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SINZANG

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COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

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Côte d'Ivoire

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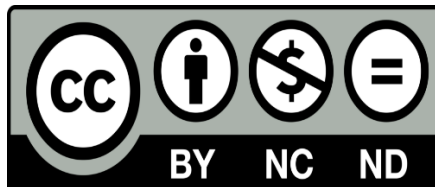
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EDITORIAL

Among the Senufos from the north of Côte d'Ivoire, the sacred grove is called "Sinzang". The first of these would date from the time of the patriarch and leader of Korhogo SORO Zouakagnon (1840-1894). It is the tutelary space of the initiatory institute of the secret society: the Poro. These sacred forests exist in all the villages of the region and are highly protected and managed. The proof is that in their midst, adolescents perform the rite of passage leading them to the age of maturity. The "Sinzang" is also the centre of intergenerational knowledge transmission. Thus, the teaching of ancestral knowledge, ontology and cosmogony-contributing to the future spiritual, moral and social formation of the Senufo elite-is associated with this pantheon.

In line with this pedagogical and academic logic, the SINZANG Journal aims to promote African and Western humanities in Literature, Language, Communication and Education Sciences. To do this, it is part of a process of promoting the reflections and studies conducted by Teachers-Researchers and Researchers for the sustainable development of society.

As distinctive signs of "Sinzang", Jacqueline DELANGE, in *Arts et peuple Sénoufo de l'Afrique noire*, identifies among others the huts, earth cones and statues (masks). The visual identity of this magazine presents two masks, one symbolizing ancestral knowledge and the other Western science. The two facing the entrance of a sacred hut express the encounter of diverse knowledge put at the service of humanity. *In fine*, they export to other horizons, hence the idea of huts in perspective.

SINZANG is a pluridisciplinary and biannual peer-reviewed scientific journal. It is published in English and French but also accepts work written in German and Spanish. Moreover, depending on the requests made at the discretion of its review committee, it may issue special thematic publications and conference proceedings.

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ÉDITORIAL

Chez les Sénoufos du nord de la Côte d'Ivoire, le bosquet sacré est communément appelé « Sinzang ». Les premiers du genre dateraient de l'époque du patriarche et chef de Korhogo SORO Zouakagnon (1840-1894). C'est l'espace tutélaire de l'institut initiatique de la société secrète : le Poro. Lieux fortement protégés et aménagés à l'envi, ces forêts sacrées existent dans tous les villages de la région. La preuve en est qu'en leur sein, les adolescents effectuent le rite de passage les amenant à l'âge de la maturité. Le « Sinzang » est aussi le haut lieu de la transmission de la connaissance intergénérationnelle. Ainsi, l'enseignement du savoir ancestral, de l'ontologie et la cosmogonie- contribuant à la formation spirituelle, morale et sociale de l'élite Sénoufo de demain-est associé à ce panthéon.

S'inscrivant dans cette logique pédagogique et académique, la Revue SINZANG ambitionne de faire la promotion des humanités tant africaine qu'occidentale dans le domaine de la Littérature, des Sciences du Langage, de la Communication et de l'Éducation. Pour ce faire, elle s'inscrit dans une démarche de vulgarisation des réflexions et des études menées par les Enseignants-Chercheurs et des Chercheurs pour le développement durable de la société.

Comme signes distinctifs du « Sinzang », Jacqueline DELANGE, dans *Arts et peuple Sénoufo de l'Afrique noire*, identifie entre autres les cases, les cônes en terre et les statues (masques). L'identité visuelle de cette revue présentant deux masques, l'un symbolisant le savoir ancestral et l'autre la science occidentale. Les deux se faisant face à l'entrée d'une case sacrée expriment la rencontre de connaissances diverses mis au service de l'humanité. In fine, elles s'exportent vers d'autres horizons ; d'où l'idée des cases en perspective.

SINZANG est une revue pluridisciplinaire à comité de lecture et scientifique. Elle est bilingue : éditée en anglais et en français. Mais elle accepte également les travaux écrits en allemand et en espagnol. C'est une revue semestrielle, tenant deux parutions l'an. Au demeurant, elle peut

procéder, selon les demandes ou les sollicitations formulées à l'appréciation de son comité de lecture, à des parutions spéciales thématiques et à la diffusion d'actes de colloque.

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LITERARY REBELLION AND MODERN CREATIVITY: A FEMINIST COMMITMENT IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The literary upper hand which influenced creation and black women's thriving in the early 1980s aroused reaction from some women writers. Gloria Naylor's works are illustrative of those responses. The matter in hand is to demonstrate how Gloria Naylor's literary rebellion that led her to modern creation can be perceived as her feminist commitment. The paper is conducted in the light of feminist literary criticism. It reveals that Gloria Naylor, as a feminist novelist, uses her pen to fight the wrongs of patriarchy and writes her own way. Her five novels break with tradition, creating thus other narrative techniques, which give a prominent place to black women. So her literary rebellion leads her to upset the old phallographic literary set up and create a new one in women's favor.

Keywords: *commitment, feminism, oppression, patriarchy, rebellion*

RÉBELLION LITTÉRAIRE ET CRÉATIVITÉ MODERNE : UN ENGAGEMENT FÉMINISTE DANS L'ÉCRITURE DE GLORIA NAYLOR

RÉSUMÉ

La domination littéraire, qui a influencé la création et l'épanouissement des femmes noires au début des années 1980 a suscité des réactions de la part de certaines écrivaines. Les œuvres de Gloria Naylor sont illustratives de ces réactions. Notre objectif est de démontrer comment la rébellion littéraire de Naylor qui l'a conduite à une créativité moderne peut être perçue comme son engagement à la lutte féministe. L'analyse a été conduite à la lumière de la critique littéraire féministe. Nous en sommes arrivés au résultat suivant : Naylor, en tant que romancière féministe, se sert de sa plume pour combattre les impairs de la patriarchie et écrit à sa manière. Ses cinq romans rompent d'avec la tradition, initiant ainsi d'autres

techniques narratives, qui accordent une place de choix à la femme noire. Sa rébellion littéraire l’emmène donc à bouleverser le vieil ordre littéraire phallocratique, créant ainsi un nouvel ordre littéraire plus favorable aux femmes.

Mots clés : *engagement, féminisme, oppression, patriarcat, rébellion.*

INTRODUCTION

The oppression and frustration experienced by minorities (black women), in American society arouse reactions. Socially, most black women rebel and stand against patriarchal subjugation. Thus, in literature, black women strongly face intellectual humiliation. Gloria Naylor is one of the key figures of that literary rebellion. Born on January 25, 1950 in the Southern areas of America and passed away on September 28, 2016, Naylor experienced the inconveniences of being a poor black woman in a white environment as the daughter of sharecroppers. Discrimination guided her to a career of novelist to broadcast her frustration. Her novels portray women that crumble under social unfairness but who never resign, who never give up fighting even before deferral dreams. She is the author of *the Women of Brewster Place* (1980), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bayley’s Café* (1993) and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1999). In her fiction, one feels a counter-Discourse rightly opposed to patriarchy, the premises of a new feminist approach in literature by taking down the current literary order. Her fiction intents to deconstruct traditional literary codes just like Julia Kristeva. Julia Kristeva wishes through deconstruction, to undo the old barriers within literary criticism in order to construct a new science or textual theory combining language, femininity and semiotics, as expressed in this phrase: “She wishes to undo-to deconstruct” (Kenyon, 1997, p. 8) She wishes in fact to deconstruct the male dominating ongoing system.

This contribution aims at showing the rebellion against patriarchal literary norms and the creation of new patterns in Naylor’s novels as the manifestation of her feminist commitment. This study, carried out in the light of feminist literary criticism, covers three main points. The first one is about intertextual aesthetics, examining the various connections between Naylor’s works. The second point deals with the practices and issues of rewriting works by other authors. The last focus will be on the gallant and beautiful picture she depicts of the black woman.

1-INTERTEXTUAL AESTHETICS: THE INTERCONNECTION OF CHARACTERS

Novel is a story created by a writer for various purposes. Most of the time, it enables readers to discover new environments, realities, and even new worlds virtually. When reading Naylor's five novels, one comes across some narrative techniques, which are particular to her writing. Among other things, we have the close connection she establishes between her different novels, developing thus a type of intertextuality. Intertextuality in literature refers to any connection between two or more pieces of work. The said connections can be of various types. The scholar Liesbet Van Zoonen provides of intertextuality this approach. It is "a term that indicates that all texts whether written or spoken, whether formal or informal, whether artistic or mundane are some way related to each other." (L. Van Zoonen, 2017, p.2).

Obviously, each of Naylor's novels is singular. However, together they share some common features which substantiate their internal connection. For instance, the realistic depiction of female characters is recurrent in the five novels. Referring to that feminist characteristic, Naylor's novels give voice to women and contribute to their shift from margin to stage. Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is about disinherited black women, fighting for their survival in a ghetto (Brewster Place). In that novel, there is a character called Kiswana who struggles to restore her ancestral identity (Africanity). Kiswana, whose real name is Melanie Browne, is from Linden Hills, a white-like neighborhood (high-standing district). However, Gloria Naylor gives that name to one of her novels in which she deconstructs the patriarchal system and combines the two places. The two places are very close according to this assertion of Mrs. Brown from Linden Hills, paying a visit to her daughter Kiswana in Brewster Place. She asserts: "At least you have a halfway decent view from here. I was wondering what lay beyond that dreadful wall—it's the boulevard. Honey, did you know that you can see the trees in Linden Hills from here" (G. Naylor, 1980, p.79). The inhabitants of Linden Hills always strive for material acquisition, better conditions of life and even wealth. As far as the inhabitants of Brewster Place are concerned, they remain hopeful despite their unbearable situation. They moreover believe in human values.

Then, in *Mama Day* Ophelia Day, one of the characters also named Cocoa relates the scene of Willa Prescott's (Willa Prescott Nedeed is the wife of the undertaker standing as the main protagonist in Linden Hills) death in *Linden Hills*: "Did you read about the fire in Linden Hills this Christmas? Well, that's my cousin and her husband and son. It upset us a lot" (G. Naylor, 1988, p.31). Clearly, a character from Linden Hills is dealt with in *Mama Day*. This connects both novels. Furthermore, *Mama Day* is linked to Naylor's *Bailey's Café*. The link between those books is illustrated as follows:

The man who owned the place found me one morning, lying on a stack of newspapers. He calls the shelter and picked me up. It was three months old. We went past *Bailey's Cafe* to the edge of the pier. You finally let my hand go, put your back into your pocket, and stared into the writer (G. Naylor, 1988, p. 31).

Explicitly, the above textual clue shows that there is a narrow connection between Naylor's different novels. In other words, Naylor's novels are interconnected, thus constituting a network. For instance, her characters, such as Abshu, Ben, C.C. Baker, Brother Jerome, Basil, Eugene, and Moreland T. Woods and even the women living in the cul-de-sac of Brewster Place are respectively recurrent in her novels *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place*. It is so since the protagonists share the same social experience as they live in the same area.

Apart from transitory characters, Naylor's works are linked by the issues she discusses. *The women of Brewster Place* deals deeply with the miserable experience of black women in one housing development ghetto. *Linden Hills* focuses on the tragedy of women in the hands of heartless so-called lovers whereas *Bailey Café* pictures disinherited girls who yield before hardships and indulge in prostitution. In *Mama Day* black women's concern resurfaces but the setting is dominated by a woman who stands as the society's leader or guide. Although each one of the enumerated novels has its own story, they are connected by a central theme which is the poor perception and living conditions of black women; their 'thingification' and terrible exploitation.

Black women's sexual objectification figures furthermore as a link that connects some of Naylor's works since they share it. In *the women of Brewster Place*, Lorraine is terribly raped by a group of burglars, with the support of the whole community, even women, just because she is lesbian as exposed in the following lines:

And through the brutal gang rape of Lorraine, Naylor connects violence against women directly to the cultural ideal that privileges male aggression, acquisitiveness, and dominance. The fact that Lorraine has chosen to live with her female lover Tee, rather than a man, offers a justification for her rape to the gang; she has committed the ultimate sin in refusing to keep her “place” as a woman in a masculine-dominated social setting. That the attack represents a homophobic attack is certainly correct, but it also represents an attack on any woman who does not accede to subordinate status in a relationship with a man. (H. L Gates *et al.*, 1993, p.266)

In a sense, she is denied the right to make any choice of her own. She is treated as a property. Furthermore, in *Linden Hills*, Mrs Nedeed as a wife is used as a baby bearer. She must give birth to an heir for her husband (a son that must absolutely look exactly like his father and his ancestors) and be abandoned and forgotten by him for the rest of her live in that house.

Those works provide a realistic picture of Blacks, particularly female ones in their living environment. Symbolically, Gloria Naylor’s narrative technique, which consists in using intertextuality to link and mix up not only characters, but also environment, history and black women’s experiences to other ones, challenges male and white dominated novelistic tradition. Intertextuality in the present context sounds like an aspect of her literary creativity, her way of refusing subjugation any longer. Naylor’s rebellious literary creativity also covers the rewriting of some of works already published by other authors.

2-Practices and Issues of Rewriting

Rewriting is the fact of writing something again in order to alter or improve its quality. In the present context, it is about Naylor’s rewriting of texts that beyond the shadow of any doubt were authored by writers of older generations.

One of Naylor’s rewriting techniques is that she restores black women’s tarnished image by disclosing her capacity to overcome social barriers. In her creative art, black women are not demonized. On the contrary, they are praised –their ingeniousness is showcased. Naylor adapts her works to American realities, expressing her disarray over discrimination. To numerous critics, such as Donna Rifkind, Naylor’s works help African-American literature move from margin onto stage. The following quotation reveals how significant Naylor’s fictional works are: “This is an author accomplished at giving world literature an African-American spin. Her *Linden Hills* was based on Dante’s *Inferno*, while *Mama Day*, her third novel, owed much to the

Tempest". (H. L. Gates *et al.*, 1993, p. 28).

In other words, Naylor rewrites a work by the Italian politician and poet of the 14th century Dante Alighieri. That poem originally is an allegory called divine comedy, which represents the journey of Dante's soul, guided by the poet Virgil through a nine centric circle of torment on earth for rejecting spiritual values. Besides, Naylor writes *Linden Hills*, which is also an allegory based on Blacks who prefer wealth to human life. In that novel, Naylor describes the terrible experience undergone by Mrs Willa Prescott Nedeed. As a woman, she is ill-treated by her husband. In fact, because of material, Nedeed sold his family. Luther Nedeed purchases the land after selling his wife and six children. That is why he is called "Lucifer" by Mel Watkins for whom: "Naylor's version of the Inferno suggests that the blacks who aspire to the white world and material success are pawns of the devil and will experience the torments of hell". (H. L. Gates *et al.*, 1993, P.184)

The Tempest by William Shakespeare the celebrated British dramatist of the 17th century is also said to have inspired Naylor. It explores the story of Duke Prospero, who overthrown by his own brother, finds himself exiled with his daughter on a deserted island. Thanks to the magic knowledge he has taken time to draw from his supernatural books, he is able to master both natural elements and even spirits. Thus, in his exile, he takes control on Ariel, a malevolent air and life spirit and Caliban, another terrible and malevolent being symbolizing Earth, violence and death.

Naylor, when rewriting this novel kept the shading and added her feminist touch. Thus, *Mama Day* also takes place on Willow Springs, a strange island dominated not only by spirits but mainly by a matriarch called Mama Day after whom the novel is named. She controls everything (human and spiritual) on the island. She is one of the descendants of the slaves, owner of the isle that cannot be found on no geographical card. Willow springs is thus dominated both by magical powers and women authority, highlighting the black woman's importance in her community.

Naylor's practices and issues of rewriting go far beyond the formal aspect. It is mostly ideological. Her feminist commitment in writing is said to be a walk in the steps of a contemporary female writer: Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison is also an African American novelist of the 1970 onward. She is an outstanding feminist and her commitment has been a suggestive literary example for younger writers such as Gloria

Naylor. Thus, Naylor's references to African American tradition, her exploration of female community and her revolt against patriarchy are in line with Morrison Writing and activism. Michael Awkward for instance draws a connection between *the Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *the Women of Brewster Place*:"

The bluest Eye stands as a revisionary reading whose textual struggles with white and Afro-American male authored texts clear imaginative space for Naylor's sustained investigation of afro American women's life in the women of Brewster Place (Gates *et al.* p.39). As mentioned above, Naylor provides panegyric image to women in her works, thus substantiating her feminist vision. She does not in fact uselessly rewrite the above cited books. She takes advantage by making of women protagonists the leading figures of their environments. She presents them as courageous social actors that can face any hardship. They are even described as spiritual figures able to confront metaphysical forces. They are thus capable of dealing with any physical and spiritual challenges. As far as the following step is concerned, it questions the symbol epitomized by black women.

3-SYMBOLIZATION OF BLACK WOMEN

White patriarchy demonizes black women. In fact, black women are regularly called "Mummy", "Sapphire", "Jezebel" or "whore" (C.R. Robinson, 1983, P.137) to scorn. The use of those epithets tarnishes their image. Naylor completely rejects that perception and develops a bright picture aiming to promote or advocate black women's values. She presents them as beautiful beings with strong physical features. In her novel entitled *Mama Day*, George reaches Willow Springs, he is surprised to see Miranda Day or Mama Day and Abigail. The deep astonishment compels George to wonder: "I was reasonable in expecting wrinkles, sagging skin, some tremble of the limbs. It must have taken me ten minutes to regain my equilibrium. Looking like this, how cold these women ever die?" (G. Naylor, 1988, p. 175). Clearly, black women (Mama Day & Abigail) who evolve on that island are dazzlingly depicted. In terms of moral and physical assets, they are exemplary. Their pictures, thus, deconstruct the old white patriarchal clichés. Being more than eighty, they look and feel great.

Naylor also focusses on the attractive features. In *the Women of Brewster Place*, her first novel, the narrator describes the dialogue between Mattie Michaels and others. The former is regarded as a young woman of a great beauty with her ebony

skin. She is so beautiful, so fresh, so tender that she attracts males who stand around her. Therefore, her beloved father Sam advises her against those sexual predators. A close look at Mattie Michaels's trajectory discloses that her beauty is the source of her trouble. In fact, Butch Fuller is the one who succeeds in conquering Mattie Michaels's heart. However, their first pregnancy worsens Mattie Michaels's situation, constraining her to leave her biological family for an uncertain adventure.

Moreover, Naylor's text also focusses on the characteristics of women's lives within their own communities. Some women are presented as the cradle of social life. In *the Women of Brewster Place*, Mattie Michaels remains an illustrative case. She stands as the symbol of motherhood. Settled in Brewster Place, after being chased by her father, she learns a lot from her experience. Symbolically, she becomes the mother of the whole neighborhood. Indeed, she is the only one who saves Luciel L. Turner when the latter undergoes troubles. Ciel another character evolves in a troublesome situation. She is depressed, dirty and really sick. Despite Ciel's repulsing smell, Mattie Michaels takes care of her. By mothering Ciel, Mattie Michaels helps her forget her strange interlude (sufferings).

To go ahead, let us indicate that black women's responsibilities is epitomized by other instances in *Bailey's Cafe*. Stanley Beckwourth Booker is an educated black man. Because of his race, he collects in the 1940s 99 jobs rejection. Disappointed, he joins Bailey's Cafe, takes Miss Maple as a new name and even dresses like a woman. This new identity transforms his life and makes him useful to his community (G. Naylor, 1993, page?). Besides, Mama Day, an eponymous character is also important in her community. She is the mysterious symbol of women's dynamism within black community. She is an old and strange lady, born in a strange family. As a descent of the founders of the island, she guides and handles the island with authority, justice, and protection. She is the exact witchdoctor and authority who heals and decides. Her preponderance in the social environment is revealed as follows: "Mama Day say no, everybody say no." (G. Naylor, 1988, p6).

In addition, Naylor Black women's psychological strength is also depicted. They cultivate perseverance and resilience. Although perseverance is widely observed in most of Naylor's books, *The Women of Brewster Place* reads as the one that best depicts that mindset. It is the novel which carries to the highest point black women's perseverance before unfulfilled dreams and even the renewal of those dreams. It is a

story about the unfulfilled dreams of black women of the sixties in the United States of America. Despite the fact that the female characters are interrelated and share more than the same living place, the narrator presents them individually, living in harmony the ones with the others. Their differences appear with the community rejecting severely, “the two” for their lesbian practices.

However, after the violent rape of Lorraine who is a lesbian black woman, the whole feminine community gathers around her. The other women forget thus about her ‘forbidden’ sexual practices and turn to a single aim: justice for black women. The critic Jill L. Matus thinks that the black women’s actions in *the Women of Brewster Place* are nothing but the celebration of their persistence before deferral dreams. This is an excerpt of his essay “Dream Deferral, and Closure in *the Women of Brewster Place*”: “*The Women of Brewster Place* turns from the grand and explosive ending to affirm endurance and persistence in the face of unfulfilled dreams”. He adds: “Naylor’s novel is not exhortatory or rousing in the same way; her response to fracture of the collective dream is an affirmation of persistence rather than a song of culmination and apocalypse” (H. L. Gates *et al.*, 1993, P135). Gloria Naylor’s fiction is also characterized by black women’s refusal to accept the deferral of dreams they have so long cherished. Therefore, they manage to resist, expecting the realization of the said dreams; unveiling thus, an insurrection against the man-dominated system. Black women as characterized in Naylor’s works are resilient and active despite the oppression they face in the hands of the patriarchal system. They keep on working, doing thus their share in the reconstruction of their community. The example of Mattie Michael in *the Women of Brewster Place* speaks volume. Although ruined by her only son, she never surrendered to despair. She epitomizes the ability of black women to turn the void into living place, to transform a shabby place such as Brewster place into a home in which people can live.

Gloria Naylor’s feminist writing singularizes through various points among which the depiction of the black woman. She presents in fact the black women not only as a beautiful person but also and mainly as a gallant human being who abound in resources to face sexist oppression and domination. She praises the black women’s grandeur (B. Hooks, 1981)

CONCLUSION

This paper intends to present literary rebellion and artistic creation in Gloria Naylor's novels as her feminist commitment. The combined analysis of Naylor's five novels in that process, in the light of feminist literary criticism, reveals a pace that is really close to the feminist ideology. Naylor uses intertextual aesthetic. She creates in fact close connection between her works though each one has its own particularity. She interconnects them either with transitory characters or by common concerns. She makes a realistic depiction of the lives of black women in the United States. Another important finding of this work is the practices and the issue of rewriting. She moves literature (black women) from darkness to light, from margin to stage. When rewriting other authors' works, she gives them a feminist spin by focusing on both the status of the black women on the American land, and on the preponderance of black women as strong beings through an obvious artistic use of language. Furthermore, this work, through symbolization, advocates and promotes black women's physical beauty and moral values such as courage, resilience and persistence in fighting patriarchy.

In view of the forgoing, this study clearly substantiates that rebellion against patriarchal or white literary domination inevitably leads to free and deep literary creation and that creation has a loud significance. It is the social and intellectual manifestation of the ideological commitment of Gloria Naylor. Unfortunately, Naylor's feminist activism stopped suddenly with her passing away in September 2016. Still, countless aspects of her writing can still be investigated.

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