

**Exploration of Masculinity and Its Contradictions:
A Nuanced Examination of Gloria Naylor's Male
Characters in *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Mama
Day* and *Bailey's Café***

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Abstract

Apparently the oppressed state of women based on sex and race is always dealt with in Naylor's novels. Men in her novels are often portrayed as irresponsible, they do not want to be committed to any relationship. Naylor's literary corpus offers a comprehensive assessment of masculinity that goes beyond basic binary oppositions between positive and negative masculine depiction. Her works expose the underlying inconsistencies of masculine beliefs, especially when they intersect with race, class, and economic circumstance in African American communities. Naylor's work shows how societal forces and influential injustices shape masculine identity, that creates a pressure in the community they belong. Therefore women toil emotionally in search of love and support, but in vain. African American women wouldn't have suppressed and neglected had the African American men given them what they needed. To live in a family and as family is a dream for African American Women. The reluctance of men to take up responsibility is vividly portrayed through the male characters portrayed by Gloria Naylor. This paper endeavors to discuss the hegemony on African American men and the pitiable plight of women because of the negligence of men.

Keywords: Masculinity, Oppression, Family, Absence, Responsibility

Submitted: 05.11.2025

Accepted: 28.12.2025

Published 30.12.2025

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In African American literature, the creation of masculinity, especially Black masculinity, has been a crucial topic of study. The ways that historical oppression, racism, and cultural norms have influenced unique masculinities in Black communities. Patricia Hill Collins asserts, "Hegemonic masculinity within Black communities often reproduces the same gender hierarchies that oppress Black women" (185). Gloria Naylor's novels are notable for their nuanced depictions of African American men as emotionally complicated people navigating racial, gender, and trauma systems rather than as stereotypical figures of power. She is called as "one of contemporary African American literature's most insightful and significant writers" by "African American Review", and calls it as "a much-needed glimpse into the inner life of black men from a black woman's perspective" (Okonkwo 70). The majority of the literature that has already been written on Naylor focuses on her feminist framework and how she prioritized the voices of Black women. But lately, her depiction of males and masculinity has drawn negative attention. Naylor portrays masculinity as a contradictory and vulnerable identity rather than as a secure one. According to Carole Boyce Davies, "Naylor creates room for fluid gender performances that weaken hegemonic norms and undermine binary gender roles" (38).

This analysis examines how Naylor's male characters embody contradictory aspects of masculine identity. The notion of hegemonic masculinity functions as a principal framework for examining how Naylor's male characters both strive for and fall short of prevailing masculine ideals. Naomi Schor calls it "masculine passivity, the feminization of men" (108). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a configuration of practices that legitimizes male dominance while subordinating alternative masculinities (77). Additionally, intersectionality theory helps illuminate how race, class, and economic factors complicate traditional masculine performances for Naylor's African American male characters.

Butch Fuller is a casual lover of Mattie. This can be understood by the short-term relationship between the two in the novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. There is no proper reason for Mattie's affection for Butch. It just happens that she loses herself to Butch in a sugarcane field. Butch disappears soon after this episode as evidence that this happened to many women in the African American community. "He was no good for any woman, and he knew it. And every woman who ever took him knew it, too" (Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* 25). The masculinity is predominantly characterized by absence fathers who abandon their children, partners who flee responsibility, and men who exist primarily as sources of trauma rather than support. Yet this absence itself becomes a powerful presence that shapes the lives of the female characters. The contradiction lies in how these absent men continue to exert influence over the women's lives, suggesting that masculinity's power operates as much through absence as through presence.

Eugene from "Lucielia Louise Turner" exhibits this dilemma. His abandoning of Ciel following their child's death marks a failure of manly responsibility, but his absence serves as the defining trauma that molds Ciel's future collapse. "Ciel

watched the taxi carry him away and felt something closing inside her, something that would never open again” (117). Naylor demonstrates how conventional male ideals that emphasize emotional stoicism and self-reliance are ultimately harmful to both men and women.

Naylor’s male characters commonly struggle with economic impotence, which challenges the traditional masculine roles of provider and protector. This economic emasculation produces a contradiction in which males both reject and frantically want to meet traditional masculine norms. *Men in Brewster Place* frequently engage in destructive behaviors like violence, substance abuse, and desertion to demonstrate masculine agency in settings where they lack economic or social power.

Naylor’s treatment of male abuse may be the most contradictory thing she writes. Naylor’s portrayal of masculine aggression is possibly her most complex paradox. While she never rejects or ignores the effects of male aggression on women, she does investigate the social and psychological reasons that contribute to such behavior. This method demonstrates the limitations of opposition, arguing that understanding the underlying causes of destructive masculine behavior is required for genuine transformation.

The character of C.C. Baker in *The Women of Brewster Place* exhibits this complication. His brutality toward women is an obvious moral flaw, but Naylor also demonstrates how his actions stem from his own feelings of impotence and marginalization. This dual perspective creates a dilemma in which readers must criticize his conduct while yet comprehending their causes. In her books, Naylor shows different kinds of men that go against what most people think of as masculine. C.C. Baker “ruled by fear, and fear was the only language he respected” (Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* 172).

Naylor depicts a variety of men in her works that defy conventional notions of masculinity. These individuals, who are frequently artists, nurturers, or community builders, provide alternatives to power and control as a means of expressing masculinity. However, these options frequently come with their costs and inconsistencies, implying that masculine transformation demands both individual and cultural change.

Naylor’s study of African American manhood shows the unique problems Black men face when they have to deal with both societal norms and the values of their community. This results in a type of split consciousness in which masculine identity becomes a sophisticated act that must satisfy numerous, often opposing audiences. The economic and societal constraints that African American males experience in Naylor’s novels make it hard to satisfy traditional masculine roles, which leads to inconsistencies and conflicts that drive much of her narrative suspense.

George Andrews represents a basic contradiction in masculine ideology. He was raised in a shelter as an orphan and is unaware of his family or heritage. He takes each day as it comes, carefully weighing all of his choices and actions since life has

hardened him. This deliberate rationalism, which has usually been associated with masculine authority and control, serves as both his strength and his fatal flaw. George is the representation of the clash between modern, secular masculinity and old, spiritually based worldviews. His engineering expertise and materialist attitude help him succeed in New York's corporate world but also leave him powerless when confronted with Willow Springs' otherworldly truths. Naylor employs George to demonstrate how male logic, while bringing some benefits, can become a form of spiritual blindness that eventually destroys what it purports to safeguard. He is unable to save Cocoa's life because he cannot "believe" in Mama Day's healing methods or give up his logical control. According to the story, the very subjection to mystery that traditional masculine ideology condemns may be necessary for true masculine power. "All you had to do was believe, but he couldn't step outside the world he understood—and because of that, nothing could save her" (Naylor, *Mama Day* 300).

Bailey's cafe serves as a liminal space where traditional masculine authority is both present and subverted. He maintains control over his establishment while simultaneously creating a space where conventional social hierarchies are suspended. This contradiction allows him to exercise masculine authority in service of those whom society has marginalized, particularly women who have been victims of male violence.

In *Bailey's Café*, Gabriel's character illustrates the conflict between human complexity and masculine religious authority. He represents traditional masculine spiritual leadership as a preacher, yet his interactions with the café's customers highlight the shortcomings of strict moral frameworks in the face of human complexity and suffering. "He preached strength and certainty, but inside he trembled like any other man who didn't know how to carry his burdens" (Bailey's Café 88). Gabriel's struggle with his own sexuality and spiritual calling creates a tension between his public masculine persona and his private vulnerabilities. This character is used by Naylor to show how masculine religious authority can be both comforting and oppressive, based on how it balances divine commands with human needs.

Ben, the drunken janitor in *The Women of Brewster Place*, is the first Black resident of Brewster Place and represents persistent communal memory in the face of urban degradation. About him, Naylor says, "There was no place left in the world for the kind of man Ben had been" (Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* 135). His background as a failing sharecropper from Tennessee exposes significant emasculation: helpless to defend his crippled daughter from sexual abuse by white landowner Mr. Clyde, he faces his wife Elvira's disrespect for his incompetence, descending into lifelong drunkenness due to shame and wrath. Haunted by past mistakes, Ben offers Lorraine refuge in his basement flat, promoting mutual healing until her gang rape renders her unconscious; in her confusion, she bludgeons him to death with a brick from the symbolic wall of tyranny. His murder emphasizes cycles of suffering in Brewster Place, where the downtrodden turn on one another, yet his

story portrays male sorrow as founded in systematic weakness rather than innate tyranny. Ben reappears in *The Men of Brewster Place* as a reimagined character of historical injustice, narrating other people's experiences from beyond death.

Miss Maple is actually Stanley, and this discovery is vital for comprehending the character's symbolic role. Miss Maple seems like a man dressed as a woman, which is interesting at first because of the contrast between biological maleness and feminine presentation. Naylor doesn't just put Miss Maple in the story to shock people. She uses the character to criticize strict gender roles and show how society's ideas of masculinity may hurt, break, or silence people. Miss Maple epitomizes the idea of emasculation, not in a purely physical sense, but as a psychological and societal situation.

Stanley's change into Miss Maple is presented as melancholy and protective, rather than playful or liberating. It is a response to humiliation, emotional distress, and the loss of male power. Naylor employs this metamorphosis to demonstrate how emasculation can compel men to rebuild their identities in marginal settings where they are neither entirely accepted nor completely eliminated. As Judith Butler argues, gender performance often reveals "the fragility of the norms it seeks to enact" (179).

Naylor depicts Black men as imprisoned in cycles of shame and silence. The "manly traits" like protection and provision are robbed from them due to white dominance and poverty, leading to psychological impotence and desperate bids for virility. Characters like Ben, the unnamed brother of Esther, embody this through haunting regrets over failing to shield family from abuse. They themselves become abusers and corner their women.

Gloria Naylor's novels offer a profound and unsettling analysis of African American manhood, presenting it as a broken, conflicted, and highly vulnerable construct formed by historical oppression, economic disadvantage, and rigid gender norms. Rather than portraying men as just accusatorial figures, Naylor uncovers how patriarchal principles of domination, emotional restraint, and authority frequently render Black men incapable of sustaining intimate relationships, parental duty, or spiritual fulfillment.

Characters like Butch Fuller, Eugene, C.C. Baker, George Andrews, Ben, and Maple/Stanley represent various manifestations of masculine failure like absence, violence, emotional withdrawal, spiritual blindness, and identity fragmentation. All are rooted in systemic powerlessness rather than inherent moral flaws. At the same time, Naylor refuses to accept the male follies and the sufferings they inflict on women. She highlights the waywardness within a larger social framework, revealing how hegemonic masculinity harms both men and women. The emotional struggle of females appears not only as a personal tragedy but also as a consequence of masculine collapse.

Naylor's critique of masculinity is neither reductive nor punitive. The myth of masculine authority is challenged by portraying men as emotionally constrained,

spiritually conflicted, and socially disempowered. Naylor calls for alternative models of masculinity grounded in empathy, accountability, and communal responsibility. Her work exhibits the genuine transformation, both personal and collective, that can only occur when masculinity surrenders its dependency on supremacy. Apparently, Naylor not only intensifies feminist discourse but also adds a dynamic involvement to Black masculinity studies, urging a redefinition of manhood that is compassionate, interpersonal, and ethical.

Naylor's vision is not only critical but also transformative. She believes that change is possible if men redefine what it means to be masculine. True masculinity, in her view, should be based on empathy, care, emotional openness, and a sense of shared responsibility. When men learn to express emotions and respect women as equals, they begin to heal the wounds of both genders. Naylor's male characters teach that emotional strength is not the same as control or authority; instead, it grows from understanding and connection.

Naylor's novels bring together the struggles of both men and women into a single moral vision, one that demands compassion, equality, and humanity. She expands feminist discourse by including men in the conversation about liberation. Her writing shows that healing for the African American community requires both genders to break away from the old ideas of power and weakness. Through her realistic yet hopeful portrayal, Naylor redefines masculinity as a moral and emotional journey toward wholeness. Her contribution is not only to feminist literature but also to the study of Black masculinity, creating a space where both men and women can coexist with dignity, empathy, and understanding.

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