them, then only one*" (sourate 4, V3). This Holy book goes further by warning its devotees to avoid inclining too much to one of them by giving her more of your time and provision so as not to leave the others hanging, meaning being neither divorced nor married.

These orders above permit and accept polygamy but at the same time give a warning to Muslims. The Koran is here dead set against any favoritism in the treatment of wives. Man has to put them on an equal footing in all sectors of life. In other words, the condition of polygamy is mainly based on the principles of justice and equality.

However, due to Muslims' misrepresentations, misinterpretations and misconceptions, polygamy is in *So Long a Letter* a very serious factor of oppression. The situation of Ramatoulaye shows that many people willing abuse polygamy and turns it into a site of oppression for women. Modou Fall, after twenty five years of marriage which blesses them twelve children, suddenly abandons his first wife, preferring the younger Binetou he has married as a second wife. From then on, Ramatoulaye's happy life is totally shaken and she starts going through oppressive moments and in its most painful forms. She experiences the heavy burden deception, humiliation and loneliness. The latter is all the more frightening and tormenting since it can be defined as the state of a person who is no longer in connection with his fellow man. Loneliness is by itself a source of suffering because man is a social and sociable creature for whom communication is a fundamental need. She says: "*But my loneliness would emerge at night, burdensome*" (BA.52).

In such a situation, it is obvious that she suffers from the void Modou fall inflicts upon her. She complains bitterly about it in the following words:

I live in a vacuum. And Modou avoided me. Attempts by friends to bring him back home to the fold proved futile. One of the new couple's neighbors explained to me that the child would go "all a quiver" each time Modou said my name or showed any desire to see his children. He never came back again; his new found happiness and gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us (BA.46).

Ramatoulaye also suffers from humiliation by accepting the young Binetou as a co-wife. Indeed, she is heartbroken due to the fact that she has to share her husband with another woman who not only has

the age of her daughter but who is the latter's dear friend. She is now promoted to the rank of her co-wife whom she must face during her married life.

Apart from the polygamous marriage, Ramatoulaye has also experienced the period of confinement as a form of oppression. *So Long a Letter* is written in an Islamic context where almost every practice is pretended to be justified by this religion. The period of confinement is an Islam institution defined by God as follows: "If any of you die and leave widows behind, they shall wait concerning themselves four months and ten days" (sourate 2, V234)

As for the observance of this institution proper, we have no idea of its being related, according to the Islamic precepts, to any form of oppression.

The period of confinement, as taught by Islam does not restrict the widow's liberty. But, today, tradition has perverted the way of performing this ritual so as to turn it into a less than real oppression as it appears in *So Long a Letter* which stands here as a sample of the Senegalese society. For instance, if it compels the widow to stay, during all the forty and ten days, inside the house and without any possibility of going anywhere, it becomes then a sort of prison in which she is locked. Therefore, there is a pure form of confinement based on Islamic precepts and which implies no restrictions if need be, and another one which has been negatively altered by tradition. Mariama Ba seems to be dealing with the latter because the letter, Ramatoulaye writes, appears to be a way of breaking silence imposed by the observance of this ritual which is a dark area to light up.

In the process of depicting the oppressive social forces, the cast system must be pointed out. Aissatou's misfortune includes another parameter of oppression that is the cast system. It is born out of a traditional division of society into classes. According to this classification, people like goldsmiths, drumbeaters, cobblers, potters and sculptors belong to groups called "castes". But what appears to be just social attitude having nothing to do with virtue in other contexts, has in the Senegalese society a very derogatory meaning. As such, the word "caste" refers to people considered as second class citizens. In this way, they are said to occupy the lowest position in the social ladder and are opposed to the "nobles". The so-called nobility is often very jealous of its "privileged pure blood" and does not tolerate any social intercourse including marriage between its members and persons of "castes". Mariama Ba expresses it in these terms:

What, a Toucouleur marrying a goldsmith's daughter? He will never "make money" Mawdo's mother is a Dioufene, a Guelewar from the sine. What an insult to her, before her former co-wives (BA17).

These social distinctions are still religiously observed and constitute real oppression for those they unjustly relegate a second-class status. In *So Long a*

*Letter*, Aissatou's misfortunes mostly derive from this oppressive institution of cast system. Strongly motivated by a cast prejudice, Aunt Nabou, Mawdo's mother, sees her son's marriage to a person of "caste" as a scandalous form of miscegenation. Since she cannot stand such a union, she resolves to take her revenge on Aissatou; the goldsmith's daughter who deprives her of her one and only man. Her ordeal is nearly the same Mireille has experienced in *The Scarlet Song*. But in that novel written by Mariama Ba, it is interesting to mention that Outman's father appears to be more understanding than his mother toward their daughter-in-law Mireille.

The cast system in *So Long a Letter* is similar to the gender exclusion women are faced with in *The Women of Brewster Place*. In this book, Gloria Naylor, in many respects, tries to depict women remonstrating against the unfair way they are treated in both male and white dominated society. Indeed, in the hardships of African American life, never married or divorced women are confined within the infernal circle of singlehood and appear to be not able to enjoy a certain amount of freedom. Such women find it too difficult to exercise that freedom, and most of the time they break the neck against their community's compelling rules and regulations. As a result, that community does not accept them.

In fact, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, almost all the women are living on their own, either divorced from an irresponsible husband or preferring to stay single. As far as life is concerned, the society in which they are evolving is not ready to give them the freedom they need, and refuses to recognize their independence. Etta Mae Johnson is a great epitome of that absolute denial of freedom.

Etta has experienced a life in a deep white dominated society where even black men cannot escape from the white man's fury even less than a woman. Being a young black woman from the south who wants to fulfill herself not through marriage but by taking her talent in the street and by "learning" to get over, to hook herself to any promising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another" (Naylor 60).

However, she may have forgotten that the white man in Rock Vale cannot accept a black woman who wants to fulfill herself. The young black girl becomes an object of fury and hatred and represents a great inhibitor for the white men of her country. As her life is threatened, Etta is forced to leave her native town escaping narrowly from death.

Moreover, Etta is not only persecuted racially but she is also pestered because of her condition as a single woman who is looking for a stable life. In fact, she is victim of many misfortunes caused by men. All these mishaps are summed up in the song she heard once in a restaurant bar, and kept in her mind and never forgot it. So by means of intertextuality Gloria Naylor writes:

I love my man

I'm a lie if I say I don't  
I love my man  
I'm a lie if I say I don't  
But I'll quit my man  
I'm a lie if I say I won't  
My man wouldn't give me no breakfast  
Wouldn't give me no dinner  
Squawked about my supper  
Then he put me out of doors  
Had the nerve to lay  
A matchbox to my clothes  
I didn't have no many  
But I had a long, long way to go (Naylor 55-56).

Furthermore, society's gender rules have made of Cora Lee victim of gender discrimination. Miss Lee is not only victim of early pregnancy from men's sexual abuse but she is unjustly excluded from school when she becomes pregnant. It is the negative consequences of gender discriminatory school legislations, which even today and in any countries throughout the world maintain that female students who get pregnant must leave school whereas male students undergo no such sanction when they become fathers. Cora Lee's eviction from school is the ideal moment for Gloria Naylor to draw the attention of the reader to the sexist discrimination against women in general and against African American in particular. One can still recall the period when women prostitutes were persecuted although their male customers were allowed to go free.

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the theme of gender exclusion can go along with the exclusion Lorraine and Theresa go through if we analyze it from the angle of the consequences they have on the characters.

As a rule, a human being's behavior is well perceived or acknowledged when it respects the norms of the society in which he or she belongs. If the behavior happens to be anti social that is to say, non respective to the laws of society, the author will be merely and purely considered as someone who does no longer belong to that society and membership related to that society is denied to her or him.

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the title chapter "the two" is different from the other chapter titles when the chapters are named after the women whose story are being told about. Instead of titling the chapter Lorraine and Theresa, Gloria Naylor uses the term "the two". She just wants to show the stigmatization or marginalization of the two women by the community of Brewster Place. Actually the community stands aloof from them. C.C Baker warns Kiswana Brown against Lorraine by saying: "Hey Swana, better watch it

talking to that dyke. She might try to grab it or it" (Naylor 162).

Moreover, Sophie their closest neighbor refuses to pronounce their names to mention them. Sophie's attitude is shared by the community of Brewster Place which uses pejorative appellations to name Lorraine and Theresa. These appellations stand for the rejection and indifference these two women go through in their respective community. The words "dyke", "lesbo", and "butch" are significant proof of a harsh expression of contempt against the two lesbians.

When people know that Lorraine and Theresa are lesbians, they began to keep their distance from these "two devils". They totally ignore the young women and avoid any associations with them. They refuse to answer back Lorraine's greetings. Naylor comments:

She (Lorraine) came out of her apartment eager to start her day by greeting any of her neighbors who were outside. But she noticed that some of the people 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 one who spoke only did so after an uncomfortable pause, in which they seemed to be peering through her before they begrudge her good morning or evening (Naylor 133).

Because of her sexual deviance as lesbian, Lorraine has already experienced more than Brewster Place denial of a good morning or evening or her membership of the community. Lorraine had been victim of her father's renunciation of her existence. In fact, when Lorraine's father discovered that his daughter had not a boy friend but a girl friend, he could not bear this insult and evicted her from the parental home. Indeed, Lorraine had been excluded from the family circle at the age of seventeen. Her own sexual orientation to lesbianism had cost her a lack of affection from her own father and from her own community. Lorraine says:

My father kicked me out of the house when I was seventeen years old. He found a letter one of my girl friends had written me, and when I wouldn't lie about what it meant, he told me to get out and leave behind everything that he had ever bought me. He said he wanted to burn them (Naylor 148).

Lesbians are considered as persons with contaminating mortal disease when all things touched by the ill person must be burnt to be sterilized. Lorraine is the right illustration of this homophobia performed on the homosexual women. Lorraine's father had burnt everything that belonged to her as if he was trying to purify the space and properties left by the contagious girl. It seems as if any contact with the lesbian is a sin and Lorraine's father went so far as to refuse to open the letters her daughter sent to wish him a happy birthday. He preferred having no daughter at all, to having a lesbian child. He had entirely chosen to ignore the existence of a daughter

of his own. Lorraine says: "I would send him a birthday card each year, and he always returned them unopened" (Naylor 148).

Moreover, in *Sula* by Toni Morrison, the female protagonist is the pariah and the outcast of her community because she has broken all the black society's rules. She behaves oddly and spontaneously. So, in creating that someone else to be, Hannah's daughter stumbles against the restrictive laws of her community. *Sula* is considered as a bird of ill omen and brings misfortune wherever she is.

### Conclusion

Gloria Naylor and Mariama Ba acknowledge that the oppression of women, multiform and omnipresent in their respective societies, is irrefutable. If that oppression does not stem from patriarchy, it results from the ways and customs of societies, racism and sexism. The female characters of the two novels go through the weight of tenacious and constraining traditional beliefs and practices that seem to be often inescapable and insurmountable for them. In the *Women of Brewster Place* and in *So Long A Letter*, Gloria Naylor and Mariama Ba have identified the diverse forms that's women's oppression is covered with and the agents of the oppression.

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