Chapter 2

THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE
The Women of Brewster Place projects black women who are totally trapped by the iniquitous system. Gloria Naylor constructs a vision of gendered subordination, racial discrimination, and class-based difficulties in a way that is metonymic of the struggles many black and impoverished women face in the US. Most of the African American women writers have been preoccupied with the problem of the multiple oppression of racism-sexism-capitalism, which black women in America have undergone for years together. According to Maya Angelou, "The Black female ... is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power." Naylor examines this "tripartite crossfire" in The Women of Brewster Place. She almost lives in her characters. Her fictional characters engage in a fierce struggle for survival in an environment of poverty and prejudice, violence and violation, and an almost crushing adversity.

Gloria Naylor exposes the depth of class difference in America, focusing not simply on constructions of rich and poor, but also the intertwined issues of race, gender, and sexuality. The Women of Brewster Place deals with seven women residents of an unidentified northern city somewhere in urban America called Brewster Place, which has become a slum for blacks. Although each woman has her own individual problems, all of them collectively share the problems of the black urban female. Naylor's focus on characters who inhabit the margins of society demonstrates the exclusive nature of dominant culture. In the novel, all of the predominantly female characters face profound hardship; from social and familial exclusion and economic impoverishment to psychological shortcomings and maternal
suffering, Naylor’s characters are lined by the commonality of pain. Their lives reflect in depth the experience of many black women alive in America today. The novel tells about their passions, disappointments, frustration with their struggles, tragedies and triumphs. The book explores the lives of African American women and men who live in a walled-off street in the ghetto of an anonymous Northeastern setting and examines relationships.

Though their varied backgrounds and lifestyles define their underprivileged status, they collectively share the problems of the black urban female, both alone and together. The novelist’s intention is to shatter the stereotypes about black women and demonstrate that their experiences are as varied as those of whites. Naylor also wants to show the resilience of the downtrodden in overcoming tough circumstances. In an interview with William Goldstein, Naylor says, “Each woman has her dream and each story is the tale of dream deferred just a bit, which is the problem of the black female experience in America.”

Although each woman has her own individual problem, all of them collectively share the problems of the black urban female. And also William Bradley Hooper describes these women aptly: “...these women are of different ages, come from different backgrounds, react differently to their blackness and to men, and have different notions of personal accomplishment, but all are burdened by being black and female.” Thus the novel depicts seven courageous black women struggling to survive life’s harsh realities. In Naylor’s own words, “... one character couldn’t be the Black woman in America. So I had seven different women, all in different
circumstances, encompassing the complexity of our lives, the richness of our diversity, from skin color on down to religious, political, and sexual preference."

The novel is composed of seven vignettes, of which six are centred on individual characters, while the final one is about the entire community. Each independent short story concentrates on a single woman's life. The dominant character in one chapter takes a subordinate place in others. The work is bound together as a novel because of the related episodes which though they do not move chronologically, span the whole narrative. The novel is about motherhood, a concept embraced by these women, each of whom is a surrogate child or mother to the next. This cycle of interconnected stories takes place in a decrepit building in Brewster Place, separated by a big wall from the main stream of society, which turns to be a haven for these women. Ironically enough, the place itself is hailed as "bastard child" abandoned by the white society. On that land, they decide to live a respectable life and escape from the oppression of society. They are the ostracized individuals who have left their homes behind and inhabit that ghetto.

The seven women of Brewster Place – Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Lucielia Louise Turner, Cora Lee, Lorraine, and Theresa – explore how such issues as class and sexual orientation unite and divide women. The main focus of the novel is on the Brewster Place and the black women who live in this locality in the form of a community. This structure gives characters an individuality that rescues them from the fate of being viewed as anonymous "female heads of households."

Mattie Michael, the protagonist and a mother-like figure, acts as a guiding light both visibly and invisibly whose presence can be felt through all the stories in the novel. She was abandoned by her father, lover and even son and reached Brewster Place to lead the rest of her life and to help other ailing women like her to identify their conditions. Etta Mae Johnson, a childhood friend of Mattie, wandered all over with many men and, unsatisfied with their behaviour, finally approached Mattie where she could be her original self in her presence. Cora Lee, an unwed mother, whose obsession for infants instead of the grownups, was cleared through her abiding bond with Kiswana Browne, who reminded her of her responsibility as a mother. Kiswana, an ardent reformer of Brewster, wanted to revolt against the hiked rent and finally remembers her cultural past through her mother’s presence. Lucielia Louise Turner, also known as Ciel, granddaughter of Miss Eva and a childhood companion of Mattie’s son Basil, is another failure, who lost her husband’s love because of the endless pursuit of his materialistic life, got aborted to support the family economically, and also lost her only daughter. Mattie’s nurturing and caring again helps her regain her lost “life” and “self.” The lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa, were rejected not only by their parents but also by their own black people and finally reached Brewster Place with a hope of sharing. Thus The Women of Brewster Place emphasizes not only bonding – class, community, and motherhood – but also focuses on the inability to fulfil dreams deferred by racism and sexism.

All these seven alienated and abandoned women are also at a loss of their dreams being unfulfilled. As the introductory poem explains, their dreams are
deferred. But their unrealized dreams act as a tool to question themselves about their survival and identity. This poem also invokes implicitly Naylor’s dream for the racial equality during the sixties, when males failed to reach up to the expectations of females to share with them.

Naylor selected Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” from the anthology *The Panther and the Lash*, as an epigraph. It has a direct attention on the community of Brewster Place as a microcosm for black America and it is comprised of marginal people’s quest for linear progress but it ultimately fails on their rather foreboding dead-end street. His poem questions and explains the unrealized dreams as one encounters the stories of each woman. The poem runs as follows:

*What happens to a dream deferred?*

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over
like a syrupy sweet?
May be it just sags
like a heavy load.
*Or does it explode?*
The poem is about the overarching question of dreams deferred which are exploded in the end; it presents seven questions which are similar to the seven women stories in Brewster Place. In each of the shattered pieces in the text stands a testimony to the above fact. There is only the continuous flow of suffering after suffering that happens in the lives of the blacks. In the end, nobody just gives up and dies, but they gather meticulously and life goes on after every disaster. The women overcome their individual differences and unite to dismantle a wall — symbolizing racism that separates them from the rest of the city.

The setting of the novel is Brewster Place: a dead-end street with four double housing units. The first occupants of Brewster Place were the Irish, then Mediterraneans, and then Blacks. As Brewster Place is a dead end street and the blacks who live there are poor, powerless and ignored by others in the city, it exists independently 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. Their physical structure protects its residents from direct interference from the outside world; thus they are able to formulate and maintain their social rules of behaviour and to condemn and punish those who, because of their life-style or background, do not stick to a prescribed pattern. Within this limited environment, all the residents exist under similar circumstances.

To give homogeneity to their living, Naylor describes the "coloured daughters" of Brewster Place as follows:
... hands on hips, straight-backed, round-bellied, high-behind women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshiped, and shared their men. Their love drove them to fling dishcloths in someone else's kitchen to help him make the rent, or to fling hot lye to help him forget that bitch behind the counter at the five-and-dime. They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story. (4-5)

This description reveals the economic and social position of the women. It creates the content of the novel.

As mentioned earlier, the novel is about the problems faced by seven characters. The dominant character in one chapter takes a subordinate place in others. The seven women tell about their passions, disappointments, frustration and their struggles, tragedies and triumphs.

The first section of the book focuses on the experiences of Mattie Michael, who serves as the emotional centre of the book and she is present in all of the individual character studies. In fact she serves as "matriarch, surrogate mother, and mentor to the other women on Brewster Place."5 In terms of Naylor, Mattie is an "an earth mother" as her generous, calm, helpful and nurturing nature deserves the title.
She stands as a representative of African American woman, who was a victim of cultural, racial and sexual exploitation in the colour and gender biased society.

Mattie Michael's story starts with a flashback as a typical young woman. It is from the real time of a moment into memory. She has been brought up in Rock Value, Tennessee, under the strict vigilance of her father, Samuel Michael. She is the only child and enjoyed love, care, warmth, and joy in her home. Her parents have constant fear and apprehension about the safety of her life.

Mattie’s ordinary life is brought to an abrupt by Butch Fuller, a black ruffian. On an innocent outing with Fuller to the Morgans’s sugarcane field to pick a few nice fat canes left around, Mattie falls a prey to Fuller’s advances and becomes pregnant. Mattie’s ordeal begins the day her pregnancy is discovered by her self-righteous father. At first, Samuel Michael broods over it in a “torturing silence” but soon breaks into a violent rage, battering and bruising Mattie for refusing to divulge the name of her baby’s father. Mattie refuses to reveal because she strongly feels that it was not Butch but it was the aroma of sugarcane field with a few nice fat canes left around that did the magic. Truly she never cared for Butch. Mattie is more frightened by her father’s silence than the physical violence which comes later. The eruptive figurative whirlwind becomes suddenly literal, as her father begins to slap her face, yank her hair, and beat her baby with a broom. The patriarchy of black male is proved when she is beaten by her father and deceived by Butch. Naylor expresses her anger both at Fuller’s cowardly behaviour and Samuel’s sexist-bias, which assumes that in an illicit
relationship between a man and a woman, it is the woman alone who is guilty and therefore she alone has to be punished.

Mattie ruins the family name and Butch completely disappears from her life leaving without a roof over her head. She misses the comfort and cleanliness of her home throughout her life. One part of her life is over. Naylor delineates her as a strong woman who never ruminates over her losses, but is determined to act against the evils of both society and male patriarchy. Finally she makes the instinctive matriarchal decision to live without a man and leaves her home like many other dark children of the South. She moves as an unwed black mother carrying “the child that would tie her to the past and future as inextricably as it was now tied to her heartbeat” (25).

Mattie undergoes all the hardships that a single woman with a meager education and an equally meager income would undergo in bringing up a child. She faces her ordeal in a harsh and impersonal world. All that she wants to give him is a secure life, even without any male support. The matriarchal power in Mattie provides her psychological strength which enables her overcome the suffering in her life. When Mattie leaves her home in Rock Vale, Tennessee, to save her son from her father’s faster and harder blows, Etta, her childhood friend, supports her emotionally. Eva provides emotional, economic and social support to Mattie and her son. Though their ages differ, Eva shares all the agonies of Mattie with motherly love and understands her need to support the helpless Mattie: “The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable” (34). Thus Eva marks a turning
point in Mattie’s life. She plays a crucial role in reviving Mattie’s sagging confidence in herself and her faith in the goodness of human beings. Mattie soon finds herself “accepting the unexplained kindness of the woman with a hunger of which she had been unaware” (34). This bond between them is visible throughout the novel when Etta comes to live with Mattie.

Basil grows up along with Eva’s granddaughter Ciel and later he turns into a rogue and kills a man in a scuffle in a bar and finally gets arrested. It appears that Naylor in a way provides Mattie with all possible problems to encounter only to enable her emerge as a strong woman. Then Mattie sells her only house, given to her by Eva after her death, to get bail for him which he skips and runs away leaving her alone, isolated, and abandoned. As a racial minority, a mother out of wedlock, and as a woman, Mattie has no socioeconomic authority and is excluded from a role of power accessible to others. In fact, the Mattie-Basil relationship represents an extreme of black mother-to-son parenting often found in African-American literature: “... mothers who love their sons to destruction through self-sacrifice and overindulgence.” Mattie serves as a “Buffer between her son and the hostile world of both intra and interracial violence. ... The result is a human being stripped of personhood, a man child emasculated.”

Mattie becomes an “object” to the oppressive forces which she leaves behind before coming to Brewster and she does not want other innocent women to be victims of this force. This determination arouses in her the power of nurturing, sharing, and caring all the marginalized and oppressed souls of that locality. In this way, Naylor
carves her woman protagonist as a natural healer of the wounds within. In the end, Mattie starts her journey of her life as an anchor for the other women of Brewster Place. Initially, Mattie meets Etta Mae Johnson, whose story forms the second part of the novel.

Etta Mae Johnson is a sassy, rebellious, independent black woman who yearns for adventure. Naylor presents her as

A woman who struggles against prejudices, uses the music of Billie Holiday to deal with rejection, and finds temporary comfort in the sustaining friendship of Mattie within the community of Brewster Place.\(^7\)

Etta, Mattie’s childhood friend, is estranged from her community. Whites force her to leave because she is too uppity. She lives, however, primarily through hitching her wagon to a “rising black star,” to a succession of men; she too never discovers that she can live through herself. Naylor’s comment on the effect of sexism and racism on her is astute: “Even if someone had bothered to stop and tell her that the universe had expanded for her just an inch, she wouldn’t know how to shine alone” (60).

Etta also leaves Rock Vale like Mattie, because she wants to be herself in a place and time which sees only black and female. Etta does not care for the society’s opinion upon her and she becomes the talk of the town. Then she decides to leave Rock Vale, where blacks are punished severely by lynching. Life has been hard for Etta. She believes strongly that she is the one to decide what she wants to do with her
life. She now wants to settle down and therefore enquires about possible candidates – one of whom she might hook down to be her life partner. For that she goes to the Church and sees the way people supplicate themselves before God to solve their problems. She thinks that it is her own action that gives the desired or undesired results and does not like people troubling God about their sufferings in life. She believes in doing as she pleases and takes full responsibility for whatever she does. Then she moves from one city to another in search of a place where she can lead an independent life. This attitude is seen in her behaviour with her head high and eyes fixed unwaveringly on her destination.

Later she gets attracted to Reverend Moreland Woods, a folkloric black preacher, and dreams to marry him and settle down to a decent and rich life. But her dreams are deferred, when she is seduced by him. She realizes her sorry plight as “the angels rejoice more over one sinner who turns around than over ninety-nine righteous ones” (68). It is at a very late stage that Etta understands that she must depend on her own self for salvation. In this crestfallen manner and nobody to care for her, Etta approaches Brewster Place, where Mattie has always been the constant and comfort for her as a true preacher. Here Mattie is aptly compared to light, love and comfort. This deference is the result of their sensitivity to other women’s problems.

This is true in case of almost all the Black American women, as their problems may vary but not the suffering and their sharing. Though they know that they are suffering, they never hesitate to host the other needy women. Sethe Suggs in Morrison’s Beloved invites Beloved to live with them even in their mediocre life
situations. Naylor, in her next novel, *Linden Hills*, creates a similar situation when the poorest Andersons invite two roaming unsettled poor fellow as their guests. And in this novel also, Eva Turner allows Mattie and her son to live with her. All these instances are typical of Black people’s caring, sharing, and the communal bonding they create among themselves irrespective of their ages and genders.

The third chapter deals with Kiswana Brown, a middle-class Black woman who moves to Brewster Place because she rejects her black middle-class background in *Linden Hills*. Kiswana and her mother confront each other about their seemingly different values and lifestyles. Mrs. Browne stands for the traditional values whereas Kiswana represents those middle-class Blacks who reject the values of their parents and embrace those of Black nationalists.

The clash of difference between the mother and the daughter is signified through the choice of name. Kiswana changes her name from Melanie as a rejection of the Euro-centric culture and affirmation of her allegiance to the African heritage. Throughout Kiswana’s visit, Mrs. Browne refuses to address her daughter by her African name, even though Kiswana tells her “no one hardly ever calls me Melanie” (78). Mrs. Browne argues with Kiswana that she has given her her grandmother’s name, which has a history and heritage behind it; and by rejecting her name, she has rejected her own past. Mrs. Browne adds that her grandmother was “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’” (86). Kiswana ultimately understands her heritage and strongly believes in the
freedom of the Blacks. They had made countless sacrifices and services for their liberation from generations of slavery. Finally, Kiswana completely knows about her responsibility and acts accordingly.

It is through her relationship with Lucielia Louise Turner, whose story forms the fourth section of the book, that Mattie's real mettle becomes evident. Ciel (Lucielia) is the granddaughter of Eva Turner and Basil's early childhood playmate. Mattie becomes her second mother with whom she grows up. Her story differs from Mattie Michael and Etta Mae Johnson's. It is the story of a poor Black couple, Lucielia Louise Turner and Eugene Turner, whose relationship disintegrates because of limited job opportunities and utter poverty.

Ciel is living a life of humiliation and degradation with Eugene Turner, her husband, who wants to desert her as soon as he comes to know of her pregnancy. It is as if it is Ciel's fault alone that she has got pregnant, as if it is Eugene alone who will have to endure the hassles of bringing up another child. Ciel even undergoes an abortion in order to please and keep Eugene, but to no avail. Ciel's only solace is Serena, her daughter, whom also fate takes away in an electric shock. It is in a kind of daze that Ciel goes through church ceremonies and the burial. After her child's death, Eugene deserts her. She decides to give up her life. But God refuses her request to end her life, so she takes the matter into her own hands and shuns food, drink or bath, and is on the verge of slipping her life. All Ciel thinks is that her prayers have gone unheeded. No amount of consolation from the other women of the block works to revive her.
However, Mattie understands Ciel’s feelings and succeeds in administering the healing touch. Naylor paints a graphic picture of Mattie’s efforts at bringing the dying Ciel back to psychic health. Mattie is determined that Ciel will not die. So she enfolds Ciel’s tissue thin body in her huge ebony arms and rocks her back and forth, as a mother would rock a baby, till a moan breaks forth from the mute Ciel and tears flow down her face freely:

Mattie rocked her out of the bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clear 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. 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)

In Mattie’s rocking and bathing, Ciel is able to cry at last, her first tears since Serena’s death. Mattie gently rocks her back towards a healthy consciousness. She undresses Ciel and gives her a complete bath. It looks like another baptism — a thorough cleansing of not only the physical body but also the suffering spirit. She then leads her freshly wet, glistening body, baptized now, to bed. She covers her with one sheet and lays a towel across the pillow. And Ciel lies down and cries. But Mattie
knows the tears will end and she will sleep, and morning – both the literal next day and new hope – will once again come.

Cora Lee’s story is counterpart to Ciel’s. While Ciel craves for a “sweet home” with her husband, Cora has an obsession for infants, instead of grownups, she gets from different “shadows” in her life. Kashinath Ranveer criticizes her as “an irresponsible black mother who loves children only when they are helpless infants and neglects them when they grow up.” When Cora was a small young girl, she had an abundant love for baby dolls. For Christmas Eve, she wanted only baby dolls and refused to take any other gift and strongly protested against anything else thrust upon her. Her mother warned her that she had already numerous dolls and added that they did not smell and feel. She told Ciel that she could make her own real babies with the “thing that felt good in the dark” (109). In spite of her mother’s repeated warning, Cora Lee had an exact opposite effect because she was desperate for babies.

This was the beginning of Cora Lee’s life. She had had many men and many babies. What the men did to her in the dark felt good and that too got her babies. She continued to satisfy her desire for the sweet, soft, and vulnerable new born. Her older children existed for her as frozen portraits of their baby days. In her candid view, they were “little dumb asses.” She marginalized her men as shadows. She was an irresponsible black mother who did not know how to love and nurture her children. She was unable to accept responsibility and maintenance of her family.

When Kiswana Browne comes in her life, self-confidence is kindled in her. To Kiswana’s question why she has so many children, Cora answers that she is fond of
babies. With the presence of Kiswana and her support, Cora transforms from an irresponsible and psychologically impoverished mother to an elevated and responsible mother who dreams for a new future for her children after watching Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Kiswana wants to shift the accusations of laziness and relentless reproductivity away from her. The visit to the play looks like a breakthrough and she begins to straighten up the house and to look for decent dress to wear for the children. She cleans up the children and puts washed, darned, stitched, and ironed dresses to make them street-worthy. The children are amazed and frightened by Cora's sudden energetic bout. Moreover the people in the street are surprised by the fresh looks of Cora and her children in their best dresses walking along with Kiswana up the street to the place where the makeshift stage has been erected.

The play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* includes yet another dream: “I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was...” (IV.1.204-205). When Cora watches the play, she casts a new reality for herself and understands the responsibility towards the children. The “truant nonsense” stops and she decides to send them to summer school regularly, check their homework, and attend PTA meetings, and help them to grow up better and make them worthy of leading a good life.

As she returns home with these dreams ahead of her, another “shadow” is awaiting her and “then she turned and firmly folded her evening like gold and lavender gauze deep within the creases of her dreams” (127). This is another instance
where the patriarchal authority does not allow them to identify their selves and to fulfil their dreams for a better life. Unless they have the strength to rebel, men will oppress them more to the marginality, whether white or black.

Mattie, in her struggle to ensure her identity in an exploitative, threatening and thwarting society, not only creates a path for herself for survival, but also stands as a representative to the other women to get rid of the unrelieved suffering and the strength that emanate from it to survive. She is not a stereotype woman who grieves over their pathetic condition, shattering the image as an ex-slave, racially inferior creatures, subjected to endless suffering and an “object” to fulfil the desires of both white and black males, but believes themselves as socially and racially elevated human beings with a culture of their own.

The last of the seven women stories deals with the relationship between the two Black lesbian lovers, Lorraine and Theresa. At first, they are considered to be “nice girls” by the female residents of Brewster Place, especially when it becomes clear that the two women are not interested in their husbands. Lorraine and Theresa are accepted by the Brewster Place community as long as they maintain and display the type of behaviour considered appropriate by the community. For the other women of Brewster Place, the primary requirement for acceptance into the community is that neither Lorraine nor Theresa invites the attention or affection of the other women’s husbands or boyfriends. Lorraine wants to be accepted by the neighbours – attend their neighbourhood meetings, watch their children, exchange friendly conversation – whereas her partner Theresa has no interest in the neighbourhood. Lorraine, all
softness, yearns for acceptance and lets others determine how she feels about herself. Theresa, on the other hand, is tough, works hard to see herself honestly, and defines herself by knowing clearly who and what she is. While Theresa is self-defined, Lorraine is other-defined.

Theresa and Lorraine have come to Brewster place not because they are economically deprived but because they are socially scorned, because Lorraine has felt the pressures of being denied normal status in former neighbourhoods. Brewster Place is their last chance; there is nowhere else to go. In their stay here, it is Theresa who gradually becomes infected by what others think. During Theresa’s food-throwing and screaming outburst (156-59), all that she says is directed to people who are not present. The crux of the mounting tension that builds their story has to do with being different. Lorraine is convinced they are not different, and Theresa insists they are.

Once it is realized that the women are lovers, many members of the community openly disapprove of their life style. They are more scared of Theresa than Lorraine. The community’s negative response on them begins slowly and subtly. The inhabitants start using words such as “unnatural” and “nasty” to describe these once “nice girls.” The rumour starts to spread as they may be lesbians.

Lorraine is the first to realize the difference in the people’s response. She gets hurt by the judgment responses of her neighbours while Theresa claims not to care what people think or say. Lorraine and Theresa learn to survive with mutual support amidst hostile environment. Lorraine chooses to see her life in fullness beyond cookie
statue, and it is this conviction on her part that compels her to attend the neighbourhood meeting. Miss Sophie, mentioned in passing in other stories, is developed in this final one. The first meeting of the Brewster Place Block Association takes place in Kiswana’s apartment, where Mattie, Etta, and Cora Lee make an appearance, the first time in the novel that the community of women is together in one place. When Lorraine enters the room, the meeting disintegrates into Miss Sophie’s homophobic diatribe against what she thinks of Lorraine’s relationship. At this point Naylor reduces the lives of Theresa and Lorraine to only their sexual relationship, letting the “theys” of the world, as represented by Miss Sophie, have their say. At the meeting, Lorraine feels reduced to a cookie. It is Mattie who first feels uncomfortable with the subject of women who love each other, but when she talks it out, she comes to the realization that “maybe it’s not so different…. deep down it’s not so different after all” (141). This awareness on Mattie’s part prepares her for her role in comforting Lorraine as she dies.

At the meeting, however, Mattie is silent. Lorraine’s simple offer to be the secretary turns into her own crucifixion. Sophie berates her, waves around the ebony statue, the weapon that she has plucked from Kiswana’s apparently growing African art collection, and points it at Lorraine like a crucifix (145). And as at the crucifixion of Jesus when no one speaks against what is happening, this room is filled with silence, until Ben, the usually zooted janitor, steps forward. Sophie’s condemnation of Lorraine reaches its peak when she discloses that she saw Lorraine get out of the bath tub and call for Theresa to bring her a clean towel. Lorraine, however, is physically
and emotionally devastated by this incident and, as she leaves the apartment, she fights an impulse to throw up.

Lorraine's only support is Ben, the oldest resident and the janitor of the complex, who brings her down off that cross, where Sophie has tried to nail her, and takes her downstairs to his place. He consoles her by taking her to his apartment and telling her the story of his daughter and his wife. His only daughter, crippled from birth, cleaned house for the white property owner. When his daughter told him she was being sexually used by the white man, Ben was impotent in the situation; he could neither protect her nor prevent what was happening. Ben's daughter was indirectly led into prostitution by her parents, who refused to do anything about the fact that she was being forced to sleep with their white landlord. This exploitation takes place down South, and tells about the white neighbour who re-emphasizes the inaccessibility of white patriarchal power to the impoverished black man. Ben was being blamed by his wife, Elvira. His wife measured Ben's masculine and human worth by his abilities as a provider – both of babies and of moderately good economic stability – and found him seriously lacking. He was not, in Elvira's pragmatic perception, "even quarter a man." He responded to her castigation by abusing alcohol and silently desiring to murder her. He imagined "his big callused hands on the bones of her skull pressing in and in," or he wanted to go in the house and get his shotgun and empty "the bullets into her sagging breasts" (153). His daughter left for Memphis and became a prostitute, and he was reduced to a drunkard. Ben drinks to fight the return of any part of the memory of his daughter's situation. He tells Lorraine that she reminds him of his daughter.
In Lorraine, however, Ben's daughter is resurrected and he becomes to Lorraine the resurrected father. Actually Lorraine's father had "kicked [her] out of the house when [she] was seventeen years old" (148). Because Lorraine is able to "really, really talk" with Ben, she becomes a stronger, more confident person. In fact, she becomes what Theresa had earlier stated she hoped for: "...someone who could stand toe to toe with her and be willing to slug it out at times" (136). When Theresa notices the changes in Lorraine, however, she is not sure she likes them. Even though she expresses some irritation with Lorraine when she sees Kiswana run interference for her during the street confrontation with C.C. Baker and his gang, Theresa herself had been ready to go to her aid. Even before they could get into any serious conversation, C.C. Baker and his gang of seven teenage boys arrive there to taunt Lorraine. Kiswana runs to protect Lorraine and show Baker his proper place. Kiswana is able to "beat [C.C. Baker] at the dozens" (162), an elaborate word game of reciprocal insult. Lorraine expresses a smirk on her face which incenses Baker. She becomes the catalyst for the rape.

Theresa urges Lorraine to be a strong woman and express herself openly to the people around her. Actually Theresa urges Lorraine to accompany her for the party but decides to go all by her. At last Lorraine makes a definitive statement to her partner: "If I can't walk out of this house without you tonight, there'll be nothing left in me to love you" (167). After a brief discussion, Theresa thinks it will do well to her to be in her own. Lorraine goes to the party. Not able to face Theresa, she returns early
and makes her way down a dark alley towards Ben but she moves through C. C. Baker's territory.

The denouement occurs just then when C. C. Baker and the five members of his group, once insulted by Lorraine, determine to take revenge and satisfy their male ego, rape her several times. They violently and repeatedly rape Lorraine with no feeling of remorse or even revulsion. She becomes helpless and the only word she repeats during and after that disastrous moment is "please," as if pleading the humanity, the community, the society and the people around to help her and other helpless woman like her from the oppression, the ills, and evils of society. The whole scene grabs the breath of the reader while reading as Naylor's use of prose and narrative style are captivating as she describes it in a naturalist mode. As a black lesbian, Lorraine cannot demand what she wants or needs, for her sex, colour and sexual orientation places her in a difficult position.

Lorraine has never been with any man, and she does not want to hear about the men that Theresa had been with. Lorraine's strength had been increasing through her involvement with Ben, but now the physical desecration of her body through a gang rape that leaves only her eyes screaming for help destroys every bit of the person she was in the process of becoming, though not before she makes a final and desperate lunge at what she knows is movement.

When the rapist feels her for dead, Lorraine is barely alive. As the sun begins to warm the air, she sees a shadow moving at the end of the alley from one side to another side. Her insane lashing out at Ben appears to reflect the chaotic and deeply
disturbed nature of Lorraine's psyche. She calls "Merciful Jesus!" that the morning light is not playing tricks with her eyes. She slowly crawls towards Ben, who sways drunkenly on overturned garbage. She takes the bricks from the wall erected by the city to smash down Ben's mouth before he opens his lips to utter "My God, child, what happened to you?" (172). Lorraine takes the brick smashed down into his mouth. His teeth crumble into his throat and his body swings back against the wall. Lorraine brings the brick down again to stop the moving head, and blood shots out of his ears, splattering against the can and bottom of the wall. The final image of Lorraine is of "A tall yellow woman in a bloody green and black dress, scraping at the air, crying, 'Please. Please' " (173). 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 of men."9

Naylor shows that practically all the women of Brewster Place are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. Mattie is seduced by Butch Fuller and then deserted; Etta Mae Johnson meets the same fate at the hands of the various men she meets, including Rev. Woods. Ciel receives a brutal treatment at the hands of Eugene; Cora Lee is burdened with half a dozen kids who are not sure who their father is; Ben's lame daughter is offered by her own mother to satisfy Mr. Clyde's lust, in exchange for the extra land he has rented them. Finally, Lorraine, who has been living a life of alienation and ostracism with Theresa, also becomes a victim of the savage sexual violation by C.C. Baker and his buddies. Through Lorraine's gang-rape and her
subsequent death, Naylor shows how vulnerable a woman is. Talking about Lorraine’s rape, Naylor says:

The thing is, Lorraine wasn’t raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she was a woman. And regardless of race, regardless of social status, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience. When you reduce that down in this society even to something as abysmal as rape there is no difference between women.10

The women of Brewster Place’s final story, “The Block Party,” presents further evidence of Naylor’s command of her material. Naylor’s novel clearly recognizes the richness of its narrative fragmentation, a recognition that is exhibited in the intentional failure of its moment of totalization. On the surface level, it suggests that a new order results from the utter chaos surrounding the brutal rape of Lorraine. It is an order based on the female protagonists’ comprehension of their interconnectedness.

The actual party is the unrealized dream of Kiswana to unite the tenements of Brewster community. This dream has symbolic importance as all the characters are involved in her dream. This dream fortifies Hughes’ poem as it shows the unfulfilled dreams of other black women too. Etta stays with Mattie without getting married against her dream to settle well as she is reminded of her middle age in Mattie’s presence. Kiswana still fights for her people to reform them. Cora Lee does not stop her “shadow” men to impregnate her. Though Ciel again plans to marry, the dream of Lorraine’s disaster disturbs her.
Mattie, the putative matriarch herself, dreams of the destruction of the myth that “created” her. Rain bursts into Mattie’s nightmare, dispersing the block party initiated by Kiswana and designed to bring the neighbourhood together in confrontation with the landlord. Cora Lee’s youngest child, Sonya, is the one who discovers the stain on the brick, which she tries to scrape away with “a smudged Popsicle stick’ (185). Cora “yanked the brick out,” (185) calling to Mattie to join her in tearing down the wall, while “All of the men and children now stood huddled in doorways.” (185) Mattie starts a chain, in which the brick “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” (186).

All seven of Naylor’s women throw the resistance to oppression they circulated among themselves out into the dominant society, breaking the flow of that society past Brewster Place as “Cars were screeching and sliding around the flying bricks” (187). When Cora Lee asks Theresa to join the rest of the women with the words “Please. Please,” Theresa demands, “Now, you go back up there and bring some more [bricks], but don’t ever say that again – to anyone!”(187). In throwing the bricks, Theresa throws away the word “please” and discards the script of submission imposed upon African American women.

The act of tearing down the bricks of wall is symbolically a way of rejecting their past and the conditions that exist in that community. The women may have various reasons for their individual suffering as each has her own story, but all of them unite in breaking down the wall. This is the wall that separates them from the main
society. They symbolically tear it apart implying that the blacks are not supposed to be ostracized and express their wish to mingle in the main stream of society. Their collective effort in the form of sisterhood helps them remove the wall as they pass down all the debris of it. Finally they achieve it: "... almost in perfect unison with the beating of their hearts (188). After a week, Brewster Place is bathed in a deluge of sunlight. The sun is shining on everything and the women are getting ready for another party. Mattie opens her window: "It's just like a miracle ... to think it stopped raining today of all days" (188). And now, the sun shines.

Gloria Naylor fits into, what Claudia Tate calls, the general tradition in African American Literature of celebrating black survival by overcoming racial obstacles. It is not as if the women of Brewster Place have succeeded in breaking the wall of racism but Naylor pins her hope on the united effort that the women are determined to make. What is significant is that the women want to forget their prejudices and their bickering and unite to fight their common enemy. Without the presence of Mattie, the pathetic stories of the seven women seem independent. Mattie acts as a uniting force to merge the whole story.

Lorraine becomes the symbol of pain and unity. The care and concern these women extend to each other without hurting them as an ideal responsibility make them understand this relationship as a source of moral strength. And this strength helps them regain their lost selves and supports them in both physical and psychological traumas. When these women are abandoned by their men and fall victims to the double jeopardy of racism and sexism, this collective friendship among
them provides the ability to survive. All the individual stories are connected by means of common characters to form this community of kinship and the personal disappointments of these individuals help them achieve collective experience of poverty, isolation, and sexual exploitation.

At the end of the "novel in seven stories," despite numerous conflicts, Naylor unites the women in Mattie's dream of the block party. They join in an act of protect against the power of men over women (the gang rape of the lesbian Lorraine) and, more broadly, against the barriers of racist and class oppression (the bloodstained wall) that distort relations between the sexes. Even after Brewster Place has been condemned and abandoned in the epilogue, "Dusk," the women carry on:

... the colored daughters 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 mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into pots of soup, and they're diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. So Brewster Place still waits to die. (192)

The women are a collective repository of dreams, a resilient source of strength for continuing survival if not yet conquest.

Gloria Naylor, like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, writes about strong black women who survive under the conditions of adversity. Most of them strongly believe that they cannot be separated from their laughter, sufferings and companionship as they share them among themselves. And Naylor projects that if they are supportive to
one another, they can get the ability to overpower their suffering, abuse and violence in the hands of men and society and also strength to rebel against it. It is also carried into her second novel *Linden Hills*, with the concept of sin, racism, loss of identity, and sexism.

In *Linden Hills*, which continues the fictional world of Brewster Place but moves up in social class to the black bourgeois housing development dominated up the mortician Luther Nedeed, Naylor places a more balanced emphasis on both men and women. At the same time, there seem to be far fewer possibilities of female community. Despite their college educations and, in some cases, professional careers, most of the women are isolated and vulnerable. Yet here, too, a sense of community comes to play an important role in the plot. When she is locked in the basement morgue with her dead child, Willa Nedeed’s emerging discovery of the suffering of her female predecessors in the house gives her strength to survive, accept herself, and take revenge on her husband. Furthermore, the hope is more clearly developed in this novel that the sensitive black male, in the person of the poet Willie Mason, can begin to bridge the gap of understanding between men and women and to support women in their quest for identity.

The women in this novel are a mere means to provide heirs to the Nedeed dynasty, and a little more than servants with no freedom to raise their sons, physically and mentally abused and cut off from the outside world by self-possessed husbands and with their lost identities in their patriarchal authority. As these women try to find a
space, a home for their "self" discovery, they encounter abuses, thus experiencing a psychological hell in the hell created by the patriarchs of Linden Hills.
References


