

Dimensions of the Sociopsychological Alienation of the African American in Baldwin's *Mountain* and Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract

*Re-appropriating the Marxist concepts of Alienation and Estrangement, this paper examines the dimensions of the sociopsychological (sociological and psychological) alienation of the African American as portrayed in James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (Mountain) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (TWBP). As depicted in the two novels, the African American, as a result of his racial difficulty in America, is alienated from himself, his family, and the society. Thus, while critics would argue that these two African American writers are different from each other in their artistic presentations, this paper avers that they complement each other by their involvement in the racial problems of Black Americans through the medium of their imaginative works. The paper further contends that the two writers also complement each other by their re-appropriation of the Marxist concept of alienation and estrangement. While the alienation of an individual in Marxism is the result of industrialisation, the paper argues that as depicted in the selected works it is the skin colour of the major characters that is responsible for their sociopsychological alienation. In this way, the paper demonstrates how the two novelists simultaneously engage and reformulate the Marxist concept of alienation/estrangement within the framework of the racial experience of the African American in America.*

Introduction

This paper examines the sociopsychological (sociological and psychological or social and personal) alienation of the African American using James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*

(*Mountain*) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (*TWBP*) as the framework. As depicted in the two novels, the African American, as a result of his racial difficulty in America, is alienated from himself, his family, and the society. Thus, while critics would argue that these two African American writers are different from each other in their artistic presentations; this paper avers that they complement each other by their involvement in the racial problems of black Americans through the medium of their imaginative works. The paper further contends that the two writers also complement one another by their re-appropriation of the Marxist concept of alienation and estrangement. While alienation in Marxism is as a result of the industrial revolution in Europe, the paper argues that as depicted in the selected works, it is the skin colour of the major characters that is responsible for their sociopsychological alienation.

In a very important book, *The Racial Problem in the Works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin*, written by Jean-Francois Gounardoo and translated by Joseph J. Rodgers Jr., it is acknowledged that both writers (Baldwin and Wright) "succeeded in making white America understand that it could no longer ignore the reality of the racial problem, and that it had to try to solve it" (1992: xv). Though it is particularly between Baldwin and Wright that this book draws a relationship, it also goes ahead to establish a confluence between them on one hand and the writers of Early African American Classics such as Frederick Douglass, David Walker, and Charles W. Chestnut on the other. The same observation can be extended to the two selected African American novelists in this paper. To reinscribe the words of Gounardoo, all African American Literature has always included protest works in which the writers are filled with indignation about the ways they and their people have been badly treated (xvii); and these two African American novelists are no exception.

Contextualizing the Re-appropriation of the Marxist Concept of Alienation

But in rendering their protest against the racial predicament of the African American; Baldwin and Naylor re-appropriate the Marxist concept of alienation by showing through the medium of their

imaginative works that the restrictions imposed upon their major black characters by society is not so much on account of their class as it is on account of their skin colour. In Marxist aesthetics, “alienation” or “estrangement” (both terms are synonymous to Karl Marx) is “the state of progressive deterioration and oppression into which the human being must fall when he has no share of the means of production controlled by the capitalist system and sees himself degraded to a commodity, and no longer disposes over himself and his life” (Peter Demetz, 1962: 109). Similarly, David E. Lowes (2006: 10) observes that “Marx identified capitalist SOCIAL RELATIONS as the source of modern-day alienation, which is basically an estrangement of an individual from their potential.”

Marx believed that capitalism erects a wall between an individual and what he produces. He believed that because people are inherently productive, they produce the food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities that permit them to live their lives as best as they can in their given circumstances. Unfortunately, the capitalist structure alienates and estranges the individuals (proletariats) that produce these products from one another as well as from the productive process and its products. According to Bertel Ollman, in *Marx theory of Alienation*, “Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do and how to do it),” in which case there is “a break between the individual and his life activity” (133). Therefore, what is thus produced belong to the capitalists that own the factors of production, and not the actual producers, who are the proletariats. It is in this sense that the proletariats are alienated from one another, themselves, and their products. Although Marx’ concept of alienation and estrangement was as a result of the oppressive capitalist system that emerged out of the Industrial Revolution in Europe; Baldwin’s *Mountain* and Naylor’s *TWBP* focus basically on the oppression that emanates from American race relations.

The Sociopsychological Alienation of Black Characters in Baldwin’s and Naylor’s Novels

For instance, that the theme of racism and the concomitant sociopsychological alienation of the African American is very close to

Baldwin's heart and enjoys a central treatment in his imaginative works is shown in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." Gounardoo sees this essay as a clue to understanding Baldwin's treatment of the African American racial problem in his literary works. According to her, Baldwin,

[A]ffirms that the white man cannot perceive the black man as he is because of more than three centuries of segregation. The values, quite puritanical, that the white man attaches to life, prevent him from seeing the true identity of the black man. The latter, who enjoys no freedom, has the rank of an inferior in a society that constantly despises him (1992: 162).

Although the purpose of Baldwin's essay is to pour diatribe on Wright's aesthetics, as can be seen from Gounardo's observation, Baldwin ends up affirming Wright's sentiments of the inferior status of blacks in America. By affirming their inferior status, Baldwin acknowledges the sociopolitical and sociopsychological alienation of his characters. It is obvious from the second sentence in the above passage that it is the sociopolitical "invisibility" or rift of the black man that both Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright write about in their *Invisible Man* and *Native Son* respectively that Baldwin also takes as his subject in most of his novels, especially *Mountain*.

Baldwin wrote other novels after *Mountain* such as *Another Country* (1962), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979), but *Mountain* seems to occupy a special place in the exploration of the black racial predicament. According to Allen Brooke (1998: 1), "Baldwin (in this novel) vomits the anguish of his people. All of it, the literal and the fanciful." Also Maxine Montgomery (1996: 52 – 53) opines that "this text (*Mountain*) mirrors closely a black reality" and reflects "the group experiences of twentieth century black-America." He continues:

The title Baldwin chose for the novel is drawn from a popular Christmas carol announcing the birth of Christ and is richly suggestive of the preacher's authoritative

position as one who, as God's mouthpiece safely positioned on the mountain, would dare to denounce racial wrongs (54).

Not surprisingly all the major black characters in *Mountain* suffer from one racial problem or another. For instance John's racial disadvantage prevents him from making use of the city library. According to the narrator:

[H]e had never gone in because the building was so big that it must be full of corridors and marble steps in the maze of which he would be lost and never find the book he wanted. And then everyone, all the white people inside, would know that he was not used to great buildings, or to many books, and they would look at him with pity (Baldwin, 2001: 42- 43).

While John is a member of the Harlem library and is thus entitled in principle to take books from any library in the city, the reality is that he has been unconsciously prevented from doing so as a result of his black skin. Wayne Templeton (1989), in his application of the Marxist concepts of alienation and estrangement to the reading of D.H. Lawrence's novels, identifies two categories of alienation. He labels the first "social alienation," and identifies the second as "psychological or personal alienation." John in Baldwin's *Mountain* suffers from both social and psychological alienation. His refusal to enter into the library, even though it is his wish, is indicative – for instance - of his social deprivations.

In terms of his psychological alienation, Templeton provides an insight. Psychological estrangement, states Templeton, "can be experienced in a number of ways, as inner division, intense ambivalence, or conflicting desires"(1989: 5). Although John's desire is to make use of the city library, it is evident that he suffers from inner division, intense ambivalence, and conflicting desires, which make him unable to mingle with the whites he expects to find inside. In other words, because he has been psychologically alienated, he is unable to equate himself with his white contemporaries in making use of the city library. His decision on

this particular occasion also betrays his psychological distancing. The solution to personal or psychological alienation, according to Templeton, “must begin by increasing self-awareness, by gaining more knowledge and experience”(8). This is exactly what John decides to do. He decides to “enter another day, when he had read all the books uptown, an achievement that would, he felt, lend him the poise to enter any building in the world” (Baldwin *Mountain*, 43). He postpones his entry into the city library so as to better equip himself and be psychologically ready to confront the whites. However, what is obvious is that in contrast to his white contemporaries, his skin colour has militated against his early exposure to magnificent buildings like the city library, which in turn psychologically alienates him from it.

Like John, Elizabeth (John’s mother) in Baldwin’s *Mountain* is also depicted to be afraid of entering magnificent buildings as a result of her skin colour. When Richard, her boyfriend suggests that they enter into the museum, Elizabeth “demands in panic, if they would be allowed to enter”(192). Richard knowing her fears responds, “Sure, they let niggers in...Ain’t we got to be educated, too...” (192). The museum is a public building that readily admits both whites and blacks but Elizabeth unconsciously believes that she would be prevented from entering because of her black skin. Thus like her son, because of the humiliation she has been born into and which she has suffered as a result of her blackness, she already feels distanced from magnificent buildings, believing that they are not meant for people like her, but for whites. Louis Althusser asserts that “a person is always already a ‘subject’ predetermined even before birth by the parents’ and society’s expectations” (qtd in Alexander Mathas 1997: 314). For Elizabeth and her son, John; their fears of entering magnificent buildings have been predetermined by the black race into which they have been born. The fact, however, is that their fear of entering magnificent buildings is a manifestation of their estrangement from their society/their immediate environment.

But for Gabriel, Elizabeth’s husband and John’s step-father, his racial disadvantage results in his hatred for whites in general, and even for his fellow black folks. In his review of this novel, David Littlejohn (1996: 122) asserts that all the major black characters “beat because they can’t

afford to love, they beat their own kind because they have no way of getting at the enemy.” Similarly, Jenkins (2006: 134) observes that “persisting discriminatory practices, and an internalized sense of defeat has proved lethal to ... Black male(s) and thus to the Black family.” While this is generally true for most of the black characters in this narrative, it is especially true for Gabriel. Having moved from the south to the north, with the same difficulties still confronting him and his family members, Gabriel develops an uncontrollable hatred for the whites and also transfers his aggression on his family members. In an attempt to draw a similarity between Baldwin’s real and imaginary father, Allen Brooke avers that:

Baldwin portrayed his step-father in all his rage, violence, and religious hypocrisy as the preacher Gabriel Grimes...for David Baldwin (his real step-father’s) simmering rage and hatred, never far below the surface, made him an unpopular preacher...It was only a few short years before the young Baldwin came to recognize his father’s brand of religion...for what it was: a justification of, and consolation for the cruelties and injustices that black Americans felt powerless to change...a dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels....There is no Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood- one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it (1998: 1)

Rather than living consciously with the injustice of a white world by enduring, Gabriel surrenders wholeheartedly to rage against his own kind as way of getting back at the “enemy.” Janet Harrison Shannon (1998: 1) asserts that “knowing Gabriel’s past would have helped Elizabeth, John, and Royal to understand his anguish.” His “past” here that needs to be understood by his family members is his “past confrontations” with whites, and how this has impacted negatively on him. Shannon’s and Allen’s argument is that the white world is responsible for Gabriel’s violence and rage against his family members. There is, therefore, no marked difference between Wright’s Bigger

Thomas and Baldwin's Gabriel: if there is any difference, Bigger Thomas' violence is outward towards the whites, while Gabriel's rage is inward towards his family members. It is, however, ironic that Gabriel turns out to be another Bigger Thomas in spite of Baldwin's attack on the latter's portrayal by Wright. Gabriel's racial experience results in his psychological distance from his family. Although he still lives with them under the same roof, he is far removed from them as a result of his constant rage and violence towards/against them.

Apart from John and Gabriel, Florence in Baldwin's *Mountain* is also portrayed as a victim of the American racial system. Contrary to Gabriel, who hates the whites and his fellow black folks, Florence exhibits a pathology of what Toni Morrison has described as "racial self-loathing" (Marilyn Mobley Mckenzie 2004: 223) as a result of her skin colour. Having "rubbed bleaching cream into her skin" (*Mountain*, 100) to make it light without result, Florence stares at her face in the mirror and thinks "angrily that all these skin creams were a waste of money, they never did any good" (*Mountain*, 101). The "good" the bleaching creams are supposed to do is turn her into a white woman. Since the lighter one's skin, the better one's chances of upward mobility, Florence attempts to mitigate her racial difference by voluntarily engaging in a depigmentation process. Like Pecola in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Florence does not believe that "black is beautiful." Just as Pecola longs for blue eyes to mitigate her blackness, thereby validating Eurocentric ideology of beauty, so does Florence.

Falaiye (2008: 155) points out that "[t]here are over sixty synonyms in *Roget's Thesaurus* for blacks, and all of them have connotations of something evil or not good." Based on this observation, he then concludes, "Is it any wonder, then, that black people have devoted so much time trying to erase their blackness? They have tried to solve the pain of their marginality by denying what they are, or at least, by hiding it, covering it up, because to deny it has been impossible" (155). Similarly, Hughes notes that in many black homes, "the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all the virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money.... The whisper 'I want to be white' runs silently through their minds" (27). Mariam Konate Deme (2009: 88) also contends that it is "because Africans have internalized

Western beauty ideals (of which skin colour is the most outward manifestation) ... that they have attached to light skin social, cultural, economic and political meanings and values alien and most of the time contradictory to their indigenous established social, political, cultural, and economic realities” (88). While Florence cannot deny that she is a black woman, she attempts to hide it by buying expensive bleaching creams. It is because American culture has associated the evil of the world with black that makes Florence develop this unconscious self-hatred of her black skin.

Mariam Deme affirms this observation: “beyond being a mere fashion trend, voluntary de-pigmentation along with the cult of whiteness that it embodies symbolizes a strong expression of an ill-resolved conflict resulting from postcolonial traumatism on the African psyche” (87-88). By developing a pathology of self-hatred, Florence fits into Templeton’s second description of characters who are psychologically alienated. According to him an individual can be alienated from himself on account of his experience (1989: 5). He also asserts that an individual can also be regarded to be psychologically estranged if he “looks in the mirror... and sees himself as a completely unknown figure” (5). The image that appears to an individual in the mirror is not as much as being unrecognizable as being not the image expected. In the case of Florence she condemns her bleaching creams because the image she sees in the mirror is not what she expects; and in this wise she has become estranged from herself.

Another character that suffers from American racial discrimination in Baldwin’s *Mountain* is Deborah. Her experience illustrates the inherent contradictions in American society. Although America promises freedom, opportunity, and equality irrespective of race, ironically it denies the black masses these privileges. Deborah as a sixteen year old girl is “taken away into the fields” and raped “by many white men.” As a result, her father goes to one of the white men’s house, threatening to kill him and all the other white men (Baldwin *Mountain*, 77). Instead of feeling remorse for what they have done, they beat Deborah’s father and “left him for dead.” Following this incident, all the black folks in the community “shut their doors, praying and waiting, for it was said that the white folks” were coming to “set fire to all (their) houses, as they

had done before” (*Mountain*, 77- 78). It is due to the racial inequality in America that the whites could regularly burn the houses of black folks with impunity. It is also as a result of their skin colour that black Americans cannot legally seek redress.

According to Falaiye (2008: 151), although “black people are told that if they have grievances they should take them to court...For them, the system is no longer legitimate...the courts, the traditional political parties, the police, the educational institutions are no longer seen as willing...to meet the pressing needs of...black people.” Following the defilement of his teenage daughter by the whites, the logical step Deborah’s father should have taken is to report the case to the police and have the white men prosecuted. But he cannot exercise this option since he has lost faith in the system to protect him, and has been socially estranged from the judicial and legal apparatus of the state. Baldwin’s conception of American police is that its “main role” is to “frighten blacks” (qtd in Gounardoo 1992: 162). As state machinery instituted to intimidate blacks, is it any wonder that African Americans would rather take laws into their own hands rather than report their grievances to the police?

Their dilemma is that they do not even fare better taking laws into their own hands. As noted by Toby Jenkins (2006: 142), “Too often...Black men who dared to speak their experience and give voice to their rage were silenced or socially shut out of society.” For attempting to avenge the humiliation of his daughter himself, Deborah’s father in Baldwin’s *Mountain* is beaten and “left for dead.” Roy, Gabriel’s estranged son, is another black character who believes he can take on the white world himself. For being defiant against the whites, he ends being silenced (killed) by the white world. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin identifies two attitudes of black Americans. While the first is engaged upon by those who subject themselves to “the omnipotence of a white world,” the second is adopted by blacks who revolt or react against the white world. Analysing this situation, Gounardoo argues that “what Baldwin makes one to see with these two examples, is that no matter what he does, the black man always ends up being humiliated, vexed, and diminished by the white man” (162). Roy, in Baldwin’s fictional world, falls into the second category; and he gets himself killed for his

attempt to revolt against the whites. According to Montgomery (1996: 54-55), “when Gabriel learns that his estranged son has been killed in a bar room brawl in Chicago, the revelation comes as no surprise. There are few other fates that could befall a black man who is so openly defiant of white rule.” For not quietly accepting his inferior position or social alienation within the American society, Roy pays with his life. His death, therefore, can be interpreted to symbolize his estrangement from the American society.

As opposed to assertive blacks are those who submit to the white world. Ironically these ones, as noted by Baldwin also end up being humiliated and diminished by the whites. Gabriel’s mother is one of such characters. She grows up as a field-worker on a plantation. Though she is allowed to marry and raise children, all of them were taken away from her: “one by sickness and two by auction; and one, whom she had not been allowed to call her own, had been raised in the master’s house” (Baldwin *Mountain* 78). Being a black woman, Gabriel’s mother is denied her maternal privileges and estranged from her children. Therefore, what concerns Baldwin in this novel is not so much “the prayer of the saints,” but the racial difficulties that are responsible for the prayers in the first place. The epigraph introducing part two of the novel entitled “The Prayer of the Saints” is an echo of the saint’s prayer in the bible book of Revelation, wherein “they cried with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth” (*Mountain* 71). Those for whom they seek vengeance are the whites, who have made their lives worthless as a result of their skin colour. Yet, it is significant that the vengeance they seek is spiritual, and not physical. By seeking a spiritual solution to a physical problem, Baldwin’s characters invariably betray the fact that they suffer from what Templeton describes as “the estrangement of the home” (Templeton, 64). That Baldwin’s black characters assume the characterization of saints implies that they are outsiders in this world who entertain the hope of an after-life habitation in which they would be insiders. In other words, it is because of their sociopolitical and socioeconomic estrangement in America that they seek for a spiritual solution or intervention in terms of an after-life wherein they would first class citizens.

Another writer whose work of fiction adds to our knowledge of the racial predicament of the African American, and who complements Baldwin's aesthetic vision of protesting against the racial quandary of the African American is Gloria Naylor. As a woman writer, there is no doubt that she claims for herself a different literary space from that of Baldwin. In her first novel, *TWBP*, Naylor, says Montgomery (1996: 88) "searches for an authorial voice with which to tell or retell the stories of partially dispossessed women. Narrative action is thus...directed towards subverting the form of authority patriarchy legitimizes and scripting a new world order among women of color." What is implied by this assertion is that Naylor's aesthetic vision is to subvert canonical patriarchal narrative action such as scripted by Baldwin. But the fact remains that even though she subverts patriarchal narrative action by focusing on women characters, she still writes about the racial dilemma of the African American from the perspective of women experiences. So, if there is any difference between her and Baldwin, it is the fact that while Baldwin focuses on the experience of Black men, Naylor concerns herself basically with the experience of Black women in America. Yet, both of them are similar in that they confront the racial dilemma of African Americans with their creative works. A close reading of both novels would reveal that they both enact the same fictional landscape in which the African American is a second-class citizen, and is thereby estranged from the sociopolitical and socioeconomic sphere of the American society.

That the racial dilemma of the African American is close to Naylor's heart, just as in the case of her male counterparts, can immediately be seen from the epigraph introducing *TWBP*:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over
Like a syrup sweet?
May be it just saps

Like a heavy load
Or does it explode? (*TWBP* cover page)

This is Langston Hughes poem entitled “Dream Deferred.” The poem re-echoes the scriptural sentiment in Proverbs 13: 12 that “expectation postponed makes the heart sick” (*New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*). In it the poet explores the effect of the unrealized aspirations of blacks due to the restrictions imposed upon them as a result of their race and class within the American society. In another of his poems, “As I Grew Older,” this motif of dream deferred is repeated. Hughes speaks of lost and forgotten dream as a result of his skin colour. In the said poem, he argues that it is because of his black skin that “a wall rose between [him] and [his] dream.” It then follows in the context of the foregoing that Naylor’s argument in her choice of Hughes’ “Dream Deferred” as the epigraph of her selected novel is that the dream of African Americans is deferred because of their skin colour. It is also significant that she uses the sentiments expressed in Hughes’ poems as the framework for her story. It then means that despite her desire to craft and create a different literary space for herself from that of her literary male forebears, she still ends up retelling their story of the alienation of the African American.

That the racial stock of Naylor’s characters is responsible for the restrictions in their lives is evident from the observation of Phillip Page, who notes, generally, concerning her novels:

External forces of life – particularly the pressures of race...are overwhelming, and...skew the characters’ identities so that even when change is possible, the characters cannot take advantage of the opportunity.
(Cited in Nweke 2007: 171)

Naylor’s characters are unable to take advantage of the opportunity that comes their way because they have been estranged from themselves and the socioeconomic structure of American society. Naylor in *TWBP*, presents her readers with the story of seven female characters, who as a result of one racial problem or another find themselves in a neglected habitation. These women condemned to live in this neglected

environment constitute a telling commentary about their racial disadvantage (*TWBP* 1983: 4). Page observes that “it is the overwhelming pressures of race and even their racial disadvantage that makes these women, in the first place, to come and live in Brewster Place, which is described as “the last stop on the road to the bottom” and “where you live when you can’t live somewhere else” in America (Cited in Nweke 169). Thus, the physical habitation of Naylor’s characters is symbolic of their sociopsychological isolation.

In Montgomery’s reading of this novel, he observes:

A number of historic events figure into the narrator’s account of Brewster’s beginning... thereby creating the illusion of progress, equality, and upward socioeconomic mobility: world war, the WPA programme, and Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education. Brewster’s rapid decline underscores the irony inherent in the historical vision held by those in positions of power and authority...The community is designed to fail, and it does. (97)

The “Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education,” which Montgomery refers to here is the Supreme Court decision for an integrated system of education to which both whites and blacks have equal access, while the Works Progress Administration (WPA) programme is the relief measures that were put in place for white and black Americans by congress through the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. But the reality of the environment of Brewster Place inhabited by blacks is a symbol that such equal privileges are only on paper, not in reality. That the area has been designed to fail by those in authority is also a manifestation of the racial disadvantage of those that live there. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) magazine *Opportunity* notes, that “in the South, as might have been expected” the participation in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) “has been limited, and differential wages and (building structures) on the basis of race have been more or less effectively established” (Feb., 1939, p. 34). Although, the WPA was instituted by President Franklin Roosevelt’s order during the Great

Depression in America so as to provide relief for black and white Americans alike, African Americans were still discriminated against because of their skin colour. Thus in a way, Naylor re-echoes the observation of Michael Gomez that “racism employed pedagogical tools and strategies extending far beyond the narrow confines of the school house. The limited opportunities, differential pay scales, and constricted spaces of the workplace conveyed that message” (2004: 180).

Brewster Place is “cut off from the central activities of the city” (*TWBP* 2); a wall has been erected, which blocks its inhabitants from the main business district of the city and makes it “a dead-end street” (2). This symbolizes the estrangement of Brewsters’ black inhabitants from the socio-economic and sociopolitical activities of main stream American society. Nweke’s contention is that “Brewster Place is separated from the rest of the city so that the blacks who incidentally inhabit this area will be separated from “respectable” (white) folks” (173). In his own reading of this incident, Charles Wilson (2001: 37) asserts that “The wall...serves as a reminder that their lives are restricted in ways that even they do not fully understand.”

It also as a result of their skin colour that the inhabitants of Brewster Place lack the political will to agitate for the protection and preservation of their environment. This is exemplified when “[t]he boulevard became a major business district” and the decision was made that “in order to control traffic some of the auxiliary streets had to be walled off.” While “[t]here was a fierce battle in the city’s legislature between the representatives of these” auxiliary streets “because they knew they were fighting for the lifeblood of their community...there was no one to fight for Brewster Place. The neighbourhood was now filled with people who had no political influence; people who were dark haired and mellow-skinned” (*TWBP* 2). While the narrator does not specifically say so, it is safe to assume that the representatives of some of the auxiliary streets that fought in the legislative house against their streets being “walled off” are whites. The implication of this then is that the whites have access to the legislative and judicial arm of government, while the blacks have been alienated from having access to such arms of government.

That this is the case is also obvious from the fact that the inhabitants of Brewster Place could do little or nothing about the court orders and eviction notices they receive at the end of Naylor's narrative. In the section entitled "Dusk," which is a pun and which suggests the twilight of the lives of the characters and that of their physical environment, the narrator notes that Brewster Place

[W]atched its last generation of children torn away from it by court orders and eviction notices, and it had become too tired and sick to help them. Those who had spawned Brewster Place, countless twilights ago, now mandated that it was to be condemned. With no heat or electricity, the water pipes froze in the winter, and arthritic cold would not leave the buildings until well into the spring. Hallways were blind holes, and plaster crumbled into snagged gaps....Brewster had given what it could- all it could- to its "Afric" children, and there was just no more. So it had watch, dying but not dead, as they packed up the remnants of their dreams and left- some to the arms of a world that they would have to pry open to take them, most inherit another aging street and the privilege of clinging to its decay (*TWBP* 191).

Noted in this passage is the racial disadvantage of the African American. Apart from the fact that they cannot seek judicial redress, the tenants of Brewster Place are denied basic social amenities like electrical and heating systems. That they would also move out from a dilapidated building like Brewster only to inhabit "another aging street" with the "privilege of clinging to its decay" is a strong commentary about their racial plight and estrangement in America.

The racial plight and the concomitant alienation of the African American can also be seen in Mattie Michael's experience. After the infant Basil (Mattie Michael's son) had been bitten by a rat in the dilapidated building she lived before eventually coming to Brewster Place; she decides to move out of her dingy boardinghouse in search of a more decent accommodation in order to prevent a reoccurrence. "After

countless attempts, she learned that there was no need in wasting her energy to climb to steps in the white neighborhoods that displayed vacancy signs”(TWBP 30). Mattie Michael desires to live in a decent environment (Wilson 39), but she is denied the opportunity, not because she cannot afford it, but because she is black. What Naylor articulates with her experience is that as a result of the skin colour of African Americans, they are denied accommodation in the more decent areas of the United States; no doubt another fitting illustration of the exclusion of African Americans from America’s social amenities.

Since no community is inhabited by women alone, the men in the lives of the women depicted by Naylor are also implicated in the racial predicament of the women. Judith Branzburg (1984: 116) in her critique of this novel observes that Naylor “makes it clear that the socioeconomic reality of black lives creates black man’s tendency to leave their lovers and children.” Naylor’s female characters are united with the men in their lives as victims of American racial system. One of such male characters is Ben, the janitor of Brewster Place. He fits Branzburg’s description of black males who are far removed from their family as a result of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical deprivation in America. While the text does not specifically mention the reason behind his frequent drunkenness, it suggests that it is Ben’s “complicity” in allowing his daughter to become the sex object of a white man (TWBP 4). As a man, he is responsible for the protection of his wife and daughter, but the American racial system does not allow him such power or authority when the antagonist is a white man. Though his wish is to protect his family, he cannot; because to do so would mean instant death; and for this reason he takes to drinking. Drinking is a habit an individual cultivates in order to temporarily escape suffering, oppression, depression, or difficulties; and if as asserted by Templeton social and psychological alienation often makes an individual to want to isolate himself or escape from an otherwise familiar environment (4), it then means that Ben’s drinking is also a psychological manifestation of his oppression.

Another male character who is united with the women of Brewster Place as a victim of American race relations and whose “legendary” action is a manifestation of the estrangement of African Americans is Sam,

Mattie's father, who becomes a kind of legend in his black neighbourhood for being able to secure the services of a white doctor to take care of his sick daughter. The narrator reports:

It was [Mattie's] mother, and not [Sam], who later told [Mattie] that [Sam] had neglected his farm and insisted on sitting by her bed every day...while the life was burning and sweating out of her pores. It became a legend in those parts, and even her mother never knew how he had gotten the white doctor from town to make that long trip to the house for her. Sam never mentioned it and no one dared ask (*TWBP* 19).

Beyond trying to show the otherwise strong character of Mattie's father and his love for his daughter (in a bid to set the stage for his unexpected violence towards his daughter after her unexpected pregnancy), this passage exemplifies how difficult it is for a black man to live up to his responsibility to his family members. McCall suggests that it is twice difficult for Black family heads to live up to their responsibility as provider, nurturer, and encourager (Cited in Jenkins, 2006: 135). Thus, what is projected here is not just that African Americans lack the financial muscle to engage the services of white men, but that they are estranged from such services because of their racial stock. If for securing the services of a white doctor, Sam becomes a kind of legend, it then follows that it is a service from which African Americans are excluded.

As against Sam, who endures under the yoke of racial oppression is Reverend Woods in Naylor's *TWBP* who capitulates. After a soul relieving sermon that captivates the congregation of the Canaan Baptist Church, Reverend Woods takes the equally eager Etta Mae Johnson to a motel, where they both satisfy their carnal lusts. Etta Mae's expectation, however, is that their relationship would culminate in marriage, but Woods' idea from the inception is to take her as a one-night stand. According to Wilson, "Reverend Woods wants Etta for only one purpose - sexual release" (*TWBP* 40). Naylor's primary purpose here is to highlight how black women are bearers of triple oppression, but she also succeeds, according to Montgomery, in showing 'the falsity of the Judeo-Christian ideals' as it concerns African Americans (95). But in

addition to highlighting the triple oppression of black women and the “falsity of Judeo-Christian ideal,” what this scene also articulates is how black men and women are alienated from each other. Rather than being partners and collaborators in their socioeconomic and sociopolitical upward mobility, they exploit each other as a result of their racial plight in America.

Describing Woods, for instance, Montgomery says that he is a “streetwise preacher, a charlatan who is concerned only about his material gain and carnal lusts” (*TWBP* 95). He sees the church as a place for material sustenance and political security as a black man, and he reneges from living according to the dictates of the church. Due to his racial difficulty he takes advantage of his fellow blacks in the same manner as Dr. Bledsoe and Gabriel in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Baldwin’s *Mountain* respectively. Whereas he preaches to his congregation to throw away temptation to preserve their soul (*TWBP* 67), he does not act accordingly. Not surprisingly, Etta sees Woods as the sort she “had encountered...in poolrooms, nightclubs, grimy second-floor insurance offices... and a dozen street corners” (66), who as a result of the deprivations they have suffered have their instincts “jungle-sharpened” (66). Woods formulates a strategy to cope with and overcome his alienation from a white world, but unfortunately it is one in which like Gabriel in Baldwin’s *Mountain* he preys on fellow blacks. So for him, he is alienated not only from himself but also from the white and black community. As a preacher and reverend father who does not live according to the dictates of his sermons, he is estranged from himself. His alienation from the white American society is obvious since he operates outside the mainstream American socioeconomic and sociopolitical climate, while his exploitation of fellow blacks is a manifestation of his estrangement from the black community.

However owing to his alienation from the white American society, Woods’ preaching carries a revolutionary undertone. His prayer to his congregation at this instance is:

Lord- grind out the unheated tenements! Merciful
Jesus- shove aside the low-paying boss man. Perfect
Father- fill me, fill me till there’s no room for

nothingelse, not even that great big world out there that exacts such a strange penalty for my being born black (*TWBP* 65).

Reverend Woods' prayer here provides enough insight into the deprivations blacks suffer. Woods' prayer can be equated with that of Baldwin's saints in *Mountain*; and just as their prayers emanate from their problems as blacks, so does Woods' prayer. He even acknowledges that it is due to the fact of "being born black" that the white world "exacts such a strange penalty" on him and his congregation. So, all Naylor's characters in the same narrative mold with Baldwin's major characters: both male and female struggle in some way to comprehend their lives, their alienation, and the racial situation in which they find themselves.

Conclusion

Therefore, the two selected writers use their narratives to simultaneously engage as well as reformulate the Marxist concepts of alienation and estrangement. In contrast to Karl Marx, who sees the alienation and estrangement of an individual as owing to industrialization, the two texts argue that their less privileged black characters are alienated and estranged from themselves, their family, and from the sociopolitical and socioeconomic structure of the American society, not necessarily as a result of their class, but more importantly as a result of their racial stock. This, however, does not mean that the black characters do not belong to a class in the American society. In fact, as portrayed in the novels analysed, they belong to the class of the proletariat. But what the two novels and novelists underscore is the fact that it is not the socioeconomic status of the black characters, but their race that places them in the proletariat class. Therefore, in Baldwin's and Naylor's novels; what is responsible for the alienation and estrangement of the black characters is not their economic status, but their racial stock.

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