CHAPTER-V

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In the conclusion of her study of twelve novels by black women over the last four decades *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black women Fiction*, Gloria Wade Gayles, speaking about the female characters says:

“Even when the women understand that they share a sisterhood of oppression, they often do not act on the belief that, “sisterhood is powerful.” They do not come together to talk about their common history and their common reality. When they do attempt to communicate as women, they fail to sustain the sisterhood”.¹

A number of writers have portrayed strong friendships between black women like, Toni Morrison in *Sula*, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, but these bonds are often broken or slackened by competitiveness, betrayal and physical or socio-economic separation. Gloria Naylor in the first three novels - *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, and *Mama Day* devotes considerable attention to the special bond that can exist between women characters, including women of different generations.

Gloria Naylor describes *The Women of Brewster Place* as a novel in seven stories. There are seven chapters and each chapter focuses on a different women who experiences and endures conflicts within herself and as a result of her interaction with others. The work is not a novel
but a collection of short stories in which the central characters and schemes are fused into one entity, and that the novel characterizes the struggle of not one, but seven black women, who in a common setting, have different versions of their confrontations with racism and sexism. These seven women constitute the major characters or protagonist of this literary work, and their struggle comprises the theme of this novel.

The setting of the novel is Brewster Place: a dead end street with four double housing units that is described by the author as:

"the bastard child of several clandestine, meeting between the alder man of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Reality Company."

(TWBP 1)

The first occupants of Brewster Place were Irish, then Mediterraneans and then Blacks. As Brewster Place is a dead end street and the blacks who live there are poor, powerless and ignored by others in the city, it exists independently away from the outside world and perpetuates its own values and more according to the needs of its residents and the limitations imposed on them from the larger society. As a result, this setting creates a unique social environment. Their physical structure protects its residents from direct interference from the outside world; thus they are able to formulate and maintain their own social rules of behaviour and to condemn and punish those who, because of their life style or background, do not stick to a prescribed pattern. Within this limited environment, all the residents exist under similar circumstances.

The main focus of the novel is on the Brewster Place and the
black women who live in this locality in the form of the community. To give homogeneity to their living Naylor describes the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place as follows:

"Nutmeg arms learned over windows sells, gnarled ebony legs carried groceries up double flights of steps and saffron hands strung out wet laundry on black yard lines Their perspirations mingle with the steam from boiling pots of smoked pork and greens and it curled on the edges of the aroma of vinegar douches and Evening in Paris cologne that drifted through the street where they stood together - hands on hips, straight backed, round bellied, high behinded women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed strong teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshipped and shared their men. Their love drove them to fling dish clothes in someone else's kitchen to help to make the rent or to fling hot lye to help him forget the bitch behind the counter at the five- and -dine. They were hard-edged, soft centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place" (TWBP 4-5)

This description reveals the economic and social conditions of these women. They are poor, uneducated and black women who despite these conditions, cling tenaciously to their needs to survive and live as black woman. This description also gives the picture of the seven women whose stories create the overall world and the content of the novel. She focuses almost entirely on the women and explores black sisterhood.

Among the seven women of Brewster Place and Mattie Michael, there is an unwed mother who is displaced from her home and forced
to move to Brewster Place after her son skips bail. Elta Mae Johnson, is a sassy middle aged women who searches for both pleasure and a self-identity in various cities and with various men, but returns to Brewster Place when she has run out of money and men. Kiswana Browne is a young middle class black woman who rejects her background and her name (Melanie), and moves to Brewster Place and attempts to help the people who live under their disastrous and lamentable conditions. Lucielia Louise Turner, who tolerates abuse from her husband; Core Lee, another unwed mother, who in her fascination for babies has one child after another but neglects them when they get older and Lorraine and Theresa, “The Two” who because they are lesbians, encounter hostility and rejection by the people of Brewster Place. All of them struggle to survive and shape their lives under the conditions and environment that overpower them.

Though these women live in the same locality, all of these women have different stories to tell about their lives and the limited options that are available to them as a result of their race, gender and poverty. Although many of the women share similar problems such as their relationships with men and with other members of community, each woman faces a unique situation that calls for a response related not only to the situation itself but also to the personality of the woman and her understanding of herself and the more of the community. By placing each woman into a different situation Naylor also creates different voices and social contexts. Brewster Place unfolds and radiates their individual destinies in different strokes. Naylor shows how the language of these black women varies according to the context in which these women find themselves.

Gloria Naylor portrays how these seven women try to understand
why they are? What factors are responsible for their lamentable flight? Who are the other co-sufferers like them? How to overcome their suffering? And after trying to find out answers to these questions, they try to establish their own identity and rediscover themselves.

The broad context of the novel is the dead end street Brewster Place. The relevance of this setting is mentioned in the novel’s prologue and epilogue, entitled “Dawn” and “Dusk”. The conclusive last chapter opens into an epilogue that too teases with the sense of an ending by appearing to be talking about the death of the street, Brewster Place. The novel opens with a prologue describing the birth of the street. “Dawn” provides a description of Brewster Place and how it came into existence. It was formed out of the political corruption and was “Walled off” from the main boulevard when new residents, Mediterranean and blacks, did not have political influence to prevent it from the rest of the city. A more blacks moved to Brewster Place, gradually the Mediterraneans moved out, until it became predominantly black. These new black residents were poor, mainly uneducated and powerless. Guarded by the wall from the influence of the outside world, The residents of Brewster Place created a value system that reflected their economic circumstances and cultural background. This description of Brewster Place allows us to understand and anticipate some of the problems that the main characters face and the choices available to them as a result of this social economic and environmental confinement. This leads to the formation of a community of residents who are predominantly black, female and poor. Thus, within the context of Brewster Place, the seven women tell stories of their passion, disappointments frustration and their struggle, tragedies, hopes, desires and triumphs

Expectations are subverted and closure is subtly deferred A}
though the epilogue begins, a street dies and tells us that Brewster Place is waiting to die, *waiting* is a present participle that never becomes past. "Dawn" (the prologue) is coupled neither with death nor darkness, but with dusk, a condition whose half-light underscores the half-life of the street. Despite the fact that in the epilogue Brewster Place is abandoned, its daughters still get up elsewhere and go about their daily activities. In a reiteration of the domestic routine that are always carefully attended to in the novel - the making of soup, the hanging of laundry, the diapering of babies - Brewster's death is forestalled and postponed. More importantly, the narrator emphasizes that the dreams of the inhabitants are what keep them alive.

"They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they're mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into pots of soup, and they're diapered round babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. (TWBP 192)

Initially they refer to the coloured daughters, but later on to their desires. And in the end the novel raises questions about the relation of dreams to the persistence of life, since the capacity of Brewster's women to dream on is identified as their capacity to live on. The street continues to exist marginally, on the edge of death; it is the "end of the live" for most of its inhabitants. Like the street, the novel hovers, moving towards the end of its line, but deferring. What joins both the text and the lives of Brewster's inhabitants is desire, in the same way that Matties dream of destruction postpones the end of the novel, the narrators last word identify the dream as that which affirms and perpetuates the life of the street.

Naylor's desire to write the experience of black American women
was born from an impatience with the critical establishments assumptions that black writers should provide 'definitive' reflections of black experience. The emphasis is on the definitives, she argues, denies the vast complexity of Afro-American experiences. In a conversation with Toni Morrison, she speaks of her struggle to realize the dream of writing the lives of black women without falsification and sentimentality, making visible those whom society keeps invisible she dedicates the novel to those who,

"gave me the dream, believe in it... nurtured it... applauded it."²

Mattie Michael is the first woman in the series of anecdotes who is an unwed mother. In order to protect her son, she stands bail. He skips the bail and escapes and as a result Mattie is deprived of her home. History begins in her home town in Tennessee, thirty-one years ago, when she was seduced by Butch, a black ruffian. Mattie was cautioned about Butch by her father stating that,

"Butch Fuller is a no-count ditch hound and no decent woman should be seen talking to him." (TWBP 9)

Mattie is a 'decent woman' by the standard of her community. She lives quietly with her father and mother, obeys their rules, and is active in church related activities. She socializes only with those of whom her family approves. Butch Fuller understands how their different social positions in the community makes him an unwelcome visitor to Mattie's world. However, by his charm the seduces her. After this event Mattie loses her girlhood and becomes a black woman. She never tells her father about the identity of the father of the child. Mattie and her father's relations are based on his superior role in the home, and
he believes that his daughter must never defy him. When she refuses to reveal the identity of her child's father, he predicatably reacts with the usual patriarchal fury:

"Her silence stole the last sanctuary for his rage. He wanted to kill the man who had sneaked into his home and desorted the faith and turst he had in his child. But she had chosen to stamp out what has hurt him the most and was now brazenly taunting him, her disobedience." (TWBP 23)

Mattie understands the consequences of not adhering to the social hierarchy within her home and that her father would never forgive her for not obeying him. She is cast out to chart the journey of her life all alone. She knows what it is to love and suffer loss, paternal abuse, betrayal and dispossessions. Although men like Eugene do not like her - she speaks the truth as she sees it - she is received and respected by most others. Cora singles her out as the only one around who does not feel it necessary to do jury duty on other people's lives. She refuses to join in the community condemnation of Lorraine and Theresa's lesbian relationship, preferring to mind her own business and open her mind to the kinds of love that women can bear for other women. After the catastrophic death of Ciel's daughter, she is mentor and nurture. Mattie's moving ritual of bathing and cleaning Ciel draws on commonsensical folkloric wisdom and links her to the tradition of black women who have nursed their sisters through grief and sufferings. As the communities best voice and sharpest eye, she is well qualified to express the unconscious urging of the community and dream the collective dream.

The second chapter of the book deals with Etta Mae Johnson.
Etta, is Mattie's friend, and is a sassy, independent black woman who has lived her life according to her own desires. Etta is introduced in the chapter on Mattie Michael. After the fight with her father, Mattie leaves her hometown of Rock Vale, Tennesses and moves with her friend, Etta. She leaves because,

“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 exist.”

(TWBP 8).

The game here means the social rules of behaviour that govern the relationship between southern whites and blacks. Elta, like her friend Mattie, leaves home because she was compelled to disobey the social rules. Unlike Mattie, Elta refuses to submit to the Southern racial system.

“Rutherford country wasn’t ready for Etta’s blooming independence, and so she left one rainy summer night about three hours ahead of dawn and Johnny Brick’s furious pursuing relatives. Mattie wrote and told her they had waited in ambush for two days on the country line, and then had returned and burned down her fathers barn. The sheriff told Mr. Johnson that he had gotten off mighty light - considering. Mr. Johnson thought so, too. After, reading Matties, letters Etta was sorry she hadn’t killed the horny white bastard when she had the chance.” (TWBP 60)

This brief account reveals not only Etta’s personality but also the social attitudes and norms, that rule the lives of Southern whites and blacks. Etta apparently rejected the sexual advances of a white male
Her refusal to passively accept his attention resulted in the destruction of her father’s property with the implied and firm approval of the sheriff, which led her to leave her home town in fear of her life. She undoubtedly knew that her actions, though unjustifiable, are taboo in her community. However, she soon learns that she would confront racism and sexism in places other than Tennessee.

“Rock Vale had followed her to Memphis Detroit, Chicago, and even New York. Etta 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 any promising, rising black star and when he burnt out, she found another.”(TWBP 65)

Thus racism and sexism compel Etta to channel her spirit of independence into inauspicious relationships with different men and to move from one city to another in search of a place that would allow her to be herself without restraints.

Etta’s story is framed by jazz and gospel music, a rather Janus faced mixture of sensuality and salvation. In this chapter, numerous references to the songs of Billie Holliday reveal the timbre of Etta’s life: pain, loneliness and heartbreak mixed with a hasty disdain for social rules and prescribed behaviour. Gospel music, in the context of the church she visits with Mattie, signifies hope and the deliverance from the pain of her past life and the void of the future. Now middle aged, Etta realizes that soon she will be unable to depend on her looks. This is obvious when the explain to Mattie:
“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.” **(TWBP 70)**

Etta intends to get some ‘rest’ with the help of Reverend Morelands Woods, a charismatic black preacher with “a mouthful of strong gold capped teeth and a diamond pinkie ring”, she wants him to become her personal savior, the one who will deliver her from the sins of her past and lead her to higher place. In other words, she wants him to marry her. However, Etta, like Mattie, is cheated by Reverend Woods who has other ideas. Seduced by him, she realises her sorry plight:

> “The angels rejoice more over one sinner who turns around than over ninety-nine righteous ones. ------ well, I can be of any assistance, sister Johnson, don’t hesitate to ask. I would not sleep knowing one of the Lord’s sheep is troubled.” **(TWBP 68-69)**

It is at a very late stage Etta understands that she must depend on her own salvation. Etta, like Mattie, is out played by the man with whom she is involved. Butch takes advantage of Mattie’s naivette and curiosity and carnally exploits her.

The third chapter deals with Kiswana Browne, a middle class black woman who has moved to Brewster Place because she rejects her middle class background, in Linden Hills. Kiswana and her mother confront each other about their seemingly different values. Whereas Kiswana represents those middle-class blacks who rejects the values of their parents and embrace those of black nationalists.
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The clash between these two women is signified through the choice of names. Kiswana had changed her name from Melanie as a rejection of the Euro-centric culture and affirmation of her allegiance to the African heritage. Throughout Kiswana’s visit, Mrs Browne refuses to address her daughter by her African names, even though Kiswana tells her:

“no one hardly ever calls me Melanie. It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandfather’s name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shot gun when they tried to drag one of her songs to jail for not knowing her place ‘yet you needed to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud’” (TWBP 87)

In this way, Mrs. Browne argues that Kiswanas given name, Melanie, has a history and heritage and that by rejecting her name, she has rejected her own past:

“Kiswana suddenly realized that her mother had trod the same universe that she herself was now travelling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just two feet away on that coach. She started at the woman she had been and was to become.” (TWBP 103)

Thus Kiswana ultimately understands her common history and struggles with other black women.

In Brewster Place a friendship based on the shared experiences of black womanhood exists. Sometimes in the form of the mother daughter relationship. One of the problems several women face is that in their
isolation they come to focus all their needs on their children and define themselves exclusively as mothers, thus enacting a male-defined, expletive role. This tendency has both negative and positive consequences. The book is dominated by Mattie Michael, whose presence is felt in all of the individual character studies. Seeing the weak model of her parents marriage and her desire for Butch, she rejects the timid suitor whom her stern father favours and at the same time harbors no expectations that Butch will show responsibility for her or their baby. After the violent scene with her father and her ejection from home, she quickly converts from lover to mother. Miss Eva, with whom she later shares a household and whom she regards as a surrogate mother, finds Mattie's excessive mothering and sexual continence unnatural. Mattie sleeps with her son Basil and channels all her needs into mothering him. In fact, she renders him incapable of responsibility. When he skips bail and she loses her house, she faces a tragic awakening.

The positive effect of her mothering emerges later, however, in her influence over other women in Brewster Place, above all in the powerful healing scene in which she rocks and washes Ciel Turner from despair back to life:

"Like a black Brahman cow, desperate to project her young, she surged into the room, pushing the neighbor women and the others out of her way-------She sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked------- ----Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her Aghanseas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of scarified babies torn from their mother's arms and
given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on. She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, into the womb... (TWBP 103).

The female connection here participates in a whole history of mother sorrow, black and white. When Mattie decides to leave her home like many other dark children of the South, travels towards:

"The seductive call of wartime jobs and freedom in urban areas, carrying the child that would tie her to the past and future as, "in exiterically as it was now tied to her heart beat." (TWBP 95)

Mattie meets Etta Mae Johnson and the second part of the novel is formed. The relationship of Mattie and her son Basil is a beautiful work to show Black women and motherhood. Mattie undergoes all hardships that a single women with a merge education and an equally merger income, would undergo, bringing up a child. Mattie faces her ordeal in the harsh and impersonable world with remarkable tenacity. She finds the world very callous when she leaves the boarding house in search for another accommodation and finds she has very few choices at her disposal. She understands it is very difficult to find a place in the white neighborhood

Mattie's meeting Miss Eva, marks a turning point in her life. It is one of the best relations of Black sisterhood exposed. She plays
a crucial role in reviving Mattie's sagging confidence in herself and her faith in the goodness of human being. As Naylor says, Mattie soon finds herself

"accepting the kindness of the woman with a hunger of which she had been unaware------ In the unabashed fashion of the old, Miss Eva unfolds her own life and secret exploits to Mattie, and without realizing she was being questioned, Mattie found herself talking about things that she had buried within her. The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, bleeding their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable." (TWBP 134).

This scene emphasizes on the commonality of the black female experience, the black sisterhood when one woman unfolds to another woman, regaining her lost confidence and acquires the strength and fortitude to survive in a brutal world. From the way Eva Turner cares for Mattie and Basil it looks as if Mattie has found another mother. The close relationship between Eva and Mattie gives the female bonding, among black writers which is the connection of many Afro-American women writers.

The next chapter is the story of Lucielia Louise Turner deals with the theme of the conflict between black men and women. Her story differs from Mattie Michael and Etta Mae Johnsons. It is the story of a poor black couple, Lucielia Louise Turner and Eugene Turner, whose relationship disintegrates because of limited job opportunities and utter poverty. Eugene, frustrated in his attempts to find and keep a job which he believes reflects his manhood, often uses hostile and combative lan-

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guage in his interaction with Ciel (Lucielia), who understanding his frustration tries to make the necessary adjustment.

The relationship between Cief and Eugene signify the tension between black men and women caused by racism and economic depression, specially as they affect the ability of black men to find employment. Eugene’s utility towards his wife Ciel, is directly related to his constant joblessness. Unable to face the social and political realities that are responsible for his problem and unable to provide for Ciel and his eleven months old daughter Serena, he blames Ciel for his in ability to succeed. When she becomes pregnant a second time. Eugene blames Cief and assumes an adversial position.

He feels that she has become her eneny - the agency that refuses Eugene a job. She and her younger daughter 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.

The bond of woman to woman is seen between Mattie and Ciel though Mattie had helped raise Ciel years earlier. Their similar suffering makes them equal. Lucietenia had come to look her own daughter, Serena as:

"the only thing I have loved without pain" (TWBP 93).

Just before Serena electrocutes herself, Ciel has detached herself emotionally from her unreliable man Eugene who has too many problems of his own with “The Man”. What Mattie and Ciel come to share in Mattie’s act of primal mothering is their isolation, their burden of responsibility as mothers, and the loss of their children
The next chapter deals with the life of Cora Lee, an irresponsible black mother who loves children only when they are helpless infants and neglects them when they grow up. She continues to have one baby after another and discards them like old dolls when they get older. All these problems arise as she was not taught what her sex role is in the given culture. The giving of dolls and other domestic toys to young girls is designed to prepare them for their roles as mothers. They receive these toys as playthings and as a source of pleasure. Parents rarely tell young girls that a baby is not a toy but a complex human being, and that a mother is responsible not only for rearing it but also nurturing, guiding and teaching the child until it becomes an adult. When Cora was a young girl, she like other women of her culture, was given dolls by her parents. One particular toy acquires overtones of a phallic emblem: "the thing that felt good in the dark" (TWBP 93). Her fascination for a childhood toy and the roles assigned to it affects not only her life, but also the lives of her children who would grow up with only a faint, pregnant recollection of the love and attention she bestowed on them when they were babies. As a result, they would not know how to love and nurture their own children nor how to accept responsibility for their action, nor how to make reasonable choices. Thus, Cora Lee's fascination and desire for "the dead brown plastic" doll, a toy approved for young girls by western culture, has made her dangerous to herself, her children, and the society that sanctioned her love affair with baby dolls.

The last chapter of *The Women of Brewster Place* deals with the relationship between the two black lesbian lovers, Lorraine and Tharesa, and the other residents of Brewster Place, Lorraine and Theresa were considered to be 'nice girls' by the female residents of Brewster Place,
specially when it becomes clear that the two women were not interested in others' husbands. Lorraine and Theresa are accepted by the Brewster Place community as long as they maintain and display the type of behaviour considered appropriate by the community. For the other women of Brewster Place, the primary requirement for acceptance into the community was that neither Lorraine nor Theresa invite the attention or affection of the other women husbands or boyfriend. Once it is realized that the women are lovers, many members of the community openly disapprove of their life style. Words such as 'unnatural and nasty' are used to describe these once 'nice girls'.

In her article inflated "Nobody / But Nobody / Can Make It Out Here Alone: Mother Daughter Relationship in the Novels of Contemporary Afro-American Women Writers" Uma Alladi suggests that historical reasons necessitated the Afro-American woman to emphasize the role of the mother in the absence of the father, who went to seek jobs in the North or deserted their families. As a result, mothers and daughters formed a relationship which was emotionally very close. In times of crises, such a close emotional relationship helped women to endure and survive. The relationship between Mattie and her mother Fannia and that between Mattie and Eve Turner are relationships of this kind. Further the relationship between Mattie and Eva Turner is only an extension of a woman to woman relationship or of female bonding. This pattern can be seen throughout the novel. The relationship between Mattie and Eva Mae Johnson whose story forms the second section of the novel and that between Kiswana Browne and her mother in the third section; that of Mattie and Ciel Turner in the fourth section, and that between Kiswana Browne and Cora Lee in the fifth section are all examples of this female bonding. Even the relationship
between the lesbians Theresa are Lorraine, at one level at least is an example of such a kind.

All these women, Naylor feels face the problems of womanhood in a society where women are undervalued and abused. They experience a sense of alienation which is ameliorated by “the networking or nurturing” by women, which one can see throughout the novel - sometimes it is very violent and a life is saved (as in the case of Mattie Michael and Ciel Turner) and sometimes it is less dramatic and there is a kind of cultural awakening from one woman reaching out to another (as in the case of Kiswana Browne and Cora Lee).

Another mother - daughter relationship that becomes sisterhood emerges not from suffering but from daughter’s discovery of her mothers sexuality. Kiswana Browne is ‘healed’ in her conflict with her mother as a woman. Kiswana has allied herself with the only thoroughly positive male character in the novel, Abshu, and with the now moribund black militancy of the sixties. Her mother from middle class Linden Hills, pulls her up short when Kiswana accuses her mother of being

“a white mans nigger who is ashamed of being black”

(TWBP 85).

Her mother reacquaints her with a tradition of pride and strong mothering in the example of her great grandmother a full blooded Iroquois “who boil nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shot gun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for “not knowing his place” (TWBP 86) and in her own example as a mother toughening her children to meet the world. But despite this re-established bond of women over generations the clinching moment for Kiswana comes only when she notices for the first time her
mothers bright red toenail polish, like her own:

"I will be damned the young woman thought feeling her whole face tingle. Daddy's into feet! And she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had rod through the same universe that she herself was now travelling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just stared at the woman she had been and was become." (TWBP 87)

From the moment of their parting laughter she begins a productive new life in organizing rent protest among the women of Brewster Place and returning to school.

Kiswana can also now bring sisterly nurture to Cora Lee, another woman unbalanced in her mothering. Strangely obsessed with doll babies as a child, Cora Lee bears numerous children by the many "shadow" men in her life who slip in and out of her bedroom at night. Much as she desires babies she is bewildered when they start growing up and she simply cannot manage them. But the friendship of Kiswana in the park, rekindles her old dreams of education. The act of friendship and offer of help, once Kiswana gets beyond her own initial condescension, contributes to restoring Cora Lee's self-esteem both as a person and as a mother. Her new mothering energy will be directed towards her children's education, and she has found a sisterhood in Kiswana that lifts her out of her isolation.

The best example of sisterly friendship without the maternal connection is Etta Mae. Johnson's relationship with Mattie. A woman who is weary but still
in Preacher Woods eyes, Eua returns to Mattie and Brewster Place as a home coming herself:

“She breathed deeply on the freedom she found in Mattie’s presence. Here she had no choice but to be herself. The carefully erected decoys she was instantly shuffling and changing to fit the situation were of no use here. Etta and Mattie went back, a singular term that claimed co-knowledge of all the important events in their lives and almost all of the unimportant one. Anne by rights of this possession it tolerated no secrets.” (TWBP 58)

After Preacher Wood’s one night stand shatters her brief illusion that she might achieve her dream of quick respectability as a Preacher’s wife in the front pew, she returns again to Mattie as to a center

“She laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps towards the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (TWBP 74)

With no worthy object for her Flamboyant spirit, Etta yet has the deep friendship, support, and even moral judgement of Mattie in warding off loneliness and despair.

The love between Etta and Mattie is described more pointedly in a key passage in the later chapter about the two lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa. But this pair of lovers have their marriage between the timid and the tough. It is fraught with as much hostility as love. Alternating
between fostering and fighting, these two young women are still struggling to find their identities. Lorraine hates the cynical gay bars that are Therasa's elements and wants to feel at one with her neighbors in Brewster Place. Theresa resents Lorraine's vulnerability yet is uncomfortable when Lorraine acquires from convictions. Each seek a different community. When Lorraine discovers an accepting listener in the alcoholic janitor Ben, Theresa insists on their own mutual dependence as outcasts, and Lorraine repels. After their final quarrel when Theresa lets Lorraine go to the party by herself there is no more opportunity for them to resolve their conflicts and reaffirm their love.

Lorraine is physically and psychologically destroyed by C.C. Baker and his gang, and in her derangement she murders her only friend, Ben. Because of its unresolved tensions and concern over power, this relationship between two women, despite its seeming intimacy, remains less successful than between Mattie and Etta, who generously accept and nurture each other.

There is a connection between the two relationships is brought out significantly in the key passage referred to earlier. After a block associations meeting where Mattie and Etta have defended the lesbians against the gossip Sophie and the others, Mattie feels uncomfortable about the lesbian relationship and ponders with Etta the nature of male friendship:

Mattie was thinking deeply. "Well, I have loved women, too there was Miss Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery as you can get, I've loved you practically all my life"

"Yeah, but it's different with them"
“Different how?”

“Well, Etta was beginning to feel uncomfortable. They love each other like you love a man or a man would love you — I guess.”

“But I have loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man,” Mattie was pondering. “And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did.”

“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...”

“May be its not so different,” Mattie said, almost to herself. “May be that’s why some women get so riled up about it, cause they know deep down its not so different after all” she looked at Etta. “I kind a gives you a funny feeling when you think about it that way, though.”

“Yeah, if does,” Etta said, unable to meet Matties eyes.” (TWBP 141)

What Mattie comes to realize, through the insight of her own experience, is that the deep bond she has left with some women may have a wholeness and power (including the sexual) comparable to that of the lesbians and perhaps superior to any relationship that seems possible with a man in the deserted world of black gender relations. This is surely the central expression of black sisterhood in the novel.

The strength of this sisterhood can be explained partly, but not entirely, by the men’s features in love. In a conversation with Toni Morrison Naylor speaks:
"I bent over backwards not to have a negative message came through about the men. My emotional energy was spent creating a woman world, telling her side of it because I knew it hadn't been done enough in literature. But worried about whether is not the problems that were being caused by the men in the women lives would be interpreted as some bitter statement. I had to make about black men."

Most of the men in the novel may indeed be so ego crippled by racism as to be unable to love their women, but Naylor still holds them accountable: the irresponsible Butch the enraged father who is ready to keep her pregnant daughter Mattie to death, the father who rejects his lesbian daughter Lorraine, the transient "shadows" in Cora Lee's bedroom, the hypocritical Preacher Woods, the incised Eugene, who abandons Ciel, and above all, C.C. Baker and his gang, whom Naylor describes with her most sardonic language. Only Ashu and Ben are capable of fruitful relationships with women, and Ben only out of guilt for his impotence in letting his wife sell their daughter into concubinage with a white man. Generally, therefore, the men abandon the women to double burdens of work and domestic life without support. Women become the victims of class, race, and sex as wade-Gayles points out. In this condition the friendship of other women is not only a saving grace but a political necessity.

Mattie relates to the other women in the novel primarily as a mother. In fact, as Darothy Wickenden says:

"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."
This is not to suggest that Naylor's concept of motherhood confirms to the image of the "black matriarch" which is so much a part of the Afro-American literary traditions.

Mattie's maternal devotion brings about the losses which result in her arrival on Brewster, it is the same devotion that proves to be liberating for the women in the novel. Naylor creates a community of women, among whom the life giving maternal bond has been ruptured and Mattie's presence allows a restoration of that bond. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship between Mattie and Ciel. Ciel is a grieving mother who has lost two children abruptly, one, through abortion, the other, through an accidental electrocution. Following the funeral for her daughter Serena, Ciel is in a death-in-life state. The most moving scene in the novel is when Mattie bathes Ciel carefully and tenderly, as a mother would. She then rocks her backward in time, symbolically back to the womb there by negating the psychologically destructive effects of temporality, the cycle that has led to the almost overwhelming tragedy Ciel now faces.

"She rocked her into the childhood and led her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, into the womb, to the nadir of her heart and they found it - a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled - and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fatty and masculine tissue clinging to them. They lift a huge hole, which was already starting to persevere, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal." (TWBP 103-4)
Ciel undergoes a mystic rebirth, not a repetition of the first, physical birth, but a spiritual one. The birth is significant as it takes place in private, outside the watchful gaze of a white, patriarchal society, and is oriented towards allowing her access to a new mode of existence in which she is no longer subject to the limitations imposed by time and space. The scene has reference to other bereaved mothers - those in Greek mythology, Jewish mothers during the holocaust, and senegalese mothers - unites Mattie and Ciel with a broad community of disposed mothers who are denied the luxury of grief. In a patently unique community of women in Brewster Place, Ciel grieves freely, however, and hers is a catharsis similar to the daughter that unites Mattie and Etta Mae. And to reveal Ciel’s new mode of existence, her narrative points towards new beginnings, concluding with a violation of the novels rigid dawn to dusk temporal timeframe;

“And Ciel lay down and cried. But Mattie knew
the tears would end. And she would sleep and
morning will come.” (TWBP 105)

Whether it is the mother’s wit that prompts Mattie to nurse Ciel back life, or the timely advice on the ways of men she offers Etta Mae Prior to the tryst with Reverand Woods, the maternal role is a key one on Brewster and it is one through which cultural values are transmitted. Kiswana Browness mother penetrates the artificial identity her militant daughter assumes simply by drawing upon the resources of age, wisdom, and experience. A generational rift stemming from class as well as ideological differences separate the two women. Because of her identification with the Black revolution, Kiswana feels compile to reject her mother’s conservative ideas infavour of a life style that allows her to live and work among “my people.” Kiswana is forced to be aware
of the rich history which she ignores in her pursuit of her radical goals. Mrs Browne tells of a lineage rooted in struggle about her grand parents and father who came from a colony of Connecticut to this country as a cabin boy on a merchant mariner. She reminds Kiswana of the sacrifices she has made as a mother:

“When I brought my babies home from the hospital, my ebony son and my golden daughter, I aware before whatever Gods would listen - those of my mother’s people or those of my father’s people - that I would use everything I had and could ever get to see that my children were prepared to meet this world on its own terms, so that no one could see them short and make them ashamed of what they were or how they looked - whatever they were or however they looked. And Melanie, that’s not being white or red or black - that’s being a mother.”

(TWBP 86)

Kiswana is a young woman whose sixties based revolutionary ideals prompt her to deny her black folk heritage in favor of an ideals prompt her to deny her black folk heritage in favour of an identification with mother Africa. Like Alice Walker, Naylor also draws narrative resolutions which privilege the ideology of the older generation over that of the overzealous youth, who fail to appreciate the historic black struggle for freedom in the country, and the role that the folk have played in determining the course of history. Thus, Mrs Browne’s revelation of the strength and fortitude she inherits from her ancestors makes Kiswana appear phony and shallow - as artificial as the name she picks from an African dictionary.

The two women discover that there are more commonalities
between the mad Larry Andrus is correct when he asserts that Kiswana and her mother share a bond that is based upon sex. When she sees her mother approaching, Kiswana is careful to conceal the evidence of a live in relationship with Abshu by hiding his shaving cream and rajor in the bottom drawer of a hair dresser. Mrs Browne is worried about the message Kiswana may be sending out as a result of her having a nude statuette in her living room, so she cautions her daughter about the vulnerabilities of single womanhood. But as the pair converse, Kiswana comes to know the fact that her mother is still a woman. The bright nail polish Mrs. Browne wears is to appeal to the tastes of Mr. Browne, Kiswanas father's. By the end of Kiswana's story, she and her middle class mother share a spiritual oneness by virtue of their sexuality:

"And she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had tried through the same universe that she herself was now traveling."

(TWBP 87)

Unlike other Black women writers Naylor make Mattie a multi faceted character. Through her, Naylor projects the struggle of a black single woman, the mother of an illegitimate child - to survive in an environment of poverty, neglect and racial discrimination. Fate deprives Mattie of the male support, she is deserted by all the three males in her life - first by Butch Fulla, her lover, then by her father and finally by her son Basil. But, Mattie does not allow these experiences to break her. Instead she comes out of these ordeals a little more strengthened, with dignity and as sense of self - awareness which enables her to chart her own destiny. She spends her life usefully by bringing succor and relief to other women who, like her, are victims of a harsh and hostile world.
It is through her relations with Louise Turner whose story forms the fourth section of the book, that Mattie’s real mettle becomes evident. She is the only person who succeeds in administering the healing touch to Ciel, who is living a life of humiliation and degradation with Eugene. Naylor points a graphic picture of Mattie’s efforts at bringing the dying Ciel back to psychic health. She is determined that Ciel will not die and for this scene Deirdre Donahues remarks:

“Naylor’s potency wells up from her language with prose as rich as poetry, a passage will suddenly take off and sing like a spiritual...”  

Mattie bathes Ciel emaciated body in a kind of a ritual that approximates a baptism. Annie Gottlieb remarks:

“The Women of Brewster Place isn’t realistic fiction, it is mythic. On thing supernatural happens in it, yet its viewed, earthy characters (Mattie) seems constantly on the verge of breaking into magical power.”  

Naylor combines the realistic and mystic with super skill, the use of flashbacks through out the novel helps her to combine the two levels artistically.

The unity among the women of Brewster Place is seen at the Block Party, to raise the money they need to fight their white landlord. Ciel now lives in San Francisco and works for an insurance company and is about to start another family with the help of Mattie; who continues to call her ‘child’, Ciel comes out of her ordeal with self-sustaining dignity and has become a self-reliant woman in control of her destiny.
Naylor shows that practically all the women of Brewster Place are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation be it Mattie, Etta Mae Johnson, Ciel, Cora Lee Lorraine, Theresa. Though these experiences are shattering for the women of Brewster Place, but they do not succeed in breaking them down completely. On the contrary, the blood stain that Cora spots on the brick that her daughter Sonya has been scraping with a Possicle stick, drives her to Yank the brick out of the wall as she cries out with determination.

"Blood - there's still blood on this wall... It ain't right; it just ain't right It shouldn't still be here... Blood ain't got no right still being here." (TWBP 185)

Impulsively the other women join her and collectively tear down the wall. In the act of tearing down the wall, the women experience a sense of regeneration and feeling of solidarity and hope. Even the reluctant Theresa, who has decided to move out of the block after Lorraine's death, is won over to join in this symbolic act, which in turn, gains her acceptance in the community of the women of Brewster Place.

The primary relationship with which Naylor is concerned exist among partially dispossessed women across time and space who are unified by the desire for a place where each is allowed just to be. Sometimes social circumstances work against their attaining their desired end, as with the lesbian bond between Lorraine and Theresa. Naylor focusses on the community's response to the nontraditional life style in treating the very sensitive issue of lesbianism. Mattie's assertion that the love the lesbians share is no different from what she has felt for other women does little to alleviate Brewster's insistent homophobia; nor does it rescue the two women from the fracturing of their relationship. Rape and madness await a newly assertive Lorraine when
she tries to establish an identity apart from her submissive role with Theresa. Both internal and external pressures prevent the two women from finding, on Brewster, the refuge each one needs.

Naylor suggests that harmonious relationship between women are not only possible but vital in ushering in the new world order. She says in an interview that her emotional energy was spent on creating a women’s world, “because I knew it hadn’t been done enough in literature”. Each of the seven women in the novel speaks in a voice that is at once both individual and communal, thereby resisting the univocal, authoritative closure which is implied in the novel’s dawn - to - dusk narrative structure. Naylor’s goal as a creator and sovereign is to establish unity between the widely disparate voices of women not just within but outside the text. Kara Holloway refers to this technique as being:

“a collective speaking out of all the voices gathered within the text, authorized, narrative and even the implicated reader”

Mattie and Etta Mae are united by a coded laughter:

“drew them into a conspiratorial circle against all the simoons outside of that dead-end-street, and it didn’t stop until they were both weak from the tears that followed down their faces.” (TWBP 61)

As Mattie nurses the crying Ceil back to life following the funeral of Serena the sound of Ciel’s primal moan propels the two women into space, establishing oneness with dispossessed mothers across the diaspora. The brick wall symbolizes an imposed reality, but the voices of women transcend all artificially imposed constructs established by
patriarchy. The result of this transcendence is a text which reflects the realities faced by women.

The breaking of the wall is symbolic to the solidarity of the women of the block and of the breaking of the racial barriers which the wall symbolizes. Naylor suggests that it is only through collective effort that such barriers can be broken. And it is to the credit of Kiswana, Browne, the young idealistic woman from a rich family, who lives in the 6th floor studio apartment in Brewster Place and who is fond of her African roots, that the women of the block unite to fight their white landlord. Nayloy describes the scene where Cora tries to pass a brick to Kiswana and the latter implores Cora:

There’s no blood on those bricks...yor know there’s no blood - its’ raining. It’s just raining! And Cora asking in return,

“Does it matter? Does it matter.” (TWBP 187)

Which meant blood or no blood the wall has to be torn down. The continuous rainfall does not dampen the spirit of the women of the block. After a week, Brewster Place is bathed in a deluged of sunlight and the women are getting ready for another party. Gloria Naylor fits into what Claudia Tate calls the general traditions in Afro-American literature of celebrating black survival by overcoming racial obstacted. It is not as if W. of B.P. have succeeded in breaking the wall of racism but Naylor hopes on the united effort that the women are determined to make their bond of sisterhood significant for them to forget their prejudice and unite to fight their common enemy.

The ebony phoenix symbolizes the woman as narrator, each story
teller emerges out of the ashes of personal catastrophe. Ciel finds new life in the wake of her losses. Morning heralds another beginning for Ciel. In ‘The Block Party’ a story with multiple authorship, she has a good job in San Francisco working in an insurance Company and is in a relationship with another man. The light, love and laughter that greet Etta Mae as she ascends the stairs after her tryst with Woods reverse the darkness and dejection she feels when he leaves her. The women enjoy a life - giving relationship that allows them triumph over tragedy.

The ending of the novel, with its account of the women attempt to dismantle the brick wall, scripts the dawning of a new day.

Together the women challenge the restriction of the amorphous white male political system responsible for Brewster’s creation. No longer bound by patriarchy and its authoritarian mandates, the women defy the fate to which they have been consigned. There is a movement away from a scriptocentric reality with its fixed boundaries and towards a cosmological system that is oral, female and collective. Thus we find in the novel a bond of sisterhood among the seven different type of women under different sections, relations and situations.
CHAPTER-V
REFERENCES


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