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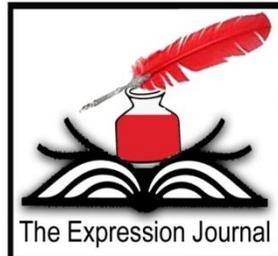
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RECONSTRUCTION OF BLACK FEMALE IDENTITY IN BESSIE HEAD'S "THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES" AND GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

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Abstract

In the main, black literature celebrates blackness, black traditions and rituals as source of life and identity against the hegemonic White value system. The black writers, especially women in the post-colonial times deconstruct the image and identity as presented in life and mainstream literature. In the fictional world of Bessie Head and Gloria Naylor, women characters assert their identity as Black, rejecting the oppressive system of sexism and racism. Both the writers endow their women characters with indomitable will, spirit of motherhood and sense of solidarity and struggle. They challenge the established system to survive and succeed by maintaining enthusiasm, commitment and toughness in their lives. Though they suffer a lot in the course of forming their identities and gaining respect and recognition, they overcome their hardships through hard work, inner strength and sisterly solidarity. Both the writers underscore the value of independence of women for self-esteem, self-recognition and self-realization. Contrary to the European archetypes of women, they reconstruct women by going back to the enriching African cultural traditions. In the characters of these women, the authors reinvent the black woman endowed with the virtues of wisdom, inner strength and power of nature, typical of African cultural traditions.

Key-Words

Blackness, Mainstream Literature, Solidarity, Postcolonial, Reconstruction, Buffoonery.

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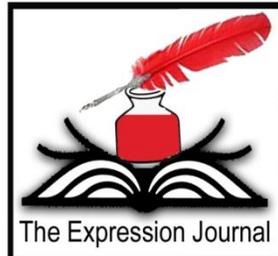
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Bessie Head and Gloria Naylor, the black women writers of the post-colonial times, reconstruct the identity of Black woman, in their writings, who rejects the still alive oppressive system of sexism and racism. These writers represent the resilience and adaptability; strengths and struggles; hopes and fears of the black women. Their women characters challenge the established system to survive, and succeed in it by maintaining enthusiasm, commitment and toughness in their lives. Both the writers endow their women characters with indomitable will, spirit of motherhood and sense of solidarity and struggle. These women work very hard to gain their identities as new women. Though, in the course of forming their identities and gaining respect and recognition, they suffer a lot, they refuse to succumb to the life-denying forces.

Bessie Head's writing deals with the universal issues, particularly the intermingling of traditional and contemporary culture and the roles of women. In short stories, Head portrays African village life with its virtues and weakness in terms of customs and traditions. The main focus of her stories is on the portrayal of hardships of women in the village life spanning from the colonial to the post-colonial period. In her stories, Head predominantly traces the life journey of black women in the face of the still alive oppressive system of sexism. Her writing is a clear attempt to write women into history, from whence they have been resolutely and traditionally excluded. As a woman writer,

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Head has resorted to an effective and devastating method of subversion “to destroy the male stereotypes of women” (Achufusi 356). She achieves this end by asserting their independence and autonomy through her writing.

In “The Collector of Treasures (1970),” Bessie Head, through the life of the protagonist, Dikeledi Mokopi, reveals the experiences of other women in the country side. In a way, the author expresses her own experiences she has had as a woman. The story, set in Botswana of the post-colonial times, charts the woeful journey of an illiterate but a skilled woman from childhood to the old age; from submission to self-assertion; from dependence to independence.

Dikeledi is reared by her cruel uncle after the death of her parents. He mistreats her as if she were a servant or sub-human and deprives her of education. As she grows up, she is married to Garesego Mopoki. It is not a marriage in the real sense, but a business deal between Garesego and her uncle. As husband, Garesego takes interest in her body, not in the whole being. He leaves her with three children to look after to seek sexual gratification with other women. The narrator describes, Garesego is a man who “imagined he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be a scramble for it” (Head 91). He is similar to the men who “make babies like machines and turn their backs upon the poor women” (Ojo-Ade 83). As a womanizer, he needs a different woman every night in order to satiate his lust. “He sees sex as a display of masculine power, domination and the oppression of women” (Head 98).

In a male-governed society, man is supposed to be bread winner, but Garesego as man, husband and father succeeds in escaping familial duties and responsibilities. He neither gives money to his wife to burn the hearth and run the home nor helps her maintain the thatch. Alone she carries all the responsibilities of mother and father. On her own she makes and mends the thatch to live in and rears her three children by sewing dresses and knitting jerseys for the village children. It is through hard work and the virtue of motherhood, typical of the southern cultural tradition, she sustains her own life and the lives of her children.

Garesego, after eight years of the marriage, abandons Dikeledi with the burden of three sons to rear and educate them on her own. Though she faces pecuniary and other hardships, she never asks her husband for financial assistance or any other support. She earns money by sewing dresses, knitting jerseys for the village children and making baskets. After a period of struggle, she is fortunate to have friendship of the new neighbours, Thebolo and his wife, Kenalepe who help her in every possible way when her own relatives reject her in the present state. It is their friendship that enables her to overcome the hardships of the lone mother. She makes clothes for their family, and in return, they supply her with grain and all other things she needs. As an extremely kind and

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good-hearted person, she receives affection and extends it to all around her.

One day, Garesego comes to know that Dikeledi is short of Rs 20 to pay the tuition fee of their elder son. He visits her under the pretext that he wants to help her with the needed money, but his real purpose of the visit is not to render any monetary assistance. To Dikeledi, he is “coming home for some sex” (Head 101) with her in lieu of the assistance. The cutting off Garesego’s genitals is an attempt by the oppressed woman to deconstruct the phallocratic society.

Anticipating his intentions, Dikeledi cuts off her genitals with a knife while he is asleep at night. Aware of all the consequences of the act, she kills him to stop his sexual abuse of her and of other women in the village. She watches him “bleed to death with an intent and brooding look, and does not want to miss one detail of it” (Head 103). Then she sends her eldest son to inform the police about it. For this act she is imprisoned for life. Thus she destroys the kind of man who creates misery and chaos in the lives of women, imitating the errors of his ancestors.

In the prison, Dikeledi finds an opportunity to befriend four women inmates who are sentenced for committing the same type of crime. They help her adjust to prison life and ways and not let any bad thing happen to her. It is their common experience in the marital lives brings them together. They continue to stay together through a strong bonding among themselves. They nurse the psychological and emotional wounds of each other through the potion of love and tenderness. One prison-inmate states, “Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care” (Head 28).

This is all that Dikeledi wishes in her life as a human being. She likes to be treated kindly and she longs to be loved. In the prison, she not only earns money for her children but also wins love, respect, recognition and appreciation from both the males and females for her talent and various skills. Thus she succeeds in turning her tears into treasures. This is why she is called the “Collector of Treasures.”

The theme, in this story, parallels the struggle of the author herself experienced in her own life. She herself was a woman who had faced many challenges, being raised in foster care, living as a refugee for fifteen years, and raising a child alone. While Head was still a child, her mother committed suicide. In 1964, she moved for Botswana with her son, saying that she would no longer live in apartheid Africa where she had suffered poverty, racial segregation and gender discrimination. In Botswana, she lived in poverty as a refugee, tending a garden and selling its products and homemade jam to earn money. Gradually, she overcame the formidable obstacles. Like the author, Dikeledi also emerges as a strong woman and redefines her life by breaking the established social codes of behaviour and gender stereotypes. She is not sorry for her crime, but she is sorry that she would never see her children and Kenalepe again.

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Alike Bessie Head, Gloria Naylor also depicts the resilience and adaptability, strengths and struggles, hopes and fears of the black women in American society. These women challenge the established system to survive meaningfully and succeed in it by maintaining enthusiasm, commitment and resilience in their lives. In *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Naylor depicts the women characters in a ceaseless struggle to find their identities in the culturally-isolated environment. Though they suffer tremendously, they remain alive through strong sisterly bonds. Naylor, contrary to the European archetypes of woman, endows her women characters with indomitable spirit to fight and live against the oppressive system.

The novel focuses on seven women who come from different classes and cultural backgrounds to live on a dead end street called Brewster Place. They “differ in their ages, their religious backgrounds, their personal backgrounds, their political affiliations, even their sexual preferences” (Naylor 53-54). There are different stories about different women and each story is linked to the next in one way or the other. They enrich the life of each other despite the crushing poverty, personal tragedy and intimidating environment. “Solidarity among women offers a safety net and a breath of fresh air in a suffocating, constraining environment” (Nnaemeka 19).

Mattie Michael, the protagonist, spends her childhood in Tennessee under the strict vigil of a doting father who adores her as a virgin. But when he comes to know that she is pregnant, he becomes violent and beats her up brutally. In the trying situation, Mrs. Fannie Browne, her mother comes forward to protect her from the violent father. She challenges her husband by putting a gun on his chest: “Hit my child again and I’ll meet your soul in hell!” (Naylor 24). Also she exhorts Mattie to take pride feeling in motherhood and provides her emotional nurturing: “Ain’t nothing to be shamed of. Havin a baby is the most natural thing there is” (Naylor 20). After this incident, Mattie leaves her home for North Carolina. At the new place, Miss Eva as a surrogate mother gives her emotional support and encourages her to live on.

The second woman is Kiswana Browne, a well-educated girl belonging to a rich black family. Being proud of her cultural traditions and community, she accuses her mother of being “a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black” (Naylor 85). She willingly leaves her home town for Brewster Place to gain independence to live life of her own brand. At this place, she, in a way, realize her dreams and desires.

Another woman in the novel is Cora-Lee who is crazy about babies from her childhood. She is so much obsessed with children that she bears babies every year outside wedlock for the sole pleasure of having them. But when Cora Lee is left alone with the burden of bearing and rearing children, Kiswana comes to her rescue. Through love, she restores self-esteem in Cora Lee both as a person and as a mother.

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Etta Mae Johnson is the woman who suffers at the hands of both black and white men. After bitter experiences with these men, she longs for a lasting love with a religious preacher but in vain. Distressed in life, she returns to Mattie to seek love and comfort. "Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (Naylor 74). Mattie succeeds in warding off loneliness and despair from the life of Etta and other women through the potion of human love and tenderness.

The next woman is Ciel who is married to Eugene and has a child. When she becomes pregnant with the second child, her husband forces her to abort the womb as he is averse to bearing the burden of upbringing two children. She loses her children abruptly—one through an abortion and the other through electrocution. Finally he leaves her alone to bear the loss of children for a materialistic life. When she loses all hopes of life, Mattie comes to her rescue. They share together their isolation, burden of responsibility as mothers and the loss of children. Despite all these adversities, Ciel shows remarkable resilience and is able to survive.

The next two women, Lorraine Theresa, are lesbians. Naylor reveals how the lives of these lesbians are crushed by the traditional society and how they come up with force to fight against the oppressive system. As a timid woman, Lorraine fails to gather courage to accept her identity as a lesbian whereas Theresa accepts her identity as a lesbian by mixing with her own type. Lorraine looks to others for constant acceptance and approval whereas Theresa relies on her own for self-development. Lorraine's worst fears come to life when she is raped by C.C. Baker and his gang. In madness, she murders her only friend, Ben who has been a father figure for the isolated women. Fowler writes, "Lorraine's unwitting murder of Ben...provides a kind of poetic justice for all the women who have been assaulted by men in the course of the novel" (54).

At the end of the novel, despite numerous differences and conflicts, these women join their hands tight together to demolish the wall of sexism and racism that imprisons them. They flung themselves "against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands" (Naylor 186). They destroy the wall of oppression in the drenching rain that signifies a sense of harmony between nature and women. Now the street becomes the place of power of love among these women. They heal their anguished heart and soul as well as body. They constitute a collective repository of dreams, a source of strength for survival. As Hooks explains, "sisterhood wasn't just about what we shared in common...it was about women learning how to care for one another and be in solidarity, not just when we have complaints or when we feel victimized" (130).

Both the writers underscore the value of independence of women for self-esteem, self-recognition and self-realization. Contrary to the European archetypes of women, they re-invent women by going back to the enriching African cultural traditions. These women

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characters overcome their hardships through inner strength and sisterly solidarity. In their new roles, they reject the discriminatory, exploitative and oppressive system. In the characters of these women, the authors reinvent the black woman endowed with the virtue of wisdom, inner strength and power of nature, typical of African cultural traditions.

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