



SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE: A STUDY OF GLORIA NAYLOR'S 1996

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ABSTRACT

Gloria Naylor (1950-2016), a strong African-American voice of the contemporary period, presents a realistic account of her own life experiences as a writer in her 'fictionalized memoir' entitled 1996 published by the Third World Press in 2005. In the book, the author unravels the most contentious and sensitive issue of privacy invasion in a world that is equipped with the weapons of advanced electronic technology. Naylor highlights the ceaseless struggle of a black female writer (Naylor herself) against the racial and gender oppression to which she was subjected in the name of national security in the year 1996. In broader terms, the author highlights the frightening challenges as confronted by black people in a stratified society on the basis of race, class, gender and sexuality. Through her personal experiences, Naylor tries to articulate the pains and privations of those who have been victimized by the governmental surveillance for one reason or the other in the name of national security.



KEYWORDS: *Oppression, Surveillance, Censorious, Tranquility, Interfusion, Offensive, Invasion, Transition.*

INTRODUCTION

Gloria Naylor, a celebrated African-American writer, chooses a unique way to narrate her story as she mingles her memories and actual experience of surveillance with that of her power of imagination. As Agnieszka Łobodziec rightly observes that "1996 is an interfusion of her memories, imagination and factual research" (60). Though the novel is discredited outright by the critics for being so offensive and censorious towards the surveillance techniques of USA government and its hidden motives; the author claims that by writing her horrifying experiences she got her soul unburdened of the conflict troubling her mind for a long time. Whether she is believed or not is of less importance than the fact that she has succeeded in voicing her experience, though in the guise of fiction. Questioned about the credibility of the novel by Ed Gordon in an interview for National Public Radio, Naylor responds:

"Well, what I can say to them is this: it's the same thing that happens when a child is abused by a trusted adult. Now, that child will go to some parents and tell them these things. They will be believed by some of the parents. Some of the parents will never believe that Uncle George could be doing these things to their little girl. So, it's either that you're going to believe me, or you're not going to believe me and ... I realized I can't worry about what reception this news is going to be received in. I wrote what I felt I had to write, and I'm willing to put my own sanity and my reputation behind it."

In the first few pages of the novel, Naylor covers her journey from her childhood which she spent in her Northern home with profound Southern environment to her national recognition as an established literary figure. The author feels indebted to her mother for her success as a writer as it was only because of her mother's determined spirit that she could escape her birth in Mississippi just by a month. Transcending geographical and gender boundaries becomes a signature trait in her life as well as in her literary career as she entered life in transition and transcendence due to her conception in one region and one decade, and birth in another ones. Naylor presents her mother, Alberta as a woman with a strong willpower and an insatiable hunger for reading books. As the author reveals in an interview by Angels Carabi:

She was not formally educated.... Yet she was a visionary in that she wanted her children to grow up in a place where they could read, if nothing else. She was so determined to accomplish her goal that she would say to anybody who wanted to date her: 'If you marry me and if we have children, I want to leave the South.' (Naylor 111)

It is only because of her reluctance to raise her children in the North that Alberta succeeds in providing a congenial environment to her daughters to read and write which wouldn't have been possible in the South due to the inaccessibility of public libraries to black people. Unable to fulfil her own desire of reading books to her fill, she introduces her children to the wonder world of books at a tender age when they are not able even to read or write in an effective way. She makes them believe that it is only through books that they can get salvation in life because "books [are] more than books—they [are] passports to a world that [holds] endless possibilities" (1996 4).

By emphasizing her mother's obsession with books and her determination to educate her daughters at any cost, Naylor foregrounds the heightened awareness of a black mother about the power of knowledge. She is of the view that it is only through education that women can empower themselves to shape an alternate course to a future society which would exercise sensitivity and sympathy towards the poor and the oppressed. Exhorted by her mother, Gloria makes library an inseparable part of her life and worships it like a sacred place as it promises her a better future in a world that has no viable options for black people. Alberta lives her dreams through her daughters, especially through Gloria who is a voracious reader like her and inculcates in them a deep love for reading and writing. As a sensitive and awakened mother, she anticipates the need to relieve her adolescent daughter of the untold burden of physical and psychological changes in her body and mind and encourages her to write her thoughts in a diary.

By highlighting the significant role played by her mother in shaping her career as a writer, Naylor recognizes the power of motherhood and the sacred bond between the mother and the daughter that gives them courage and strength to realize their dreams in a society that treats blacks as inferiors both in mind and body. The creative powers of this fulfilling bond help them sustain a far greater degree of self-pride than what is intended for them by the hegemonic white society. It is only due to her determined spirit and assertive behaviour that Alberta succeeds first in exacting a promise from her husband to leave South and then reserving a substantial life for her daughters. Gloria acknowledges the contribution of her parents in making them tough, self-reliant and assertive as she tells:

They wanted us to be independent and trained us that way. Your race or your gender was no excuse for not succeeding. If you hit a roadblock, get up and bounce back; if you hit a wall, jump higher. The world owed you nothing but a chance, and even the slimmest chance was enough of an opening to somehow squeeze through and make your mark. We were raised to believe that no one was better than we were just because of skin color. Regardless of what the world may say, what you tell yourself is all that matters. (5)

After covering a long and winding journey fraught with innumerable hurdles, Naylor realizes her dream of becoming an established writer as she recalls: "It was rough going because I was on my own and putting myself through college by working midnights as a switchboard operator in different Manhattan hotels. I wrote after finishing classes and on my two days off from the Job" (8). She succeeds in making a strong foundation for her literary career with the publication of her quartet of novels just in a span of ten years (1982-1992). The year 1996 brings substantial changes in Gloria's life when she finds her privacy and serenity of life threatened by the surveillance strategies of National Security Agency. Though the author is harassed to the extent of driving her to the brink of insanity, she emerges victorious by virtue of her inner strength and strong will to fight back. When the author decides to write her fifth novel, she returns to her little black and white Victorian cottage situated at the edge of St. Helena Sound with three hundred feet of beachfront. She feels a lot of pride in buying this two acres of land as she thinks of the past of black people in America: "My people once worked this land as slaves, and here I was, owning part of it" (1996 11).

The writer has a close proximity with nature which becomes a source of inspiration for her to continue living with patience and resilience. Naylor, like many other black women, has a great love for gardens and tries to make her own in a thirty by twenty feet patch on the side of her house. The author wonders at her luck that has offered her a chance to act out her fantasies and to enjoy a complete satisfaction and perfect peace aspiring for nothing as she sits in her study looking at her garden patch. She expresses her contentment, saying: "... there was nothing more in the world that I needed. Literally nothing. I had my writing. I had my two acres of land fronting a shoreline. I had my good health to keep it all going" (13).

The tranquility of the writer's contented life is stormed by a Jewish woman, Eunice Simon, who works as a paralegal and lives just across the road from her house. She is a tall woman with brunette hair and pale skin and is strangely obsessed with her love for cats. She has at least twelve cats which spoil the garden plot of the author, making it a litter box. Naylor tries hard to make Eunice understand her problem by paying a visit to her personally, but all her grievances to "the cat lady" remain unheard and unresolved (13). She becomes obsessive with her cat dung patrols every morning only to find it "curled up between the leaves of [her] zucchini, clinging to the petals of [her] marigolds" (14). Naylor finds the huge grey cat, Orwell, more problematic than others. She vehemently rejects the advice of her neighbours who ask her to put fences up around her garden and to use pepper spray to keep the cats away from her place saying: "It was my land and my garden. Why should I be the one to make concessions?" (15).

This attitude of Naylor exhibits the growing consciousness of black women towards their rights in a society which attaches a stigma to the pigmentation of their skin, and in a country which disputes their birth right as citizens. The author decides to make her place rat free by calling an exterminator who puts fresh bait in the attic as well as underneath the house after confirming that there is no pet in the house. But the day when one of Eunice's cats dies after eating the bait brings about a substantial change in Gloria's life. Eunice blames Gloria for the death of her cat and decides to teach her a lesson by telling some lies about Gloria to the Deputy Sheriff, Miller that she suspects her of drug-dealing, only to trigger her surveillance.

Though the Deputy Sheriff does not find anything objectionable about Gloria, he decides to hand over the case to the Drug Enforcement Agency just because of his conservative approach towards black women. He finds it hard to digest that a black woman can be capable of affording such a nice place on the island without any substantial means. As he ponders over the information, he gets about the Naylor woman: "She's a writer. She's black. And she wears dreadlocks. Some kind of radical, that was for sure, but not necessarily dealing. Then again, how could she afford a place like that on that end of the island without some major help? You didn't pay for a place like that on welfare checks" (1996 21).

This estimation of a black woman writer by the Deputy Sheriff underscores the racist and sexist mindset of the hegemonic society that treats black women as inferior human beings incapable of doing any kind of intellectual work that is of any worth. Black woman is placed at the lowest rung of the economic ladder and is expected to remain there forever. Her talent is underestimated and any

achievement on her part to improve her life is considered a threat to the established norms of the racist and sexist white society. Her success is associated with illicit activities and is seen suspiciously for the fear that "Black women, in gaining their public presence as writers, would directly confront the political and economic dimensions of their subjugation" (Carby 32). Eleanor White in her review of 1996 clearly observes the reason behind this harassment of Gloria Naylor as she states:

In 1996, Gloria had reached the stage in her profession where she could just afford "a summer place" on one of the Sea Islands along the coast of South Carolina. This is a great stage in anyone's life. I wondered, as I read the book, what Gloria may have done to "deserve" her submission to the covert harassment establishment, which is the typical covert harassment establishment characteristic of dictatorships. I can't help thinking that her gifts as a writer, being black and being a woman might have been enough to trigger jealousy.

When Naylor discovers that her neighbour, Eunice Simon, is behind all this surveillance, she gathers courage to rebuke her for being so revengeful and in a heated argument calls her a "bitch" (Naylor, 1996 27). Eunice, who is a self-indulgent and paranoid woman, misinterprets it as "Jew bitch" and tells her brother, Dick Simon, about the incident that took place in the supermarket (28). Dick Simon, who is an Assistant Deputy Director of the National Security Agency, is quite aware of the paranoia of his sister and outright discards her allegation on Gloria. But the moment he discovers that Gloria is a black woman with a good name in literary field, he frowns deeply and tries to find her connection to the Nation of Islam. Dick Simon finds nothing to prove Naylor a threat to the national security yet he orders her surveillance just because she is a sympathizer of Louis Farrakhan and has recently got publicity for delivering a speech at Parris Island in which she mentioned the Million Man March as a great event that moved her deeply.

When the author notices that she is being followed without any cause, she decides to question her surveillance by paying a visit to the Sheriff, but in vain. Though she has nobody to help her in St. Helena, she is daring enough to face the situation single-handedly. Dick Simon is determined to prove her anti-Semite on the basis of the report he receives from his agents on her novels. He puts his finger on *Bailey's Cafe* in which she has written about an Ethiopian Jew Mariam, a Russian Jew Gabe and the founding of the state of Israel. Though the report says that it is "A sympathetic portrait," it also adds that Gloria "criticized Israel for not admitting Ethiopian Jews when the state was first founded" which is enough to make Dick Simon believe that she hates Jews (37).

Naylor's peace of mind is stolen by the surveillance triggered on her by NSA. Wherever she goes, she is followed by the agents who work for NSA and ADL and also by civilians who keep an eye on her every movement outside home. The author, being a creative writer, is gifted with the talent of observing things minutely which helps her recognize the pattern of her surveillance quite early as she tells: "It was Jews in those cars, and for some reason, they had developed an interest in me" (1996 43). Naylor, at first, hesitates to reveal the truth for the fear to be labelled as anti-Semite, as it would end her literary career in no time, she, ultimately, decides to fight against the oppressors to protect both her private and public life:

But then there was a part of me, the greater part of me, that wanted this thing stopped. It was infuriating to think that any people for any reason felt they had the right to harass and torment me when I had done nothing to them. I was on St. Helena, growing tomatoes and writing a book, for God's sake. Was that a crime? (44)

Dick Simon is adamant on applying Code 3 surveillance on Gloria only to satisfy his wounded ego as he realizes that she has spotted their surveillance and "if he stops the surveillance now it would be just as good as admitting failure—and he never failed" (48). Simon's supremacist ego does not allow him to accept his defeat at the hands of an ordinary black woman who is living alone without any

support system at a place entirely new for her. The author reads his mind with quite accuracy as he looks at her smiling face in the picture and thinks: "Who are you Gloria Naylor? He thinks. Nobody. Living in a nowhere town on a nowhere island. And yet you've taken up half my day. And you're about to dip heavily into my budget because I'm putting a Code 3 on your file. You're going to be watched my dear, like you've never been watched before" (48).

Despite the unwelcome intrusion in her private life, Naylor tries hard to keep her routine life unchanged and utilizes time in taking care of her small garden, in reading books and in meaningful interaction with her friends on the internet. She even hires a lawyer to seek some legal redress for her genuine problems. The level of her harassment keeps increasing as she finds her system hacked, her phone tapped and her activities monitored by the operatives of the ADL and NSA for 24x7. Though Naylor loves to drive her red truck, she avoids driving only to get rid of the intolerable zinging of the cars that keep harassing her with a fixed pattern of chasing her.

Naylor's earlier doubts of surveillance get confirmed as she finds that someone has hacked her computer system without her being on a network. This realization comes to her as a bolt from the blue because someone is trying to meddle with her work and even her thoughts without her permission. Naylor, in her conversation with Nikki Giovanni, testifies her surveillance. Asked by Giovanni about not opening her e-mail, Naylor responds:

I don't. I'm no longer on-line. Because people had hacked into my system. And it was my suspicion that they were sending things under my name, you know. You remember the thing I had with the government last year? So I said, fine, I'm just going to get my butt off the internet. For about three years I had enjoyed it tremendously. ("Conversation" 180)

Naylor succeeds in copying the encrypted file labelled "American. Vtd" as a proof against the hackers, but gets no relief in her disturbed life, rather she finds the oppression getting more intensified and her night sleep ruined by an organized noise pattern (1996 54). Even her garden is poisoned by "The Boys"—the Young recruits who work for NSA and are groomed in an undercover work (57). The way these Boys play with the author's life is quite disgusting and demonizing. When Naylor has to remove the withered plants from her garden in order to save the withering ones, she feels somewhat broken. With the emotional intensity the author presents the image of the devastated garden and her consequent anguish is quite moving: "But when I went out to check, the plant had gone totally black as if someone had scorched it with fire. I also saw that my brussels sprouts were beginning to wither. I dug up the tomato plant and all the brussels sprouts. It was like losing a part of myself. I had worked so hard on that garden" (65). Though Naylor feels disheartened seeing the withering garden, she succeeds in revitalizing it by dint of sheer hard work and strong will.

The author highlights the secretive powers of the surveillance agents who can turn even one's closest friends and relatives into their hired puppets and use them to realize their selfish ends. The author also faces such a betrayal at the hands of her good friend, C.J. Hudson who works as an informer for the National Security Agency. Despite all his unwillingness to deceive his true friend, Hudson has to follow the orders of his bosses. He fails to gather courage to disobey them for the sake of his friendship as he has no guts to buy their enmity because they have such a formidable power which can "make you disappear. Everything you've worked for, everything you've built over the years—gone in the blink of an eye" (1996 67). The Boys compel Hudson to steal Gloria's laptop for them during one night. After installing a virus and fragmenting her hard drive, they return it to him with a warning that he is to say nothing about it to anybody.

The author happens to see C.J. Hudson running from the back of the plantation. Her chance discovery of the fact that her friend, whom she trusts so much, is working for her oppressors makes her numb internally. This betrayal of a close friend proves devastating for her because being unmarried and childless she has given a high priority to friendship in life. After facing a mental trauma of invasion in her private life for the next two months, Naylor decides to leave the island to regain her peace of mind. She dreams of reading and writing in a peaceful environment and maintaining her little garden, but it

shatters when she finds it impossible to keep her life smooth-going in the existing circumstances. Even her decision to move back to New York does not bring any relief to her rather it aggravates her situation.

Dick Simon, infuriated by the intelligence and courage shown by the author as she succeeds repeatedly in blowing up their surveillance, decides to harm her at any cost. Despite all the recommendations of the operation head, David Shane, that 'the Naylor woman' is posing no threat to Jews or anybody else as she is a harmless creature living her life peacefully; Dick Simon continues to be adamant on making her burn in hell. The intense hatred that he feels for the woman robs him of his sleep and other pleasures. She becomes irksome to him like "a pesky mosquito" that keeps haunting to suck the blood until it gets killed (1996 80). Simon surprises to think how a black woman can be so intelligent and observant to see through their tricks and enter their world without permission. Irritated and infuriated by Naylor's powers and success, he is hell-bent to destroy the quietude of her life. The author highlights the profound effects of racial paranoia on her life in the following lines:

A person becomes bitter who has asked for less than nothing and gets even that taken away. What are the depths of anger and hatred when that happens? Deep. Even though you know that you can't afford to wallow in it. Even though you've learned through a lifetime of experience that some things need to be shoved aside if you're going to go on. You are changed by an experience like mine. (84)

The author also criticizes those blacks who instead of taking pride in their blackness think it as a curse and try to get rid of it as early as possible. Montgomery Swiss, a black neighbour of Gloria in New York, hates his own black self to such an extent that he marries a white woman and after producing a fair-skinned daughter never tries for the second child for the fear that the "child might look like him with caramel skin, a pug nose, and full lips" (86). He imitates Whites in every way and his blackness is limited only to his skin colour. It is he who allows the NSA agents to use his house to carry out their operation on Naylor because he himself is unable to digest the truth that a black woman can afford a beautiful duplex. Moreover, he dislikes black people just because they are black as this feeling of inferiority is transmitted in his persona by his grandparents who used to tell him that "It's a white man's world...and you gotta learn to play by their rules, to live like they live" (85).

Though Naylor feels relaxed for some time and enjoys with her friends having lunch and dinner with them, she remains constantly aware of the fact that she is being watched every moment. Dick Simon finds that the Naylor woman is getting help from somebody who believes what she says because he has been requested by the CIA to provide information about the on-going surveillance. In order to destroy her credibility, he decides to make her seem like a lunatic by using ultra-modern technology that can produce sound in someone's head by radiating it with microwaves. The author is bombarded with negative and depressing thoughts for the whole two weeks that would have been enough to make an ordinary human being a maniac. But with the help of her inner strength and sharp sense of observation Gloria is able to save her sanity as she tells: "It came to me that I never heard the voices when I was outside of the house, and I wondered why" (1996 101).

Being a strong person internally, Naylor avoids telling others, except her doctor, what is being done to her. She believes that talking too much about her problem will encourage her oppressors because her phone is being tapped and "airing [her] grievances would just give them a measure of how they were succeeding in disrupting [her] life" (103). When 'The Boys' fail to get any substantial information about the success of their move on the target, they try to get it by pressurizing Gloria's psychiatrist, Dr Davis, who outright rejects their demand of sharing the confidential records of his patient with them. This new realization of what is being done to his patient strengthens his intention of protecting her.

The author highlights the frustration of the NSA agents as they try to harass even Dr Davis in the name of auditing his taxes and even bugging his office as a punishment for saying no to their enquiry about Gloria. As they fail in getting the desired results, they go to the extremity of their profession and

use an ultra-modern technology that makes it possible to read human mind and to translate the brainwaves into thought. Naylor is bombarded with abuse and accusations so as to instigate her to commit suicide, but the valuable knowledge she gets from the internet and her suspicion of the involvement of her neighbours in this conspiracy help her understand the real cause behind her mental torment. Eleanor White in her review of 1996 sheds some more light on the issue of using advanced technology for brain-mapping as she tells:

When we think things silently to ourselves, as words, even though our vocal muscles don't form audible words, there are enough tiny electric currents sent to the vocal cords that these can be picked up by electronic equipment. One practical use for this "mind reading" technology was announced in 2004 as being a research project by NASA for use in detecting "terrorists" at airports.

As a brave woman, Naylor decides to fight back by writing her experience which she thinks is the only way to her salvation. She determines to shed light on the darkened aspect of the issue in order to help and encourage the other victims of such type of torment to speak out. She even hopes that writing this book will help her regain her self-confidence and win the battle for her mind. Quite aware of the fact that the abusive thoughts are not coming to her mind from within rather they are being imposed on her from outside, Naylor decides to fight fire with fire. Even her tormentors are surprised to see her bold response to their abusive language which appears on their screen like this:

Eat shit and die.
You die.
Scream.
You scream.
Scream.
Leave me alone.
We'll leave you alone when you leave us alone. Bitch.
And then she gathers up her books and runs to the library. (1996 126)

It is only through the power of knowledge that she has acquired from different sources, the author is able to ignore the abusive thoughts and regain her lost confidence. Library, which has always been a refuge for Gloria since her childhood, becomes her shelter while writing becomes therapeutic as it relieves her of the haunting memories of a nightmarish experience. Recalling the heroic struggle of the countless black writers who did not stop writing even in the most horrific environment of slavery and afterwards, Naylor musters courage to voice her sufferings for the cause of humanity. Pulling up all her strength from within she picks up the pen with trembling hands and writes the first sentence that transforms her from a victim to a victor. Transcending her victimized state with the help of her inner consciousness and unending resilience, the author emerges victorious in her battle against her oppressors. Anticipating her victory, the author writes:

I asked my mind to dig in just a little bit more and pull up the strength to tell my story. I asked myself to look beyond the scars. The yellow pad was on the table before me and so was the pen. I only had to pick it up and start, one sentence a day. If I could manage just one sentence a day, then I wasn't alone and I wasn't worthless. It didn't matter how many were against me or how strong. If they couldn't keep me from that one sentence, I had won. (1996 128)

CONCLUSION

Thus, by telling her real-life experience in such a courageous manner Naylor asserts her own black female identity as a writer in a world that is fraught with the overt and covert forms of racism and

sexism. The fortitude and persistence with which the author sustains her serenity of mind in the face of the distressing and demoralizing environment created by the cruel and crazy agents of National Security Agency is quite commendable. Naylor emerges as a strong and determined human being out of this ordeal and succeeds in reclaiming her own life by winning the vicious battle perpetrated against her mind. The author also exhibits a tremendous strength of mind and extreme courage in divulging the bitter truth of her personal life, thereby disregarding the perilous consequences of her audacious action. By telling her own story with such an emotional intensity coupled with factual information and vivid imagination, Naylor gives voice to the untold sorrows and sufferings, travails and tribulations of those who have been either mistrusted or labelled as maniac for expressing the horrors of their mental intrusion which, for the author, is akin to the ultimate rape.

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