CHAPTER – 7
THE MEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

I tell you
I love you
And I trust you.
Take my Faith.
Make of my Faith an engine.
Make of my Faith
A Black Star. I am Beckoning.¹

A community is essentially a collection of individuals, of lives and experiences. It is not an abstraction. The cultural homogeneity aimed at or achieved is essentially a sum total of the positions, moral and otherwise taken by these individuals. Naylor turns this into a structural design in both The Women of Brewster Place and The Men of Brewster Place. Naylor’s fifth novel The Men of Brewster Place (1998) completes the portrait she rendered so vividly in 1982 in her first novel. The sequel to this first novel is comprised, like its predecessor, of a collection of linked portraits of the inhabitants of the urban housing project. Naylor returns to the fictional neighbourhood, this time focusing on the men behind the women, telling their sad, tragic and heroic stories. In The Men of Brewster Place, the other side of the story is told, with the same rich grace, humour, and compassion that Naylor brought to her first novel. Brewster Place has been the home of many ethnic groups over the years. Now, crumbling and decayed, this street shares with its readers the stories of the black inhabitants. In this novel, Naylor not only revisits the dilapidated urban environs of her first novel, but also breathes new life into the male residents who once caused havoc in the lives of the women. Brewster Place’s men, once mere shadows hardly deserving the marginal space lent to their characterization, assume centre stage in Naylor’s latest work of fiction, telling of the trials and tribulations which have led
them to where they are. Naylor turns her artistic and political attention to the plight of
the black man, and she does so in such a way as to render a compelling fictional
expose of his dilemma.

In 1982, after the publication of *The Women Brewster Place*, Naylor was always
confronted with the inevitable question regarding the absence of the men of Brewster
Place and the other side of the story. Finally, with *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor
has given the men, who had appeared briefly in the earlier novel, a voice of their own.
Talking about the genealogy of her latest novel, Naylor in an interview to Tamala
Edwards says that ".....the passing of my father and witnessing the Million Man
March made me return to the subject. Those things slowly added up to my writing *The
Men.*" Like many people, Naylor too, was profoundly moved by the Million Man
March and the images of all those black men calling themselves to task, promising to
return home and be better citizens by concentrating on being better fathers, husbands,
and brothers. The March provided an alternative to the popular media image of the
troubled black man. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, the women are still present, but
they take a back seat as Naylor looks at these men in all their complexity, and in their
relationship to their families and community.

In the sixteen years gap since Naylor published her first novel, her outlook on the
role and condition of America's black man has definitely changed and it is reflected in
her projection of the stories of the men. As Naylor says,

I now see that black men are in a dangerous situation in this country. While
two-thirds of them are managing their lives as best they can and are providing
for themselves and their families, there is that one-third who have succumbed to
the pressures and don't see any hope for themselves. This is the one-third that
helps to make up the prison population and the under-employed or
unemployable.1
While black women have had to battle both sexism and racism, the black man was seen as more of a threat than the black woman because of his race and gender. So, while a few men have managed to excel, the majority of the black men find themselves having to overcome stereotypes and negative images. The genealogy of *The Men of Brewster Place* is further made clear by Naylor's statement that she wrote the novel "...as a testament to the hidden majority, men like my father who worked hard all of their lives, who struggled to keep their homes together against incredible odds and who remained even after their deaths unsung, unknown."

Naylor has once again, in her latest novel, focused on a world of sadness and glory. The men of Brewster Place continue to stream into the story in raw, biting vignettes until the stage is full and the future of their community is threatened. The question that Naylor poses in the novel is whether these men can come together and reclaim what is theirs. The answer lies at the root of their self-worth and sexual identity; and in probing at the problem, Naylor brings each of the character to life: Ben, the neighbourhood janitor serves as the Greek chorus and comes as close as one can to understand the men and women of Brewster Place; Brother Jerome, whose blues speaks for everyone on Brewster Place; Basil, who wants a family so badly that he makes the wrong choices; Eugene, torn between the pull of his family and the urge to recreate himself into a person even he does not understand; Reverend Moreland T. Woods, a stereotypical black preacher hungry for power; C.C. Baker, who finds that his desire for power over people and places he cannot control renders him powerless; Abshu, the perennial community activist and playwright who struggles to rescue the ill-fated community from its inevitable demise.

*The Men of Brewster Place* offers the men a second chance to explain themselves. Ben, the janitor who lives and works on the block, enjoys the greatest second chance
of all – struck to death by a distraught rape victim in the earlier book, he is resurrected as a narrator here. He either recounts the travails of the other men or climbs off the garbage pail and lets them narrate on their own. Much like a Greek chorus, the voice of Ben weaves its way in and out of each story, establishing the time and place and introducing the characters. Naylor’s appropriation of a male voice as a literary device is not new, however, for in Bailey’s Café she uses the voice of Bailey to allow the reader access to the poignant tales the café patrons spin. But more than the shadowy World War II veteran, Bailey, Ben is at once both a detached observer of and participant in the complex struggles the men face. His is an elusive quest for self, despite prescriptive notions of manhood and sexual identity. Naylor has appropriately made Ben introduce the reader to the male subjects. But unlike Mattie Michael’s or even Mama Day’s position as community othermothers, Ben is much more of a silent observer. Resurrecting his spirit and voice is a clever narrative strategy, “…one that not only helps to establish intertextual continuity but plunges the reader/audience into the Dantesque realm that is a hallmark of Naylor’s fiction.”

Ben’s situation, traceable to slavery and its bitter legacy of emasculation, is every man’s dilemma, and his story of injustice, anger, powerlessness, and despair, offers a historical frame for the contextualization of the stories the other men relate. One of Naylor’s goals in this novel is to elevate the men’s personal situation from the individual to the collective realm. This is what the first epigraph conveys:

Why should it be my loneliness,
Why should it be my song,
Why should it be my dream deferred
overlong?

Ben’s story assumes within it a historical memory of dislocation and lack of power which has been the hallmark of African American resistance. Hence, in Ben’s
narrative come in his father and grandfather, as if to parallel the expansion of Mattie Michael in the Ciel narrative of *The Women of Brewster Place*. The common stereotype has been that the bonding that was available in the case of African American women was not there for the men. It appears that through the structuring across time zones, Naylor uses Ben’s narrative to expand the sense of the community, to achieve a larger holistic perspective where the men also overcome the branding as isolated existences without any positive ties. It may also be posited that this expansion can be related to the role that the grandfather figure plays in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. (1952)

Ben, much like his grandfather, an ex-slave turned sharecropper, who is unable to protect his sister from the sexual abuse black women often experienced, fails to rescue his daughter from Mr. Clyde’s sexual exploitation. Ben’s touching story links the past, present, and future in such a way as to direct attention to the timelessness of the black male situation. Ben’s poor economic condition renders him helpless as he watches his crippled daughter being exploited. He cannot even make his wife, Elvira, understand the plight of their daughter, because Elvira is bent on making money. Naylor, here, offers what is missing in the first novel, an in-depth focus on the repressed anger that prompts Ben’s retreat into alcoholism:

*I feel a slight dampness in my hands because my fingernails have broken through the skin of my palms and the blood is seeping down my fingers. I look at Elvira’s dark, braided head and wonder why I don’t just take my hands out of my pockets and stop the bleeding by pressing them around it. Just lock my elbows on her shoulders and place one hand on each side of her temples and then in toward each other until the blood stops.* (30)

Ultimately, Ben’s family ties collapse all together when his daughter disappears one day leaving a note saying that she is going off to Memphis and after sometime, Elvira elopes with another man. Ben’s story highlights the problems the black men face –
their sufferings in silence while waiting in vain for divine retribution for racial wrongs.

Naylor’s sweeping, musical prose soar in the next story of Brother Jerome, a retarded boy, who is a genius when it comes to playing the blues. His story bears no connection to The Women of Brewster Place. The autistic Jerome, a talented pianist, is cursed with a mother who exploits his gift for monetary gain. Jerome’s mother, Mildred, loved him in her own peculiar way – “…with a lot of attention at one moment and none at the other” (39), as most of her time would be engaged in partying around with her friends. Left alone with a retarded child, Mildred had considered it a punishment for not going to church and refusing to marry Jerome’s father. But, because the damage was already done, she seeks solace in partying even harder. Naylor, here, focuses on the lack of positive family life, and this idea is highlighted in the other stories too. For Brother Jerome, masculine identity comes in the form of a rickety upright piano whose missing keys and wobbly wires burst to life when he plays. Jerome plays so well that his hedonistic mother decides not to institutionalize him, so that she can charge for his performance. Though Naylor has not fully developed Jerome’s story, what is of primary significance is the affect of his blues on everyone at Brewster Place. It is as if Jerome has an innate sense of what it means to be a black man and it is his mission to remind everyone else. His blues speak for every black man, the frustrations, and the quests for manhood, and in this sense portray the condition of the black men subjugated by the pressures of a hopeless legacy.

By letting the men speak for themselves, Naylor offers the readers a chance to understand a character’s voice as if it were his own. The last we saw of Basil was when he jumped bail, leaving his mother, Mattie Michael, to forfeit the house she had
put up as bond. Now Basil tells his story after he has eventually come home, contrite, to make restitution. By this time, though, Mattie Michael has died. In order to atone for his past misdeeds, he wants to start a family so badly that he makes the wrong choices. He looks for his redemption by caring for a welfare mother’s (Keisha) fatherless boys, Jason and Eddie, and trying to find atonement for his sins against his mother by giving those boys what he had never received as a child. He resolves to become the ideal father for those boys, and in an attempt to do so, he marries Keisha, and adopts the boys officially. For Keisha, as well as Basil, the marriage was not an outcome of love, but for convenience. Keisha is more than satisfied with Basil’s huge bank account. Women like Keisha, who cannot contribute to a positive family life, abound in this novel. Basil, however, in his utmost desire to give back some solace to his dead mother, tries to make amends by setting out to be a good father, and he definitely proves to be one. Trying in vain to reform Keisha, who has absolutely no parenting skills, Basil finally gives up and focuses his attention on being both a father and a mother for the two boys. There is hope that he is about to break a long tormented cycle when he is called back to serve prison time for past charges. By the time he returns, the positive strides he had made have gone in vain – “Jason had already done time himself in juvenile detention for car theft and aggravated assault. And little Eddie had built a shell around himself, hard and permanent.” (72)

Ultimately, Basil is left to wonder if he might have made a difference otherwise.

Similar to those suffering men like Ben and Basil, there is Eugene, a well-intentioned husband and father unable to conquer a tendency toward homosexuality. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, we saw Eugene in the background, brawling with his wife Ciel, forgetting to help look out for his baby daughter, who sticks a fork in an electrical outlet and dies as a result. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Eugene is in the
foreground, giving us his version of that tragic night and revealing the secret that caused his estrangement from his wife. He makes a return to explain why his marriage to Ciel was off and on, until the day came when he could no longer return to her and be the husband she wanted him to be. Eugene has a real difficult act to handle – he is married, he is a father, and he is gay. Ciel, his wife, does not know the reason he keeps leaving, so she takes family matters into her own hands and sends Eugene into a bottomless pit of guilt and self-loathing. In Eugene’s story, the word “faggot” (78), dropped into the text, sets the stage for his confession to the readers that he is gay.

After the death of his daughter, it seemed to him as if all future doors slammed shut at his face. His overwhelming grief and guilt lead him to Chino, a gay prostitute, a man whose own sad story is that he realized only after his voluntary castration that he need not have become a woman in order to love black men.

Through the voices of Ben, Eugene and Basil, Naylor asks us to believe that men who have just acted rashly and selfishly can return afterwards to articulate their wrongs. Roy Hoffman states appropriately that in this novel, “(t)he rocking chair for storytellers is gone, replaced by the therapist’s couch.”7 But at the same time, one cannot fail to notice that when Naylor’s men centre their revelations on their problems – alcoholism, sterility, feeling ashamed over the fact that they are gay – they lack the complexity of the women, who, as characters, are defined by far more. Even when they seek redemption, they stand little chance of receiving it. After the death of her baby, Ciel is comforted as she sobs in Mattie Michael’s arms. After the same death, Eugene seeks out a transvestite who he knows relishes cruelty – “I had come searching for his type of pain to replace mine...He whipped me until his arms grew tired, specks of my blood covering everything but the tiled ceiling.” (104,105) Heart-
rendering stories, like Eugene's, are flashes of Naylor's genuine insight into the tragic situation of the majority of the black men of the community.

Naylor's portrayal of black men caught in the web of a hostile environment, in which they struggle in vain to achieve manhood, is highlighted all the more through the characterization of C.C. Baker. Naylor had introduced this character in her first novel as a gang leader terrorizing Brewster Place residents. He was responsible for the gang rape of Lorraine that led to Ben's death; and since then, his life has continued to spiral downwards. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor brings to life this young man whose tragic appeal lies in his self-delusion. Baker, who terrorized Brewster Place in the first book, is torn by conflict in this one. Instructed to murder his step-brother in order to demonstrate loyalty to a gang leader, he closes his eyes and squeezes the trigger, then "...thanks God for giving him the courage to do it. The courage to be a man." (146) His final and ultimate act of 'manhood' and 'courage' could be proved only by murdering his brother. Yet even here, with a character well beyond redemption, Naylor offers a glimpse of what might have been a possible turning point: "His parents stopped asking him long ago where he was going and why. He lies about the money he's bringing into the house – and they pretend to believe the lies because they need the help." (141) Repeatedly in these tales, we are forced to look at parents who do not intervene, who make no moves to actively seek truth and change; the results of their passivity, fear, and/or denial are always tragic. But at the root of this passivity is the glaring cause of financial crisis which make them close their eyes on truth deliberately. However, the damage is already done and young men like C.C. Baker are doomed to hell. Baker, thus, is driven as much by fear as anger and rebellion in his elusive quest for self, amidst prescriptive notions of manhood and sexual identity.
Amidst men like Ben, Basil, Eugene, and C.C. Baker, who are portrayed as victims of the hostile environment, Naylor has also presented before the readers, a young man named Abshu, a community activist, who fights for a better existence of the Brewster Place residents. Introduced as Kiswana’s boyfriend in the first novel, Abshu’s childhood and community involvement are elaborated in the present novel. He, much similar to Kiswana, has changed his name from Clifford Montgomery Jackson to the more Africanized ‘Abshu’. Working as a playwright and a community activist, he had committed himself to broaden the horizon of the young black gifted kids around the street. Being the head of the community centre of Brewster Place, Abshu arranges for puppet shows and plays for the residents – plays with social messages like avoiding drugs and the importance of sending children to school. He focuses on children not getting proper attention and brings it to the notice of parents “to see if there was something the family could do to pull things back together.” (152) Abshu’s belief in the power of ‘family’ as a rejuvenating force stems from his deprivation of one. Abshu and his siblings were put in different foster homes by their mother because she could not protect them from the brutalities of their father. Even though she had tried to place them all together, but she could not find a decent family willing to take all her four children. The family with which Abshu was placed was not mean, but as he puts it later on “they were stingy – stingy with their food and with their affection.” (156) As a result, the community centre in Brewster Place became Abshu’s home; and living in the foster home always “on the edge of hunger” (156) and “on the edge of kindness” (156) made him appreciate a life fully lived. Even though the foster home that Abshu fell into, did not give him a real sense of family, but they were strict about going to church and school, and somehow, with this education, Abshu emerged with
both a strong moral code and the desire for a happier and healthier existence which he brought to the community.

At present, Abshu's life is given direction by his hatred for the greedy and politically ambitious Reverend Moreland T. Woods, a black preacher hungry for power. Reverend Woods, a wolf in sheep's clothing, is willing to sacrifice his soul at the altar of political gain. Woods, who had sought help from the Brewster Place residents to support him to be the first black member of the city council, forgets his own community as soon as he gets the taste of political power. The whole area including Brewster Place is condemned to be rebuilt as middle-income housing, leaving most of the residents no other opportunity than to become homeless or leave the town. Moreland T. Woods is powerful enough to make a difference, but he chooses not to. Abshu is determined to oust the preacher and with help from others, he is successful at last in driving out Woods. But sadly, Woods was replaced by a much similar man, another conservative, except that he was white. Brewster Place was still slated for demolition and men like Abshu are left to wonder whether it was “...better to have a black conservative on the council who didn’t vote with the interests of the poor or a white one? Does it matter what color the hand that circles your throat as you’re choked to death?” (171)

In this novel, though Naylor does not project the men having strong communal ties like that of the women, there is no doubt, the presence of a community and the heart of it, is the barbershop, a setting that provides some wonderfully comical exchanges as well as one of the most tragic and powerful scenes in the novel.

Projecting Max’s barbershop, the narrator says,

If those chairs could talk, they would be at it day and night with sadder and sadder stories. Brewster Place is a small street but it seems there’s an endless supply of I coulda, I shoulda, but I didn’t. Can you call it any man’s blues? I don’t know, but you can definitely call it the black man’s blues. (179)
What Naylor wants to highlight here is the fact that if this failing community is to reach a millennial new dawn, there needs to be group solidarity which is missing at the present. Even the barbershop, with its emphasis on male bonding and brotherhood, is limited in its role in bringing about solidarity. The brothers, however well-meaning, fail to rescue the suicidal Greasy, whose death is in most probability the consequence of despair. Greasy’s final unavailing plea “I’m a man...I’m a man...” (184) falls on deaf ears. Ultimately, the men’s collective denial of their role in perpetuating Greasy’s hopelessness makes his suicide all the more tragic. Naylor here foregrounds the experiences of contemporary black men struggling for manhood in hopes that society will act to bring an end to injustice. The psychological traumatized existence, the shortcomings and failures which characterize the lives of these men, is typical of the situation in which Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas also found himself, totally alienated from his sister, mother, and the community at large.

_The Women of Brewster Place_ begins at dawn and ends at dusk, wherein we find the women joined together in a riotous act of breaking the wall and ridding their street of the bloody bricks that marked the place where Lorraine was raped and Ben was killed. But there was hope in the frenzy as presented by Mattie’s dream of the much-awaited block party. The breaking of the wall, in a dream sequence in _The Women of Brewster Place_ and the ultimate dissolution of the street in real time in _The Men of Brewster Place_, has a larger metaphorical significance linking Naylor’s first novel to her latest. If the breaking of the wall in the first novel is taken to imply the barrier of race moving into the larger multicultural American space, the final dissolution of the street in _The Men of Brewster Place_, projects Naylor’s idea of finally breaking down all barriers of race, gender, and class to achieve the sense of a holistic homogenous
community, despite resistances to it. Here, in *The Men of Brewster Place*, we begin with dusk and ultimately surface to dawn, when Abshu goes to bid farewell to his old neighbourhood. In his voice, Naylor represents hope for the future. The blues continue to play for the men just as the women continued to pin dreams on the wet laundry they hung out to dry. In both halves of this fictional cycle, Naylor has presented the desire to push forward amidst the sense of pain and loss.
NOTES

4. ibid.
   <http://www.findarticles.com/cf_o/PI/search.jhtml?key=%22MaxineLavonMontgomery%22>
   *[All quotations in this chapter from *The Men of Brewster Place* have the same publication details.]*
   <www.nytimes.com/books/98/04/19/reviews/980419.19hoffmat.html>