

Emasculated Masculinity: A Study of Ben in Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place*

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Abstract: Since ever feminism framed the core of literary conversations, masculinity was also discussed a lot because the problematic of gender requires the interaction of both to comprehend the trajectory to a harmonious relationship between the two. The word masculine evokes the image of strong and all powerful man whose manhood sets the parameters of standard definitions, where as emasculated masculinity evokes the image of a man who has been robbed of his manhood and all that entail to it. The present paper studies the threats that hover over the black masculinity in America. It particularly studies the character of a black man whose name is Ben and who plays a very important role in Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place*. Ben is the representative of all those black men who are emasculated not only by the white supremacists but by their own men and women. The paper brings to the fore the causes and effects of this emasculation of black masculinity.

Key Words: Emasculation, trajectories, harmonious, masculinity, parameters, problematic.

To emasculate means to deprive a man of his strength or power. Emasculation can happen in various ways such as dominating men, not respecting them, speaking harsh words to them, withholding sex, trying to control them, comparing them to others and many other ways. Emasculated men feel, one way or the other that they are lacking as men. They feel that they are far from being real and authentic. A sense of terror seizes them and they try to hide the fact. This lack of manly traits leads them to be ashamed of themselves, which further leads them to a desperate need to prove their masculinity. If such men belong to black community in America, the damage to their masculinity is beyond repair. Gloria Naylor has depicted the same painful cry of black men in her novel *The Men of the Brewster Place*. This paper studies how Ben, the narrator, is victimized by the act of emasculation and how traumatic his state becomes because it is not only the white men who emasculate him, but the people of his own community with his wife also participate in this horrible act of emasculation.

Emasculation-physical or psychological- is ghastly, the emasculated one is never able to gather the pieces of his fragmented self to become whole. The question that occupies the prominent place is about the need that instigated this act of emasculation. Why would this happen at all? The black masculinity which is thought to have more physical prowess than the white men, why was it suppressed under the white normative masculinity? One may easily perceive the answer that lies in the inhuman practices of racism. The demon of race emasculated the black men and they had to witness helplessly the abuse happened not only to them but to their families also. The whites found them over-sexed bestial black men who needed to be emasculated, literally and symbolically both. "Negro men have been more feared, sexually and occupationally" (Bernard 69). So sometimes they were literally emasculated as white men felt that they were threat to their women. Ben, the centre of this study is not physically emasculated; his is a case of psychological emasculation.

A cursory reading of his character reveals that Ben is an emasculated man. He is never found to act in the ways that can assert his identity as a masculine. He is silent most of the time, onlooker of the assaults that happened to him and to others, inactive in most of the circumstances and just shedding tears on his powerless status. His wife Elvira was incredibly emasculating because her behaviour was so disrespectful and abusive towards Ben, and thus Elvira, in a way, facilitated the process of Ben's emasculation. St. Claire Drake and Horace Cayton in their book *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* attribute the emasculation of Black men to the gender battles that ensued among "Black men and 'forceful' Black women" (582), where poor economic condition and supremacy of white men played an important role.

Ben belongs to a small place called Richland Plantation which, contrary to its name, is filled with poor people. Ben's family includes his foul-mouthed wife Elvira and his physically- challenged daughter. Elvira attacks him for his impotence in not giving her more children and their miserable plantation lives, berating him as not being even "half a man" (*MBP* 26). She was always blaming Ben, calling him lazy, stupid and a good for nothing guy. Ben had mastered the art of remaining silent but if he tried to speak ever, his wife would bombard him with her abusive words. "I see it's better you keep your mouth shut 'cause when it's open, ain't nothing but stupidity comin' out" (*MBP* 24). Elvira was an unhappy woman who unloaded her stress on both Ben and their lame daughter all the time. "I'm sick of carrying the load for a half- grown woman and a no-count man. Both of you lazy as sin" (*MBP* 22). Ben never uttered a word against his wife but all he wanted to save his daughter from Elvira and the demonic white master who forcibly employed his daughter at his home and exploited her sexually.

The white perpetrators were so confident of black man's silence that they could continue taking advantages of the blacks. In case of Ben's daughter, Clyde, the white master felt no fear in molesting her, he knew that the poor sharecroppers could not stand up against their rich landlord. The following words from Ben's daughter also show the same: "And when I told him," my daughter continued, "that I was gonna tell my daddy, all he did was laugh. He laughed. And laughed" (*MBP* 22-23). All Ben could do is to drink all night when his daughter was at Clyde's house. He tried to drown his sorrow and voice in alcohol and continue to smile at his daughter's molester because standing up and giving voice to his anger would be dangerous for him and his daughter.

Elvira does not pay heed when the girl complains of sexual advances of her white master, not only this she does not let Ben speak against it. Since Ben did not act on time, he is left with regret for life. He went through the suffering of watching his lame daughter get molested by Clyde week after week. The pathetic socio-economic condition emasculates his masculine prowess and he has no option but to suffer silently. The whole of his life after his daughter left his house and disappeared, he lives with her memories and the regret of not being a man enough to protect and stand up for his daughter. He drowns himself in alcohol to numb himself. His soul cries:

Nobody knows my true story-and never will-as it is my turn to be the silent old man as I inherit more than my share of the pain riding on the question, what does it mean to be a man? Even now at sixty-eight I'm still wondering. If I had killed Clyde Haggard, the law kills me. If I had killed Elvira, the law puts me in jail for life. If I killed myself, there was no one but an understanding God to face. So I settled on killing myself- slowly with booze- and on God understanding that I'm fighting for my manhood. There is no way to face my daughter's eyes, even in memory, as she said, He laughed, Daddy. He laughed. And laughed. (MBP 28)

Poor economic status and very few job opportunities also deprive the black man of his masculinity. James W. Button et.al in their study of black men's struggle to get economic equality, throw light on the sorry state of job opportunities for the blacks in America: "Blacks unemployment rate is double than that of whites, and they are three times as likely as white to live in poverty" (1). Besides the black man is victimised by the member of his own community. The rich, wealthy and physically strong black men try to wield their power on the poor and weak men of their society, which has been given enough coverage in Naylor's *Linden Hills*.

Naylor depicts that there were only a few jobs the black men could do to make an honest living and most of these jobs were lowly paid manual labour jobs. Ben's emasculation is an apt example of it as he has to work as a maintenance man in the Brewster place because he does not find any work that can raise his living conditions. Ben reveals the pathetic conditions of job opportunities for black men in America, "There wasn't a whole lot of work for black men like us outside of picking cotton; and some would do anything to keep from having to go back to the fields" (MBP 18). Even in the jobs they could somehow manage to find, they were treated badly without any respect. Ben narrates his experiences at work "But hardly a day ever passed that I didn't get tobacco juice spit on my uniform or in my hair. It made some of 'em feel good as I was there bending over to dump the spittoons to pretend they didn't see me as they let go with a wad of tobacco" (MBP 17). Silence was the only means for the black men to exist in such a biased society. In *Bailey's Café*, Naylor highlights this kind of emasculation in clearer light through the character of Miss Maple, who was a transvestite. He is a strong- muscled man with pretty large fists but neither his strong built nor his highly qualified status brought him a job. Miss Maple whose real name is Stanley is a young man with a Ph.D. in statistics from Stanford. But he is unable to find a job in his field of expertise due to very few job opportunities for blacks. One may find him the participant in his own process of emasculation when he chooses to wear women's dresses due to hot weather but he, very soon, steers clear of adversities by the dint of his hard work. Unlike Ben, he rises above the abysmal condition he was living in and works hard to fulfil his dreams. Naylor, through his episode, highlights discrimination in the sector of education and job opportunities. Naylor in her *Linden Hills* shows how the wealthy black men carry out emasculation of poor black men.

Ben arrives at Brewster Place after his daughter and wife leave him. His is a tale of pain and suffering which makes the readers find that his emasculation happens due to his hostile and disrespecting partner and his white landlord. His episode makes the readers ponder over the role of black woman in emasculation of black man. The abusive white society and behaviour of his wife left crippling effect on his masculinity and he became psychologically impotent. The behaviour of Clyde, the white landlord to his black employees reminds the readers many other instances of abuse that black men suffered as slave and even after slavery was ended. The emasculation of Ben is caused by white dominance, economic trappings and oppositional relationship that were there between black men and black women, due to the former two factors.

It was not Ben only; his grandfather had also suffered from emasculation. In *Grandpa Jones*, Naylor brings a man who "was a silent old man who sat on his porch rocker. A man who shunned the church, holding a closed Bible, while he searched for another kind of God in another kind of world than the one who told black men that the only way to be a man was to suffer and be still" (MBP 16). Grandpa Jones had to be silent when he saw his sister dying of a terrible act of rape. It was nothing but the proof of his emasculated masculinity when he kept quiet over this heinous act. His mother could very well see the adverse consequences if he fought against this injustice. It was she who made him keep quiet because she did not want to lose her son. He was told to hold himself back which was not easy. He wept over his helplessness, his being powerless for not standing up for his sister. Naylor writes, "Men cry as much as women-but most just cry inside" (MBP 163). Through this observation, Naylor portrays the human emotions under the hard cover of masculinity and unfolds pain that black men feel which ensues from the deep buried anguish in him.

The fear that the oppressed will one day rise up and seek revenge with the oppressor, was also one of the factors that instigated the white men to inflict more tortures on the black so that they might not be able to stand up for them and their community. This deep seated fear of rebellion in the collective consciousness of the whites made the situation worse and they kept on treating the blacks more badly. On the other hand the black men had no other option but to show demeanour even in the face of insult and aggression. Naylor conveys that there is need to unlearn the lessons the whites have inherited about black men for the rest of their lives. The whites should not deny, blame, shift and twist the facts. The blacks need not be apologetic for their existence anymore and try to recover from the painful past that left emasculating effect on them.

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