Chapter – II

Colored Daughters

Growing up in the North in integrated schools, I wasn’t taught anything about Black history or literature. When I discovered that there was this whole long literary tradition of Black folk in this country, I felt I had been cheated about something. I wanted to sit down and write about something that I hadn’t read about and that was all about me – the Black woman in America. (Goldstein 35)

African-American fiction primarily deals with the exploitation of the colored, particularly sexual exploitation of the colored women. Loyalty to the race of the colored over that of the country very often prevails, because the African-American in the nineteenth century remained deprived of the basic principles of autonomy, equality and justice protected in the American Constitution. The oppressive and hostile white American culture, forces the colored to search for dignity and identity to develop unified self. Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place subtitled a novel in seven stories, is therefore a quest for identity, fulfillment of individual potential by merging a divided, alienated self into a truer and better unified literate self.

Naylor tries to represent the voice of the colored women through her writings. The communal voice of the women tries to empower and nurture each other and give a little strength to each other as and when needed. The life history of Brewster Place comes to resemble, the history of the country as the community changes with each new historical shift, following the Civil Rights Era; Brewster Place inherits its last inhabitants, African-Americans, many of whom are immigrants from the southern half of the United States. The stories within the novel are the stories of these residents. As Brewster Place is a dead end street and the colored who live there are poor, powerless and ignored by others in the city, it exists independently of the outside world
and perpetuates its own values and moves 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.

To give homogeneity to their living, on the colored women, who live in this region in the form of community, the women of Brewster Place are described by Naylor as:

Their perspiration mingled 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. (WBP 4-5)

The seven women, struggling to survive in a world that has never been kind to African-Americans or women is a tribute to the African-American female experience. Their environment further causes difficulties in their lives. Brewster Place is an impoverished and threatening neighborhood. Each woman, in her own way, plays an indispensable part in the making of Brewster Place. The women are forced to rely on each other when the world seems to shut them out. Despite their differences, the women of Brewster Place are bound by a sense of community and sisterhood that enables them to deal with the everyday demands they face in the male dominated society in which they live. This is best exemplified in the relationship between Cora Lee and Kiswana and Mattie and Ciel.

*The Women of Brewster Place* is a realistic fiction and it portrays the middle and lower class people in the Brewster Place. All the residents, who live there are considered as lower-class, perhaps even below the poverty line. Lack of money is one of the most literal impediments
in the way of leaving Brewster Place. Some of the residents try to fight their poverty, but actually they escape. Through the responsiveness of their shared struggles, these residents can find unity with one another, as they all take pains to survive. Taken individually, each of the seven women displays great capability for compassion, civilization and consideration. It is more accurate to place the novel to research under archetypal approach.

The Archetypal Approach is a demonstration of some basic cultural pattern of great meaning and appeal to humanity in a work of art; it suggests interest in myth and the influence of Frazer (The Golden Bough) and Jung (the theory of collective unconsciousness). The Jungians reward myth not as the dream of an inhibited individual person, but as protoplasmic pattern of the race. Gilbert Murray states that in the greatest ages of literature there seems to be, among other things, a power preserving due proportion between opposite elements – the expression of boundless primitive emotion and the subtle and delicate representation of life.

Sigmund Freud’s theory of dreams proposes that the various stimuli of our daily life force us to respond to them with dreams during our sleep at night. But the pressure of our routine life makes us to wake up in the morning. This theory is beautifully handled by Naylor in her novel Brewster Place, where an urge is seen in every character to fulfill their dream of redeeming themselves from the injustice they suffer in the American society. The same can be said about Naylor’s handling of Jung’s theory of collective consciousness. In her novel Brewster Place, the civilized American society sticks to their ancestral belief of treating the colored as slaves.

Mattie’s evolution as an encouraging motherly figure from a destitute character, Etta’s entry into a life of hope from a worthless one, Eva’s change from irresponsible nature to responsible nature, Kiswana’s change of attitude towards her own race, Lucielia’s transformation from a weak and helpless person to a strong revolutionist, Cora Lee’s climb from an incompetent
mother to a smart character, Theresa and Lorraine’s inferiority complex turning to self-confidence – all remind us of Phoenix bird from Greek myth which resurrects from its own ashes.

It would not do homage to Naylor’s first novel to understand the broader social critique informing her treatment of these separate lives. The reader is continuously reminded that the failures of caring, eruption of hatred and patterns of sexism being embellished are rooted in a long legacy of racism, poverty and displacement. Although there is no sense of an easy or happy ending, *The Women of Brewster Place*, offers hope through community.

Despite the commonality of characteristics, it cannot be denied that the reading of the novel clearly evokes so diverse, responses, resonances and allusions that every character can be treated as an exclusive document, an expression of an individual. The autobiographical writing of African-American women writers of the 1970’s achieved to humanize their tragic plight and thereby make it worthy of artistic treatment.

Structurally the novel can be divided into three parts: Dawn, the narratives of seven women protagonists, and Dusk their struggles to survive and their achievement after the battle. Symbolically, Dawn and Dusk are the dawn and dusk of Brewster Place, a cul-de-sac street, and Mattie in their long, winding journeys. Mattie Michael is delineated through several points of view: familiarity with Butch Fuller, Mattie’s parents, ever lasting relationship with Etta’s, the pain of being lovable to his son Basil and even that of the novelist. The narrative is developed through five parts: the first narration is about Mattie’s arrival in Brewster Place and the episode with Butch; the second part is about Mattie’s trial with her father; and the third part chronicles Mattie’s decision to leave home, her strife and success in her search for shelter and a turn in her fortune. Part four depicts Mattie’s motherly yearnings for her only son; and part five delineates
the final catastrophe in Mattie’s life, her illusion in bringing her son back into her life. The
concluding part conveys the fearless and determined spirit reaffirms her faith in her own self.
She shakes off her despair and determines to live with zest.

The seven colored female residents of Brewster Place is an infirm ghetto housing project
in an unidentified Northern City through their relationships with one another. The stimulation for
*The Women of Brewster Place* came from several sources. According to Naylor:

> The Women of Brewster Place are women I never knew personally. But I have
> known that spirit; I have definitely known that life. That’s how those characters
> were born. But they lived for me as characters with their own personalities and I
> let them have it. I wanted to immortalize the spirit I saw in my grandmother, my
> great aunt and my mom. (Goldstein 36)

Naylor wrote the stories that eventually became *The Women of Brewster Place* in a
creative writing class at Brooklyn College. When she sent her first story to Essence Magazine,
the editor asked to see more, and Naylor’s career was launched. As has happened with many
African-American women writers, Naylor has been criticized for her pessimistic portrayals of
colored men as acknowledged by her to respond to a trend that she had noticed in the colored and
white critical establishment. There has been a tendency on the part of both to assume that a
colored writer’s work should be definitive’ of colored experience. She makes it clear that the
socio-economic conviction of colored lives creates colored men’s tendency to leave their lovers
and children:

> Brewster Place is separated from the rest of the city by a brick wall erected to
> control traffic in the major part of the town. Disconnected from the business of
> the city (North east near New York) by a wall, Brewster Place has become a dead
end, literally and figuratively, for the black people who finally come to inhabit it.

(Branzburg 117)

The environment of the Brewster Place is a dead end street with four double housing units that is portrayed by the author as “. . . the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Reality Company” (WBP 1). The first inhabitants of Brewster Place were Irish, then Mediterranean’s and they were followed by colored. As Brewster Place is a dead end street and the colored used to live there are poor, powerless and ignored by others in the city. It exists independently of the outside world and perpetuates its own values and more according to the needs of its residents and the restrictions forced on them from the larger society:

So the wall came up and Brewster Place became a dead end street. There were no crowds at this baptism, which took place at three o’clock in the morning when Mrs. Colligan’s son, stumbling home drunk and forgetting the wall was there, bloodied his nose and then leaned over and vomited against the new bricks. (2)

The main focus of the novel is on the Brewster Place and the colored women who live in this locality in the form of a community. Naylor describes the ‘Colored daughters’ of Brewster Place:

Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home. Nutmeg arms leaned over windowsills, gnarled ebony legs carried groceries up double flights of steps, and saffron hands strung out wet laundry on back-yard lines. (4)

Using an omniscient narrator to weave together seven interlinked narratives of colored women from diverse backgrounds and experiences, they end up living on the same block in a
derelict urban neighborhood. Naylor creates complex, believable and ultimately heroic characters. “I think of the women of Brewster Place as a love letter to the black women of America – a celebration of their strength and endurance” (4), Naylor commented in *Contemporary American Fiction Series* (1982). The author’s harmonious, rich prose brings the residents of Brewster Place to life:

> They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They came; they went, grew up and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story. (WBP 5)

This depiction reveals the economic and social position of these women. They are poor, uneducated colored women who despite these conditions, cling tenaciously to their need to survive and live as colored women. This description also prepares the reader for the seven women whose stories create the overall world and the content of the novel. Like the resurrection of Phoenix from its ashes, these women resurrect from their depressed state to the zenith of achievement.

Naylor announces that the book is a novel in seven stories and thus pushes the boundaries of both the short story and novel. The novel opens with the history of the street and couches it in the birth metaphor. The street was conceived in a “damp smoke – filled room” and born in the city legislature. The street had always been home to the lowest social demographics of the city, and when the story opens, the residents are basically African-Americans.

Each chapter or story is dedicated to detailing the circumstances of one of the women’s lives. Naylor’s intention is not to present all the different possible types or situations of African-American women, but to present a range that illustrates the difference in detail but the similarity
in effect. All the characters in this novel have a monotonous ambition of relieving themselves from the bonds of immorality and acquiring a decent status and recognition in the society. But the flavor differs in their backgrounds.

The seven women of Brewster Place are Mattie Michael, an unwed mother who is displaced from her home and forced to move to Brewster Place after her son skips bail; Etta Mae Johnson, a sassy, middle-aged woman who searches for both contentment and 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, a young, middle class colored woman who rejects her background and her name (Melanie), and moves to Brewster Place and attempts to help the people who live there under disastrous and dreadful conditions; Lucielia Louise Turner, who tolerates ill-treatment from her husband; Cora 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 aggression and rejection by the people of Brewster Place. All of them struggle to survive and shape their lives under the conditions and environment that empower them.

For a long time, colored women were treated as beasts of burden in white patriarchal society. They were ridiculed as Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Matriarch, Sister, colored Bitch, and Girl. Naylor has created an image of resilient colored women and their mutual supportiveness in *The Women of Brewster Place*. The creation of an imaginary street, Brewster Place, symbolizes a racist, sexist society. In such a society, colored women struggle to live with their dreams. The flexible character of colored American women is shown clearly in the novel through their narratives. The dreams of these women protagonists are fulfilled festered or exploded in this narrative. These colored, brown and yellow heroines are brought together on Brewster Place...
from the starving Southern climates. The colored women join hands to break the obstacles faced by them in the society which reminds us of the Phoenix bird that restores to life from its ashes.

The prismatic features of these women’s personalities are exposed by Naylor through various points of view. They are strong, independent minded, and nurture each other. They are proud of their African roots and heritage, ready to face adversity for the betterment of colored people. Some heroines like Cora Lee and Kiswana are eager to enjoy aesthetically satisfying plays. Some like Sophie and Betina are quarrelsome or jealous. Others are helpful as evident in the cases of Mattie and Etta, Kiswana and Cora Lee. They have crucial relationships with one another. These women laugh together, and bear their sorrows as well as uncertainty in each other’s nearness. A protagonist like Mattie Michael has a voice of her own. She is full of fiery spirit. Etta Mae Johnson has an independent nature and is a stylish lady. Kiswana and Cora Lee are dreamers. Ciel learns hard lessons in life and overcomes deep frustration gradually due to Mattie’s sympathetic companionship. Theresa learns after losing Lorraine that life without each other’s support and understanding will be hard to bear. These women collectively share their rich and bitter experiences on Brewster Place. This is reflected in the form and content of the novel, and in the use of language as well as through images, metaphors, mood and tone.

The interactions of the characters and the similar struggles they live through connect the stories, through their recurring themes and motifs. Of these unifying elements, the most notable is the dream motif, for though these women are living in a very unpleasant existence, they are united by their common dreams. Naylor delineates only the predicament of colored women and their exploitation by colored men. She does not refer to the attitude of white men towards colored women in her novels. As critic Barbara Christian in a *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985) reports, “Many black women were being raped by
white men, rather than the popular conception that white women were constantly being raped by black men” (27).

The novel begins with Langston Hughes's poem, *Harlem*, which asks “What happens to a dream deferred” (WBP 1)? Just as the poem suggests many answers to that question, so the novel travel around many stories of deferred dreams. Each woman in the book has her own dream.

As a young, single mother, Mattie places all of her dreams on her son. She leaves her boarding house, room after a rat bites him because she cannot stay “...another night in that place without nightmares about things that would creep out of the walls to attack her child” (31). She continues to protect him from destruction and nightmares until he jumps bail and abandons her to her own terrifying prospective.

Etta Mae dreams of a man who can move her off of Brewster Place for good, but she is totally disappointed by the dream each time when the man frustrates her.

Kiswana, an outsider on Brewster Place, is constantly dreaming of ways in which she can categorize the residents and perform social reform. Even as she looks out of her window at the wall that separates Brewster Place from the heart of the city, she is daydreaming:

> She placed her dreams on the back of the bird and fantasized that it would glide forever in transparent silver circles until it ascended to the center of the universe and was swallowed up.” But just as the pigeon she watches, fails to ascend gracefully and instead lands on a fire escape “in awkward, frantic movements.

(75)

So Kiswana’s dreams of a revolution will be disturbed by the depressing realities of Brewster Place and the awkward, frantic movements of people who are busy merely trying to survive.
Lucielia Louise Turner (Ciel) dreams of love, from her boyfriend, daughter and unborn child, but an unwanted abortion, the death of her daughter, and the rejection by her boyfriend cruelly discourage these hopes. She is left dreaming only of death, a suicidal nightmare. She is animated only by the motherly love which she gets from Mattie.

Lorraine dreams of conformity and a place where she does not “. . . feel any different from anybody else in the world” (165). She finds this place for the time being with Ben, and he finds in her a reminder of the lost daughter who troubles his own dreams. But their dreams will be ended brutally with her rape and his death, and the image of Lorraine will later haunt the dreams of all the women on Brewster Place. But perhaps the most revealing stories about dreams are those told in Cora Lee and The Block Party.

Cora Lee's story opens with a quotation from Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595) “True, I talk of dreams / which are the children of an idle brain / begot of nothing but vain fantasy” (107). The quotation is appropriate to Cora Lee's story not only because Cora and her children will attend the play but also because Cora's chapter will explore the connection between the begetting of children and the begetting of dreams. It will also examine the point at which dreams become vain fantasy. As a child Cora dreams of new baby dolls. When her parents refuse to give her another for her thirteenth Christmas, she is heartbroken. Her mother tries to console her by telling her that she still has all her old dolls, but Cora dolefully says, as they do not smell and feel the same as the new ones. As an adult, she continues to prefer the smell and feel of her new babies to the trials and hassles of her growing children. Her babies just seemed to keep coming until they grow, and then she just did not recognize them. Once they become an adult she finds them wild and repulsive and she makes little attempt to comprehend or parent them. They no longer fit into her dream of a sweet, dependent baby who needs no one but her.
Kiswana finds one of these wild children eating out of a dumpster, and soon Kiswana and Cora become friends. Kiswana talks confidently to Cora about her dreams of reform and revolution. Excitedly she tells Cora, “. . . if we really pull together, we can put pressure on [the landlord] to start fixing this place up” (115). She is similarly convinced that it will be easy to change Cora's relationship with her children, and she eagerly invites them to her boyfriend's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Cora is unconvinced, but to calm down Kiswana she agrees to go.

It is at the performance of Shakespeare's play where the dreams of the two women temporarily merge. The production, sponsored by a grant from the city, has inspired Cora to dream for her older children. She envision that her daughter Maybelline “. . . could be doing something like this someday — standing on a stage, wearing pretty clothes and saying fine things. Maybelline could go to college — she liked school” (125). When she remembers with guilt that her children no longer like school and are often idlers, she resolves to change her behavior in order to ensure them brighter futures “Junior high; high school; college — none of them stayed little forever. And then on to good jobs in insurance companies and the post office, even doctors and lawyers. Yes, that's what would happen to her babies” (126). Cora Lee’s new dream of maternal devotion continues as they arrive home and prepare for bed. She pushes them in and the children do not question her unusual attention because it has been a night for wonders. Amid Naylor's painfully accurate depictions of real women and their real struggles, Cora's instant transformation into a devoted and responsible mother seems a vain fantasy.

In the last paragraph of Cora's story, however, we find that the delusion has been Cora's. After kissing her children good night, she returns to her bedroom and finds one of her shadow-like lovers waiting in her bed, and she folds “. . . her evening like gold and lavender gauze deep
within the creases of her dreams and lets her clothes drop to the floor” (127). She will not change her actions and become a devoted mother, and her dreams for her children will be deferred. They were, after all, only illusions, and real dreams take more than one night to achieve.

The Block Party tells the story of another deferred dream, this one literally dreamt by Mattie the night before the real Block Party. The chapter begins with a mention of the disturbing dreams that preoccupy all the women and girls of Brewster Place during the week after Ben's death and Lorraine's rape. They will not talk about these dreams; only a few of them will even admit to having them, but every one of them dreams of Lorraine, finally be acquainted with the bond they share with the woman they had shunned as different. Sadly, Lorraine's dream is being different from anybody else in the world is only fulfilled when her rape forces the other women to recognize the victimization and vulnerability that they share with her.

Naylor, reminds about the economic reality when she describes the wall that blocks Brewster Place from a major thoroughfare. She suggests that the life blood of the neighborhood has been stanched, and the inhabitants have been left to fend for themselves or die. Most die, if not physically, then emotionally, because the coping skills they have cultivated are designed for a more agrarian existence with its emphasis on open spaces, nature and the solace offered in extended families. Though each of them has come to Brewster Place for different reasons, each has come to escape some perceived ill back home. The irony, of course, rests in the fact that their present conditions have brought new ills.

In Mattie's dream of the Block party, even Ciel, who knows nothing of Lorraine, admits that she has dreamt of a woman who was supposed to be her but she did not look exactly like her, but inside she felt it was her own image. The long-awaited Block party designed by the tenants associates the anticipation of Mattie’s dream event. “...the widespread guilt surfacing
in various women’s dreams, is a sign of the phoenix of this neighborhood rising from destruction and achieving solidarity in realistic hope for a better place to live” (Michael Lynch, 374).

In a novel full of disappointed and constantly deferred dreams, the only dream that is fully realized is Lorraine's dream. She is recognized as a miserable human being who is somebody's daughter or somebody's friend or even somebody's enemy. In dreaming of Lorraine the women concede that she represents every one of them and reconcile themselves as daughter, their friend, their enemy, and her brutal rape is the fulfillment of their own nightmares.

Mattie's dream presents an authoritative response to this nightmare of disempowerment. She dreams of the women joining together to tear down the wall that has separated them from the rest of the city, she dreams of a way for all of them to achieve Lorraine's dream of approval. The women in Brewster Place tear down the wall which has separated them and made them different from the other residents of the city. They will tear down the wall which is stained with blood, and which has come to symbolize their dead end existence on Brewster Place. As Jill Matus notes, the destruction of the very bricks of Brewster's walls is an act of resistance against the conditions that prevail within it.

But the women in Brewster Place endeavor at tearing down the wall which is only a dream in Mattie’s ecstasy. And just as the rain pours the women are baptized and their dream worked out and the dream ends. Mattie awakes to discover that it is still morning, the wall is still standing, and the Block Party still looms in the future.

Nevertheless, this is not the same sort of disappointing interruption as in Cora Lee's story. Though Mattie's dream has not yet been fulfilled, there are hints that it will take place. She awakes to find the sun shining for the first time in a week, just like in her dream. They are still in a party and the rain in Mattie's dream foreshadows the stormy clouds that had formed on the
horizon and were silently moving toward Brewster Place. The book ends with one final mention of dreams. In the epilogue we are told that Brewster Place is abandoned, but does not die, because the dreams of the women are alive.

But the colored daughters of Brewster, get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they are mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into pots of soup, and they are diapered around babies. Brewster Place lives on because the women whose dreams it has been a part of living and they continue to dream. Their dreams, even those that are continually deferred, keep them alive, continuing to sleep, cook, and care for their children. Dreams keep the street alive as well, if only in the minds of its former inhabitants whose stories the dream motif unites into a logical novel.

Another persistent theme in the pattern of the novel is that women share their experiences with each other. Mattie shares the secrets with her mother, not with her father even though the father is affectionate, caring, and concerned for her well-being. Her mother cannot tell her husband the name of the man who rapes their daughter. This mother–daughter tie is a testimony of womanhood in harmony. The novel is sprinkled with episodes where this heroines exchange their experiences, feelings and thoughts. It is evident when Miss Eva recalls her past capitalize in the company of Mattie, and in return elicits secrets of Mattie’s life. This pattern affirms the fact that colored women survive together although estranged from the mainstream of a racist and sexist society. They have a minority living on the fringes of this society.

Mattie Michael, a woman who becomes a central unifying figure to both the neighborhood and the novel. Mattie grows up in the rural South, in the sugarcane of Tennessee. Her conservative and religious father protects her from the ways of the world with an iron fist, to the point of even choosing her friends. One day in her father’s absence, she leaves the house to
chop some sugarcane with the attractive and appealing Butch Fuller. For Mattie, the outcome of the one seductive afternoon is pregnancy and the wrath of her father. Her father insists to marry Fred Harris, the only man he has allowed to court her. Mattie denies that the child is Fred’s but will not confess her dalliance with Butch “Well, past is past. And I still think Fred Watson is a tolerable young man, in spite of what he done.” He cleared his throat again and looked up at her. “I was young once, too. And done made many a mistake and ain’t through makin’ ‘em” (WBP 21).

The father flies into a fury and beats Mattie unmercifully. One week later, she is on a Greyhound bus headed to North Carolina where she is greeted by her friend Etta Johnson. Mattie stays with Etta until her son, Basil, is born, but then Etta leaves North Carolina for New York City where she hopes to find more action. Mattie fights back alone with her son until he is bitten by a rat, and she can no longer stay in apartment for fear of his safety:

Mattie tightened her around Basil and shook her head. There was no way she could have slept another night in that place without nightmares of things that would creep out of the walls to attack her child. She could never take him back to a place that has caused him so much pain. (31)

She flees the apartment in an irrational moment and walks through the streets until she is exhausted and hopeless. A woman calls her from her covered entrance and invites her in. The hospitable but unconventional woman is Eva Turner, survivor of five husbands and dispenser of common wisdom. Miss Eva is raising her granddaughter, Lucielia, and she provides Mattie with the excuse that Basil will be a good playmate for Lucielia:

‘Well,’ the old woman chuckled, ‘I’ve had five – outlived ’em all. So I can tell you you ain’t missing much.’ She opened the gate. ‘Since you done already
picked up your valise, you might as well come on in and get that boy out the night air. Got plenty of room here. Just me and my grandbaby. He’ll be good company for Lucielia.’ (32)

The night of sociability turn into thirty years of friendship, and Mattie has found a home for herself and her son.

Basil becomes the object of Mattie’s intemperance, and he grows up to be a demanding and irresponsible man who feels no guilt about using his mother “There’s nothing left to talk about, Mama, unless you wanna here about the broken toilets with three-day-old shit or the bedbugs that have ate up my back or the greasy food I keep throwing up. Other than that, I got nothing to say to you” (49). When he is thirty, he calls home one night to proclaim that he is in jail for killing someone, and he demands that she should come and get him out. Mattie cannot stand the thought that Basil must undergo difficult conditions in jail for the two weeks before his trial, so she uses her house against his bail:

He wondered why she hadn’t let the public defender take care of such simple case. He would be receiving a huge fee for something that wouldn’t even require a trial by jury if it was in the next county. Bell, he sighed, and put his glasses back on. Thank God for ignorance of the law and frantic mothers. (47-48)

When Basil jumps bail, Mattie loses everything. Mattie leaves her home and travel to Brewster Place, carrying with her an inheritance of sorrow and a spirit of survival. Mattie Michael, an unwed mother, the emotional center of the novel, is a middle aged woman who comes to Brewster Place from her home. Before her coming, she has dedicated her life in raising her son, but he disappoints her in all ways.
Naylor is as successful as she is at presenting the intricacy of colored lives without reducing the people to types simply because she is an accomplished writer. Mattie Michael’s motherly ways did not just come naturally to her. They came mostly from the personal experiences and the people in her life. Mattie is a decent woman by the standards of her community. She lives quietly with her father and mother, obeys their rules, and is active in church related activities.

Mattie meets people only with those of whom her family approves. Butch Fuller understands their different social positions in the community makes him an unwelcome visitor to Mattie’s world. However, by his charm he seduces her. After this event Mattie loses her girlhood and becomes a colored woman. She never tells her father about the identity of the father of her child. Mattie and her father’s relation are based on his superior role in the home, and he believes that his daughter must never resist him. Mattie knew that if she reveals this to her father he will kill him and she does not want this to happen. When she refuses to reveal the identity of her child’s father he unavoidably reacts with the usual patriarchal agony:

Her silence stole the last sanctuary for his rage. He wanted to kill the man who had sneaked into his home and distorted the faith and trust he had in his child. But she had chosen this man’s side against him, and in his fury, he tried to stamp out what had hurt him the most and was now brazenly taunting him - her disobedience. (23)

Mattie had a very strict father, Sam, who expected her to be a daddy’s good little girl. When she became pregnant from Butch, a young man who her father despised, he nearly beat her to death until, her mother screamed, and jumped on his back and tried to grapple the stick from him:
‘So help me Jesus, Sam! She screamed. ‘hit my child again and I’ll meet your soul in hell!’ she cocked the gun again and this time aimed for the centre of his chest.

‘Look! Just look a ‘what you done!’

Fannie, I . . . Fannie, she . . . he mumbled dazedly. A slow moan came from the pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor. Sam Michael looked at it, saw that it was his daughter, and he dropped the stick and wept. (24)

During the beating Mattie could only think of one thing, protecting her in order to guard her unborn child. Naylor shows through these two colored women, Mattie’s mother and Mattie herself; a protective nature that women have to make them very adaptable to the pain inflicted upon them, often by men. Mattie did not hesitate to move away from her father and the rest of her family in the South to provide what she thought would be a better life in the North.

Mattie understands the consequences of not clinging 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 found herself at Brewster Place where there is a large block wall at the end of the street that tells her and all others who live there that they have reached the end of the road.

Mattie tried to move away to give Basil a better life and found it in the home of a white woman named Miss Eva Turner. Miss Eva was already caring for her granddaughter, Lucielia Louise Turner, and would not take any recompense from Mattie. She was a strong influence in the motherly characteristics that Mattie intended to possess. The young colored woman and the old white woman sat in the kitchen for hours and blending their lives so that what lay behind one and a head of the other became indistinguishable:
Mattie looked at Miss Eva’s stooped back and the wrinkled yellow neck with grizzled wisps of hair lying on it, and small needles of repentance began to stab at her heart. She would be gone soon and Mattie didn’t want to imagine facing the loss of another mother. (39)

Miss Eva gave Mattie advice and encouragement at no cost, just because she was a woman who cared. Mattie thought of her as a mother. When she noticed that Miss Eva was getting older, she did not want to imagine the loss of another mother. But sometimes Mattie became defensively angry whenever the old woman chided her son for neglecting his own needs.

However, through Mattie’s correlation with Miss Eva, Naylor wants us to see how women regardless of skin color, tend bond together and strengthen each other in a motherly fashion when they have been put in a very ascetic situation by men. Eva’s shelter to Mattie and her son Basil till the end of her life made Mattie to save money. With this money Mattie bought a house so that:

Her son must have room to grow in, a yard to run in, a decent place to bring his friends. Her own spirit must one day have a place to rest because the body could not, as it pushed and struggled to make all around them safe and comfortable. It would all be for him and those to come from the long, muscular thighs of him who sat opposite her at the table. (40)

Once Eva passed away, Mattie had a very difficult time raising Basil on her own. She was so fearful of being like her father that she let her son do as he pleased:

Mattie remained silent because she didn’t want to argue with him while he ate. He’d had a nervous stomach all his life and she didn’t want him to get cramps or run out of the house, refusing to eat at all. She doubted that she would see him
anymore that day and she wanted to be certain he got at least one decent meal.

(41)

This ended up being a very poor parental decision because Basil ended up killing a man in a bar fight. Basil was then given a lengthy prison sentence:

‘Mama, he’ll say anything to get your money. If someone offered him a nickel more than you paid, he’d throw me in jail personally and swallow the key. You don’t know them like I do, and you don’t know what it’s like in those cells. And they’ll send me to a worse place than some county jail.’ He looked at her sorrowfully. ‘I couldn’t stand it, Mama. I just couldn’t’. (52)

This brought a great deal of pain and sorrow to Mattie. Thus Mattie’s youth is blemished by Butch and in old age by Basil, her son, who ruined her financially, morally and emotionally:

‘Oh, Basil,’ Mattie sighed, suddenly feeling the strain of the last twelve hours, ‘I ain’t sticking up for nobody, but we gotta face what happened so we can see our way clear from this’.

‘It’s not ‘we’ Mama, it’s me. I’m stuck in here - not you. It’s filthy and smelly, and I even heard rats under my bed last night.’

Mattie’s stomach knotted into tiny spasms.

‘So when am I leaving?’ (48)

She mortgaged the house to raise the bail for her son and the son ran away. Unfaithfulness from her beloved son was the worst kind of a wound for a woman. Mattie, an unwed mother, who had pinned all her hopes on her only son, was left alone at the end of the story:

She walked up the street and saw that his car wasn’t parked out in front and the house was dark. She stood for a moment by the front gate, first looking at the
space where the car should be and then at the unlit windows. Normally she would have gone through the front door, taken off her coat, and hung it in the front hall closet. Tonight she entered the house through the back door that led straight into the kitchen. (53)

The unavoidability of Mattie being stuck at Brewster Place was caused by two men, first her father and then her son, shows how women are at times put in such situations because of the men in their lives.

Thus Mattie Michael, a strong, elderly unmarried colored woman who reared a son before moving to Brewster Place is the essential role in the novel. Her own personal tragedies – her father’s shame and rejection when he learns she is pregnant; the loss of her son, Basil, whom she loves dearly; the loss of her worldly possessions – make her sensitive to the tragedies of others. She breathes life and hope into the dismal atmosphere of Brewster Place. At the end of the novel, Mattie is the first to begin tearing down the wall that makes Brewster Place a literal and figurative dead end for its residents:

‘Get that out of here!’ she grabbed the brick and gave it to Etta, who took it over to the next table. And it was passed by the women from hand to hand, table to table, until the brick flew out of Brewster Place and went spinning out onto the avenue. . . .

‘We gonna need some help here,’ Mattie called out. ‘It’s spreading all over!’

Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands; the water pouring under their chins, plastering their blouses and dresses against their breasts and into the cracks of their hips. The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of
Brewster Place past over – turned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. (186)

Mattie actually develops her potential in Brewster Place and learns to channel her alarming maternal love in suitable directions, becoming an effective surrogate mother to others there. She is the most powerful figure in the novel around which the other stories revolve. The underground world is created around Mattie Michael, the central mother figure. Mattie is the communities comforting force, whose community influence is boundless, and one of the distinctive features of African - American fiction is the presence of characters like Mattie who is an ancient wisdom borne out of the hardships she has faced by virtue of being both colored and a woman in a world that is white and male.

The second story focuses on Etta Mae Johnson, the woman who gave shelter to Mattie Michael over thirty years earlier, when she was pregnant with Basil. Now the situation is inverted, and Etta Mae comes to Brewster Place to live with Mattie. Etta Mae Johnson, an old friend of Mattie’s southern childhood, a middle-aged woman searches for both pleasures 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. Whereas Mattie has dedicated her whole life to only her son and has never risked loving a man, Etta Mae has lived with an uncontrolled passion and at last she abandons from her teenage years back in Tennessee:

Rock Vale had no place for the black woman who was not only unwilling to play by the rules, but whose spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist. The whites in Rock Vale were painfully reminded of this rebellion when she looked them straight in the face while putting in her father’s order at the dry goods store,
when she reserved her sirs and mams for those she thought deserving, and when she smiled only if pleased, regardless of whose presence she was in. (59 - 60) She learned to hook herself to any promising rising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another. Etta Mae’s free spirit and enterprising traditions have earned her the contempt of whites and the self-righteous contempt of her own people. The life of independence and using others before she can be used has taken a payment on Etta Mae, and she comes into Brewster Place broken in spirit. She turns to Brewster Place and her lifelong friend, Mattie, for the unspoken “. . . love and comfort that awaited her” (74).

The best example of sisterly friendship without the motherly connection is Etta Mae Johnson’s relationship with Mattie. Women are weary but “. . . still dripping with the juices of a full-fledged life. . .” (67). Etta returns to Mattie and Brewster Place as a homecoming 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 constantly 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 ones. And by rights of this possession, it tolerated no secrets. (58)

Etta Mae Johnson is a cheerful, impudent, and a self-governing colored woman who has lived her life according to her own desires. Etta, like her friend Mattie, leaves home because she was compelled to disobey the social rules. Unlike Mattie, Etta refuses to submit to the Southern racist system:

Ruther Ford County 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 county line, and then had returned and burned down her father’s barn. The Sheriff told Mr. Johnson that he had gotten off mighty light – considering Mr. Johnson thought so, too. After reading Mattie’s letters, Etta was sorry she hadn’t killed the horny white bastard when she had the chance. (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 colored. Etta apparently rejected the sexual advances of a white male. Her refusal to submissively accept his attention resulted in the demolition of her father’s property with the implied and firm approval of the Sheriff, which led her to leave her home town in fear for her life. She undoubtedly knows that her actions, though unjustifiable, are taboo in her community. However, she soon learns that she would deal with racism and sexism in places other than Tennessee, her native place:

Rock vale had followed her to Memphis, Detroit, and Chicago and even to 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 to any promising, rising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another. (60)

Thus, racism and sexism compel Etta to channel her spirit of independence into disappointing relationship with different men and move from one city to another in search of a place that would allow her to be herself without chains. Etta’s story is framed by Jazz and gospel music, rather Janus-faced mixture of sensuality and salvation. In this chapter, numerous references to the songs of Bellie Holliday reveal the timbre of Etta’s life: Pain, loneliness and
heartbreak mixed with a self-important contempt for social rules and prescribed behavior. Gospel music, in the context of the church she visits with Mattie, signifies hope and 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 she explains Mattie “Don’t you think I got a mirror? Each year there is 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” (69-70).

Etta intends to get some rest with the help of Reverend Moreland Woods, a charismatic colored preacher with a mouthful of strong gold capped teeth and a diamond pinkie ring. She wants him to become her personal savior, to deliver her from the sins of her past and lead her to a 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 realizes her sorry plight “The angels rejoice more over one sinner who turns around than over ninety-nine righteous ones.” And again, “Well, if I can be of any assistance, Sister Johnson, don’t hesitate to ask. I couldn’t sleep knowing one of the Lord’s sheep is troubled” (68-69).

It is at a very late stage Etta understands that she must depend on her own for salvation. Etta, like Mattie, is outplayed by the man with whom she is involved. Upon her returns to Brewster Place, Etta learns that her friend and the women in her family can give her comfort which she is searching for and no man has ever given her love, comfort and friendship. Mattie offers the warmth and support which Etta Mae needs at this crucial moment, and they share an important, common bond based on the disappointments which each has faced in romantic relationships. The invincible narrator describes their bond thus:
Etta and Mattie had taken totally different roads that with all of their deceptive winding had both ended up on Brewster Place. Their daughter now drew them into a conspiratorial circle against all the Simeons outside of that dead-end street and it didn’t stop until they were both weak from the tears that flowed down their faces. (60-61)

Etta Mae is impossible to defeat or subdue the classic blues singer she characterizes, with Mattie’s assistance, able to rise above the near-tragic night world of Brewster Place. Indeed, at the end of her narrative, her psychology is hardly one that is suggestive of the depth of gloom:

When Etta got to the stoop, she noticed there was a light under the shade at Mattie’s window, and she strained to hear what actually sounded like music coming from behind the screen. Mattie was playing her records! Etta stood very still, trying to decipher the broken air waves into intelligible sound, but she could not make out the words. She stopped straining when it suddenly came to her that it wasn’t important what song it was - someone was waiting up for her. Someone who would deny fiercely that there had been any concern – just a little indigestion from them fried onions that kept me from sleeping. Thought I’d pass the time by figuring out what you see in all this loose – life music.

Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her. (74)

Through Etta Mae’s narrative, Naylor illustrates the important role of Mattie as guide in the emblematic descent that the women in the community experience. The blues originating from Etta Mae’s down-home rural past pass through her narrative and suggest not only the presence of a vibrant, underground folk culture but also the women’s ability to convert, and create a
authoritarian reality. Her narrative, like the novel itself is “... an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically” (Ellison 78-79). After her assignation with Reverend Woods in a seedy motel room and her return to the night world of Brewster Place she finds Mattie, a keen gospel music fan, listening to Etta Mae’s blues records.

Kiswana Browne is the third woman to whom we are introduced. She is a young political activist and a middle-class colored woman who rejects her background and her name and moves to Brewster Place and attempts to help the people who live there under disastrous and lamentable conditions. Formerly, Melanie Browne, Kiswana has changed her name to signify her faithfulness with the social revolutions of the times that she has fully discomfited. She has moved from the colored middle class neighborhood of Linden Hills to Brewster Place, so that she might live the conditions she is trying to change. Her family does not understand her calling and urge her to return to the material security of home:

You constantly live in a fantasy world – always go into extremes – turning butterflies into eagles and life isn’t about that. It’s accepting what is and working from that. Lord I remember how worried you had been putting all that lacquered hair spray on your head. I thought you were going to get lung cancer – trying to be what you are not. (WBP 85)

She claims:

Oh, God, I can’t take this anymore. Trying to be something I’m not – trying to be something I’m not, mama! Trying to be proud of my heritage and the fact that I was African descent. If that’s being what I’m not, then I say fine. But I’d rather be dead than be like you – a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black! (85)
Unlike Kiswana her brother Wilson does not spend his college years trying to retrieve his roots, and she disrespects him as a sellout to the establishment. When her mother voices concern about her living, as she does, amid those people, Kiswana takes offense:

‘I don’t care. I still think it’s downright selfish of you to be sitting over here with no phone, and sometimes we don’t hear from you in two weeks – anything could happen – especially living among those people’.

Kiswana snapped her head up. ‘What do you mean these people? They’re my people and yours, too, Mama – we’re all black. But maybe you have forgotten that over in Linden Hills. (83)

Kiswana Browne whose parents lives in Linden Hills and is mentioned in the second novel is another powerful character in Brewster Place. She is the conscious activist proud of her African heritage and comes to Brewster Place to live among her people. The story centers around a visit Mrs. Browne makes to Brewster Place to convince Kiswana that she should return to Linden Hills. Kiswana explains her decision to drop out of college, saying, ‘You’ll never understand, will you? Those bourgie schools were counter revolutionary. My place was in the streets with my people, fighting for equality and a better community’ (83). When Kiswana confronts her mother, Mrs. Browne stands up and gives her a speech:

‘My grandmother,’ Mrs. Browne began slowly in a whisper, was a full bloodied Iroquois, and my grandfather a free black from a long line of journeymen who had lived in Connecticut since the establishment of the colonies. And my father was a Bajan who came to this country as a cabin boy on a merchant marine. (86) Kiswana was furious and she uttered angrily:

‘I know all that’ Kiswana said, trying to keep her lips from trembling.
'Then know this.’ And the nails dug deeper into her flesh.

‘I am alive because of the blood, our proud people who never scraped or begged or apologized for what they were. They lived asking only one thing of this world – to be allowed to be. And I learned through the blood of those people that black isn’t beautiful and it is not ugly – black is! It’s not kinky hair and it’s not straight hair – it just is.’ (86)

Mrs. Browne continues, saying that she has used “... everything I had and could ever get to see that my children were prepared to meet this world on its own terms, ... that’s not being white or red or black – that’s being a mother” (86). The visit yields reconciliation and an understanding between the women that is triggered by Kiswana’s recognition that she and her mother have more in common than she had imagined. Mrs. Browne gives her unspoken approval of Kiswana’s choice of life when she leaves an envelope with seventy five dollars in the couch. Kiswana looks at her mother and sees “... at the woman she had been and was to become,” but she warns her mother, “I’ll never be a Republican” (87-88).

The confessional tone of Mrs. Browne’s talk with her daughter suits the episode. The mother persuades Kiswana to accept a better job, leaving her struggle to help the colored people. Kiswana has prepared a banner, “Today Brewster, tomorrow America” for a meeting of the residents of Brewster Place. It is held in her studio apartment. Though very few people recognize the slogan at the time, Mrs. Browne’s stand affirms her positive approach to face the problems squarely. This she inculcates in her daughter. This mother – daughter relationship reaffirms Kiswana’s pursuit. The mother wants her daughter to be proud of being what she is, as she exists. This spirit of woman’s dignity is invoked in the story of Kiswana Browne.
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 confirmation of her commitment to the African heritage. Throughout Kiswana’s visit, Mrs. Browne refuses to address her daughter by her African name, even though Kiswana tells her not to call her Melanie. Mrs. Browne informs her:

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)

In this way, Mrs. Browne argues that Kiswana was given name, Melaine, has a history and heritage and that by rejected her own past. Thus Kiswana ultimately understands her common history and struggles with other colored women. When her mother tells her that she is being selfish for living among these people “Kiswana snaps back, what you mean these people. They are my people and yours, too, Mama- We’re all black. But maybe you’ve forgotten that over in Linden Hills” (83).

Naylor’s depiction of the character Kiswana is presented as lacking the clench and humor of the other women who have endured more and lived more deeply, she is nevertheless the only one who endeavors to help the community see itself as a political force that can fight the landlords and demand its rights. Still she can leave Brewster Place when she wishes. She does not risk survival, as the others would if they rebelled; nor has she yet been worn down by the unceasing cycle of displacement that the others have experienced. And she has a sense of how
power operates accurately because she comes from Linden Hills, a place she leaves exactly because it is so focused on money and power.

Naylor’s enclosure of Kiswana as a pivotal character in *The Women of Brewster Place* indicates the great distance between women who must live in women centered communities and those who have the option to live in them. For Kiswana’s choice to live Brewster Place is already a sign that, in relation to the other women, she has some advantage in the society. She is an exception while they are the majority. And her privilege comes from the fact that she was raised in a wealthy community.

The fourth story is about Lucielia Louise Turner, the granddaughter of Eva Turner, who took in Mattie Michael when she was a young mother with nowhere to turn. Now Ciel lives on Brewster Place and her friendship with Mattie has continued. Ciel’s partner, Eugene, is the father of her child, Serena, but he cannot undergo the strictures of family life for long stretches “I’m not picking on you, but you’re going to wake up the baby. Which is always supposed to lead to: You don’t give a damn about me. Everybody’s more important than me - that kid, your friends, everybody. I’m just chickens hit around here, huh (93)?

After he returns to Brewster Place, he loses his job, Ciel is pregnant again, and Eugene is calling for a fight. Though she does not really want to, Ciel decides to have an abortion, hoping that there will be one less stress on the family. The abortion buys Ciel some peace in her family, but once again, Eugene is ready to leave the family in the quest of his next exploration. As they argue and Eugene packs his bag, the toddler Serena wanders into the kitchen and plays with electrical outlet.

When Serena dies from the electrocution, Eugene once again absents himself from the family and does not even attend the funeral. Ciel is grieved beyond her ability to cope and simply
shuts down. She does not cry, eat, drink water, or bathe. Mattie Michael finally realizes that Ciel is grieving to death, and she steps in and cares for her with the tenderness of a mother, rocking Ciel until she can begin to cry a thin, painful groan. She bathes Ciel, and puts her to bed where she “. . . lay down and cried, But Mattie knew that the tears would end. And she would sleep. And morning would come” (105). Ciel Turner’s husband Eugene constantly blames her and the two children for their poverty. She loses her daughter Serena in a tragic accident. Mattie nurtures her back to life and sanity in one of the most touching scenes of the novel. Perhaps Ciel’s slow recovery of her will to live with the psychological support of Mattie which is the most assenting scene in the novel. This scene testifies to the fact that suffering cannot only be shared but can mobilize one’s inner resources. Lucielia Louise Turner, a kind of step child to Mattie, learns the pain of loving a man, tolerates abuse from her husband Eugene, who cannot give her any support, emotional and economic and the torment of the death of a child. Ciel moans, but Mattie rocks her. Mattie becomes the archetypal mother of all children of the human race. These are the children who were oppressed and murdered through centuries:

Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. Mattie nestles Ciel on and on. She passes Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children’s 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.

(103)

Mattie with her maternal compassion comforts Ciel. She removes the cause of deep hurt sustained by Ciel. In Mattie’s lap, the childhood world of Ciel comes alive. It is her murdered dreams which cause her distress. Still Mattie nestles her, takes her to the root of her heart. She
knows that Ciel will be healed. She nurses Ciel tenderly and affectionately. Due to Mattie’s devoted efforts Ciel gets a lease of new life. Ciel cried and her agony was washed away.

Lucielia Louise Turner evokes the tender aspect of colored motherhood. The healing touch of the mother is evident in Mattie’s compassionate treatment of Lucelia. Ciel is hurt, due to the inconstancy of her husband, Eugene. She suffers acutely when two tragic events occur simultaneously. Serena, her young daughter dies; Eugene loses his job. To pull the family together, before Serena’s death, Ciel undergoes an abortion. In spite of Ciel’s best efforts, Eugene lies and leaves Ciel all alone. Then, Ciel “was simply tired” of being hurt. She is about to succumb to death. Mattie determines to see Ciel alive. She like a “black Brahman cow” becomes desperate to protect “her young” (103).

The life sustaining spirit of a woman is the vanguard of colored womanhood. Finally Mattie’s faith proves true. She knew the tears would end:

Mattie took the edges of the dirty sheets and she’d pulled off the bed and wiped the mucus that had been running out of Ciel’s nose. She then let her freshly wet, glistening body, baptized now, to the bed. She covered her leg with one sheet and laid a towel across the pillow – it would help for a while.

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

Ciel is saved. Later, Ciel settles in San Francisco, decides to marry and have a family. This news enraptures both Mattie and Etta at the Block Party. Yet Ciel dreams a frightening dream in San Francisco, about the wall, Ben’s and Lorraine’s tragic death. This dream impels Ciel to visit Brewster Place specifically on the day of Block Party. Thus, she too emblematically partakes of
the rite of dispelling the stain of sexist oppression in a racist society by hurling away the blood-spotted bricks of the wall against which Lorraine had sacrificed.

Lucielia Louise Turner is a young married woman, the granddaughter of Eva Turner, the woman who befriended and sheltered Mattie years earlier. The story of Lucielia Louise Turner deals with the theme of the conflict between colored men and women. Her story differs from Mattie Michael and Etta Mae Johnson. It is the story of a poor colored 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 sustain in a job, which he believes and that reflects his manhood, often uses hostile and combative language in his interaction with Ciel. Ceil on the other hand, understanding his frustration, tries to make the necessary adjustment.

The relationship between Ciel and Eugene signifies the tension between colored men and women caused by racism and economic depression, specifically as they affect the ability of colored men to find employment. Eugene’s hostility towards his wife, Ciel, is directly related to his constant joblessness. Unable to face the social and political realities that are responsible for his problems and unable to provide for Ciel and his eleven months old daughter, Serena, he blames Ciel for his inability to succeed. It is augmented when she becomes pregnant, for a second time. He blames her for his plight:

I lost my job today; he shot at her, as if she had been the cause. I’m fucking sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that’s all you are 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 ever gonna having nothing. He came and grabbed her
by the shoulders and was shouting into her face. Nothing, do you hear me, nothing. (95)

By blaming Ciel, Eugene assumes an adverbial position. She becomes the enemy-the agency that refuses Eugene a job. She and her young daughter also represent for Eugene all the social, political and economic ills that plague those colored men who are unable to fulfill their culture’s definition of manhood. Eugene’s preoccupation with his manhood and indeed, his distorted notions about what constitutes manhood, is revealed in his conversation with Ben, the janitor “I mean, I should be there today with my woman in the limo and all, sittin’ up there, doing it right. But how you gonna be a man with them ball-busters tellin’ everyone it was my fault and I should be the one dead? Damn” (90)!

Ciel is faced with something that causes her immense pain and is all too often a commonplace for colored women in America, that dreams are shattered by the men in their lives. Trying to please Eugene and in turn keep him with her, Ciel aborts her baby. This familiarity causes her life and she feels normal: “The next few days Ciel found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world. Everything seemed to have taken on new textures and colors” (95).

She then became defensive of Serena, who is the only thing ever loved without pain. Throughout this entire section we see Mattie’s motherly nature coming out. She doesn’t like Eugene’s treatment of Ciel and Serena. She recurrently offers to care Ciel and Serena. Mattie even has a maternal instinct for Eugene’s eventual abandonment of her and Serena. When Ciel tells her that Serena has learned her father’s name she says: “Better teach her your name; . . . She’ll be using it more” (96).
In a way, Mattie is right. Eugene comes home one day, and makes up a story about a job in another town in order to leave them. For instance, on the evening that he announces his loss of a job, Ciel reflects:

He wants to pick a fight, she thought confused and hurt. He knows Serena’s taking a nap, and now I am supposed to say, Eugene, the baby’s asleep, please cut the music down. Then he is going to say you mean a man can’t even relax in his own home without being picked on? I am not picking on you but you’re going to wake up the baby which is always supposed to lead to. You don’t give a damn about me. Every one’s more important than me – that kid, your friends and everybody. I’m just chickens hit around here, huh? (93)

Ciel comprehends that her simple request for consideration for their sleeping child will bring out a furiously hostile response from Eugene. Not intending to anger him further for fear that he may leave her, she resorts to silence.

In a tragic turn of events, while he and Ciel are fighting, Serena is left alone in the other room where she plays with a metal fork and an electric socket. The death of Serena is a very tragic event that proves to be yet another shattered dream for a woman of Brewster place that is, in this case, indirectly caused by a man. With the death of her daughter, Ciel becomes overwhelmed and does not want to move, speak or live. The text tells us of Ciel’s failure to cry for the death of Serena “They thought it some special art of grief when she stopped eating and even drinking water unless forced to; her hair went uncombed and her body unbathed. But Ciel was not grieving for Serena. She was simply tired of being hurt and she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her” (101). It is Mattie who holds her and rocks her until the pain starts to flow out. Mattie’s rocking allows her to connect the pain of her
own maternal losses with an apparently timeless pain and, in a sense, equally gain less-history of maternal pain.

Ciel’s imaginative flight does not end, however, with such insights. Mattie rocks Ciel from visions of the general awareness of the timelessness of her pain to the specific and a direct confrontation with her illusions about life and about herself which rendered her incapable of preventing her personal tragedies. These illusions, in fact, had made her a hesitant participant in her tragedies’ unfolding:

Mattie rocked her into her childhood and let her see her murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, 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 it roots were deep, gigantic, ragged and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103)

The removal of the symbolic splinter leads to Ciel’s ability to observe clearly the terrible consequences of the splinter’s lengthy presence. These consequences include her inability to confront the origins of her repressed agony, her unnamed murdered dreams- and her creation of self- protective illusions which encourage her continual victimization.

Mattie’s and Ciel’s are complementary acts of purification- the cleansing of the outside and the inside of the female respectively. The communal laying on results in the liberation of the female self and the holiness of herself released. Ciel’s baptized and reborn self, can courageously confront the problems inherent in being a colored woman in America.
With Mattie’s help, Ciel is able to regroup and start over. Mattie is also able to help herself in the process “To some degree when Mattie saves Ciel, she also saves herself, and the ritual bathing that she performs on Ciel becomes a testament to the healing powers of sisterly love and bonding, particularly in the face of a chauvinistic, male-centered world” (Wilson 48). The relationship between Mattie and Ciel represent the powerful sisterhood and community that the women of Brewster Place share.

The next story features Cora Lee, a stereotypical incompetent mother. She loves babies, and loves to care for them with great tenderness, but once they grow past infancy, she is neglectful of them. She sits at home and rocks her latest infant and watches soap operas. She has suffered abuse from men, the shadows who drift into her life just long enough to leave her with one more baby. Though she means well, she has no control of her children, and they run freely throughout the apartments, eating from the garbage, disturbing the tenants, and getting into scraps with other children.

It is not until Kiswana Browne knocks on her door one day, seeking her assistance in getting a tenant’s association started, that Cora Lee’s life begins to change. Kiswana invites Cora Lee and her children to an all black production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream in the park; at first Cora Lee is offended, thinking Kiswana is critical of her parenting, but then she uses her anger as motivation. She scrubs the children and mends their clothes in preparation for the big event. At the park, Cora Lee is touched by the play, and something long dormant inside her is unlocked. Kiswana’s desire to change her neighborhood takes its first root in the life of Cora Lee and her children. Cora Lee, another unwed and welfare mother, who in her fascination for babies, has one child after another but neglects them when they get older.
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 many shadow men in her life who slip in and out of her bedroom at night. Much as she desires babies, she is confused when they start growing up and she simply cannot manage them. But the friendship of Kiswana Browne, through an invitation to Shakespeare in the park, regenerates her old dreams of education. The act of friendship and offer of help, once Kiswana gets beyond her own initial arrogance, contributes to restoring Cora Lee’s self-esteem both as a person and as a mother. Her new mothering energy will be directed toward her children’s education, and she has found a sisterhood in Kiswana that lifts her out of her isolation.

As a child Cora Lee only wanted one thing for Christmas, every Christmas: a new plastic baby doll. She loved the smell and the smoothness of the plastic figures. Cora Lee became upset on her thirteenth Christmas when her father, denied her a new baby doll:

He put his foot down on her thirteenth Christmas. There would be no more dolls – of any kind. Let her go play like other children her age. But she does play like other children, her mother pleaded. She had secretly watched her daughter over the years for some missing space, some faintly visible sign in her school work or activities that would explain the strange Christmas ritual, but there was none.

(WBP 108)

When her mother told her that she already had so many in her room, Cora informed her that “But they don’t smell and feel the same way as the new ones” (109).

Her childhood fascination with having a new baby doll every year led to her obsession with giving birth to a new baby every year. She finds herself a single mother living at Brewster place with a whole slew off children. Just as Cora Lee, during her childhood, would rip off the
heads of her baby dolls when they lost their newness, she neglects her children as they get older when they reach adulthood.

All these problems arise as she was never taught about sex role 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 play things 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 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 child, she, like other women of her culture, was given dolls by her parents. 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 distressing 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, how to accept responsibility for their actions, nor how to make reasonable choices:

Cora Lee spends all of her time caring for the infant. She asks her baby if she was ‘gonna be a dumb ass too? And goes on to tell her, No not mama’s baby. You ‘re not gonna be like them.’ so where were the men that helped to bring Cora Lee’s children into the world? Well, they are primarily mentioned as being nothing more than shadows. Cora Lee learned to view her subsequent sexual partners as shadows, men who came in the dark and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark, and often left before the children awakened. (113)

Cora Lee not only contains within its pages, but also Naylor offers the means of locating what appears to her to be the dominant theme of The Women of Brewster Place. Cora Lee is like
most of the other narrative sections, an exploration of unfulfilled and unachievable dreams of African-American Women.

When Kiswana Browne comes to Cora Lee’s door to tell her that one of her children has been eating out of a trash can, she gets defensive. Kiswana makes several suggestions on how better care be given for her children, but she is quickly told why Cora can or cannot do certain things. Kiswana invites her to bring the kids to a Shakespearean play in the park that her boyfriend is putting on. Cora, because she wants to impress Kiswana and show her that she can be a good mother and because of her fond memory of seeing Shakespeare when she was in Junior high, accepts the offer. She is actually proud of her children and herself when Mattie comments that they all look nice.

The way in which Kiswana’s concern helped Cora Lee to see the importance of all her children is yet another example of the keen ability of women to be there for each other in times of need when men are nothing more than shadows. 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.

After seeing the play along with Kiswana, Cora Lee begins to think of the possibilities of her children that are no longer babies. Kiswana’s concern over the colored community is reflected in helping Cora Lee to see the importance of all of her children, not just the babies. She also “. . . contributes to restoring Cora Lee’s self-esteem both as a person and as a mother” (Andrews 19). Their relationship is another example of the ability of women to be there for each other in times of need when men are nothing more than shadows. Cora Lee’s new found sisterhood with Kiswana enables her to see the possibility of a better and brighter future.
The last woman featured in the book is Theresa and Lorraine, lesbians who “And they had seemed like such nice girls” (WBP 131). Soon, they started generating stories about the two women. Lorraine reacts with a characteristic submission, but Theresa responds to Lorraine’s anxiety with a determination not to be forced out of one more neighborhood. Their circumstance highlights a growing fracture in their relationship. Theresa perceives softness in Lorraine that she once believed to be tenderness but now sees as weakness. Lorraine goes to the tenant’s association meeting and volunteers to take notes, but the meeting devolves into accusations and Lorraine leaves the meeting hurt. She is met by Ben the caretaker and invited into his apartment. There they begin to unburden their painful life stories and forge an unlikely friendship. As homophobic tensions in the neighborhood escalate, the troubles between Theresa and Lorraine also increase. Lorraine leaves one night after an argument, and on her return from the club she is visited, attacked and brutally raped by a local gang of young men. As she lingers in the alley, near death, old Ben finds her but she is deranged by pain and attacks him with a brick, killing him.

Lorraine and Theresa, who because they are lesbians, encounter hostility and rejection by the people of Brewster place. They become symbols both of women’s pain and women’s unity by the end of the novel. All of them struggle to survive and shape their lives under the conditions and environments that overpower them of The Women of Brewster Place; Naylor says that the book just drove itself in its own passion and innocence. She continues to write with passion and the wise innocence of a new seasoned novelist.

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 their 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 changes of the community.

In each case, the women accept responsibility for their parts in their relationships with men and then continue their lives. By taking responsibility for mistakes, pain, love and in choosing each other, the women accept that they can, at least to some extent control their lives. Such an acceptance means ceasing to be victims of others’ wills or circumstances. The men are finally incidental, good for pain and not much more. They come, do their dirty work and go. The children fail too, for they are not strong enough to carry their parent’s dreams. The women stay and support each other.

Theresa and Lorraine are considered to be nice girls by the female residents of Brewster Place, especially when it becomes clear that the two women were not interested in their husbands:

But when no wild music careened out of the corner building on weekends, and especially when no slightly eager husband were encouraged to linger around that first floor apartment and run errands for them, a suspended sigh of relief floated around the two when they dumped their garbage, did their shopping and headed for the morning bus. (129)

Once it is realized that the women are lovers, many members of the community openly disapprove of their lifestyle. Words such as unnatural and nasty are used to describe these once nice girls:

So it got around that the two in 312 were that way. And they had seemed like such nice girls. Their regular exit and entrances to the block were viewed with a
jaundiced eye. The quiet that rested around their door on the weekends hinted of all sort of secret rituals and their friendly indifference to the men on the street was an insult to the women as a brazen flaunting of unnatural ways. (131)

This homophobic response to the lesbians’ lifestyle reveals the community’s intolerance. It is further reinforced by the physical nature of the community, a dead end street that is closed off from outside influences and thus, is allowed to establish its own rules for social conduct. Once the community senses a violation of its rules, it proceeds to condemn this violation. The community’s negative response to Lorraine and Theresa begins slowly and subtly. Lorraine was the first to realize the difference in the people’s response to her. Sophie, a neighboring girl sought evidence of the two women’s lesbian relationship from innocent, every day activities. In one scene, for example, Sophie, as she tries to peek into Lorraine’s bag, accusingly asks her:

‘You been shopping, huh? What you buy?’ After replying ‘groceries’.

Lorraine shielded the top of the bag from you and squeezed past her with a confused frown. She saw Sophie throw a knowing glance to the others at the bottom of the stoop. What was wrong with this woman? Was she crazy or something? (133)

As a frail and quiet, light skinned woman Lorraine seems to want nothing more than to fit in with the rest of the women at Brewster Place. Lorraine even tries to integrate herself with the rest of the building by going to a tenants’ meeting where she is insulted by a very nosey woman by the name of Sophie. Theresa feels that Lorraine does not want to fit in, but rather is ashamed of her sexuality.

Lorraine feels rejected by the women of Brewster Place as well as by Sophie’s friends in the community. The only person with whom she can relate to and talk to is Ben, the frequently
intoxicated janitor. Ben is an older gentleman who tells Lorraine that she reminds him of his daughter. He is haunted by his recollections of how he was not man enough to do anything when his daughter was being raped and beaten by her White boss.

Late one night after Lorraine is returning home through the dark alley next to Brewster Place she is attacked by a gang of teenagers (C.C. Baker and his friends). Naylor makes reading this section difficult because of the terrifying details of the rape scene. The young man’s rejection of lesbians differs from that of the other residents of Brewster Place. Deprived of other means to show their power and strength, these young men depend on their sex to prove their superiority. Anyone who rejects, openly or silently their man hood is a threat to them. Lorraine’s provocation is just that. She had stepped into the thin strip of earth that they claimed as their own.

Without the means to conquer the world or even to control their own lives, these young men decide to conquer and exert control over Lorraine by raping her. The hostile language directed at Lorraine by these young men reflects their intolerance of her life style and their need to establish their sense of Macho spirit. Baker, and his five friends violently and repeatedly rape Lorraine with no feeling of remorse or even revulsion. Lorraine’s only response during and after rape was to repeat the word ‘Please’. Her plea for compassion, sensitivity, humanity, seems inappropriate in that situation. As a colored lesbian, she cannot demand what she wants or needs, for her sex, color and sexual orientation places her in a difficult position. Her ‘difference’ from what is considered to be the ‘norms’ restricts her from acting freely. Her emotional feelings are very well pictured by Naylor:

Theresa was standing in front of her and shouting. She saw Lorraine’s face crumple, but she still kept pushing her.
‘You with your beige bras and oatmeal!’ she grabbed the clothes from Lorraine’s hand and shook them at her. Why didn’t you stand in that locker room and pass around a picture of this great love in your life? Why didn’t you take her to the senior prom? Huh? Why? Answer me!

‘Because they wouldn’t have understood,’ Lorraine whispered, and her shoulders hunched over. (166)

As Theresa explains herself as ‘That’s right! There go your precious ‘theys’ again. They wouldn’t understand – not in Detroit, not on Brewester Place, not anywhere and as long as they own the whole damn world, it’s them and us, sister- them and us. And that spells different’ (166).

Lorraine and Theresa are viewed as a menace by the Brewster Place Community because their sexual deviance poses a threat to the world created by its residents. This would reflect their perception of reality and their understanding of what constitutes good or evil, and what behavior is right or wrong. All other residents are imposed in a perspective that restricts their ability to allow strangeness. Despite their differences, all the women brazenly exhibit sexism and racism. Images of Lorraine have entered the unconscious thoughts of all Brewster’s females, causing the dreams of both mothers and daughters to be haunted by the image “. . . the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress” (175).

The protagonists of the individual sections of The Women of Brewster Place form, in response to Cora Lee’s assertion that a week of rain has failed to wash Lorraine’s blood from the wall, a determined and harmonious group working hysterically to tear down the structure. These women:
flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands; the water (from a thunderstorm) pouring under their chins; and plastering their blouses and dresses against their breasts and into the cracks of their hips. The bricks piled up behind them were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place past overturned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. They came back with chairs and barbeque grills and smashed them into the wall. (186)

There has been a great debate for the murder of Ben. Some say that she did not know that it was Ben and she just wanted someone to feel her pain or she wanted the figure to stop his swaying motion. Others say that she may not have known it was Ben, but did know it was a man and at that point she wanted to kill any male in sight. There is also an argument that she knew it was Ben and she killed him because, just as he did not protect his real daughter from being raped, he did not protect her (his surrogate daughter) from the evils of men. Naylor seems to suggest, the male response to unachievable dreams is violence-and violence, at least in *The Women of Brewster Place*, directed against women–then Ben’s murder by his surrogate daughter seems not to be an arbitrary act where the author’s explorations of male abuse of women is concerned.

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor portrays the pain and suffering of women who have been oppressed and discriminated against on the score of race and sex. Women like Mattie, Cora Lee and Lucielia are all at Brewster Place because they have nowhere else to go; they have reached the end of the road. Their pathetic lives have all reached this dead-end street because of their racial and sexual identity. Traumatized and economically vulnerable, these poor women cannot survive in the white world. They have been abandoned by their men and look after
themselves and their children single-handedly. Brewster Place echoes with the blues, but there are the strains of a subdued joy also. Colored women are tough and enduring; they are survivors as well as victims.

In conclusion the words of Hernton’s in *Sex and Racism in America* (1965) are the tribute to the African-American woman:

> Finally after nearly four centuries of oppression, having been raped, murdered, lynched, spat upon, pushed through back doors, denied human respect, thought of and treated as sluts and mammies and Negresses, fit only to breed and suckle babies, to wash and cook and scrub and sweat, after having been sexually depersonalized and taken bodily for the having, the Negro women of the modern era are just beginning to be recognized as human beings; as sexual creatures clothed in their own personal skins, as American citizens with public rights and duties, private longings and desires, like any other citizens of this republic (166).

Despite Gloria Naylor’s shrewd and lyrical portrayal of many of the realities of colored life in *The Women of Brewster Place* is not realistic fiction:

> . . . it is mythic. Nothing supernatural happens in it, yet its vivid, earthy characters especially Mattie seems constantly on the verge of breaking out into magical powers. The book has two climaxes, one of healing and rebirth, one of destruction. In the first, Mattie magnificently wrestles Ciel, dying of grief, back to life. In the second, Lorraine, rejected by the others, is gang raped, a blood sacrifice brutally proving the sisterhood of all women. Miss Naylor bravely risks sentimentality and melodrama to write her compassion and outrage large, and she pulls it off triumphantly. (Gottlieb 25)
It is a dream that draws heavily on what Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, calls demonic imagery. The chapter begins with a description of the continuous rain that follows the death of Ben. Stultifying and confining, the rain prevents the inhabitants of Brewster’s community from meeting and talking about the tragedy; instead they are faced with clogged gutters, debris, trapped adores in their apartments, and listless children. Men stay away from home, become aggressive, and drink too much. In their separate spaces the women dream of Lorraine tall yellow woman in a bloody green and black dress. Mattie’s dream expresses the communal guilt, complicity and anger that the women of Brewster Place feel about Lorraine. Ciel is present in Mattie’s dream because she herself has dreamed about the ghastly rape and mutilation with such identification and urgency that she obeys the impulse to return to Brewster Place:

“And she had on a green dress with little black trimming, and there were red designs or red flowers or something on the front,’ Ciel’s eyes began to cloud. ‘And something bad had happened to me by the wall – I mean her – something bad had happened to her. And Ben was is in it somehow.” She stared at the wall and shuddered. “Ah, who knows? It was just a crazy dream, that’s all.” (WBP 179)

Every woman and small girl there has had disturbing dreams about Lorraine. Cora Lee attributes her weird dreams to the fact that she is pregnant and Ciel dismisses the dream as crazy. Beyond what the women know cognitively, the dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection. It is interesting that Mattie and Etta conceal from Ciel the significance of her dream. Mattie becomes intent on basting her ribs and Etta responds that she is trying to figure
out what number she can play off the dream. “Now I know snakes are 436 and a blue Cadillac is 224, but I gotta look in my book to see what a wall is” (180).

Rather than explore the strange significance of Ciel’s link to Brewster, Etta clouds the felt truth with the superstition. Freud in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1973) remarks “The final abuse of dream interpretation was reached in our days with attempts to discover from dreams the numbers fated to be drawn in the game of lotto” (115). Within Mattie’s dream the reader initially assumes to be a part of the progressive narrative temporality, Etta is interpreting Ciel’s dream in a way which the reader would implicitly be counseled to avoid.

The close of the novel turns away from the intensity of the dream, and the satisfaction of violent protest, insisting rather on prolonged yearning and dreaming amid conditions which do not magically transform. The collective dream of the last chapter constitutes a symbolic act which, as Jameson, Frederic puts it in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) enables “. . . real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, (to) find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm” (79).

Novel captures the pain, suffering and futile attempts at happiness for a group of colored women transplanted to a Northern city’s dead end street known as Brewster Place. In Brewster Place women are not so directly tied to Mattie. Cora Lee, fell in love so desperately with dolls as a child that she began to produce babies as soon as she discovered where they come from. Another resident, Kiswana Browne, is middle – class militant who has moved across town from Linden Hills to help unfortunate colored brothers and sisters on Brewster Place. Saved from anachronism only by her commitment, Kiswana tries from the residents of Brewster Place into a tenants union; they plan to fight in court of the many improvements, the complex needs. In her commitment, Kiswana is just the opposite of the two young women who are the focus of ‘The
Two’; Lesbian in a place which is hostile to their relationship, their different coping strategies illustrate how truly isolated they are; Theresa compensates by pretending not to care about the opinions of the neighbors, while Lorraine is driven to seek approval.

Naylor’s heart – wrenching account of Lorraine has a counterpart in the character sketch of Lucelia Louise Turner, the granddaughter of Etta Johnson, the woman who had befriended Mattie after the birth of her child. Ciel finds herself on Brewster Place in a common-law marriage with Eugene for whom she has an abortion when he asserts that she is all good for is “babies and bills”. Several months later, when Eugene declares that he is leaving, Ciel’s claim that she loves him evokes, “that ain’t good enough”. While the two are fighting, their five-year-old firstborn child, playing in another room, electrocutes herself by sticking a fork into an outlet. In the face of the rejection she believes God has shown her, Ciel determines to starve herself.

The pain, numbness, and death – in – life that define Ciel after her child’s funeral are relieved only when Mattie takes her into her arms and rocks the damned – up suffering into expression. That scene is a combination of conversion, renewal and rebirth in which Mattie serves as preacher, guide and sustainer.

Naylor’s presentations of human emotions ring so true that we sing our Amens from the knots in our stomachs or the tears in our eyes. There is verisimilitude in characters who are in their twenties as well as those who are in their fifties and older. In one scene between Kiswana Browne and her mother, who insists upon calling her newly remained daughter Melaine, Naylor astutely presents the clash of generations, and the games parents and children knowingly play. In this instance, neither mother nor daughter win out; instead, both realize that they can learn from, and must allow respect for, each other.
Throughout, Naylor maintains a narrative style suffused with images that cause us to pause. She writes of the boy who attacks Lorraine:

> When they stood with their black skin, ninth-grade diplomas, and fifty word vocabularies in front of the mirror that the world had erected and saw nothing, those other pairs of tight jeans, suede sneakers and tinted sunglasses imaged nearby proud that they were alive. And if there was life, there could be dreams of miracle that would one day propel them into the heaven populated by their gods – Shaft and Superfly. (WBP 161)

And of the possible death of Brewster Place:

> No one cries when a street dies. There’s no line of mourners to walk behind the coffin wheeled on the axis of the earth and lidded by the sky. No organ-piped dirges, no whispered prayers, no eulogy. No one is there when a street dies. It isn’t dead when the last door is locked, and the last pair of the footsteps echo up the sidewalk, reluctant to turn the corner and melt into another reality. It dies when the odors of hope, despair, lust, and caring are whipped out by the seasonal winds; when dust has settled into the cracks and scars, leveling their depths and discolorations – their reasons of being; when the spirit is trapped and fading in someone’s memory. So when Brewster dies, it will die alone. (191)

But Brewster Place is not dying. Women like Mattie resist its demise as spiritedly as the images used to describe it. It is a testament to Naylor’s large talent that, in her first novel she handles the task so well.

An Archetypal Approach is observed in Naylor’s presentation of characters. In the historical record the Phoenix symbolize renewal in general. It also symbolizes the sun, time,
empire, consecration, resurrection, life in the heavenly paradise, Christ and Mary the mother of Jesus Christ. In Brewster Place, Naylor depicts this in the repetition of the efforts taken by each character in overcoming their troubles and tribulation through steadfast perseverance and emerging, a heroic figure.

The next chapter deals with Gloria Naylor’s second novel, Linden Hills which presents a scathing examination of the precarious struggle for African-American identity in the nineteenth and twentieth century’s. The novel concerned with an exploration of the fictional middle–class colored community of Linden Hills, devotes a significant amount of its attention to detailing the ways in which some African-Americans efface themselves as they try to be both Americans and African-Americans. In this sense, the novel records the specific consequences of W. E. B. Du Bois’s well-known double–consciousness idea. However, the novel does so by positioning most of the contemporary inhabitants of Linden Hills as educated and intelligent people who supposedly are aware of their culture and their colored identity, who have lived through the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements, but who nevertheless are unable to effectively create and respond to healthy ways of seeing self.

Naylor insists that the very crumbs of American life and the corresponding promise of material success will often be the criteria that many African-Americans will use as the yardsticks by which they will evaluate self and others, no matter that such an adherence to the mythological American Dream is destructive to self, others and African-American culture and identity. One especially adept way that Naylor captures the struggles for authentic African-American identity in her novel is by focusing on the food which the characters consume and the rituals and codes of conduct that surround its consumption. Put simply, Naylor suggests that food consumption is a viable way of understanding some of the problematic of African-American
identity. For many of the characters in *Linden Hills*, certainly its middle – class representatives, healthy African - American identity is as vaporous as the whiff of scent remaining after the consumption of expensive caviar.