CHAPTER II

Gloria Naylor, renowned novelist, nominated for the ‘American Book Award’ for her first and outstanding novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), which portrays triple jeopardy of the black community known for its portrayal of black women’s bonding and search for identity. This fiction reveals much about the self-searching of black women towards life and discusses the issues about gender, race and class also. It gives us the life stories of women who are, “… hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding and easily pleased…. 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.” Naylor interprets the stories of seven women-residents of Brewster Place and these characters are namely: Mattie Michael, Etta Mae, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Lucielia Louise Turner and ‘The Two’ (Lorraine and Theresa). This place, according to Naylor is, “the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company”(1). And in spite of it, she however, very articulately depicts every motions as well as shades and bravery of these female characters.

One of the chief and leading inmates of Brewster Place is Mattie Michael. The prime exponent of the nurturing parent and community mother is Mattie, who seems:
Pregnant and disowned, she made the instinctive matriarchal decision to live without a man and invest all her love back into her child. Left in the lurch by the grown, spoiled son, she becomes the anchor for the other women of Brewster Place.²

Mattie is the only daughter of a doting father, Mr. Michael. Her father works hard and fulfills all her desires. One day Mattie discloses that she is pregnant and, “...the torturing silence in the house was far worse than the storm that Mattie had prepared herself to take, her mother had told him about her pregnancy”(19). Mattie never discloses about Butch i.e. rapist’s name, in front of her father because of terror and most probably she dislikes and hates him. Although Mattie’s father had enlightened her for Butch and warned, “... a no'-count ditch hound, and no decent woman would be seen talkin’ to him”(9). But nevertheless, she commits mistake and conceives a baby. Mr. Michael beats her very violently demanding the name of the man who has sneaked into his home and distorted the faith and trust, he had in his child. They have hardly spoken since that day but she is convinced that the baby does not really belong to him. She does not expect her father to understand the real cause of her pregnancy so; she absolutely ignores and refuses to open the secret. The father interprets her silence as her having chosen this man’s side against him and in his fury; he tries to stamp out what has hurt him the most. Finally, he is upset to see her daughter’s disobedience. His attitude is a stark contrast to that of his wife Mrs. Michael who always has a soft corner for her only daughter Mattie. Here is a clear indication of how differently men and women look at the issue of child bearing. The negative attitude of her father makes Mattie worn away. After this episode, Mattie decides to leave the house and
reaches Asheville, North Carolina, where her friend Etta lives. After five or six months in North Carolina, Mattie delivers a son, Basil. She works hard to foster her son and gives the best to her son expecting nothing in return. Meanwhile, Etta has omitted North Carolina and gone to live in another place. Basil goes to college and easily falls into bad company. Till adolescence, Basil never thinks thoroughly about how his mother Mattie earns and how she fosters him. One day, all of a sudden, Basil commits manslaughter and goes to jail. To get him out of jail, Mattie sells her house. This house belonged to Miss Eva Turner, who was very helpful to Mattie in her adversity and calamity, and after her death the ownership of the house came to Mattie. After this shocking incident, Basil runs away leaving Mattie alone. Being aloof and gloomy, she thinks, “...there just wasn’t enough life left for her to do it all again”(7). Finally, she unlocks the apartment of the house for the movers and moves back to Brewster Place. Mattie identifies herself so completely with her son that she can not think objectively about him or his actions. Thus, in her entire life Mattie struggles without any emotional support and does her duties without any expectation. In Mattie’s character, Naylor has shown different shades of male characters such as a cruel father, a ditched lover and an equally good for nothing son.

Mattie’s strong-spirited, thirty-five years old chum Etta, “…survivor and good-time woman, who comes home to Mattie when her dream of redemption by marrying a ‘respectable’ preacher is sordidly ended…”³ has reached an age when she can no longer catch men. Although her attitude is different from Mattie yet they are good friends and help each other at any time. Etta likes to
call herself by her second name ‘Miss Johnson’ and it shows that she has some identity crisis because of her rich father. Her juvenility was not so good because she had spent her teenage years in constant troubles. She leaves her hometown Rock Vale, Tennessee because her experience in Rock Vale was not so good. The place, “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”(59). The whites in Rock Vale are painfully reminded of this rebellion. They are completely against the blacks in Rock Vale. There are the social rules of behavior that govern the relationship between Southern whites and blacks. Though Etta has left her hometown like Mattie but Etta’s reason is little bit different to Mattie. Etta is compelled to disobey the social rules and Mattie refuses to submit to the Southern racist system.

The character of Etta also reveals the social attitudes and norms that rule the lives of Southern whites and blacks. Etta apparently and consciously rejects the sexual advances of a white male. Though her refusal results in the destruction of her father’s property but the ‘Sheriff’ i.e. (chief officer) being a well-wisher suggests to her to leave Tennessee for the sake of her life. Unjustifiably, to protect herself, she runs away. But soon she realizes that she would have to confront racism and sexism in places other than Tennessee too. Double jeopardy compels Etta to move from one city to another in search of a safe place, where she can live without any restraints and obligations. Meanwhile, she also develops some illicit relationship with different men in different places and atmosphere. Although she rejects sexual advances of
certain whites as well as blacks yet while running from one place to another, she willingly makes some physical relationships with different men. Finally, she decides to move back to Brewster Place to meet Mattie. Etta is growing old and so, she wants to settle down. She feels that marriage could be the permanent settlement, so at once she starts to search for a nice person. But soon she realizes that there can be no permanent relationship with men of her choice because she had started to like Reverend Moreland Woods, a preacher, as her life partner but Moreland also beguiles and out wits her and her faith too. After that, she resolves that she should not allow her spirit to be broken. Being a reliable person, Moreland shatters her feelings but after facing the deceit, Etta realizes her existence and starts her life with some planning. At a very belated stage, she senses that she must depend on her own for salvation. Etta, like Mattie, is always outplayed by the man with whom she is involved. On her return to Brewster Place, although she has lost her happiness, courage and confidence yet in spite of all, still there is someone waiting for her, it is her old and best friend Mattie, who is always unchangeable and the comfort for Etta Mae. Etta’s dreams have been deferred but not yet killed. So once again, “Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light, and the love and the comfort the awaited her”(74).

Another dweller of Brewster Place is Kiswana Browne, “There’s Kiswana (formerly Melanie) Browne, idealistic daughter of middle-class parents, who has moved to Brewster Place to be near ‘my people.’” She is a rebel and has left the home of her middle-class parents. She is in Brewster
Place to realize and asserts her blackhood and to help the other blacks living there. The mother understands her daughter’s feelings but does not support her at all. In contrast, the mother-daughter relationship is examined by Naylor in the characters of the 1960s militant Kiswana and her mother, Mrs. Browne:

Kiswana is a bright-eyed product of the 60s, who received the dictum ‘black is beautiful’ political ideology. Mom, though upbraided for her ‘backwardness’ proves to be more than a match for her militant daughter, who finally succumbs to a force more potent than her revolutionary zeal, a mother’s love.5

Kiswana is an adult and living on her own without her parents support. Mrs. Browne first aggravates her daughter by calling her by her birth name ‘Melanie’ but Kiswana wants to be known as “Africanized”6 Kiswana, there by bridging the gap with her African roots. Changing her name is about as close to her African roots as she can get in appearances for, “...she is light-skinned and has thin, fine-textured skin” (80-81). Kiswana wants to see her black race gain uniformity with the white race. While in college, in an unidentified Northern city during the 1970s, she joins a college activist group and so to get in touch with her roots, she changes her Euro-centric name to African name. Her brother who is dark-skinned and had the type of hair, “…that was thick and kinky enough for a good ‘Fro’”(80) does not acknowledge his blackness. And seeing his behavior, Kiswana mostly becomes outraged. She does not understand as to why any black person would not want to take pride in his or her heritage. Many of her associates in college finally drop out of the activist movements and settle down in their roles. Believing that the role and identity of the black people could not be changed, Kiswana also drops out of the college. Although the generational
dissimilarity always comes between mother and daughter yet the mother is very possessive and caring for her daughter. Kiswana desperately argues to her mother Mrs. Browne, “...how can you-a black woman-sit there and tell me that what we fought for during the Movement wasn’t important, just because some people sold out”(84). Naylor makes Kiswana endowed with a sensitivity and genuine commitment not evident in the others. As a result, “We take her black nationalist beliefs more seriously.”7 Throughout the story, though the mother is not against her daughter but is against her revolutionary thoughts. Conflict between parents and children is almost as common in literature as it is in life. Mary Helen Washington has discussed the presence of generational conflict, especially between mothers and daughters, “…the conflict as basically between the idealists (the daughter) and the pragmatists (the mother and/or grandmothers).”8 So, the terms ‘idealists’ and ‘pragmatist’ apply in the characters of Kiswana and her mother.

The mother-daughter’s conversation revolves around different ideologies regarding the nurture of black youth. Mrs. Browne can not accept that her daughter can really be of any assistance to the community by merely living among the poor in the Brewster Place tenement:

You don’t have to sell out, as you say, and work for some corporation, but you could become an assembly woman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighborhood. That way you could really help the community(84).

Kiswana is a clerk and finding her file-clerk job, her mother becomes shocked and thinks that she is wasting her talents in this job. Mrs. Browne also thinks
that it is a hand-to-mouth job; she can not do anything for the people of Brewster Place. But, on the other hand, Kiswana does not think so for her living in Linden Hills, where her parents already live, would make a difference. Simultaneously, Mrs. Browne gives her daughter a short history lesson of her family’s proud heritage that Mr. Browne and she have been charter members of the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) for the last twenty-five years:

Kiswana no doubt believes herself as the epitome of radicalism until she listens to her mother’s theatrical recounting of her proud heritage and commitment to the black cause. Suddenly she comes to understand and appreciate the source of her own dynamism, idealism, and dedication: her mother.⁹

While Mrs. Browne’s impassioned account of her history makes clear her racial pride, she rejects chauvinistic assertions of racial superiority as well as narrow concepts of blackness. Mrs. Browne relates to Kiswana a personal testimony of a mother’s love. This rendering shows Kiswana that there is wisdom in age and motherhood. Mrs. Browne goes in retrospect that when her children were born, she was determined that both her, “ebony son” and her, “golden daughter” would be, “...prepared to meet this world on its own terms, so that no one could sell them short and make them ashamed of what they were or how they looked - whatever they were or however they looked”(86). The mother-daughter episode shows the epitome of love and concern that in the end proves very positive. Significantly, her words move Kiswana so deeply that, “...further reinforcing the story’s critical view of Black Nationalism.”¹⁰ Looking her mother’s deep affection towards her own children,
Kiswana follows her reflection in the two single tears that moves down her mother’s cheeks until it blends with them into the woman’s Copper skin, “...She kept her head down and her eyes closed, and thought, oh, God, just let me die. How can I face her now?”(87).

As in the earlier image, Kiswana looks at herself reflected in her mother’s tears, now; her reflection mixes into her mother’s skin, suggesting the daughter’s growing identification with her mother. Simultaneously, Mrs. Browne also exhibits her feelings and emotions to Kiswana expressing her disagreement and completely rejects her African name ‘Kiswana’. She reacts on her renamed that:

> 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 proud(86).

This statement comprehensively portrays the crux of Mrs. Browne’s feelings. Finally, in the climax of the Kiswana’s story, Mrs. Browne gives some enthusiastic words to Kiswana that, “…not to be afraid to face any one, not even a crafty old lady like me who can outtalk you” (87). Although these lines imply the contradiction between mother-daughter relationships because throughout the mother’s life, she did not want to see her daughter as an activist of black movement yet now she wants to look at her as a bold and strong character against white rulers. Mrs. Browne is much more concerned about her daughter, so she desires that Kiswana should not come in the notice of white community. In fact, the chapter celebrates the maternal;
moreover, no matter how strained the relationship between mother and daughter is shown to be, this story ends with an affirmation of mother-daughter closeness. Mrs. Browne is a mature and articulate woman while Kiswana is an idealistic young one. In fact, Mrs. Browne constantly draws readers’ sympathy not as a race representative but as a caring and doting mother because she emphasizes motherhood over race, “The Women of Brewster Place is a novel about motherhood, a concept embraced by Naylor’s women, each of whom is a surrogate child or mother to the next.”11 Thus, Kiswana, a black woman, understands her common background and values and affirms work hard with others for the black community’s freedom and an identity.

The next chapter is about Lucielia Louise Turner, whose grandmother, Miss Eva, gave shelter to Mattie when Basil was a baby. Ciel also lives at Brewster Place. She has grown up with Basil but has not drifted away like him. She has married Eugene and has a baby girl. Eugene does not stick to a job or a place and deserts his wife for long periods. On one of his return trips, Lucielia once again becomes pregnant but he forces her to abort the child. He becomes annoyed and exasperatedly says to Ciel, “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. ‘Nothin’, do you hear me, nothin!’” (95). This statement clearly shows the frustration of Eugene by economic predicament, though he is not irresponsible but looking to over-burden himself without economy, he screams at Ciel and again decides to move away. But at this moment, Ciel begs Eugene to stay as her husband and as her daughter’s
father. She tries to stop Eugene to move away but all her endeavors go in vain. He shouts upon Ciel that, “I lost my job today, he shot at her, as if she been the cause”(94). These lines reflect the husband-wife relationship which has been beyond the concord and signifies the suffering from tension between black men and women caused by racism and economic depredation. Eugene’s hostility towards his wife is directly related to his constant joblessness. Unable to face the social and economical realities that are responsible for his problems and unable to provide the support for Ciel and his eleven months old daughter Serena, he holds Ciel responsible for his plight and overreacts that, “I’m fucking sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that’s all you are good for…”(94). Ultimately, Ciel realizes that Eugene is utterly selfish and self-centered. Now, she decides to conceive the baby and gives up the plan of abortion. Meanwhile, during husband-wife confrontation, the baby Serena goes near an electric socket and gets electrocuted. After losing her child:

Ciel’s whole universe existed in the seven feet of space between herself and her child’s narrow coffin. There was not even room for this comforting God, whose melodious virtues floated around her sphere, attempting to get in (101).

In a state of shock, she is unable to cry till Mattie cleans every part of her body though tenderly and lovingly. Here, Naylor presents a metaphorical trip back through time, highlighting incidents where mothers have sacrificed their children. She creates a full body exorcism of the repressed evilness of pain that exists inside Ciel. Throughout the whole process of the rocking 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. Finally, Ciel begins to cry. Her first tears since Serena’s death. Mattie knows that Ciel’s exertion of energy will lead to sleep and soon, “morning would come”(105), a symbolic meaning that a new fervent hope will once again come for Ciel, a logical and possible progression from moaning and sobbing. Ciel is alone but her will-power and self-conscience does not leave her alone, so very soon she starts her life with a new hope.

The next chapter of the novel is on Cora Lee, a black mother of seven children. She loves children only, when they are infants and neglects them when they are grown up. She delivers one baby after another and discards them like old dolls when they become older, “All these problems arise as she was never taught what her sex role is in the given culture.” Cora adores baby dolls as Christmas gifts and her passion for the scent and feel of plastic baby dolls turns into a motherly passion for her children. From childhood to adulthood Cora has a yearning passion for baby dolls and looking her strong passion, her parents become worried. Now, Cora becomes adult and prepares for marriage. While talking to a Murphy Boy, her younger sister complains to her mother that, “…one afternoon that Cora Lee had been doing nasty things with the Murphy boy behind the basement steps”(109). The mother becomes upset and fears that her daughter could be lured for sex because Cora is too young to marry and Murphy or any other boy can ditch her because, “The thing that feel good in the dark”(109). Mother warns her daughter about doing nasty things in the basement but Cora Lee ignores her advice. Cora deliberately retorts that, “…it was not nasty, he had just
promised to show her the thing that felt good in the dark—and it had felt good, Mother”(109). Cora finally becomes the mother of seven children namely: Dorian, Brucie, Sammy, Maybelline, Dierdre, Dophane and Sonya Marie. She always suffers at the hands of her men who treat her as a means of gratifying their sexual lust, give her babies one after another and do not show their faces again. Even, “Who their father is immaterial to her and she cannot handle the children when they grow up.”\(^{13}\) Cora, throughout her life, struggles as well as strives and survives without any male or female support. She brings her children up, fosters them and gives them all a mother can give. Her children go to school and simultaneously the mother completes their every demand as possible. She is a role model of ‘mother Earth’ and never asks or complains about anything for herself. She has realized that, “husbands are tyrants”\(^{14}\) and she has to live alone without any husband, so she feels confident that she can take care of herself and her children very well. Thus, the outline of Cora’s character is clear that her priorities are first to nurture the babies or children before herself and even before any men.

The last chapter of novel is about two lesbian girls, Theresa and Lorraine, who have to face stiff antagonism from some of the inmates of Brewster Place and then Lorraine is raped by a gang of young hooligans. ‘The two’ lesbian girls come in Brewster Place giving up Theresa’s apartment in Linden Hills not because they are economically deprived but because they are socially scorned, and Lorraine had felt the quiet denial of her former neighborhood. Brewster Place is their last opportunity; there is nowhere else to move. But both are accepted by the Brewster Place community as long as
they maintain and display the behavior considered appropriate by the community. For other women of Brewster Place, the rule for acceptance into the community is that neither Lorraine nor Theresa invites the attention or affection of the other women’s husbands or boyfriends. Once it is felt that the women are lovers and repercussion of it may be disliked by others. Many members of the community openly disapprove their life style. These society’s “nice girls” are called now “unnatural” and “nasty”(131). The community openly discards their life style and reveals their intolerance against them. The community’s negative response to Lorraine and Theresa begins slowly and subtly, “Naylor’s presentation of the tensions in their relationship hinges on the community’s rejection of The Two. And she emphasizes the fact that their isolation is initiated by women in the community.”

Lorraine was the first to realize the misbehavior of the people because as a friendly woman, she begins to notice that her greetings go unanswered. ‘The two’ women’s relationship leads Sophie, a self-appointed reporter of the activities of Lorraine and Theresa, to openly confront Lorraine. Sophie is also one of the dwellers among them, who notes the deviation between ‘The Two.’ Although Lorraine lives with Theresa yet she feels guilty and ashamed each and every time of their relationship. So, Lorraine defers by changing location. When Lorraine begins to challenge her, Theresa is angered and jealous because she sees her lover’s growing rebellion as a result of her friendship with Ben, an old boozer and a janitor of Brewster Place. Meanwhile, the first time in Brewster Place, the meeting of ‘The Brewster Place Block Association’ takes place in Kiswana’s Apartment, where Mattie, Etta and Cora Lee make
an appearance and the first time in the novel, the womenfolk are together in one place. During the meeting when Lorraine enters the room, the meeting disintegrates into Miss Sophie’s diatribe query against what she thinks of Lorraine’s relationship. But it is Mattie, who first feels uncomfortable with the subject of women who love each other. When she asks her friend Etta, what makes the two different, Etta answers that they love each other the way a man and a woman love each other. Although feeling and awareness of Mattie’s character prepares her as a role model in the death of Lorraine yet here Naylor points at the fears of heterosexual women who are lesbians, even as she underlines the violence, men do impose upon them. In fact, Etta argues with Sophie about Lorraine and insults her to state that she would not be able to take notes but Sophie becomes annoyed and replies, “Listen here!... ‘Why should a decent woman get insulted and y’ll take sides with the likes of them?’ Her finger shot out like a pistol, which she swung between Etta and Lorraine” (144). Now, this statement of Sophie makes Etta silent and her silence safely signifies her fear of being ostracized for she has already made some illicit relationship with different men and may be it is tolerated and ignored by the community. But any indication that she is lesbian would not be tolerated by the community anymore. Her silence also indicates her disapproval of homosexuality and lesbian relationships. Hence, Lorraine, who is physically and emotionally divested by this incident, finally leaves the apartment and, “…fights an impulse to throw up.”

In the chapter of Lorraine, the most disturbing example of the community’s intolerance of ‘The two’ is the rape of Lorraine by C.C. Baker’s
gang. The hoodlum’s rejection of lesbians differs from that of the other inmates of Brewster Place. The attack on Lorraine is not only made by these men but by the entire community that had created an environment in which she could be seen as a 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.”

The hoodlums exhibit their power, strength and rejection through the form of gang rape. They rape Lorraine very brutally and show their superiority upon the other women of Brewster Place. Anyone who rejects openly or silently their manhood is a menace to them and Lorraine’s provocation is just that. In describing the men who rape Lorraine, Naylor uses terms that express the community’s powerlessness as well as male’s values:

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 (169-70).

The confrontation between Baker’s gang and Lorraine becomes so depressed that these hooligans decide to conquer and want to subjugate over women. So, in this process, they exert control and their sovereignty over Lorraine by raping her, “As they tear up this woman, her previous words that black people are all in the same boat reverberate with horrible irony.” During the rape, Lorraine is only repeating the word ‘please.’ Her plea was for compassion, sympathy and most probably for humanity but all efforts go in vain because except hooligans, there was no one who can hear her voice. After gang rape, Lorraine has thoroughly emaciated and annihilated. In the
novel, one can see, Lorraine, as a black lesbian can not demand about her wants or needs for her sex, color and sexual orientation place her in a difficult position. Barbara Christian opines:

In contrast to Walker and Shange, Lorde and Naylor consciously use the word ‘lesbian’ in characterizing their protagonists. Neither Lorde nor the lesbians of Brewster Place have been deeply hurt by men before they choose women as lovers. Rather, their choices go back to their adolescence, and it is society, both men and women, that hurt them because they have chosen to love women.19

In the climax of the Lorraine’s chapter; this innocent, harmless and submissive girl in a frenzy and depression; kills an old man Ben, who was trying to help her. Ben as janitor of Brewster Place feels his first priority is to help and look after each resident of Brewster Place and so he tries to help Lorraine but Lorraine unconsciously kills Ben thinking him as a one of her rapists. Thus, the novel ends with the death of Lorraine and Ben. Among the seven characters of the novel, Lorraine was the most crucial character, who was raped by a gang and after the awful rape she dies. As far as Lorraine is concerned, Naylor states:

Lorraine wasn’t raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she was a woman...I feel very strongly that we as black people have to be there as nurturing agents for each other, male and female, female and female. And when that broke down in “The Two”, I wanted to show how that could destroy the community.20

Lorraine faced and endured male chauvinism, male depredation and most probably male fury. After facing these genres of predicament and malice, she ends her life but her existence exists in the soul of every dweller of Brewster Place, “Naylor uses the symmetry in the stories of Ben and
Lorraine predictably, to develop the bond of sympathy between them. The banished daughter and the bereft and guilty father connect.²¹

‘The Block Party’ is a concluding and an important chapter of the novel because it explores the importance of community and womanhood. The novel ends with the death of Lorraine and Ben, a janitor of Brewster Place. And with their death, the rain has started and throughout week it continues. In the novel, rain symbolizes black women’s cry of protest, fury and dismal days. As soon as rain stops, black women realize the truth and fact of collective consciousness that will lead them to enthusiasm and happiness. The inhabitants of Brewster Place are women; they are black and are invariably poor. Brewster place names the women, houses them and defines their underprivileged status. Among the women, there is both commonality and difference, “Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story”(5). The image the ebony phoenix develops the idea in the introduction that the women rise as from the ashes and continue to live. In fact, they strive throughout their life for new day and new life. Although the women come to Brewster Place by very different routes, Brewster is a reality that they are, “obliged to share.”²² Moreover, with the death of Lorraine and Ben, the women of Brewster Place have become restless and even Mattie does not sleep very well because of her troubling dreams. Mattie’s dream makes her impatient and unsteady for other female residents of Brewster Place, “For all the residents of Brewster Place, an eerie discomfort saturates their existence, hounds their erratic movements, and seeps into their sleep patterns.”²³ In Mattie’s reference, Naylor uses sleep and dreams as a mean
through which time passes in reality. In her dream Mattie sees, one after one, all the seven characters in Brewster Place. Mattie and these six characters have faced and endured the hindrances, fury, disloyalty, male chauvinism and hardships of male society. So, after facing these various genres of uncertainty, Mattie dreams and finds her female characters mutually dependent. The women reveal a sisterhood and show their female bonding. It is a dream that heavily lies and calls, “demonic imagery.”

In ‘dream’, the seven characters of the novel, make their firm presence and show their strife against fixed and conventional myth of a sexist and racist society. All these women being united eliminate the wall of Brewster Place, which is a symbol of “dead-end street.” The women believe that this wall separates them from the white world and society, so they want to demolish the gap between white and black. Mattie’s dream on one way or other tries to bridge the gap between whites and blacks. She heartily wants to put down the separation and diversity. Mattie and her remnant bevy recalcitrant and defy the rules of blacks and whites. For the protest and retaliation to the white as well as black males, the women constitute on association and this association’s principal objective is to retrieve their missing identity, their right place in the family as well as society and protest against male chauvinism as well as male tyranny. With the collapse of the wall, the Brewster Place itself collapses and the residents shift to another place, where they can live with their own way and manners, “So it had to watch, dying but not dead, as they packed the remnants of their dreams and left”(191). Although Mattie’s dreams are unrealistic but its existence and truth cannot be ignored. Thus, the women
of Brewster Place ruin the wall of triple jeopardy, “...it establishes the necessity of sisterhood among black women as the key to survival and leads the road for self- discovery of self- identity.” Through Mattie's sleeping vision, Naylor opines the positive attitude of her protagonists, who wish to have a happy and comfortable life with all their benefactors. Within Mattie's fancy, Cora Lee, one of the dwellers of Brewster Place, delivers the brick to Mattie. The brick is taken form Brewster Place, which is the symbol of discrimination and partiality between whites and blacks. At this time, “...all of the men and children now stood huddled in the doorways” (185) but the women take control of the movement, passing the stained bricks from one hand to another until the bricks are out of Brewster Place.

In addition to it, Gloria Naylor wants to expose the women’s courage and power through their protest. Her female characters are trivial, constantly poor, very innocent and almost blacks and during each and every moment of their life; they face various types of obscure obstacles, adversity and despite of all this; they manifest and prove their one origin, gender solidarity and most important female heroism. Under the control of Mattie’s dream, all the women contribute to tear down the wall and after the collapse of the wall, keeping certain possibilities in their mind; they try that none should leave out to Brewster Place. Here ‘that none should leave out’ too interprets the symbolic meaning that women should not leave the society due to male oppression and male plundering.

Though Mattie and her bevy understand that their action is beyond the law but after making an association, all the women exhibit their power to
break down the wall of separation. Here, Jill L. Matus does not agree with Naylor because she believes, “...it does not enlist a dogmatic feminist ideology” simultaneously she also believes that, “There are important moments of friendship and supportive connection, but there are no radical transformations.”27 But, on the other way, Naylor ignores all the norms and shows her own view that when women affirm solidarity, they can break and discard the fixed and formal, conventional myth of male domination and supremacy. And in this process, Naylor’s women destroy the wall of torment and show their will and strength as it is as Naylor desires. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Mattie Michael, one of the protagonists, plays the conducive and inspiring role for other female characters, and as a result, they all, “…raise a cry of protest and draw the attention of the readers and society.”28 So prima-facie, it becomes clear that Naylor too procures the right and main place with other black feminist writers of African-American literature. Moreover, the women as a community will carry their struggles and dreams into another day, although their dreams are deferred but not yet died away. They really want to retrieve their self-respect, self-identity, equal status and liberty in family as well as in society.

The women have lost one of their friends but retaining the memory of Lorraine in their heart, they start a new beginning with courage and firm determination. The women of Brewster Place are the mirror for other women, who are frequently facing and enduring the males’ fury and exploitation not only physically but also mentally. Therefore, these women give impetus to other women to raise their voice against males’ superiority. After finding some
solace from the tension, torture and malice; the women organize the party for own association ‘The Block Party’, as a symbol of celebration of courage and persistence. Symbolically, the rising sun portrays a new inception of women’s life in a profound and fervent manner. In Mattie’s fancy, she evermore sees each six female colleagues and finds them as strong characters, which deliberately go against the male chauvinism and take their vengeance very effectively, “The sun is shining when Mattie gets up: it is as if she has done the work of collective destruction in her dream, and now a sunny party can take place.” After the constant raining, when the sun rises, each and every one feels a pleasure. Even then, Etta comes out on the stoop and looks up at Mattie in the window and says, “Woman, you still in bed? Don’t you know what day it is? We’re gonna have a party”(189). After a long period, once again the women in Brewster Place experience joy and retrieve their disappearing individuality. ‘The Block Party’ brings happiness and new stimulus for them. In short, Mattie dreams and her dreams are not merely dreams but the dreams are the beginning of a new life. With the help of her sleeping vision, she assembles her womenfolk in sisterhood and rather in one origin and finally all these women start their life with ardent enthusiasm and firmness of purpose.

The novel opens with prologue, “Down” describing the birth of the street and their remnant dwellers i.e., “colored daughters”(4), who are emphatic and zealous. These black and trivial women being venturesome spirits face the harsh possibilities of the persecution and come out into the imprisonment of male depredation as well as male chauvinism. The novel's
last chapter opens but unfortunately ends into an epilogue, “Dusk” that deals with the sense of an ending by appearing to be talking about the death of the street i.e. Brewster Place. In her dreams, Mattie discovers her womenfolk constantly in trouble because of Lorraine’s rape and death but beyond what the women recognize cognitively, the dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection.

Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* has a strong significance of place on her characters and the setting of the plots. Seven women of different backgrounds face acute adversities and troubles under different circumstances before coming to Brewster Place. The setting of the novel is the wall of Brewster Place, a dead-end street and is also a symbol of double jeopardy which is being perpetually faced by the black women. The novel has seven short stories and each story focuses on a different woman, who experiences and tolerates conflicts of male dominated society, where the males torture and humiliate the women by different means. But these women come out with new courage and determination. One of the most important aspects of the novel is devoted to the ‘racial and sexual oppression’ and bearing of these harassments, the women however, survive in the tyrannical society with love. Here, the novelist portrays these aspects through the characters of Mattie, Etta Mae, Kiswana, Lucielia and last but not least Lorraine:
The Women of Brewster Place was meant to celebrate the female spirit and the ability to transcend and also to give a microcosm of black women in America—Black women who are faced by a wall of racism and sexism. In this novel, Gloria Naylor projects black women, who are totally trapped by the iniquitous system but bravely, in short time, they get control of themselves. So, the first character comes in this series is Mattie. She is an unwed mother and faces the randomly double jeopardy. Firstly, she is beguiled by Butch, a male of her own black community and then raped by him. Mattie’s encounter with Butch comes in the result of pregnancy. After pregnancy, Butch and Mattie’s parents leave her. Mattie relinquishes her home town and at another place delivers a son, Basil. She finally starts to live alone in Brewster place. One day, Basil commits manslaughter and goes to jail and in order to get him released from jail, she sells her only shelter i.e. her house. After the bail, Basil escapes and as a result, Mattie once again has become alone and aloof. Mattie is exploited not only physically but also mentally by her own community’s males. Now, she is cast out to chart the journey of her life all alone:

The sexual atrocities that the Negro woman has suffered in the United States, South and North and what these atrocities have done to her personality as a female creature, is a tale more bloody and brutal than most of us can imagine.

Thus, after facing the unjust incidents, Mattie determinately makes herself a strong and a reliable wall of Brewster Place against such acute oppressions.

The second story deals with Etta Mae Johnson. Miss Etta’s story comprehensively differs from the other characters of Brewster Place. She is a
sound or deep benefactor of Mattie and helps her in a clumsy time. She is a, “sassy”32 and an independent black woman, who has lived her life according to her own desires. She is a woman of great steadiness and apparently rejects the sexual advances of black as well as white males. She imagines about a person, who would be well reputed and marry her. Etta meets Reverend Woods and starts to like him. Though Mattie interferes but her all attempt goes in vain. Both the chums separate themselves and select their own way. Moreland Wood is a very cunning personality. Finding Etta alone and dolorous, he sympathizes with her and ultimately wins her trust. First time in her life, Etta believes in someone and wants to settle down but her dream breaks away when she finds delude from her dream boy. Although Etta is a girl of moderate thoughts yet encountering enough deceit, she is compelled by the prevalent racism as well as sexism to move from one city to another in search of a place, where she could live without any restraints and limitations. Throughout her life, she faces hostility but being a venturesome spirit, she always comes out from these tribulations. Ultimately, Etta comes back to Brewster Place and with the support of Mattie starts to survive in the society with self-dignity and self-respect.

Kiswana Browne is a middle class black woman, who has moved to Brewster Place because she rejects her black middle-class background in Linden Hills. During her college days, Kiswana was rebellious and an activist for the good for blacks. Kiswana drops out of her college and also of the job. Since childhood, she observes the influence of Euro-centric culture and to show her revolt against Euro-centric name, she renames herself the African
name ‘Kiswa’. Although Kiswana’s mother disagrees with her Africanized name yet she ignores her mother. Kiswana is a girl with a revolutionary bent of mind and Mrs. Browne is calm and articulate lady, so both mother and daughter disagree with each other in every decision. Kiswana puts an open challenge to the white community and does not care for the repercussions. She feels that whites are responsible for every injustice caused to black community. So, being an activist, she takes part in the civil rights movements and does everything for the benefit her black community. Kiswana as a strong and powerful woman fights against the atrocities and wins all the hurdles in her journey.

The next character is Lucielia Louise Turner. It is a story of a poor black couple-Lucielia alias Ciel and Eugene Turner, whose concordance disturbs because of limited job opportunities and utter beggary. So, being jobless, Eugene becomes frustrated and often uses hostile and bitter language for Ciel. Ciel, on the other hand, understands his frustration and tries to make good relevancy. The couple faces the calamity in the form of racism and economic deprivation. Due to continuous joblessness, Eugene becomes tensed and his condition makes Ciel hopeless but however, Ciel tries to give her full support to him. Although Eugene is the prey of racism and economic problems yet he does not try to understand these realities. He is unable to face the social and domestic realities that are responsible for his plight and unable to provide support for his wife and his eleven months old daughter Serena. He constantly blames Ciel for his inability to succeed. During her second pregnancy Ciel suffers from depression and Eugene blames:
I lost my job today, he shot at her, as if she had been the cause... “I am fuckin’ sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that’s all you good for”... “And what the hell we gonna feed it [the second child] when it gets here, huh-air? With two kids and you on my back, I ain’t never gonna have nothing.” He comes and grabs her by the shoulders and shouts into her face, “Nothin’, do you hear me, nothin’!”(95).

By blaming Ciel, Eugene directly shows his frustration towards his hapless time. She becomes the enemy and both spouses become antipathy, “She and her young daughter also represent for Eugene all the social, political and economic ills that plague those black men who are unable to fulfill their culture’s definition of manhood.” Hence, the double jeopardy’s attacks always come in the way of the spouses and as a result being supportless Eugene leaves Ciel alone. After parting from Eugene, Ciel finally gets a job and being self-dependant, she passes her life with new steadiness and fervent thoughts in Brewster Place.

Double jeopardy’s another example are ‘The Two’. Lorraine and Theresa are lesbian and hence they are called ‘The Two’. Both are black and most probably they are lovers and being lesbian, they come to the notice of other habitants of Brewster Place. Their lesbianism is viewed as the direct challenge to the male superiority and both very soon, face the persecution of males. Lorraine becomes the main target of males and in this process, C.C. Baker and his friends rape Lorraine. The seven males at a time rape innocent Lorraine just to show male chauvinism and sovereignty. Eventually, Lorraine dies but her spirit does not die. Racism and sexism compel ‘The Two’ to change their apartment from Linden Hills and they come to Brewster Place. As the entire community knows about them, their disapproval is apparent in
forms of negative response. Mattie and Etta try to protect them, Lorraine too realizes that the relationship between them is illicit but it is too late and males’ fury has sparked out resulting in the gruesome rape. Women like Lorraine, who want to make their own identity and recognition always face hardships and atrocities in the male dominated society. Thus, Lorraine as a rape victim, experiences the exploitation and humiliation of males even in her black community.

The image of woman comes in the mind as a living, caring creature, who puts all her concerns, wants, needs and pleasures aside for the care of the man in her life and for her children as well. She does not want, as a man wants her own time and she also does not need as children need, special and undivided attention. She is created to provide those needs for both her husband and children also. Nevertheless, she is dominated by males and during her whole life she feels necessity of freedom and liberty. If the women are discouraged, how do they attempt to break from these social ills? Here, Gloria Naylor depicts a microcosm of the black women community in her novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. The novel reveals much about the self-searching and sisterhood of black women. Her characters are caught in the traps of triple jeopardy. But they fight to overcome these mysterious traps, they also learn about change, woman bonding and also about survival in the society. With it, the reader also finds and feels about their strife towards life and self-identity. Every woman plays the roles of wife and motherhood and very perfectly they nurture their family. Gloria Naylor’s novel *The Women of Brewster Place* depicts the female heroism and women bonding in a perfect
manner and also portrays the women helping other women to fight against male chauvinism.

Naylor presents the depressing and embroiling conditions of women living in a black American society. But under the pressure and uncertain miserable conditions; her women characters come out with new vigor, courage and show their strength against both white and black males. The first character of the novel, Mattie collects all the six women together and collectively they show their female heroism and gender solidarity. Mattie makes an association in Brewster Place and this association’s main object is to protect the women i.e. tenants of Brewster Place against persecution of landlords and males of their own or white community. In this novel, Naylor portrays her characters’ miserable condition step by step and in this series, Mattie one of the protagonists suffers the pain of rape and unwanted pregnancy. It is unfortunate that her own community’s man rapes her and her father treats her badly. Finally, Mattie leaves her family and goes to live to other place. Although leaving her family is serious matter yet this decision shows her courage against the depressing circumstances. In fact, she is helpless and alone but for the sake of her unborn baby, she takes bold step and comes to her chum Etta. In the time of adversity, Etta helps Mattie giving her shelter and shows the example of women bonding. It was Mattie’s heroism which inspires Etta to encourage facing her dark and gloomy time. Out of seven characters of novel, it is only Etta who apparently rejects the white’s order and implies her female heroism against male chauvinism. Etta is another case of rape victim. She was entirely bluffed by Reverend Moreland Wood, who very shrewdly confuses her
and destroys her virginity. After obliterating, she once again comes to Mattie and Mattie responds as a true friend. Being exploited by Reverend Woods, Etta however, starts her life with new vigor and zeal.

Novel’s another instance of female heroism is Kiswana. It is her heroism that she consciously rejects her Euro-centric name ‘Melanie’ into African name ‘Kiswa.’ She constantly faces her mother’s disapproval but in spite of it, she does those things which profit her black community. Kiswana, in her college days always takes part in the movements and as an activist she always presents herself as a role model for black females as well as other black males. For the sake of black community, she drops out of her college and does job in a clerical post. Although her mother disagrees with her yet she interrupts her mother, convincing her to own side. After leaving her parents’ hometown, she starts to live alone in Brewster place and participates in meetings of Brewster place for the good of the female tenants and against the landlords. So, it was Kiswana’s heroism which leads her to go against dominated white as well as black community and do something for the welfare of her own community.

Besides Mattie, Etta and Kiswana, there are some other examples of female heroism. One of the names in this reference is Lucielia Louise Turner. She is nurtured by Mattie and finally settled down with Eugene. Eugene is evermore frustrating because of constant joblessness. Being jobless, Eugene always shouts on Ciel but she peacefully tolerates her husband. This was her patience which she always bears her husband’s different moods but someday she goes against him and presents her will power. Eugene without taking any
responsibility towards his wife and daughter wants to omit his family. So, at this time sensing his intention, Ciel herself takes a vital step and leaves her husband forever. Their daughter gets electrocuted and after Serena’s death, Ciel becomes aloof but it was Mattie, who consoles her as a mother and gets her back to her senses as well as confidence. Mattie being a symbol of female heroism takes control in all the matters and it was her efforts that once again Ciel starts her life with new determination. Finally, both women being mutual dependent show their female heroism against inflexible and rigid circumstances. It is Ciel’s courage that she works in an insurance company under the painful circumstances and now she feels independence and finds respectable status in the social and domestic affairs.

With Lucielia, there is another example comes about Lorraine and Theresa. Both are lesbian and, so their relationship is thoroughly disapproved in the black society. Naylor uses lesbian relationship in her novel because she wants to show her female characters courageous and bold in the male dominated society. Being homosexual women, both the women face and experience the negative approach of the society. Its repercussion becomes so aggressive that Lorraine is raped by C. C. Baker’s gang. More than five men rape brutally and exhibit their hate upon innocent and artless girl Lorraine. Before rape, though the inmates of Brewster Place had rejected the two lesbians but after the rape incident, the entire community wants to take revenge against rapists. Lorraine though dies but her existence does not die. It is her bravery and strong will power that after her death she stands with other women to tear down the wall of triple jeopardy. Lorraine being an
instance of female heroism inspires the women of Brewster place to find out their invisible identity and proper place in the society.

The conclusion of the chapter implies that the women of Brewster Place bear and experience the oppression of black and white society. These women are robust and healthy wall of Brewster Place against any sort of domination. They succeed in making a new black community which has now become a strong, confident and determined similar to the white community. Within this new society and association, all the women can live with their own desires and survive with honor. They make their own rules and laws abided by all. Nobody can now dare to torture and humiliate them. Within the power of an association, they hear the complaints against landlords through female tenants and decide the matters under their own law. Mattie as a veteran woman leads the main role in the association. The women give their full support as well as exhibit their female heroism and gender solidarity with this association and offer ample strength and support to each others as and when needed.

After facing and bearing the malignant and troubles in the forms of penury, negligence, adversity, exploitation and male chauvinism, finally the women come and live in company in Brewster Place. Naylor’s female characters endure contradictory conditions and survive peacefully in the Brewster Place. Although Brewster Place is a symbol of dehumanization and struggle but however, these seven women come out of this anguish and try to live their life their own way. The living place as a ‘dead-end-street’ becomes a painful and tyrannical place for the seven characters of Naylor. Each and every character has its own story and incidents and, so in this series, Mattie
as a main character comes first in the novel. She comes to Brewster Place, after losing both her son and her last shelter i.e. Miss Eva’s gifted house. Etta comes there after realizing her life has no purpose or direction because she begins and ends relationships in rapid sequence. Kiswana the other one comes there after realizing that she must live with people to whom she wants to help. Cora Lee comes after learning that babies are not just living baby dolls and the last characters ‘The Two’ after being ostracized, wherever they lived together. The women of Brewster Place have faced and endured one after another problems and being problematic, they come to Brewster place for dwelling. After coming here, they rely on each other for survival and psychological support. Although Brewster Place unites and gives them complete security yet nevertheless they feel insecure. The women are black, indigent, illiterate and most probably being trifling female, each and every time feel insecurity from white community without any congenial support. Among these dwellers, Lorraine who comes to Brewster Place right now has faced sensational violence. She is raped by several hooligans in a peculiarly horrible manner and after losing her chastity she dies. Hence, being a prey of male’s hand Brewster Place naturally becomes a victim of dehumanization and struggle. The wall of sovereignty in Brewster Place always separates blacks from white society, so to remove the separation between white and black, the women ruin and breach the wall of Brewster Place. The wall is the grim and major symbol of inferiority and partiality towards blacks. With breaking the wall, the women’s first struggle stops but is not yet finished.

After collapsing the wall, the women organize the party ‘The Block Party.’ Though Brewster Place is relied around the seven women but
somewhere they have to pay a heavy cost for showing the picture of diversities in front of residents. So, for the sake of equality and similarity, the women stamp out the wall of triple jeopardy and despite of trivialness, the women show their power and courage against male chauvinism. It is Gloria Naylor, who uses Mattie, as a pioneer and leading woman who seeks to alter the conditions and circumstances in male dominated society. Brewster Place has drastically changed after sustained dehumanization and struggle. The women are now recognized with their own identity and the dreams now take its shape with more force, vigor and protest in ‘The Block Party.’ By destroying the wall, Naylor discerns that when women affirm solidarity, they can break the stereotyped and dominated myth of a sexist and racist society, which the wall so strongly symbolized, “The novel ends when the Black women on Brewster Place revolt against their environment and with the help of their neighbors, tear down the walls of the dead-end street on which they are trapped.”34

In addition to it, the novel indeed succeeds through the characters of Mattie and other females, in raising a call of protest and drawing the attention of the readers and society as a whole against the male chauvinism in society. As Gloria Naylor prima facie comments, “And for me, that wall symbolized simply racism in this country.”35 Thus, Brewster Place is a symbol of dehumanization and struggle of women who fight for their rights as well as identity and simultaneously exhibit that they finally achieve their salvation towards life. Therefore, the main aspects are narrated in this novel depicting the women’s bravery and mutual conflict in the male dominated society.
REFERENCES


3. *ibid.*

4. *ibid.*


14 *ibid*.


16 Ranveer, *op.cit.*, 123.

17 Christian, *loc.cit*.

18 *ibid*.

19 *ibid.*, 194 – 95.


25 Ranveer, *op.cit.*, 112.


27 Matus, *op.cit.*, 62.


29 Matus, *op.cit.*, 54.


32 Ranveer, *op.cit.*, 115.

33 *ibid.*, 119.