

# The Escape Theme from the Perspective of Self-Discrepancy Theory in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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**ABSTRACT.** Historically, the theme of escape has prevailed in world literature. The fictional characters pursue escape either to get away from threatening circumstances, or depart their oppressive root and community. The essay incorporates the self-discrepancy theory in analyzing physical escape in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. The conclusion is that escape can promote self-concept construction as long as the escaper has firm belief in the ideal self and regulates oneself towards it.

**KEYWORDS:** Escape theme, Gloria naylor, The women of brewster place, Self-discrepancy, Approach-avoidance

## 1. Introduction

Gloria Naylor's novels *The Women of Brewster Place* embodies the theme of escape. The female characters take various forms of escape to distance themselves from desperate circumstances. These escapers are not the first, nor the last in literature.

Historically, the theme of escape has prevailed in world literature. Benson points out that "All the best stories in the world are but one story in reality—the story of an escape. It is the only thing which interests us all and at all times—how to escape." (Benson 32). The theme of escape and the means of protagonists' escape contribute to the heart-thrilling plots of world classics.

Escape behavior and underlying motivations can be explored with theories of social psychology. E. Tory Higgins, a social psychologist, develops the self-discrepancy theory that the construction of self falls in three domains: actual self (what one really is); ideal self, a representation of someone's hopes, aspirations, or wishes for one; and ought self, a representation of someone's sense of one's duty, obligations, or responsibilities (Higgins, "Self-discrepancy" 320-21).

Actual self constitutes the self-concept of a person, while ideal and ought selves serve as self-directive standards, known as self-guides, steering people to regulate their behavior so as to reduce the discrepancy between self-concept and self-guides. Self-regulation towards ideal self or ought self usually inspires motivated movements- approach-avoidance system (Higgins et al 276). If the goal is associated with desirable consequences, approach motivation occurs so as to reduce the discrepancy. Otherwise, avoidance motivation occurs in order to amplify the discrepancy (Higgins, "How Motivation Works" 22).

Higgins' self-discrepancy theory sheds light on the motivation of people's escape behavior. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, these marginalized African-American women flee desperate circumstances from harsh beating of a furious father, a rich family with internalized racism, irresponsible playboys, to a cold-blooded mother, burdens of fatherless babies, and numerous men drooling over her beauty. Under close examination, these situations all produce discrepancies between the women's self-concept and self-guides. During their self-regulation process towards the self-guides, the undesired prospects motivate them to adopt avoidant behavior. Unable to negotiate a self-concept under the guides of conflicting ideal self and ought self, they all choose to flee. This essay will explore a case of their flight in combination with the self-discrepancy theory of Higgins to figure out how discrepancies between the three domains of their self force them into approach-avoidance conflict and seeking out the actual self through avoidant behavior.

## 2. Flight-All God's Children Had Wings

For African-American people in the US, flight has been a common theme not only in their folklore but also in their history, whether they were transported in chains from the remote continent, whether they were abused on white plantations before the Civil War, whether they were under threats of lynchings and starvation after liberation, or whether they were segregated and persecuted in Jim Crow towns. They have yearned to escape from slavery, persecution and adversities to seek transgression and transcendence, thus taking their fortune in their own hands. African-American women, under interwoven oppression of race, gender and class, are more eager to escape than their male counterparts.

*The Women of Brewster Place* presents a deteriorating neighborhood-Brewster Place with a wall at the end of the street that cuts off traffic and makes it a literal and metaphorical dead end. Women have moved here with respective life stories and healed each other with care and support. Naylor pictures them as “hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased” (“The Women of Brewster Place” 5). Unprivileged as they are, they cherish their value of family, regulate themselves with religious belief, and never retreat from hope and dream.

The curtain rises with the story of Mattie Michael. 20-year-old Mattie lives with her pious parents in rural Tennessee. It all begins with a light-hearted conversation between Mattie, a naive girl and Butch, a notorious womanizer. Mattie’s crush on him is obvious: she’s obsessed with his laugh-so translucent and mystifying that she compares it to the edges of April sunset (9). Also his physical appearance attracts her: his masculinity and graceful movements appeal to her *reluctant* admiration. She enjoys the time spent together with Butch but next second her heartfelt laugh over his witty humor turns to *reluctance*, too. Apparently, the conflict between her ideal self and ought self spawns the weirdness that her heartfelt joy and adolescent admiration become reluctant: her ideal self aspires after independence and autonomy; whereas her ought self confines her to submission to her father. Her father has repeatedly warned her against Butch, “a no-count ditch hound”, and that “no decent woman would be seen talkin’ to him” (9).

Ought self contains elements of conscience and role demands: the former stresses both conventional standards and prohibitions, while the latter sets prescribed behavior for sex and occupational roles such as a loving daughter (Bybee et al 38). As for Mattie, her ought self is no more than absolute submission to her father in every aspect of her life.

Actually, father has nominated a decent candidate for her life companion—a devout young man he appreciates most in the church-- the only man he allows her to see. Father leaves her no autonomy at all in choosing a desirable spouse. He even tears her and her sweetheart apart because the young man of humble origin tries to take her far away. That’s just another interference in Mattie’s life and she submits like usual. She constantly regulates herself towards ought self.

Meanwhile, Butch spares no efforts to provoke rebellious thought in her: how clumsy and vapid her fiancée-to-be is, how unreasonable and autocratic her father is, how repressive Christianity is, how boring and desperate an arranged marriage is, etc. What he says all makes sense to Mattie because he speaks out her very ideal self—an autonomous, self-determined grown-up girl. In the approach-avoidance conflict Mattie faces towards the ideal self, she does measure the desired end state and the undesired end state. She yearns for the desired end state—the autonomy to be with a man she likes, so after hesitation she approaches it. Cautious as she is, she fails to resist his invitation to accompany him to sugar cane field.

For her approach to ideal self, Mattie has to pay. But first she has to confide in her mother about the pregnancy. When Mattie’s father hears of Mattie’s pregnancy, this “old man with set and exacting ways” keeps silent for two entire days (19). Suspended in panic, Mattie can’t help recalling how caring and sacrificing he has been. All the memories amount to her deep, deep guilt that her shameful transgression of the moral standards has disgraced him. Her actual self defies her ought self beyond retrieval.

Hoffman suggests that males and females respond distinctively to the discrepancy between actual self and ought self: moral transgression arouses guilt for females but with fear and anticipation of punishment for males, because females tend to have internalized moral standards (Hoffman 727). This internalization theory explains why Mattie keeps reminding herself of the cans and can’ts her father regulates, and why her joy and admiration associated with Butch goes both sincere and reluctant. She has internalized the religious belief and the moral standards her father instills in her; therefore, the increasing discrepancy between her actual self and ought self activates her sense of shame and guilt.

But her father is not irritated as much by her violation of moral standards as by the sign of her demanding for autonomy. Albeit massive fear, Mattie conceals the identity of the baby’s father. Mattie’s concealment, in her father’s eyes, equals bold autonomy and departure that is “now brazenly taunting him” (23). After beating blood out of her, he even shoots at her. To him, a daughter isn’t worth living once she strives for autonomy. Mattie has

long been avoiding her ideal self by internalizing the rules and standards established by her father, and molding her actual self in accordance with the ought self. When she approaches her ideal self for the first time, she abandons her internalized moral standards; when she does it again, she is almost murdered by her father.

Therefore, she has to take avoidant behavior to survive. She flees the repressive ought self to maintain her ideal self and elevates her actual self with independence and autonomy. A week later, she hits the road to a girlfriend in North Carolina.

Mattie's escape is a transgression and transcendence. On the one hand, she spontaneously approaches the ideal self and avoids the ought self thus redefining her actual self with full latitude. On the other, through tireless work she gains independence economically. Courageous and strong, she escapes from ought self but never escapes from her ideal self. Her flight proves to be effective in that it liberates her of spiritual confinements.

### 3. Conclusion

Mattie strives to reconstruct a better self for the sake of survival. She transgresses and transcends ought self successfully not only because she moves out of her dilemma, but also because her escape remains under the guidance of ideal self. From her escape behaviors, one finds that escape can promote self-concept construction as long as the escaper has firm belief in the ideal self and regulates herself towards it.

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