CHAPTER – II

WOMAN TO WOMEN HEALING

To achieve social liberation, the black women must first acquire a consciousness of their own selves and lives. The gradual development of an inner awareness and interpretation proceeding to an outer recognition and celebration of their black female self can be achieved only collectively and not individually. Though each black woman needs to be aware of and develop her power and strength individually, wholeness can be attained only with the realization of interconnectedness.

The African American women writers of the third phase of the Black feminist movement have felt the need to utter the pain and the struggle in unison along with their sisters, and also provide healing matrices through different genres. These women writers have revealed the African American women’s progression from the detection and recognition of pain to verbalization. The portrayal of the struggles encountered by their characters and the consequent attainment of self-affirmation only with a collective identification has been the sole aim of the black women writers.

“Gloria Naylor’s is a strong voice, and a compassionate one. She writes – and speaks – with the solid, decided vigor, of someone, who has given her subject its thoughtful due” (qtd. in College Street n. pag), said Brad Leithauser, Emily Dickinson Lecturer in Humanities.
Living in a culture, which has marginalized African-American women, structured where they should live, attend school and eat, allot specific days for burial, denied economic opportunities, prevented their political rights and abused psychologically – the contributions by African-American women have helped their women not only to resist but to endure, prevail and hope for a better living. As these African-American women have been cut off from the main stream for which they had to turn to one another, the African-American women novelists have depicted comforters and powerful healers to battle against the forces of distraction. This forceful depiction with a Black feminist literary consciousness has been the prominent theme in their fiction.

During a talk in 1993 in St. Louis, poet Nikki Giovanni has stated, “Black love is Black wealth.” Almost nowhere has Black love manifestation been better presented than in the novels of Gloria Naylor. By churning out quartet novels, Naylor has celebrated the power of love as a force that heals bringing peace and an entirety.

Naylor’s depiction of numerous women characters with myriad shapes of love, which has been manifested to reassert the self, could be examined in all her novels. The manifestation of Black love finds its description in her very first and National Book Award winning novel, The Women of Brewster Place (1982).

A network of female characters serves as protagonists in Naylor’s collection of six interwoven stories in The Women of Brewster Place. The novel is about the black women’s condition in America which Naylor herself states as:

… to deal with that picture couldn’t do justice to the complexity of the black female experience. So I tried to solve this problem by creating a
microcosm on a dead-end street and devoting each chapter to a different woman's life. These women vary in age, personal background, political consciousness, and sexual preference. What they do share is a common oppression and more importantly, a spiritual strength and a sense of female communion that I believe all women have employed historically for their physical health and survival. (qtd. in Black Literature Criticism, 1482)

The inspiration for The Women of Brewster Place came to Naylor not from any personal knowledge of all or any of those characters but from an intuitive ability to capture the spirit of their life. She expresses it in the following statement:

These ... are women whom I never knew personally but I have known that spirit, I have definitely known that life. That's how these characters were born. But they lived for me as characters with their own personalities and I let them have it. I wanted to immortalize the spirit I saw in my grandmother, my great aunt and my mom. (1482)

The novel is set in Brewster place, the “bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company” (WBC 4). The first dwellers were Irish, later the Mediterranean and then Blacks. Brewster place continued to exist in these multi-coloured “Afric” children of its old age. Even in their old age, they worked hard and were passionate. Each one was different from the other. The women particularly clung to the street considering this integrated environment to be better than the “starving
southern climates they had fled from” (4). Naylor describes the homogenous living of these “coloured daughters” of Brewster Place as:

They cursed, badgered, worshipped, and shared their men. Their love drove them to fling dishcloths in someone else’s kitchen to help him make the rent, or to fling hot lye to help him forget that birth behind the counter at the five-and-dime. They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story. (5)

The process of transformation – of moving towards a place to identify themselves with their similarly oppressed women’s psyche is a process of rebirth - of a new dimension for their self. This movement contains the seeds for a healing in future thereby leading to a transformation and an empowerment.

Naylor depicts the life of these women characters as an “ebony phoenix” with a unique story to reveal. The relevance of the geographical setting in which all the women characters revolve finds its description in the novel’s prologue and epilogue, entitled “Dawn” and “Dusk.” The black residents, being poor, uneducated and deserted by the outside world had formulated a system according to the socio-economic conditions. The setting reveals the racial, class and gender consciousness of the writer in the portrayal of characters as being black, female and poor. Montgomery views Brewster Place as “a microcosm for black America” (30), as the women here are “excluded from the social, economic, and political mainstream” (WBC 42).
Mattie Michael is the first woman whom Naylor introduces to her readers. She serves as a protagonist but her presence is felt in all the individual characters. Mattie’s life is typical of any black girl living in a plantation, which Amin affirms to be in “constant fear and apprehension” (qtd. in Anand 242). Her father, Samuel Michael, warns Mattie against a black ruffian named Butch. He describes Butch as follows:

That Butch Fuller is a no-'count ditch hound, and no decent woman would be seen talk in’ to him. But Butch had a laugh like the edges of an April sunset – translucent and mystifying. You knew it couldn’t last forever, but you’d stand for hours, hoping for the chance to experience just a glimmer of it once again. (WBC 9)

She becomes a prey to his desire in the sugarcane fields in Tennessee. Mattie’s story begins as a flashback of thirty-one years ago, “in the time of memory” (Whitt 17), when the Black ruffian Butch seduced her. This black ruffian tries to justify his ways with other women as:

Ya see, all the women I’ve known can never remember no bad days with me. So when they stuck with them men who are ignorin’ ‘em or beatin’ on ‘em, they sit up on their back porches shelling peas and they thinks about old Butch, and they say, Yeah, that was one sweet, red nigger– all our days were sunlight; maybe it was a short time, but it sure felt good. (WBC 16)
Though Mattie knew of Butch’s behaviour and his ways of enjoying life, she too angrily utters, “I suppose runnin’ after ever woman that moves is your idea of enjoyment” (21). Like all the other women, she too ends up as a prey to his lust. It is as Amin affirms “a young girl’s vulnerability that brings Mattie’s ruin” (qtd. in Anand 242).

It is Mattie Michael “who serves this novel as a matriarch, surrogate mother and mentor to the other women” (Whitt 17) of Brewster Place. She has been seduced by the language and looks of Butch, and ultimately becomes “a willing sex partner” (Whitt 19) for Butch on a hot summer afternoon. By the standards of the Black community, Mattie has adhered to the rules and has been active in church practices. After losing herself to Butch, she refuses to reveal the identity of the father of her child. As a typical father the patriarchal fury gets its reaction: “He still held her by the hair so she took the force of the two blows with her neck muscles, and her eyes went dim as the blood dripped down her chin from her split lip. The grip on her hair tightened, and she was forced even closer to his face” (WBC 22-23).

Fraser observes that the father -Sam’s beating of Mattie as an attempt to “subject black women to patriarchal authority” (98). Though Mattie acknowledges her guilt and shame, the mother Fanny Michael is elated at her daughter possessing a baby, which she expresses, “Havin’ a baby is the natural thing there is. The Good book calls children a gift from the Lord” (WBC 25). Amin observes the plight of Mattie to be mainly due to “Fuller’s cowardly behaviour and her father’s sexist-bias” (qtd. in Anand 242) that punishes Mattie and labels her guilty of the crime. When she realizes that her father’s anger and her own Black community would not allow her to
protect the baby in her, she quits the house and meets her friend Etta Mae to secure a
shelter. She believes that “Rock Vale had no place for a black woman, who was not
only unwilling to play by the rules, but whose spirit challenged the very right of the
game to exist” (WBC 8).

With a firm decision to bring up the baby, she meets her friend Etta Mae
Johnson who was always “Miss Johnson” (9). Mattie moves away from Rock Vale
because she could not adhere to the game, which enforced the social rules of
behaviour that was governed by the southern whites and black men. The bond
between Mattie and Etta has been strongly rooted from childhood and has continued
throughout their adult lives. Mattie realizes that even when her parents and the society
have deserted her, she can still count on Etta for survival. As soon as the child is born
to Mattie when the restless Etta tells Mattie of her departure, it creates a fear in
Mattie, and she questions Etta, “‘you leaving?’” for which she replies. ‘Yeah, honey. I
was ready months ago, but when you wrote and said you were comin’, I stuck around
to see you settled with the baby. But this town is dead” (26). Etta has spent her
tenage years in constant trouble. She desires to lead an independent life. Etta Mae
had always refused to submit to the Southern racist system:

The whites in Rock Vale were painfully reminded of this rebellion
when she looked them straight in the face ... when she reserved her
sirs and mams for those she thought deserving, and when she smiled
only if pleased, regardless of whose presence she was in ... she was
just being herself. (60)
The racist attitude of the southern whites towards the black community has not only resulted in the destruction of property of Etta’s father but has forced her to move from Rock Vale. She moves to other places to fight against the racist and sexual behaviour:

Rock Vale had followed her to Memphis, Detroit, Chicago, and even to New York. Etta Mae soon found out that America wasn’t ready for her yet – not in 1937. And so along with the countless other disillusioned, restless children of Ham with so much to give and nowhere to give it, she took her talents to the street. And she learned to get over, to hook herself to any promising rising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another. (60)

It is the racial and sexual oppression that allows her to have relationships with other men. When Mattie questions Etta Mae of a hope of still searching for a few promising men, Etta replies, “No, honey, it just seemed so. Let’s face it, Mattie. All the good men are either dead or waiting to be born” (61). Etta’s pain and dejection reaches its peak when she sings the blues song ‘Johnson gal’:

Southern trees bear strong fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging
In the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging
From the poplar trees. (60)
The song is sung after Etta’s rapid departure from Rock Vale. Whitt observes “Strong Fruit” to be a euphemism for “Black bodies swinging / in the Southern breeze” (27). Mattie consoles Etta Mae by asking her to meet a few “settle-minded men” in the church and hopes that Etta Mae would get a relief from pain. In spite of being betrayed by many men, she still hopes for a better living with someone and utters:

Don’t you think I got a mirror? Each year there’s a new line to cover. I lay down with this body and get up with it every morning, and each morning it cries for just a little more rest than it did the day before. Well, I’m finally gonna get that rest, and it’s going to be with a man like Reverend Woods. (69-70)

To the contrary, even the religious blacks’ attitude towards black women too does not seem to be a healthy one. Naylor’s portrayal of Reverend Woods proves this:

Moreland Woods was captivated by the beautiful woman at his side. Her firm brown flesh and bright eyes carried the essence of nectar from some untamed exotic flower, and the fragrance was causing a pleasant disturbance at the pit of his stomach. He marveled at how excellently she played the game. (71)

Even when Mattie questions the mind of Reverend Woods, Etta firmly believes him. According to Nigel Thomas, “… the three greatest character traits of Rev. Woods are owning others, ostentation, and lechery” (43). As Etta herself states, being a woman in loneliness, she does not know where to turn and expects the man to
be her saviour, who to the contrary observes her weakness and says, “Well, if I can be of any assistance, Sister Johnson, don’t hesitate to ask. I couldn’t sleep knowing one of the Lord’s sheep is troubled. As a matter of fact, if you have anything you would like to discuss with me this evening, I’d be glad to escort you home” (68-69).

Throughout her life, Etta Mae had been in search of a man and had tried to “hook herself to any promising rising black star” (60). When one would fade away, she would choose the other. Only after the bitter experience with the religious black man, she finally realizes that she had to stand alone and ultimately seeks her salvation in Mattie. Both these women have suffered from sexual oppressions in the hands of their lovers. These two women identify themselves and with interconnectedness get healed. Even six weeks before her departure, Etta gives Mattie “eight cases of condensed milk and coupon books for fifty pounds of sugar” (27), which reveals the motherly concern the woman has for her friend who is in need. Mattie observes the broken dreams and spirits of her friend Etta deserted by the preacher. She understands her friend’s need “to pick up the pieces” and when she tries to console her, “Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her.”

(74) Montgomery states that they share “a common bond based on the disappointments, which each has faced in romantic relationships. It is the source of strength derived from the friendship that heals and nurtures them” (10). Andrews compares Etta’s return to Mattie to a “Center” (281) and their friendship as “the best example of sisterly friendship without the maternal connection” (289). Both these women characters suffer from sexual oppressions in the hands of their lovers and when deserted by the men they decide to create a bond among themselves and heal each other.
The other healer to Mattie is Miss Eva Turner. Mattie is deserted not only by her father and lover but also by her son Basil. Etta Mae her childhood friend helps her. To bring up her child Basil, Mattie works as a switchboard operator for survival. When Etta Mae moves out, Mattie encounters the poor conditions of living and reaches the old white Eva Turner’s house. This woman had nurtured her granddaughter Lucielia, who invariably at a later stage is helped by Mattie. Mattie accepts the “unexplained kindness of the woman with a hunger of which she had not known in her life” (WBC 39).

Irrespective of the race, woman’s suffering from the sexual oppressions finds its expression when Eva Turner speaks about her married life. Naylor emphasizes the commonality of the female experience. Amin opines that the strategy of “woman unfolding to another woman her past” as regaining “her lost confidence and acquiring the strength and fortitude to survive in a brutal world” (131).

The plight of daughters irrespective of any race is justified, when Eva Turner says:

I remember the night I ran off with my first husband, who was a singer. My daddy hunted us down for three months and then dragged me home and kept me locked in my room for weeks with the windows all nailed up. But soon as he let me out, Virgil came back and got me, and we was off again. (WBC 34)

Even on hearing the life of Eva Turner and her advice to Mattie to seek men for her economic survival, Mattie still wishes to live with her son Basil and asserts.
“My bed hasn’t been empty since Basil were born” (31). She lives and earns to give her son a room to grow in, a yard to run in and a decent place for her son to bring his friends. Mattie’s trait proves that irrespective of any race, the concept of mother remains universal. Poet Arunachalam in his poem “My Mother” (2004) establishes the sacrificial traits of motherhood as:

... ... ... ... Best care

she took of him never pulling a long face.

Jewel and silk, never did she desire nor demand.

Level held she her head. Opinions did she have any of her own? Hell! (Sorry. She wouldn’t have used a word like that.) Ours were hers. (12-17)

Mother! My mother! Be my mother in all births. (44)

To the contrary, this young Blackman Basil, fights a quarrel at the bar, gets arrested and deserts his loving mother. Mattie spends her long and hard earned money, to save her son, who later absconds without informing her. Basil is being held for assaulting a peace officer and Mattie, in spite of the warning that if Basil gets disappeared the bond might get forfeited, pays the house as collateral and later turns penniless and reaches Brewster Place. King compares Mattie’s character to serve as a “buffer between her son and the hostile world of both intra and interracial violence ... the result is a human being stripped of personhood, a man-child emasculated” (9).
Loving without limits often leads to the displacement of the self. Morrison once explained this state with reference to Sethe’s character in *Beloved* (1987) in an interview with Gloria Naylor: “A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself” (583-584). This statement proves quite applicable to Mattie’s immense love for her son Basil, which has led her to Brewster Place. Judith V. Branzburg comments on the attitude of Black women and men as:

> In each case, the women accept responsibility for their parts in their relationships with men, and can then continue their lives. By taking responsibility for mistakes, pain, and love, and in choosing each other, the women accept that they can ... control their lives. The men ... come do their dirty work, and go ... The women stay and support each other. (qtd. in Callaloo 117)

The first meeting between Mattie and Eva Turner, despite the racial and age differences stands as a proof for a new bond being developed: “The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other become indistinguishable” (WBC 34).

The friendship between Mattie and Etta Mae had continued from childhood, whereas between Mattie and Eva, it has been a woman helping another woman, despite being a total stranger in times of crisis. Not only does this old woman look after Mattie’s baby, but also “kept her baby from sharp objects and steep stairs while she worked” (35). This old woman instead of receiving a rent, allows Mattie to save.
which enables Mattie to buy the house when Miss Eva dies ultimately deriving a 
solace, for “she had wanted her spirit to remain in this house through the memory of 
someone, who was capable of loving it as she had” (40). Thereby the dream of Mattie 
of possessing a decent house for herself and her son gets fulfilled. “Like the Papa 
Legba figure in African-American Literature, who meets characters at crossroads and 
leads them in the way, they must go. Miss Eva’s appearance and offering a place to 
stay is precisely timed” (Whitt 23). This “liberating and redemptive” (Montgomery 
45) friendship continues and succeeds in Naylor’s portrayal of other characters too.

Naylor by depicting Kiswana as a naive middle class apostate and a Black 
power activist, dedicating her life to revolutionary ideas presents a representative of 
the Black female intelligentsia, which flowered during the 1970’s and 1980’s. 
Kiswa3na rejects her parents’ middle class values and lives alone in the sixth-floor 
studio apartment in Brewster Place. The traditional mother Mrs.Browne, who visits 
er her estranged daughter and the conversation between the political idealist daughter 
and the mother who hails from the African heritage in all her living middle class 
existence, provides the reader an insight into the generation differences that prevailed 
in the early 1970s. Though Kiswa3na tries to adopt the spirit of the movement by 
choosing to live in Brewster Place, in spite of this naivete’s consciousness, ultimately, 
it is the love and affection of the mother that heals and empowers her daughter 
Kiswa3na.

Typical to her race, the mother is named Mrs.Browne. The mother represents 
the traditional woman who expects the daughter to adhere to their race, which the 
daughter Kiswa3na realizes but does not live according to her mother’s expectations.
To the contrary, the Black teenager’s desires and expectations and longings get revealed through Kiswana:

Kiswana gave silent thanks that the elevator was broken. That would give her at least five minutes’ grace to straighten up the apartment. She rushed to the sofa bed and hastily closed it without smoothing the rumpled sheets and the tangled bedcovers would give away the fact that she had not slept alone last night. She silently apologized to Abshu’s memory. (WBC 77)

Unlike Kiswana, the mother still lives within the traditional circle by calling her daughter by the original name, “Melanie.” The mother ridicules her daughter for selecting odd jobs like fork-lift operator, cutlery salesman and chauffeurs and questions her daughter whether she was moping and day dreaming like the young daughters. Through Kiswana’s conversation, the readers are presented with the Blacks hailing their race with a patriotic fervour. She resents her brother Wilson when he does not adhere to her race. When everyone at school was discovering their blackness and protesting on campus, Wilson had not taken part and had even refused to wear an Afro. This had outraged Kiswana because, unlike her, he was dark-skinned and had the type of hair that was thick and kinky enough for a good “Fro”. Kiswana had still insisted on cutting her own hair, but it was so thin and fine-textured, it refused to thicken even after she washed it. So she had to brush it up and spray it with lacquer to keep it from lying flat. She never forgave Wilson for telling her, “… she didn’t look African, she looked like an electrocuted chicken” (81).
The daughter's refusal to borrow the money from her mother but ready to pay for her brother and her longing to live with these people makes the readers accept the representative of the Black Power movement- Kiswana through whom their ideologies are reflected:

No Mama, you're not poor. And what you have and I have are two totally different things. I don't have a husband in real estate with a five-figure income and a home in Linden Hills - you do. What I have is weekly unemployment check and an overdrawn checking account at United Federal. So this studio on Brewster is all I can afford. (83)

The mother's rejection of the present generation's path of evolution through which they cannot contribute to their Black Community is pointed out when she says:

You don't have to sell out ... work for some corporation ... you could become an assemblywoman or a civil liberties lawyer ... That way you could really help the community ... while you're living hand-to-mouth on file-clerk jobs waiting for a revolution. You're wasting your talents, child. (84)

The father and the mother representing the NAACP for the last twenty-four years and the mother Mrs. Browne's contention that the present movement was not grounded in reality speaks of Naylor's acceptance of the traditional struggle and the remembrance of their ancestors. When Mrs. Browne states that her grandmother was a "full bloodied Iroquois" (85) and her grandfather a free black from a long line of journeymen and the father who was a cabin boy on a merchant mariner, reminds the
attitude of the women still with a pride and reverence reminiscing the past heritage. When Mrs. Browne gets dejected of Kiswana changing her name, Naylor observes the reverence of consciousness the blacks have towards their race and colour through Mrs. Browne:

> It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother’s name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for ‘not knowing his place.’ Yet you needed to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proved. (86)

The mother’s advice and encouragement to her own daughter not to be afraid of facing any one, depicts the Black woman’s strong will. When the mother, Mrs. Browne, without informing Kiswana leaves seventy-five dollars in an envelope, Kiswana realizes the bond between them. She admits succumbing to her mother’s love to be more potent than her revolutionary zeal. Despite the complexities between the mother and the daughter, it is the loving concern, which heals and nurtures the young daughter Kiswana.

By participating in mixed gender organizations such as the church, NAACP and the UNIA, the black women had behind the scenes worked for the common struggle for racial justice and for their community with self-determination. This gets represented in Naylor’s portrayal of the Black mother, Mrs.Browne. She represents the Black mother’s obligation to improve their children’s lives and to protect them.
from the harshness of segregation. Mrs. Browne’s realization of the false ideologies of the youth and their political activism gets focused when she advises Kiswana to focus on the practical way of living. Mrs. Browne represents the strong mother as a woman who transmitted the objectives of “activist mothering” (50) through her courage and persistence to her daughter.

Kiswana represents the new segment termed as the Black Power or Black Arts Movement, which fights for the freedom of the restrictions of the middle class norms, which dominated the lives of the most educated Black women. Kiswana quits her family considering herself freed from the burden posed by work, family and marriage. She decides to sacrifice her life for the working class and poor Black women and she serves as a typical activist, who saw herself as an autonomous freedom fighter.

The conflict between the representatives of the traditional past and the new movement gets a facelift, when Naylor, by rejecting Kiswana’s realization of love and affection to be more powerful than the revolutionary, proves the seemingly different values and life styles that the black women were confronting during that time. The only remedy for healing their oppressions would be the loving care and support from their own women. Be it a mother or any other women.

The Lucielia Turner-Eugene episode deals with the theme of conflict between black men and women. Lucielia is Ciel, a young girl, the grand daughter of Eva Turner, - the old woman, who sheltered and solaced Mattie years before. She is married to Eugene, a jobless black man. The tension between the black men and women amidst racism and economic poverty and gender oppressions are portrayed in these two characters. Eugene remains constantly jobless.
Marriage, sexuality and parenthood are considered as distinct experiences in the Black society. Black women have experienced their child-centered values and have always ended in conflict with their men. Their differences have been reinforced by physical abuse, addiction and adultery. All these values and conflicts and differences are given a vent to in the Ciel - Eugene episode.

In the heated argument between the husband and the wife, they forget to notice the child Serene plugging her little finger in the electric socket hole under the dining table with the fork. The child gets electrocuted and dies. Eugene’s frustrated remarks to Ben, the drunkard wino, for his name not being enlisted in his daughter’s funeral, reveals his inability and also the community’s denial to the Black men their due rights. The recklessness and hatred on the part of the Blackman, abusing his wife whom he loved and married, proves his calibre. Lucielia is always left frustrated of being left alone, sick with a month old baby. Her humiliation gets reflected when she says, “You can find him to have it, but can’t find him to take care of it” (93). For the explainable hate and inexplicable love of the black man, the economical crisis and poverty remain to be the only cause. The ultimate solution, which these women can resort to, would certainly be in creating a mutual bond among them.

Mattie, the saviour of this stepchild – Lucielia, is fully understandable and even when Ciel tries to support her husband, she does not yield to that belief. Ciel becomes pregnant, but still yearns for Eugene and desires to live with them. She realizes his frustrated mood and decides to remain in silence. The Black woman’s submissiveness gets a portrayal through Naylor as:
He wants to pick a fight, she thought, confused and hurt. He knows Serena’s taking her nap, and now I’m supposed to say, Eugene, the baby’s asleep, please cut the music down. Then he’s going to say, you mean a man can’t even relax in his own home without being picked on? I’m not picking on you, but you’re going to wake up the baby. Which is always supposed to lead to: You don’t give a damn about me. Everybody’s more important than me – that kid, your friends, everybody. I’m just chicken shit around here, huh? (WBC 93)

As a typical black man, Eugene is egocentric. Ciel is blinded by love for her husband. Mattie had understood his plight. To the contrary, Eugene calls Mattie as “fat bitch” for she might turn the kid, Serena, against him. This black man’s inability to succeed in life, but blaming it on his wife, child and other women finds its expression in his abusive language:

And what the hell we gonna feed it when it gets here, huh – air? with two kids and you on my back, I ain’t never gonna have nothin’.” He came and grabbed her by the shoulders and was shouting into her face. “Nothin’. do you hear me, nothing! (WBC 95)

Only when Ciel gets aborted, the tragedy of the daughter Serena being electrocuted occurs. Eugene decides to quit the house, as he is unable to bear the economic crisis owing to his joblessness. She understands her husband’s arrogance in leaving his family and shirking his responsibility. She looks at him and ponders:

... he stood before her just as he really was – a tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness twisting his mouth into a strange shape.
And, she thought, I don't feel anything now. But soon, very soon, I will start to hate you. I promise – I will hate you. And I'll never forgive myself for not having done it sooner – soon enough to have saved my baby. Oh, dear God, my baby. (100)

The black men neglecting their duties and the saviours like Mattie consoling Ciel prove the emerging womanhood trying to console each other. The typical mother’s agony is seen in Ciel’s sorrow:

Like a black Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young, she surged into the room, pushing the neighbor woman and the others out of her way. She approached the bed with her lips clamped shut in such force that the muscles in her jaw and the back of her neck began to ache. (103)

Whitt comments on this act as “God refuses her request to end her life; she takes the matter into her own hands” (40). She refuses to eat, drink, or bathe and decides to die. It is the community of Black women who try to offer her food and solace but all their attempts remain futile. It is Mattie, who tames up the position and positively heals Ciel, when she washes and bathes her consequently healing Ciel, physically and psychologically:

And slowly she bathed her. She took the soap, and, using only her hands, she washed Ciel’s hair and the back of her neck. She raised her arms and cleaned the armpits, soaping well the downy brown hair there. She let the soap slip between the girl’s breasts, and she washed each one separately, cupping it in her hands. She took each leg and
even cleaned under the toenails. Making Ciel rise and kneel in the tub, she cleaned the crack in her behind, soaped her public hair, and gently washed the creases in her vagina – slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn. (WBC 104)

The female bond beyond race and colour gets developed in Mattie – Ciel’s relationship. It is their similar suffering, which makes them equal. Whitt observes this healing strategy as:

Naylor has suggested … healing is connected to language, but to reconnect with language, forceful action may be necessary …. Throughout the whole of the rocking, the vomiting, and the bathing, Mattie does not say a word. The communication between the two women is solely in touch – one the powerful giver and the other, the meek receiver. (41)

It is a woman-to-woman bond beyond race, which the women share in their primal mothering and in their burden and loss of children. The Blackman’s expectations of comfort and the women’s sexuality and domesticity is well depicted, while the women’s yearning for protection and carnal desires brings an estimation of both the Blackman and the women’s longing. The black man’s decision to avoid commitment ultimately leads him to depression and despair. Their relationship tends to fail owing to non-commitment and lack of mutual love.

It is the violence and abuse along with a non-commitment of Black men, which leads Ciel Turner to cultivate self-sufficiency and face the tough front. The
hope given by other black women like Mattie only helps her to survive: “And Ciel lay down and cried. And Mattie knew the tears would end. And she would sleep. And morning would come” (WBC 105). Mattie as a psychic healer believes that Ciel’s exertion of energy will allow her to sleep and expects that words and new hope will once again come from Ciel and a logical and possible progression from moaning and sobbing would take place.

The plight of the single unwed mothers is Naylor’s next portrayal, Cora Lee. As a child, she is brought up with only one thing each year and it happens to be her “powerful attraction / addiction” (Whitt 45) for dolls. She gradually develops an obsession to possess more live babies with “shadows” in the dark. Due to her dream of possessing a new baby doll every year, she conceives every year and reproduces children every year finally ending up with a large, demanding family. Cora Lee is a portrait of obsessive and arrested desires. She is not concerned about her children’s “schooling, rotting teeth, truancy and slovenliness” (WBC 109). She dwells in the world of soap operas:

... Shifted the baby into her arms, and got up to adjust the picture and change channels. She hated it when her two favorite stories came on at the same time; it was a pain to keep switching channels between Steve’s murder trial and Jessica’s secret abortion. (110)

Cora Lee wishes to lead the life of a caretaker of small babies wherein she expects to get a comforting sense of her self. “She’d spend hours washing, pressing, and folding the miniature clothes, blankets, and sheets. The left-hand corner of her
bedroom, which held the white wooden crib and dresser was dusted and mopped religiously (112). Cora finds herself accountable for a multitude of young growing children. Her men are shadows except one or two, which she herself says:

Having all them babies year after year by God knows who. Only Sammy and Maybelline got the same father. Daughter, what’s wrong with you? Sis, what’s wrong with you? Case number 6348, what’s wrong with you?

What was wrong with them? If they behaved better, people wouldn’t always be on her back. (113)

All the other men with whom she lives are only “shadows” who would come in the night and show her the thing that “felt good in the dark” (114) and left before the children had awakened. She had not listened to know about those shadows, as often “they would lie about their last names or their jobs or about not having wives” (115). Even when she is reminded of her child eating out of one of the garbage cans, she always worried about the “two more stories to watch before forcing herself to face the greasy sink full of day dishes”(116). The recklessness of the mother’s attitude to reproduce children and not to look after attains a realization only with Kiswana’s intervention.

Kiswana Browne the political radical, who lives in the sixth floor, decides to change Cora’s life and open her eyes and invites her to a black production of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Even before visiting the theatre, after a few restless moments, she slowly steps in through the expensive studio poses of
her babies:

Dorian, Brucie, Sammy, Maybelline – Dierdre and Daphane (how pleased she had been that year to have two come at once). Her babies – all her babies – stared back at there, petrified under the yellowing plastic. She must get Sonya’s pictures taken before it was too late. (120)

The conversation between Kiswana and Cora Lee of having children even without husbands and Kiswana’s reply that all she had was the studio, for which Cora Lee’s explanation of a small chest would suffice for children implies her ignorance. It is Kiswana’s only phrase “But babies grow up” (121) that brings about a radical transformation in Cora Lee. The experience at the theatre puts her in touch with the needs of her children. She resolves to check their homework every night and dreams of good jobs for them:

...She’d have no more excuses for missing those meetings in the evening. Junior high; high school; college – none of them stayed little forever. And then on to good jobs in insurance companies and the post office, even doctors or lawyers. Yes, that’s what would happen to her babies. (126)

Cora Lee takes the words of the last act to represent her, “I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was ...” (126). When her son asks whether Shakespeare was black, she replies, “Not yet”, remembering the days when she had beat him for writing rhymes on the bathroom walls. Cora’s dream of her son as the black Shakespeare reveals the visions of a
typical Black mother derived from the awareness created by the young radical Kiswana. Even the children imitating the antics from the play and the change in Cora to be “a welfare mother” brings an insight into the lives of black women like Cora Lee who is ready to adhere to anything for the sake of their children.

The reality of Cora’s life, her poverty in bringing up children and racial and sexual oppressions she confronts every day, illustrates the miserable plight of the black women. Even when she returns from the theatre, she thrusts her children in bed only to find another nameless man in her bedroom. This reveals the drastic life of single unwed mothers and the male’s craving for sexual desires. Cora lives in an unreal world. The unreal being is the result of the rootlessness of the black psyche, as they had their roots in Africa. Cora, amidst the other women characters, is at last doomed to lose her social identity and becomes like an earthly element – whereever if any seed were sown in the earth it would sprout out to give a new plant. Such a doom, which a woman faces, is due to the societal oppressions, dislocations, and disorientation from their ‘mother earth’ – Africa and owing to the irresponsible behaviour of the men, who also share the same psychological setbacks owing to their race which they try to compensate by sexually exploiting the women.

Though the metamorphosis in Cora Lee might be a deceptive experience, her envisioning hope as an active parent, who attends PTA meetings and helping her children with their homework, reveals the black mother’s dreams. Though a fantasy, it might be a premonition to truth. The change and the conscious awakening in Cora’s changing behaviour could be compared to the process of awakening amidst Black women, in spite of the oppressions.
The crudest melodrama with violence and tragedy in this composite novel could be experienced in Naylor's portrayal of "The Two." The last chapter deals with the relationship of the two black lesbian lovers, Lorraine and Theresa. The act of lesbianism and the reaction of the Black community's non-acceptance are clearly depicted in these characters. The patriarchal world, which refuses to accept the homosexual relationship of Lorraine with Theresa, ultimately, leaves her homeless.

When the lesbians enter the Brewster place the same community who had labelled them as "Nice Girls" (130) after suspicion, immediately brand them as "seemed like such nice girls" (131). Women who were ready to console other women had not gained a consciousness to accept two women living together. Their attitude depicts their conventional restricted codes of behaviour, which they were not ready to overcome. "Sophie had eyes darted over the rushed tin cans, vegetable peelings, and empty chocolate chip cookie boxes. Lorraine could understand the "knowing glance" (131), which she gave to the others at the bottom of the stoop. Lorraine could understand the craziness in these women. She confesses to Theresa that people were not as "nice" as they were and Theresa does not give a heed to and she shouts:

"They, they, they!" Theresa exploded.

Now these mysterious theys are on Brewster Place. Well, look out that window, kid. There's a big wall down that block, and this is the end of the line for me. I'm not moving anymore, so if that's what you're working yourself up to - save it! (WBC 134-135)
Theresa decides to fight alone at these situations. She prefers Lorraine to anyone else in the community. She insists on being a lesbian whereas Lorraine detests the word ‘lesbian’. Lorraine yearns to live within the community. Theresa detests the sight of Ben, the janitor, and Lorraine’s friendship with him. Naylor presents the relationship between the two and the community’s rejection of the two women. Even Mattie, the saviour of all the women in Brewster Place, articulates with Etta Mae about their relationship for which through Etta Mae Naylor answers:

‘Yeah.’ Etta thought for a moment. ‘I can second that’ but it’s still different, Mattie. I can’t exactly put my finger on it, but...

‘Maybe it’s not so different’” Mattie said, almost to herself. ‘Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it, ‘cause they know deep down it’s not so different after all.’(WBC 141)

Mattie realizes her deepest bonds with some women are comparable to that of the lesbians, and agrees that these bonds may be “superior to any possible relationship with a man, in the world they live in “(Andrews 290). The suspicion reaches its height when Sophie declares what she had witnessed of Lorraine getting out of the bathtub and asks Theresa to bring her a towel. Frustrated over the attitude of Sophie, Lorraine quits and she encounters the community’s greatest intolerance of being raped by C.C.Baker and his friends. These black men, to show their superiority and opposition begin to rape her. Naylor picturizes the horrific scene as:

Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reign the place. They only had that three-hundred-foot alley to serve them as
stateroom, armored tank, and executioner’s chamber. So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence – human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide. (WBC 169-170)

They repeatedly rape Lorraine while her only response to defend herself was the word “please” (170). She yearns for consolation where Theresa explains “as long as they own the whole damn world, its them and us, sister, them and us. And that spells different.” (159). As these women are not accepted by their own lot, they get exploited by her own men, of whom Naylor lashes out as “the most dangerous species in existence- human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide” (170).

It is in Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, the complexities of the black lesbians get an analysis: “Being women together was not enough. We were different” (qtd. in Christian 198). In spite of the society’s condemnation, she stresses that it is in the difference that they must recognize that therein rests the strength. Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* (1969) associates such acts of rape as, “sadism with the male (the masculine role) and victimization with the female (the feminine role)” (33). She further adds that at such situations, “one even hears from occasional expressions of envy or amuse men.” (34).

Women like Sophie only protest orally the lesbian behaviour whereas men like C.C. Baker, being unable to tolerate women’s independence and to prove their strength, have attacked the thin, slimy Lorraine. The woman’s natural bonding has been a threat to the male dominated societies.
Barbara Christian affirms the gang rape episode as:

The attack on Lorraine is not only done by these men, but by the entire community that had created an environment in which she could be seen as an accessible scapegoat, and beyond that by a society whose racism exacerbates the fear and anger powerless men feel against women who reject their only visible sign of manhood -their penis. As they tear up this woman, her previous words that black people are all in the same boat reverberate with horrible irony. (196)

The Lorraine and Theresa episode demonstrates the complexities of being an outcast. It arises out of the community's rejection and ironically is initiated by the women, particularly Sophie, in the community. Naylor has presented all the women characters as being sexually and economically independent of men and forming an alliance of sisterhood among themselves, which would benefit the entire black community. On the other hand, in presenting the Lorraine and Theresa episode, she has stressed the relationship in terms of lesbianism, which would underscore the "many death obstacles - silence, malice, guilt and violence, which the society places before them" (50).

Analyzed from the feminist point of view, women who have created a consciousness to accept a woman-daughter relationship that precedes even sisterhood have not started to realize the relationship of lesbianism. Accepting it, as a mode of the qualities of self-assertiveness, strength, independence and a fighting spirit would take a long time yet it is not far off. As these women challenge the traditional role of
women in the community, it results in a negative consequence. These women of Brewster have always adhered to the traditional norms. They consider such relationships as “an abomination against the Lord” (WBC 140). Fowler states, “… the venom that develops against the two women belongs to everyone in the community” (49). All the women do not denounce the relationship. For instance, Mattie does not disagree and Etta even defends Lorraine as, “They love each other like you’d love a man or a man would love you – I guess” (WBC 141).

Naylor, while celebrating the female bonding, has also demonstrated ‘Lesbianism’ to be a threat to male-dominated societies. ‘The Brewster women’s non-acceptance of the lesbians consequently had led to the gang rape and death of Lorraine. As these women had “failed to mother” (Christian 114) Lorraine, she becomes vulnerable to the male violence. Awkward positively observes this incident of Lorraine’s demise as, “it serves to unify a (female) community.” (56)

Naylor does not conclude her novel with just the gang rape. The sequences that follow – Ben’s murder, the dream sequence, the block party and demolishing the wall – all these indicate not only the dilemma but also a hope that will heal them in the future, arising out of a consciousness.

The next morning after being raped, Lorraine is seen still in the same spot and Ben sitting on an old garbage can, sipping wine. She crawls towards the movement with a brick in her hand and begins to smash his head until Mattie pulled her away. The day Ben died, it began to rain and the women had dreams of Lorraine and their dream of the block party troubled them.
The dream sequence reveals the inner conflicts underlying every woman’s life. Each woman dreamt that she was Lorraine. In the dream when Etta Mae questions Ciel, she says, “something bad had happened to me by the wall. I mean to her something bad had happened to her. And Ben was in it somehow ...” (WBC 150). The dream sequence evokes a process of ongoing transformation in a vision of unity and symbolically expresses a holistic perception. Psychologist Eugene T. Gendlin describes the “felt sense” (3) of a situation as “bodily awareness ... an internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at the given time” (3). This “felt sense” which Mattie has experienced without being aware of it, reveals a holistic truth of the situation in future. The following dream sequence portrays an experience of “fluidity, empathy, inter-identification and ongoing transformation not accessible to the waking mind... existence have been liberated to intermingle, interweave, inter-permeate” (Shiwy 22). For example, Ciel reveals that she came back because of a strange dream about a woman “who was supposed to be me, I guess. She didn’t look like me, but inside I felt it was me” (WBC 179). Montgomery supports that “Lorraine functions as the women’s alter ego, a second self” (46). The guilt in every woman, in not protecting and healing the two women gets revealed in their dreams.

Many female black writers have attempted the theme of strong friendships. Especially in Toni Morrison’s Sula (1974) and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982), the bonds amidst the characters, do not exist but are shattered by either competitiveness, betrayal or due to some separation, which might even be socio-economic. It is only in Naylor’s fictional world the bond amidst the characters.
continues to exist owing to the consciousness derived from the sufferings and oppressions they have meted out. This consciousness out of which each woman heals the other woman arises from a realization, which Christian observes as: “... they have participated in the destruction of Lorraine, one of their sisters, and can redeem themselves only if they protest” (WBC 120) Lorraine’s death.

On the day at the Block Party, in order to raise money for a community lawyer, all the women join the festivity. Even when the rain clouds are spotted on the horizon, all the women refuse to end the party and express hopefully “clouds don’t always mean rain” (184). The Block Party suggests a new order resulting out of the chaotic condition surrounding the brutal rape of Lorraine. “It is an order based on the female protagonist’s comprehension of their interconnectedness” (Awkward 61).

A powerful talismanic presence clings to the bodies of all the biological, surrogate or ‘other’ mothers. By demolishing their barrier, the wall of the vision of the construction of a feminine world gets projected. To attain this notion almost all the women have been nurturers and healers of their biological or surrogate families and their ‘Black’ culture.

In the prologue “Dawn”, Naylor presents the vibrant community and at the end despite the invariable conflicts, she unites almost all the women characters in Mattie’s dream of the Block Party. As an act of protest against the gang rape of the lesbian Lorraine, each woman takes one brick after the other to demolish the bloodstained wall. The wall, which acts as a barrier of the racist, class and gender oppressions, gets demolished in their dreams. In tearing down the wall, “the women experience a sense
of regeneration and a feeling of solidarity and hope. 'The Block Party' suggests a new order from an utter chaotic situation. Awkward observes it to be “an order based on the female ‘protagonists’ comprehension of their interconnecting” (61).

The united action of the women working persistently in the rain, according to Awkward, “signal[s] an achievement of female unity” (5). It indicates the need for a communal harmony. The portrayal of similar seven black women characters is dealt in Ntozake Shange’s choreo poem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1974). Shange presents seven black women who overcome the pain and the idea of considering suicide by a collective consciousness. Each woman has suffered a type of male aggression and abuse as the seven women of Brewster Place. An extreme example of oppression is depicted in the Lady in Red who is forced by her lover to witness her two children being dropped by him from a fifth floor-window. A similar victim is the girl child Serena being electrocuted when Eugene and Ciel encounter a verbal conflict in Brewster Place.

Shange’s choreo poem ends with the seven women characters celebrating their love for themselves in a final communal song. The play symbolizes the emergence of new black women, who by attaining a consciousness of victimization begin to celebrate and love themselves in communion with music and dance whereas Naylor presents her characters’ attainment of a consciousness only after witnessing a horrifying rape of Lorraine, whom they had failed to identify. In a dream sequence the women get united. Despite the differences, these two writers through different genres have contributed to the healing of the wound. Though many black women writers have shown the internal and hidden wound borne by black women, it is only Naylor
and Shange who have continued to address what Shange terms as the “conspiracy of silence”(3).

In spite of the oppressions, all the women struggle to fight back. Naylor holds all the male characters accountable for the oppression, which they have imposed on their women. The irresponsible Butch, who seduces Mattie to pregnancy, the conventional father kicking his daughter Mattie to death, the reckless son Basil, the numerous “shadows” in Cora Lee’s bedroom, the hypocritical preacher- Reverend Woods, the insecure Eugene who deserts Ciel, and C.C.Baker and his gang-- all the male characters have been responsible for the wretched lives of the estranged women. Of the two male characters, Abshu and Ben, the latter’s guilt for his impotence in allowing his wife to sell his daughter into concubinage with a white man makes him ultimately a drunkard. It is poignantly tragic to note that all the men including fathers have abandoned their women.

Naylor’s portrayal of a bond between each woman character with a self-will, in which friendship and sisterhood despite the generation gap serves to be a healing matrix. It also affirms a necessity for survival. The inability to see the reality amidst oppressive situations results in the women’s failure. The bonding among themselves either as mother and daughter, as sisters, or as friends have healed them from their tragic past and provided them with a hope in their integrated actions. The black women who are victims of class, race and gender find their expression in Naylor’s crude portrayal of the realities of black lives.
Langston Hughes poem, “What happens to a dream deferred?” which is on the prefatory pages, derives an answer in the demolition of the wall in Mattie’s dream implying a sense of healing and a hope for the future. To the critics who have contrasted Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place with The Men of Brewster Place, which Naylor has presented from a male point of view, the former ends with a note of despair, while the latter ends with a definite sense of hope for which Naylor answers in an interview as follows:

...I don’t see The Women of Brewster Place ending on a note of despair. The spirit of the street is still there even though the physical place is now deserted. So both the novels end on a note of however small- of survival. This is because I believe that no matter how bad things might get, if there is still life within our bodies then there is hope. (4)

Almost all the women have formed an emotional relationship, which has endured them to survive. The relationship between Mattie and her mother Fannie, Mattie and Eva Turner, Mattie and Etta Mae Johnson, Mattie and Ciel Turner, Kiswana and her mother, Kiswana and Cora Lee and the relationship of the lesbians, Theresa and Lorraine have been formed in times of crises, resulting in healing and nurturing with a hope for survival. bell hooks in her Sisters of the Yam (1994) asserts: “The choice to love has always been a gesture of resistance for African-Americans” (130-131). For all those who are denied, deserted and devoid of love, they have to depend on another supportive community to remove shame, guilt and blame. To recover from the lost love so that they could heal themselves one has to occupy a
place and own persons they choose. All these women have moved to Brewster Place, have shared their oppressions and have helped each other and in Mattie’s dream have attained wholeness.

Though miles apart, these women have adhered to the African concept of “ubuntu” or community building to heal each other. ‘Ubuntu’ is an Nguni word from South Africa, which speaks of the interconnectedness amidst the Black people. It is a consciousness that arises out of the natural desire to identify their fellow human beings. Barbara Nussbaum defines ‘Ubuntu’ as “the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring”(2). Bishop Tutu, an African psychologist, further defines this liberational psychological healing as:

A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able or good, for he or she has a proper self assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed or treated as if they are less than who they are.” (31)

In the concept of ubuntu one’s self-assurance is treated through the treatment of the other. As self and community are reflections of each other, this psychological communal healing has paved the way for the positive development of their self, free of abuse, exploitation and diminishment.
Naylor has framed the matrix of woman to women healing in the first of her quartet novels, *The Women of Brewster Place*. From this basic human matrix, she proceeds to an inspirational documental healing, which she carves for the craving black middle class in *Linden Hills* analysed in chapter three.
For what is done or learned by one class of women becomes, by virtue of their common womanhood, the property of all women.

— ELIZABETH BLACKWELL