Chapter III

Female Bonding

Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home.

(TWOBP 4)

Gloria Naylor's first novel, The Women of Brewster Place (TWOBP), which won an American Book Award in 1983, chronicles the plight of eight black women living in an urban lower class cul-de-sac. It is a novel about poor and working class women whose relationships with each other help them to endure the brutalities of urban life. The novel modifies many of the tropes of the migration narrative discussed in the introductory Chapter. As this text belongs to a group of black feminist texts that emerged after the Black Power Movement of the sixties, Naylor asserts the vital necessity of women centered ritual and community for black women, specially female bonding. This female bonding will itself serve as a safe space to the residents of Brewster Place as will be shown later in the chapter. More than Petry, Naylor explores the possibilities of safe spaces for her characters and her narrative strategies. Unlike Lutie who doesn't have any women or community support on whom she could fall back, here, in
TWOBP, all the women characters will help each other to survive the onslaught of both the sexist and the white urban capitalist power. There is always somebody to give them strength. Lutie never had the time to make friends either at her workplace, or in her apartment. Had Petry explored this safe space of black sisterhood, Lutie's condition would have been different. But, Petry wrote in an earlier decade, when the concept of black sisterhood was not being explored by black women writers. Naylor, on the other hand, wrote her novel in a more recent time when the notions of womanist and feminist movement had gained momentum. Therefore, Petry lags behind Naylor in the handling of sisterhood as a safe space.

Naylor's opening description of Brewster Place is that it is the product of an illegitimate union: "...the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of the Unico Realty Company" (TWOBP 1). By the time the African migrants come to Brewster Place it has already served as a stepping stone for Irish immigrants and their Mediterranean cousins. These Southern European immigrants infused it with their own foods, smells and colours. The black Southern migrants cling to the street with a sense of desperation and some hope for they will not leave Brewster Place:

They clung to the Street with a desperate acceptance
that whatever was here was better than the starving
southern climates they had fled from. ... they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason. (TWOBP 4)

A maternal Brewster Place welcomes these black daughters. These daughters come to a final home of the mother as:

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 backyard lines. (TWOBP 4)

The language is consciously feminine, it rolls sensually over the readers' tongue. The migrant daughters literally colour Brewster Place in shades of nutmeg, ebony and saffron. This maternal imagery and the roundness of syntax characterise all Naylor's descriptions of the South in the city; not just the migrants who enter Brewster Place, but those spaces also in the context of the narrative where she presents safe spaces of nurturing and healing, as well as, later in the text. Often black women writers represent "home" -safe spaces- as necessary to their characters' survival. On the pages of their migration narratives, these spaces distinguish themselves from the rest of the text in language, rhythm and notions of temporality. Literary safe spaces fit Michael Awkward's definition of "historically determined tropological refigurations". In other words they exist as figures
of language revised according to the historical moment in which they are used. Lutie, on the other hand, never feels at home in that small apartment when she returns back from her workplace. This is in sharp contrast to the Brewster Place where all the women feel one and at home. Ironically Mrs. Hedges is not able to provide the safe space to Lutie which Mattie provides to other women.

The novel is divided into seven stories of seven women characters and Naylor has blended the lives of these distinctive characters very well. Their personal histories share a common theme: violence and abuse at the hands of men both white and coloured (black). Adoring fathers beat their young daughters senseless and turn them out of the house when they get pregnant; lovers fracture their jaws when they burn a pot of rice; sons mysteriously change from affectionate boys to juvenile delinquents who pick them clean of money and love. Mattie Michael, holds together the lives of the other women through her strength of will; and it is Naylor's forceful characterisation of Mattie that makes TWOBP more than a patchwork of stories about seven women. Mattie is described in her old age as someone who, chose her words with great precision, which can also be said of Gloria Naylor's language.

For Naylor the act of violence that finally causes Mattie to leave the South is the physical abuse she incurs at the hands of her father. She first
defies her father by dating a man of whom he does not approve. Then she further defies him by refusing to name this man as the father of her unborn child. In an effort to learn the name, her father beats her brutally. The physical characteristics of the lynched body—the limp, hanging neck, the dim eyes, and the bloodied mouth—are imposed upon the body of the beaten black woman and indicate the physical violence from which these women attempt to flee. Here violence is done specifically on a black woman by a black man: "Mattie's body contracted in a painful spasm each time the stick smashed down on her legs and back, and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach" (TWOBP 23). This brutal beating by a man she loves and respects, serves as the primary catalyst for Mattie's migration North to a place that offers anonymity. In order to avoid further abuse, Mattie flees the abuse of her father. Thus economic deprivation or threats of violence from a white community are not the only forces that compel a Black woman to flee or migrate. Black patriarchy is a significant factor in her decision to leave the South. Once she is in the North, Mattie is met by her best friend, Etta. Naylor suggests that Etta's leaving the South is in some way linked to mob violence, but she never fully explores this. Similar reasons could have impelled other women characters in the novel to leave the South and move to the North. Etta and Mattie are representatives of the hundreds of black women migrants ignored by history. Darlene Clark Hine urges historians to consider domestic abuse as one of the many "push" factors that contributed to the
migration of black women. According to Hine, many black women migrants went North out of the "desire for freedom from sexual exploitation, especially rape by white men, and to escape from domestic abuse within their own families" (138).

Upon her arrival in the walled-in community of Brewster, Mattie smells a scent strongly reminiscent of the almost forgotten aromas of her Tennessee childhood:

> For a moment it smelled like freshly cut sugarcane and she took in short, rapid breaths of air to try to capture the scent again. But it was gone. And it couldn't have been any way. There was no sugarcane on Brewster. (TWOBP 8)

Naylor's introduction of the smell of the cane (as South) is accomplished in terms of the memory of her protagonist. The scent awakens in Mattie specific recollections of people and events in her past: "Sugarcane and summer and Papa and Basil and Butch" (TWOBP 8). Here "sugarcane" has been employed as a symbol of the African American deep South communal impulses. However, Mattie's statement about this suggests that the northern climate that Brewster typifies does not foster such communal inclinations. When read in this light, Mattie's subsequent efforts can profitably be viewed as her attempt to establish in the urban North those patterns of unity and communality in the form of safe spaces
that had existed when the black American population was located primarily in the agrarian South. Mattie will act as a creator of a safe space for the other women of Brewster Place.

Mattie and her son are sheltered by Miss Eva, who takes her in as a daughter. Miss Eva anticipates in her generosity and wisdom the woman Mattie herself becomes in the present time of the novel. Despite her age Miss Eva remains the lusty humorous woman of her youth. She tells Mattie that she's had five husbands and "outlived 'em all" (TWOBP 32) and her old house still glows with the laughter of her absent son's girl child, the aroma of a pot roast, and the gleam of brightly polished surfaces. She becomes the mother that Mattie, Basil, and her own grand daughter all need so desperately as she binds together a family from the damaged urban setting. The migrant here finds a safe space in Miss Eva and her home as she acts also as the "ancestor". Miss Eva holds the warmth of life even after the beauty and passion of youth have passed. As Mattie realizes, Miss Eva replaces the mother she lost when she left her home. Thirty years later, as Mattie prepares to take Miss Eva's place, she remembers the lessons the old woman taught her, and she too in turn takes over the task of sheltering the lost and the weak. Mattie, however, has no home or family of her own now; it must all be redone by will and emotion. When black women migrate from the South to the North, this friendship and bonding amongst them help them to resist the sexist,
racist white world. These are virtues, which were prevalent in the antebellum South, which would give strength to the blacks in the post-bellum North. Hence, Mattie who receives love and affection from Miss Eva in turn, becomes a mother to the inmates of Brewster. In the novel all visits to safe spaces are represented by a return to the mother. Nowhere is it more evident than in the laying on of the hands ritual in the text. Mattie's friendship with Etta also serves as the best example of the way in which the South ensures the nurturing and survival of the migrant in the city.

Cast aside by a succession of men, Mattie's girlhood friend, Etta Mae Johnson, places her last hope for a respectable life on enticing Reverend Moreland T. Woods into marriage. A rebel, she "... was a woman who was not only unwilling to play by the rules, but whose spirit challenged the very right of the rules to exist" (TWOBP 59). Etta is driven out of the small town from which both Mattie and she come, moving from man to man as she seeks always to better herself economically and socially. She breaks the rules by accepting them with a vengeance. Like her male counterparts, Etta wants to rise in the social scale and she will do it by treating the opposite sex as a commodity. For a woman, however, the game ends, as age becomes a barrier. Abandoned by Reverend Woods after their sexual encounter, Etta realizes that she is trapped in Brewster Place, that she has no other place to go to except Mattie's. Their
friendship, not the physical structure of Brewster place, is the space that equals home in Etta's life. As she walks into Mattie's house she hears Mattie's records and she realizes someone has waited up for her and she, "laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps towards the light and the love and the comfort that awaited" (TWOBP 74). Upon seeing her, Mattie calls her "Tut", a nickname that immediately says "I knew you when". It invokes pride in the way she used to be, and a tired middle aged lady at once becomes the defiant, proud young girl who "always had her shoulders flung behind her collarbone and her chin thrust toward the horizon" like "the wife of king Tut" (TWOBP 59). It was this very defiance that forced her to leave Rock Vale, Tennessee, years ago. Mattie provides Etta with grounding stability in simple gestures like name calling, teasing, concern for physical and spiritual well being, a space that shares the foundation of a common past, and common origin without the negative aspects of patriarchy and racial oppression. Brewster Place presents for its inhabitants both their sense of community of home and low social status. If the 116th Street of Petry's novel presents for its inhabitants a low social status it is because there is no sense of community there, as there is in Brewster Place. Lutie's inability to make friends or have any kind of female bonding with any other woman is one important reason for this lack. The depth of the friendship between Mattie and Etta is apparent:
(Etta) breathed deeply of 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 secret. (TWOBP 58)

This friendship between the two represents female bonding and serves as a space — a healing space — where they can shed all pretensions. These two women, looking beyond the horizons of their youth, had shared the passage of time. This simple fact makes their friendship one in which the mere mention of a nickname invokes the pain and the warmth of a southern past, a necessary prerequisite for survival in the city. Though these safe spaces are not enough to alter the social circumstances that act upon Mattie and the other women, they do provide a space, however temporary, for healing and wholeness.

Naylor's portrayal of the character of Kiswana presents yet another example of female bonding which Kiswana provides to Cora Lee in her own way. Although she is presented as lacking the grit and humour of the other women who have endured more and lived more deeply, she is
nevertheless the only one who attempts to help the community see itself as a political force - which can fight the landlords and demand its rights. She fights for the justice of black women and in this passion for justice of Kiswana, Naylor indicates that Brewster will not fall. 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. However she has a sense of how power operates precisely because she comes from Linden Hills, a place that she leaves because it is so focused on money and power. Touched by the revolutionary fervour of the 1960's, Melanie Browne of Linden Hills changes her name to Kiswana and goes down to live with "the people" in Brewster place, just as some whites went in the sixties to live in black communities. The people of Brewster Place wonder what this privileged black woman is doing in their midst, even as Melanie's family in Linden Hills is hurt, for they have made sacrifices so that she would never have to be associated with the kind of people who live in Brewster Place. Naylor's inclusion of Kiswana as a pivotal character in TWOBP indicates the great distance between women who have to live in women centred communities and those who choose to live in them. Kiswana's choice to live in Brewster Place is already a sign that, in relation to the other women, she has some privilege in this society. She is an exception, while they are the rule and her privilege comes from the fact that she was raised in a wealthy community.
Kiswana's relationship with her mother also serves as an example of sisterhood in the novel. This emerges not from her suffering but from the daughter's discovery of her mother's sexuality. Kiswana Browne is "healed" in her conflict with her mother by coming to identify herself with her mother as a woman. Kiswana has allied herself with the only thoroughly positive male character in the novel, Abshu. Her mother, from middle class Linden Hills, pulls her up when Kiswana accuses her mother of being "a white man's nigger who's ashamed of being black!" (TWOBP 85). Her mother reacquaints her with a tradition of pride and strong mothering in the example of her great-grandmother — a full-blooded Iroquois, "...who 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" (TWOBP 86), and in her own example as a mother toughening her children to meet the world. But despite this re-established bond of women over generations, the clinching moment for Kiswana comes only when she notices for the first time her mother's bright red toenail polish, like her own:

I'll be damned the young woman thought, feeling her whole face tingle. Daddy's into feet! And she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had trod through the same universe that she herself was now travelling. ... she
stared at the woman she had been and was to become.

(TWOBP 87)

While depicting the oppression of the urban bureaucracies, Naylor places a strong emphasis on shared identification between women, which serves as a safe space for black women. After their shared laughter and her mother’s departure, Kiswana, begins a productive new life in organising rent protests among the women of Brewster Place and returning to life.

The next woman whose story Naylor goes on to project is Lucielia Louise Turner's. In this story she directly addresses the proposition that black men need only to assert themselves as patriarchs in order to overcome poverty. We have seen, in the case of Mattie too that patriarchal authority is emphasized when her father beats her. The argument for marriage as the family ideal (commonly phrased "for children's sake") is refuted in the desperate attempt by Mattie's adopted daughter Lucielia to hold on to her husband Eugene. To save this marriage, Ciel attempts producing an unwanted child, goes through a sacrificial abortion and later the accidental death of their daughter Serena. Eugene coerces Ciel's submission to his authority. The utter failure of Ciel's action to produce their desired end - Eugene's unwillingness to remain in this relationship - becomes obvious when he announces that he is leaving her and their daughter Serena for some kind of employment on the docks of Maine. This announcement coupled with his refusal to allow mother and
daughter to accompany him and his confusion about Newport, shatters the image Ciel has held of her mate,

She looked at Eugene, and the poison of reality began to spread through her body like gangrene. It drew his scent out of her nostrils and scraped the veil from her eyes and he stood before her just as he really was – a tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness twisting his mouth into a strange shape. (TWOBP 100)

Eugene asserts patriarchal power by expelling Mattie from their apartment and refusing to accept her offer to watch their child, “She (Serena) can stay right here, ... If she needs ice-cream, I can buy it for her” (TWOBP 97). Even Eugene’s statement, "I lost my job today" (TWOBP 94), signals, in Ciel’s mind, the end of the tenuous peace that had existed in her apartment since his return. Upon hearing the announcement Ciel, standing at the sink, cleaning rice, transforms her culinary efforts into a (somewhat sadistic) rite of purification:

The water was turning cloudy in the rice pot, and the force of the stream from the faucet caused scummy bubbles to rise to the surface. ...Each bubble that broke seemed to increase the volume of the dogged whispers she had been ignoring for the last few months. She poured the dirty water off the rice to destroy and silence them, then watched with a malic-
cious joy as they disappeared down the drain.

In this doubly symbolic rite, Ciel equates "scummy bubbles" with the repressed and "dogged whispers" of discord that were entering the relationship. By sadistically draining the whisper containing bubbles, by silencing, in other words, the voice of reality, she displays a preference for illusion, silence and dream and an unwillingness to confront directly the implications of the voice's message. Ciel fights stubbornly to maintain her image of her mate. In an effort to maintain her relationship with this self-centred man, Ciel resolves to be governed by his will even though such a resolve will result in her abortion of the foetus that is growing inside her. She is completely under the control of black patriarchy if not white urban power. Rather than providing security, for his child, Eugene's commands leave Serena unattended during an argument in which Ciel attempts to keep him from leaving her. While the lovers dispute in another room, Naylor manipulates the emotions of her readers as she draws them with the child behind a roach walking toward a wall socket. The scene breaks up just a moment before certain disaster: "Picking up the fork, Serena finally managed to fit the thin flattened prongs into the electric socket" (TWOBP 99). The readers' horror grows with Ciel's increasing awareness of her self degradation as she implores: "'Eugene, please.' She (listened) with growing horror to herself quietly begging" (TWOBP 99). Ciel shifts too late her thirst for love from her
husband to her daughter. At the moment at which Ciel decides to accept the legitimacy of the female-headed household, Naylor punctuates it with her daughter's death:

Ciel began to feel the overpowering need to be near someone who loved her. I'll get Serena and we'll go visit Mattie now, she thought in a daze. Then they heard the Scream from the kitchen. (TWOBP 100-101)

Ciel decides to accept Eugene's decision to leave them and go, but the daughter's death shatters her totally. Ciel's collapse after Serena's death allows her to receive her adopted mother's spiritual legacy. Mattie's role as healer and nurturer is most apparent in Naylor's portrayal of the laying on of hands ritual between Mattie and the younger Ciel. She constantly acts as a maternal healing space to the younger generation of women.

When Lucielia loses the desire to live due to grief of losing her toddler daughter, Mattie refuses to let her go. Mattie realises that it is not just the daughter's death which is responsible for Ciel's condition. The oppression of racism and poverty lead to the Kitchenette conditions, which in turn lead to the death of the child and to Ciel's death filled stare. Witnessing this, Mattie yells, "Merciful Father, no!" Naylor says,

There was no prayer, no bended knee or sack cloth supplication in those words, but a blasphemous fire ball that shot forth and went smashing against the
gates of heaven, raging and kicking, demanding to be heard. (TWOBP 102)

This is no passive spirituality but a demanding, active one. It is the ultimate act of defiance for the very religious Mattie, for it resists the highest authority of all – God. "No, No, No." Safe spaces are spaces where black women find voice and the ritual that provides them with it is conducted in silence: "She approached the bed with her lips clamped shut in such a force that the muscles in her jaw and the back of her neck began to ache" (TWOBP 103). Her silence emphasises her role as as the ancestor. This is as a very significant space within this narrative. Here Mattie speaks with her hands. It is this hands ritual that will serve as a safe space for Ciel. Griffin notes that this hand ritual serves "not only as a safe space where Ciel is healed, but also as a discursive retreat within the text itself" (120).

She (Mattie) sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked... . Back and forth, back and forth – she held Ciel so tightly she could feel her young breasts flatten against the buttons of her dress. ... she rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past
Dachau, where soul gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors... .

She rocked 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. (TWOBP 103)

There are many dimensions of safe spaces here. First, Ciel's healing takes place in the space of the ritual. Second, Mattie's very body serves as a safe space as she holds and rocks Ciel. Her body constitutes the vessel in which Ciel travels over the seas of history and through which Ciel is reborn. Finally, the narrative passage itself exists as a safe space. The phrase "back and forth, back and forth" provides the curve on which the paragraph itself rocks. Here, spoken words and dialogue give way to silence. Naylor's portrayal of the ritual resists the straight linearity of the rest of the narrative, taking both Ciel and the reader back through space and time. Farah Jasmine Griffin's very fine analysis of this passage comes to mind here. She says that the ritual occupies a realm - a women's sphere - where Ciel meets and melds her sorrow with the historical sorrow of other women who have lost their children to the violence of racial, ethnic, religious and class oppression. Mattie rocks her back to her ancestral mothers - women who were forced to lose their children. She
takes Ciel through and beyond historical time, and only then, when her sorrow and pain are merged with those of other women, does she return her to that timeless place of origin – the womb. She must travel through collective history before she can return to personal history. Modern black women's fiction abounds in the ancient laying on of hands ritual. Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Paule Marshall utilize this ritual as a central element of their narrative strategy. It exists as a womanist reclamation of the divine healing and resurrecting powers.

In this narrative, the safe space of the ritual that Mattie enacts is a biblical rite revised and maintained by New World Africans. Before she can be reborn, the woman must be led back to the womb. Ciel emerges as a literal "newly born". At the end of the novel Ciel, healed and whole, will return to Brewster Place to meet Mattie.

Cora Lee is important in exploring the ambiguities of the dream and in setting up a polarity between dream as vain fantasy and as a sustaining or transforming power. Cora, as a small child, desired no other toys than a new baby doll every year. Her desire for dolls is suggestive of the fact that she never grows up. Cora Lee becomes a woman who reproduces her dream and finds herself with a large, demanding family. Unable to cope with the children those babies have become, she nevertheless continues
to satisfy her desire for the sweet, soft, vulnerable newborn. Though she attends to her infant children she has not the slightest notion of how to care for or nurture children when they are no longer babies because of her own emotional stagnation. Her ignorance of the fact that they are weak in studies results largely from her failure to provide adequate discipline or inspiration. There is no one to guide her till Kiswana arrives on the scene. Cora's men are marginalized and exist as mere shadows. This is the urban sexist power that acts upon Cora in the form of these men who burden her with infants. One of these men even hurts her physical self by fracturing her jaw. Men come and go: once one even promised to marry her, but he never returned from a trip to the corner store to buy milk. "So Cora lives on welfare and accommodates the shadows in her bed for the brief sensuous pleasure and the sperm they provide" (Matus 132). Cora becomes one of Kiswana's challenges. The antithesis is Kiswana, who is so concerned about ethnic specificity and the recovery of her African roots that she fails to recognize her commonalty with her mother. Kiswana is going to change Cora's life and open her eyes, and she starts by inviting her to a black production of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream – in which Kiswana's boy friend Abshu Ben-Jamal has a grant from the city. Kiswana brings sisterly nurture to Cora Lee who is unbalanced in her mothering. The act of friendship and offer to help, once Kiswana gets beyond her own initial condescension, contributes to restoring Cora Lee's self esteem both as a person and as a mother.
Her new mothering energy will be directed towards her children's education, and she has found a sisterhood in Kiswana that lifts her out of her isolation. She resolves to check their homework every night, join the P.T.A., and see that they go to summer school. She dreams of good jobs for them "in insurance companies and the post offices, ..." (TWOBP 126) homes in Linden Hills - a middle class aspiration. When her son asks her whether Shakespeare is black, she replies, "Not yet" (127), remembering guiltily how she had beaten him for writing rhymes on the bathroom walls. No Shakespeare can be nurtured in the environment she provides for her children. Actually, she doesn't realize, that here urban power is responsible for such living conditions where her children have no space for themselves in a small apartment. The dreams that the play provokes reflect a simple fact that education will secure for her children a larger piece of the pie than Cora herself has ever been entitled to command or expect. A single trip to the park to see Shakespeare is not going to resolve life's demands. What Naylor suggests here is that Cora is inspired to imagine and dream. Kiswana has succeeded in providing a space-sisterhood to Cora Lee who is an exploration of the unfulfilled and unachievable dreams of African American women. It can be seen that Naylor does not examine the societal forces, which are responsible for the unfulfilling nature of many black women's lives in as systematic, and illuminating a fashion as Morrison does in her novels. What TWOBP offers
... is the author's explorations of her characters' own culpability in the tragedies of their lives.

However profitable individual acts of sisterly love prove, they do not have the power to alter significantly the conditions for Brewster Place's females as a group. TWOBP's penultimate story, "The Two" makes this point abundantly clear. In "The Two", Naylor considers the tragedy of Lorraine's rape and the "deadly eruption of her deferred self assertion, which results in Ben's death" (Matus 31). The lesbians, Lorraine, the timid one and Theresa, the tough one must be considered first. They flee more affluent neighbourhoods only to discover in Brewster Place the same homophobia they had hoped to escape. "The Two" - a female household represents a departure from the patriarchal power structure. Alternating between fostering and fighting these two women are struggling to find their identities. Lorraine hates the cynical gay bars that are Theresa's element and wants to feel at one with her neighbours in Brewster Place. Theresa resents Lorraine's vulnerability and yet is uncomfortable when Lorraine acquires firm convictions. Each seeks a community different from the other. When Lorraine discovers an accepting listener in the alcoholic janitor, Ben, Theresa insists on their own mutual dependence as outcasts, and Lorraine rebels against this. After their final quarrel, when Theresa lets Lorraine go to the party by herself, there is no more opportunity for them to resolve their conflicts and reaffirm their love.
This relationship between two women, despite its seeming intimacy remains less successful than that between Mattie and Etta and the other women who generously accept and nurture each other. That there is a connection between the two relationships is brought out significantly in the passage below. After a block association meeting where Mattie and Etta have defended the lesbians against the gossip of Sophie and the others, Mattie feels uncomfortable about the lesbian relationship and ponders with Etta on the nature of female friendship.

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

... "Well ..." Etta was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "They love each other like you'd love a man or a man would love you - I guess."

"But I've loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man," Mattie was pondering. "And there has been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did."

(TWOBP 141)

What Mattie comes to realize through the insight of her own experience is that the deep bond she has felt with some women have a wholeness and power which is superior to any relationship that seems possible with a man. And that is why she sees no wrong in a lesbian relationship for
bonding amongst women which has been more intense than any kind of bonding with men. This is surely the central expression of black sisterhood in the novel, which has been discussed later in the chapter. The strength of this sisterhood can be explained partly, but not entirely by the men's failures in love.

Most of the men in the novel may indeed be so ego crippled by racism as to be unable to love their women, but Naylor still holds them accountable: the irresponsible Butch, the enraged father who is ready to kick his pregnant daughter Mattie to death, the father who rejects his lesbian daughter Lorraine, the "shadows" in Cora Lee's bedroom, the hypocritical preacher Woods, the insecure Eugene, who abandons Ciel and above all C.C. Baker and his gang, whom Naylor describes in her most sardonic language. Only Abshu and Ben to some extent are capable of fruitful relationships with women: for Ben it is only out of a sense of guilt for his impotence in letting his wife sell their daughter into concubinage with a white man. Generally, therefore, the men abandon the women to the double burden of work and domestic life without support.

The story of "The Two" is also carefully structured around the relationship of Lorraine and Ben, the "harmless old wino" and the first black person to have settled in Brewster Place, and is there only because he is old and broken and has nowhere else to run to. He drinks to displace the
poisonous melody of his personal song that tells of his collusion long ago in his lame daughter's prostitution. In the South from which he fled, Ben has been cheated by the landowner, who promises Ben more land if he will ignore his daughter's sexual abuse, by the white man. Ben has to leave the South because of his white employer's cheating and his daughter has to leave for she has been exploited enough by the sexist white power. That she makes prostitution her profession later to earn money is a pity. But many black women migrants made prostitution their living in the North to support their family and children. Ben's wife Elvira accuses him of unmanliness because he will not accede to Mr. Clyde's demands. Ultimately his daughter is lost to the world of Memphis sending back the money Elvira craves:

If you was half a man, you coulda given me more babies and we woulda had some help workin' this land instead of half grown woman we gotta carry the load for. And if you was even quarter a man, we wouldn't be a bunch of miserable sharecroppers on someone else's land - but we is, Ben. (TWOBP 153)

Ben becomes an alcoholic, a figure of no great influence even on Brewster Place, yet in his own compassion he illustrates that men as well as women can shelter and care. Ben is one Brewster place inhabitant who says to Lorraine, "I got nothing, but you welcome to all that. Now how many folks is that generous?" (TWOBP 149). Together they form a father
daughter relationship until violence tears them apart. Ben is the father who has been betrayed and has lost his daughter; Lorraine is the daughter who has been banished by an unaccepting father. Rejected because she is a lesbian, Lorraine, nevertheless, continues to send her father a birthday card every year. As these have always been returned unopened, she has stopped putting her return address on them so that she can imagine that one day he may open one. Naylor uses the symmetry in their stories to develop the bond of sympathy between Ben and Lorraine. Ben’s daughter is lame and Lorraine’s “inner limp”, which defines her as a victim, is the trait in her that reminds him of his daughter. It is interesting to note the difference between Jones, the Super of The Street and Ben of The Women of Brewster Place. Jones’s basement is a dark, suffocating place where he tries to rape Lutie. This basement is a threat to Lutie and her child Bub. All his wicked planning is done in that basement, whereas Ben’s basement is a safe space for Lorraine where she identifies with her real self.

C.C. Baker and his gang destroy Lorraine physically and psychologically. The gang rape signifies an attempt to force “The two” back into a patriarchal power structure. As Barbara Christian observes, Lorraine becomes “an accessible scapegoat” for the racism and powerlessness in the community as experienced by the “most dangerous species in existence - human males with an erection to validate in a world that was
only six feet wide" (196). Those six feet dramatize the oppression of black women inside the brick wall i.e. at the dead end of Brewster Place. This wall blocks the young black men from access to full patriarchal power by conferring on them the status of "dwarfed warrior kings with appendages of power, circumcised with a guillotine" (TWOBP 169). The young men do not rebel against the social forces that build the constricting wall but rather resort to terror against black women to assert themselves as patriarchs. The attack on Lorraine in Christian's explication represents an attack on all women, not only because lesbians are women, but because lesbian stereotyping exposes society's fear of women's independence from men.

Lorraine's decision to return home through the short cut of an alley late one night leads her into an ambush in which the anger of seven teenage boys erupts into violence:

... (C.C.) slammed his kneecap into her spine and her body arched up, causing his nails to cut into the side of her mouth to stifle her cry. .... Two of the boys pinned her arms, two wrenched open her legs, while C.C. Knelt between them and pushed her dress ... Lorraine's body was twisting in convulsions of fear ... and C.C brought his fist down into her stomach.

(TWOBP 170)
The penis of the gang-bang leader C.C. incarnates the phallic power promoted as part of the ideal of the traditional family. C.C. violently imposes patriarchy on Lorraine by announcing his intention to “slap that bitch in her face and teach her a lesson” (TWOBP 162). This lesson links voice and gender transgression as C.C. first threatens to “stick (his) fist in (her) cunt eatin’ mouth!” and later, as a prelude to rape, rubs his penis in her face saying “see that what you need” (TWOBP 170). This act of violence targets the black woman’s voice, silencing her through sexual terror. Rape serves as a method to stifle the black woman’s voice, forcing her into a script of submission. Lorraine cannot survive in a society where she neither has any friends nor is a part of female bonding. It is ironical that she doesn’t find any support from the women around her except for Kiswana who sympathises with her. Could we say Naylor’s vision is limited in her denial to extend the benefits of the women–defined safe spaces to her lesbian characters. While relationships between women serve as a source of safe space for other female characters, in the context of the lesbian relationship it is a source of oppression not only by whites and men but also by other women. Alice Walker’s vision is broader and progressive when it comes to lesbian relationships. The female bonding is so strong in the case of Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple* that it changes the whole life of Celie. It is because of Shug’s support, encouragement and the lesbian sexual act, that the confidence in Celie is reinforced. It helps her to come out of the
sexual oppression which she faces everyday and the lack of identity in her own home because of black patriarchy and other factors.

Naylor completes the circle of resistance “trapped in the closed economy of oppression with a reverse gender dynamic in Lorraine’s murder of her friend Ben” (Fraser 102). Ben tells Lorraine earlier in the novel: “You remind me lots of my little girl” (TWOBP 147), who also suffered repeated rape. The reader expects that she will ask for and receive help, but Ben becomes her unwilling target, the object of her desire now to fight back. Ironically, Lorraine murders the “father” who has been kind to her. The male and father must pay and who more fittingly than the father who has failed his own daughter? Ben’s death avenges neither the machismo of C.C.’s gang nor Lorraine’s repressed anger towards her father. Rather, “the text suggests that accumulated hurts and betrayals breed a store of violence which erupts on displaced targets” (Matus 131). Even Lutie in The Street takes out her accumulated anger on Boots Smith. She does not realize that it is Junto, the white man, who is responsible for her failure. Of course, Boots can in no way be compared to the good janitor, Ben.

Naylor offers a suggestion for the cause of urban male violence. She connects the street violence on Brewster Place with the violence she perceives at the center of the American ruling bureaucracies. The young men leading urban gangs find no wide fields or deep forest to conquer, no
boardroom to dominate as validation of their success as men in the social competition; instead they like to conquer and dominate women in places like Brewster Place. Naylor shows that violence against Lorraine affirms the leader C.C. as a model of triumphant masculine initiative. She puts it succinctly:

She (Lorraine) had stepped into the thin strip of earth that they had claimed as their own. Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reigned in that unlit alley like dwarfed warrior kings.

(TWOBP 169)

The same argument is reiterated when Levy says, "Denied the individual notice celebrated in cultural myths perpetuated by daily news and sportscasts, celebrity biographies, and television and movie narratives, the disenfranchised male still can find a way to affront his individual dominance within the social dead end of Brewster Place" (267).

As the name suggests, "The Block Party" is a vision of community effort, or everyone's story. We discover after a first reading, however, that the narrative of the party is in fact Mattie's dream vision, from which she awakens perspiring in her bed. The real party for which Etta is rousing her has yet to take place, and we never get to hear how it turns out. The chapter begins with a description of the continuous rain that follows the death of Ben. This rain prevents the inhabitants from talking about the
tragedy; instead they are faced with clogged gutters, debris, trapped odours in the apartments and listless children. Men stay away from home, become aggressive, and drink too much. In their separate spaces the women dream of a tall yellow woman in a bloody green and black dress: Lorraine. 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 and she obeys the impulse to return to Brewster Place. The presence of Ciel in Mattie’s dream expresses the elder woman’s wish that Ciel be returned to her and the desire that Ciel’s wounds and flight be redeemed. For many of the women who have lived there, Brewster Place is an anchor but also a confinement and a burden. Mattie’s dream scripts important changes for Ciel; she works for an insurance company (good pay, independence, and status above the domestic), is ready to start another family, and is also connected to a good man who Ciel hesitantly acknowledges, is not black. Middle class status and a white husband offer one alternative in the vision of escape from Brewster Place; the novel does not criticize Ciel’s choices so much as suggest the difficulty of envisioning alternatives to Brewster’s black world of poverty, insecurity, and male inadequacy. Yet Ciel’s dream identifies her with Lorraine whom she has never met and of whose rape she knows nothing. It is a sign that she is tied to Brewster Place, carries it within her, and shares its tragedies.
Every woman and small girl at Brewster Place has had disturbing dreams about Lorraine. The dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection. Now as the rain comes down, hopes for a community effort are scorched and frustration reaches an intolerable level. The dream of the collective party explodes in a nightmarish destruction. Poking at a blood stained brick with a Popsicle stick, Cora says “Blood ain’t got no right still being here” (TWOBP 185). Hence, tearing at the very bricks of Brewster's walls is an act of resistance against the conditions that prevail within it. The more strongly each woman feels about her past in Brewster Place, the more determinedly the bricks are hurled. The women have different reasons, each her own story, but they unite in hurling bricks and breaking down boundaries. The incessant rain becomes a cleansing force. Naylor captures the cathartic and purgative aspects of resistance and aggression brilliantly.

Black sisterhood or female bonding which has been referred to in the earlier part of the chapter needs an explanation. In contrast to Petry, Naylor has clearly modified this trope. Unlike Petry, she fully explores the possibility of motherhood and sisterhood in the urban North. The South becomes prominent in the rituals of nurturing and sisterhood. A number of writers have portrayed strong friendships between black women (e.g. Morrison in Sula) but these bonds are often broken or weakened by
competitiveness, betrayal, and physical or socio-economic separation. In this novel, this bond derives its power from the women’s previous sense of isolation, from their ill-treatment by men and from their discovery, through suffering, of the saving grace of shared experience. In the prologue, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Naylor presents the female residents of the tenement as a vibrant community. Naylor has created a tapestry of nurturing women in this novel; she emphasizes how female values derived from mothering, nurturing, communality and concern with human feeling are central to Brewster Place’s survival. Because of their origin and history, African American women could lay claim to a tradition in which they had been strong central persons in their families and communities, not solely because of their relationship to men, but because they themselves had bonded together to ensure survival of their children, their communities and their race. Partly because of the matricentric orientation of African peoples from which they were descended, partly because of the nature of American slavery, African American women had had to bond with each other in order to survive. “Afro-Americans as a race could not have survived without the “female values” of communality, sharing and nurturing” (Christian 118). At the same time, the centrality of African American women in their communities was in such great contrast to the American norm of woman’s subordination in the nuclear family that they were denigrated both in black and white society. The African American mother was
punished and maligned for being too strong, too central in her family. African American women writers of the 1970s responded to black and white society’s denigration of the black mother and of female values by showing how such a position was sexist-based on a false definition of woman as being ineffectual, secondary, weak. Marshall in Browngirl Brownstones and Morrison in Sula present women who are strong, who believe in their own primacy, and who are effective in some important ways. But these writers have presented another view too - that Afro American women who internalize the dominant society’s definition of women are courting self-destruction. Naylor’s rendition of her women’s lives in the community of Brewster Place indicates that she is intensely knowledgeable about the literature of her sisters and that the thought processes of African American women during the seventies is one by which she both celebrates and critiques women centered communities.

The obvious characteristic that her women share with each other, with the exception of Kiswana and the two, is that they must live in streets like Brewster Place, and that they are displaced persons. The culture of sharing, and nurturing in Brewster Place is based on a black tradition in this country that harkens back to slavery. But at the same time Naylor also emphasizes that these relationships between women do not substantively change their lives at the materialistic level. Another remarkable aspect about these relationships is that, lesbians have no
place in this world of female bonding. The fact that Lorraine has chosen to live with her female lover Tee, rather than a man, offers a justification for her rape to the gang; she has committed the ultimate sin in refusing to keep to her "place" as a woman in a masculine dominated social setting. The refusal of Lorraine and Tee to conform has excited the curiosity and enmity of the conventional women around her, especially the gossiping churchwoman, Sophie, who spies on Lorraine and her lover. Eve Sedgwick has suggested that in contemporary society close relationship between women are only socially acknowledged after primary allegiance to the male is first sworn; otherwise the relationship is classified as deviant and therefore one which has to be shunned. Love between women having either emotional or sexual intensity, or both, is ignored and reviled and finally attacked as being illegitimate.

The novel ends with the epilogue "Dusk". Though Brewster Place has been condemned and abandoned in the epilogue, the women carry on. As Naylor says:

But the colored daughter of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they're diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. (TWOBP 192)
The women are "a collective repository of dreams, a resilient source of strength for continuing survival if not yet conquest" (Andrews 286).

TWOBP, therefore, departs from the other migration narratives preceding it by treating the trope of migration, in a different manner. Naylor's text revises the tropes of the earlier texts, like Ann Petry's The Street. Her refiguration of the tropes of entrapment - the brick wall, motherhood, and the fictional urban neighbourhoods - are directly related to the historical and political moment in which she writes. TWOBP does not simply emerge in response to the changing political and social relationships between black men and black women following the Black Power Movement but it also helps to create that change. Though the sense of resignation is not unlike that of the urban dwellers of Ann Petry's The Street, yet Mattie's existence on Brewster Place is significantly different from that of Lutie, because Mattie survives to act as a maternal source of nurturing for the other female inhabitants of Brewster Place. She both benefits from and provides a safe space on Brewster Place. Hence, TWOBP emerges as a black feminist attempt to show that black women's intra-racial gender-based oppression necessitates the construction of black women's community and the utilization of safe spaces in the North. Her narrative technique best exploits the literary potential of the safe space and also follows and contributes to a feminist literary construction. However, by the time Naylor wrote Brewster Place an alternative movement in the
fictional texts had already begun in the form of counter migration. However Naylor, too, like Petry, does not suggest that Mattie, Luciellia, Kiswana or "the two" should go back to the South to realize the importance of the South in their lives. Naylor too rejects the South as Mattie's memory of the South is untenable, to be thought of as an option if the North does not accept her. Instead, Mattie, with the help of sustaining element of her culture i.e. female bonding, creates the atmosphere of the South in the North. However, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara etc. had started portraying their protagonists as going back to the South: some in search of their roots, some to go back home, some tired of the North's indifference and coldness. The migrants will realize the full potentiality and the importance of the South in their lives only after going back to the South, for the North will be hostile to them. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* best illustrates this kind of movement. She will further modify the tropes of migration and counter migration that will be discussed in the next chapter.
Works Cited


