CHAPTER TWO

Women’s Solidarity: Female Friendship

2.1. Introduction

The black woman must come to grips with her colour, her gender and her need for female bonding in order to survive. Female friendship not only helps women counteract the effects of patriarchy, but it also provides them with comfort, security and even healing. The black woman’s survival relies partly on her capacity and her willingness, to turn to her own gender for love, support and understanding. Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* acknowledge the importance of female friendship. According to Morrison and Naylor, sisterhood is essential to the survival of the black woman. The black woman, and by extension all women, must turn to her gender, not necessarily in a sexual manner, but in a loving manner to help, guide and care for one another. Treating one another as equals is also vitally important. Those who live together in harmony learn more about themselves and their identities in the world around them. The authors illustrate that if the women cannot support one another and do not communicate, they will destroy one or all the women involved in the relationship. Audre Lorde states that black women have traditionally “always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasy and in the face of whatever other allegiances which militated against that bonding” (22). She argues that black women come together in a common bond of sisterhood (not to be confused with the practice of black men and women calling one another “brother” and “sister”) for “wisdom and strength and support” (Lorde 22).
Sisterhood and mother-daughter relationship are two kinds of female bonding in Morrison’s and Naylor’s novels. Sisterhood usually extends to female solidarity, which involves more women who benefit from this care and nurturing. Clenora Hudson-Weems notes:

Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each another. Our children would be more secure, for they would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs. (73)

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, women represent the true nature of female solidarity in the sense that they nurture a sisterhood that allows them to care for one another. Each helps the other in difficult times; because they go through similar experiences, they understand each other. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the uniqueness of Afro-American Women’s experiences because of the historical and cultural backgrounds related to slavery and racial segregation. She observes:

Being Black and female in the United States continues to expose Afro-American Women to certain common experiences. U.S. Black women’s similar work and family experiences as well as our participation in diverse expressions of Afro-American culture mean that, overall; U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. (23)

Morrison and Naylor encourage serious commitment between black women in order to heal wounds linked to oppression related to race, class and patriarchal constraint. Throughout the interaction of race, class and gender, female bonding is at risk because gender suffers from the
influence of the first elements. Obioma Nnaemeka states, “Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves” (19). In *Sula*, Nel Wright and Sula Peace make a deep friendship that allows them to develop their identities. Black women in *The Women of Brewster Place* also support each other by sharing their stories and experiences. Dorothy Wickenden writes:

> There are men who live here too, of course. They visit their women like nightmares, leaving behind them babies and bile. But Gloria Naylor’s women, much like those of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, are daunting even in desolation. Most of them find that through laughter and companionship they can make themselves virtually impregnable. (37)

She adds “*The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel about motherhood, a concept embraced by Naylor’s women, each of whom is a surrogate child or mother to the next” (Wickenden 38). Black women realize that they have to work in unity, peace and harmony in order to achieve their dreams. This collective commitment to the same objective results in a strong sisterhood that benefits not only the women themselves, but also the community as a whole. At the end of *The Women of Brewster Place*, the black women join in the block party in order to protest against the power of men over women and against the barriers of racist and class oppression.

Motherhood is very important in African society and sisterhood relates to co-mothering; a form of sisterhood that gives women the opportunity to take care of children and form bonds as well. Oyeronke Oyewumi argues, “In many African societies, there is no sisterhood without motherhood. The most profound sisterly relations are to be found in co-mothering, which is the essence of community building. Co-mothering as a communal ideal and social practice is not
reducible to biological motherhood, it transcends it” (13). Motherhood is considered as a source of empowerment of women in African society, black women access to female solidarity and sisterhood which allow them more freedom. In black feminist concept, female solidarity is fundamentally associated with the culture of matriarchy and the ideology of motherhood.

Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* provided the basis which women-centred psychologists have since used to discuss the origins of gender-identity differences between men and women. Significantly, although Chodorow explores individual psychological development, her theory explicitly rests on the social fact of women’s having been the primary caretakers of children. She sees the construction of an individual, gendered self as the result of inescapable social context. In “Family Structure and Feminine Personality,” Chodorow states, “a woman identifies with her own mother and, through identification with her child, she (re)experiences herself as a cared-for child” (47). In addition, a girl forms her gender identity by observing female role activities that are “immediately apprehensible in the world of her daily life” (Chodorow 51).

### 2.2. Female Friendship in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, a contemporary novel about female friendship offers a view of female psychological development that defies traditional male-centred interpretations of female development and calls out for an expansion of the woman-centred paradigm. Morrison considers *Sula* as “a novel about black women’s friendship, and about good and evil” (McKay 4). *Sula* portrays successful girlhood bond that allows Sula and Nel in the novel to build new identities, comfort and support each other.
In many ways, the friendship between Sula and Nel nurtures both girls by supplying the lacks in their mother-daughter relationships. Basking in Sula’s approval, Nel stops using the clothespin which her mother hopes will reshape her “too-broad” nose. Sula, on the other hand, finds companionship to replace the distance in her family; Nel sees her fully. The attachment to Nel prevents Sula from operating totally out of unsocialized selfishness. Without Nel, she would be “constrained by a lack of power that stems from feeling disconnected and thus, in effect, all alone” (Gilligan 75). Although Sula considers Nel and herself identical, Nel is at crucial moments aware of their boundaries. When Sula sacrifices the top of her finger to scare off hoodlums frightening the two girls, Nel notices as they walk away that Sula’s face is “miles and miles away” (Sula 55). Jane Bakeman writes, “While, in a sense, she has solved the immediate problem and while the girls have become ‘blood sisters,’ she has reacted with the violence which she can act, she does so irresponsibly” (31).

The two girls are reared in the small, tightly-knit, insular black community of Medallion. In Medallion, women are expected to be passive, church-going child-bearers; men are supposed to be emotionally restrained money-earners. The community of the Bottom is more than just setting for the novel: it is fairly apparent that the town is a character in its own right. One possible interpretation argues that “the community of the Bottom . . . is not only a place but a presence—a kind of collective conscience that arbitrates the social and moral norms of its members” (Rubenstein 148).

Eva is Morrison’s model for the complexity African-American motherhood manifests. She is a paradox, nurturing yet selfish, powerful and helpless, surviving on the edge of life. Eva is forced to commit another horrific act when she has no more food or money to support her
children. After leaving her children with a neighbour, Eva disappears and returns over a year later on crutches and with only one leg. Upon her return, she moves out of the shack and begins to build a new home for her family. Rumours suggest that Eva stuck her leg in the path of a moving train and claimed the insurance money, sacrificing her physical body to support her family (Sula 31). Eva’s love for her children is so strong that she will allow any part of her self, emotional or physical, to be sacrificed to the burdens and destructive forces of mother-love. Dayle B. DeLancey explains, “[Eva’s] emotional self already ravaged by the rigors of mother love, [she] must now mutilate her physical self . . . Eva’s mother-love has taken on a double-edged destructiveness: it drives her to sacrifice herself in order to maintain her children economically, and in so doing absents her from them so that their love for her is diminished” (16-17). Her self-sacrifice emphasizes the centrality of motherhood in African society.

Eva and Hannah are strong women, similar in their independence and self-reliability, and different mainly in the way that they perceived motherhood.

It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, as old as she was . . . had a regular flock of gentlemen callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter. (Sula 41)

This passage seems to celebrate the Peace women’s love of men, as both Eva and Hannah, the role models to Sula, clearly have a need for male company. Besides bequeathing this kind of “manlove” to her daughters, Eva also bequeaths “. . . a capacity for emotional distance that
allows for the creation of a female self” (Gillespie and Kubitschek 76). These two women are both independent and sexually appealing to men, and the fact that they sustained fairly liberal heterosexual liaisons is particularly relevant to Sula’s future sexual behaviour; indeed, as Deborah E. McDowell states, “Sula’s female heritage is an unbroken line of ‘man-loving’ women who exist as sexually desirable subjects rather than as objects of male desire” (82).

Hannah, however, enjoys frequent sex with any man who comes to visit the house. Hannah seems to be addicted to casual sex, and what Eva actually bequeaths to Hannah, who in turn passes this on to Sula, is a thwarted love of men, leaving both her daughter and granddaughter incapable of committing themselves to any healthy relationships. “Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (Sula 44). This description of Hannah’s behaviour may be seen as a foreshadowing of what Sula will turn out like. Thus Sula’s legacy from her mother, as Roberta Rubenstein points out, is sexual licentiousness, “Hannah is literally an easy ‘piece,’ thriving on sexual satisfaction because it is the most potent affirmation of her being” (Rubenstein 132). It is in this environment that Sula grows up, which has a devastating effect on her and her later relationships with men. When Sula and Nel become friends, they become inseparable, but with their very different homes, upbringing and mothers, they choose different lives when entering adulthood.

Nel is born into an aspiring middle-class family. Her mother, Helen, has done all she can to distance herself from her own mother, a prostitute in New Orleans. “Helene projects and channels fear of her own mother’s ‘outlaw’ sexuality into a controlling repression of Nel’s sexuality” (Demetrakopoulos 53). She has cultivated a respectable reputation with her “heavy
hair in a bun, dark eyes arched in a perpetual query about other people’s manners” (Sula 18). She embraces her duty to inculcate Nel with the proper respect for what Helene perceives as the community’s conventions of race, class and gender. For example, Helene forces Nel to wear a clothespin on her nose so that it will not be broader than what Helene feels is “proper” for a girl of her standing.

Sula’s mother and grandmother show little interest in upholding the middle- and upper-classes’ standards of housekeeping, standards that traditionally are maintained by “the lady of the house” or her servants. Sula’s family lives in

a woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions, where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (Sula 29)

Nel loves to visit Sula’s house, a house whose lack of cleaning and order might be classified as “masculine”—the stereotypical bachelor’s residence. One might expect the rebellious Sula to scorn Nel’s oppressively tidy home; however, Sula “loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time—still as dawn” (Sula 29). While Sula’s upbringing is somewhat different in the chaos of a household of unusual women, she too struggles for some sense of her own identity just as Nel does. Sula not only likes Helene’s home, she also brings good fortune to it through her simple presence. “When Sula first visited the
Wright house, Helene’s curdled scorn turned to butter. Her daughter’s friend seemed to have none of the mother’s slackness” (Sula 29). Missy Dehn Kubitschek states:

Sula and Nel provide one another with support crucial to establishing and maintaining their identities in somewhat hostile contexts. Nel escapes her mother’s stifling conformity to middle-class norms in the less conventional Peace household. With Nel, Sula experiences the sense of order and control not present in the Peace home, as well as the love that her mother cannot offer her. (Critical Companion 52)

Therefore, the two girls’ friendship is based, at least in part, on a rejection of their mothers and their mothers’ ways.

Morrison depicts a relationship between two little girls whose isolation binds them together. “In the absence of close bonds with one or both parents, a child seeks some other person who will satisfy the need for a deep, abiding emotional attachment” (Rubenstein 134). Nel and Sula became friends when they were young girls:

They felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and Incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead; Nel’s because he wasn’t), they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (Sula 52)
As the surrounding society bears in, they internalize social contempt. While buying ice cream, they are deemed “pig meat” (Sula 50), a phrase replete with the ambiguous compliments of a sexist society.

Sula, in turn, finds in her friendship with Nel the comfort and nurturing her mother fails to provide her. Talking with her friend about her daughter, Hannah states, “you love her, like I love Sula. I just don’t like her” (Sula 57). These comments sadden Sula considerably until Nel’s voice brings her back to reality by simply calling her. “She [Sula] only heard Hannah’s words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye. Nel’s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (Sula 57).

The care and compassion Nel offers Sula during this difficult time greatly contributes to her recovery. In turn, Sula also helps Nel face her mother’s control and unreasonable demands. Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek assert:

In their childhood friendship, Nel’s and Sula’s antithetical strengths and weaknesses assure them mutual dependency and thus equality of participation. Sula’s preservation of her self allows Nel to limn boundaries between herself and her mother; in turn, Nel’s attention to details of connection and her calm consistently allow Sula’s rigid boundaries to become more fluid. (41)

Sula and Nel were committed to life and to love, they were curious, imaginative and creative, and these qualities allowed them to embrace all things alive, “. . . toughness was not their quality—adventuresomeness was—and a mean determination to explore everything that interested them . . . . Joined in mutual admiration they watched each day as though it were a
movie arranged for their amusement” (*Sula* 55). Rubenstein reflects on their bonding, “in Morrison’s narrative of a female friendship, Sula and Nel initially discover their own essences and begin to grow through their reciprocal connection; each girl seems to have, both materially and metaphysically, what the other lacks” (134). All through their childhood, the two girls were inseparable. “Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality” (*Sula* 53). As Sula’s childhood confidante, Nel functions much like a sister, someone whose presence Sula never fundamentally questions. Maureen T. Reddy reflects, “The Sula-Nel couple are the centre of the plot about female friendship and female development and represent the effects of internalized racist stereotypes and the multiple oppression of black women” (3).

Sula and Nel visited one another’s homes, each gaining something from the other’s environment. Sula learned comfort and quiet in the surroundings of Nel and her mother. Nel learned acceptance and pleasure in Sula’s home. Nel gave strength and consistency to Sula, Sula gave emotion to Nel (*Sula* 53). The two girls enjoyed one another’s company day in and day out, until Nel married Jude. Their friendship empowers them until the end of their adolescence. It is threatened by the marriage, for now, Nel is expected to lavish her attention on her husband, not her best friend. McDowell says, “Morrison equates marriage with the death of the female self and imagination” (82).

When Nel marries, however, Sula establishes a “clean break” with her community by leaving it. On the day of Nel’s wedding, after the reception, Sula disappears for ten years, apparently to go to college and travel. She leaves no way for her best friend to contact her during her absence. “Sula made the enjoyment of [Jude’s] attentions keener simply because she seemed
always to want Nel to shine. They never quarrelled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys, or competed against each other for them” (*Sula* 83-4). However, Sula’s abrupt departure from Medallion and her best friend’s life suggests that she may not be altogether happy with Nel’s marriage. Perhaps Sula views it a betrayal of their friendship.

Barbara Smith has labelled homoerotic the relationship between Sula and Nel. She seems to acknowledge that the “homoerotic” dimension of the girls’ relationship is primarily metaphoric in her comments on *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*:

> In both works the relationships between girls and women are essential, yet at the same time physical sexuality is overtly expressed only between men and women. Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters I discovered in rereading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison’s consistently critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family. (Smith 165)

The only real epiphany in *Sula* belongs to Nel and occurs in relation to her estranged love for Sula. It is apparent that the central concern of the novel is that of black-female bonding. The complicity and understanding between the girls creates a deep nurturing and caring which, if possibly homoerotic, also exceeds the boundaries of our common assumptions about “lesbian” relationships.

Alisha R. Coleman maintains that Smith has misread the “emotional intimacy” drawn between these two female characters. Coleman’s psychoanalytic reading asserts that the friendship between Sula and Nel makes *Sula* a feminist novel in which the two women
“complement” or “complete” one another, generating “two halves of a personality that combine to form a whole psyche” (Coleman 151). Morrison writes that the two girls somehow complete each other. Their bond creates a “safe harbour of each other’s company” where they can “afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (*Sula* 55). Morrison said in her interview with Claudia Tate:

Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*. Relationships between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they’re playing. This is not true of men. (157)

Morrison did not set out to explore the possibilities of women’s friendships and even told Tate, “I was half-way through the book before I realized that friendship in literary terms is a rather contemporary idea” (157). Morrison herself does not agree with a lesbian reading of *Sula* but, instead, encourages us to see that women and girls in particular may nurture strong bonding without being sexually involved. Gloria Naylor notes that while Nel and Sula’s relationship fell short of physical bonding, it “involved a spiritual bonding that transcended the flesh and was much superior than a portrayal of an actual physical bonding would have been anyway” (“Toni Morrison: A Conversation” 578). Morrison concurs and also adds that the terrifying aspect of that story for many people is that concept of friendship among women (“Toni Morrison: A Conversation” 578).
Although Morrison insisted during the Tate interview that there “is no homosexuality in *Sula*” (157), she nevertheless depicts a similarly climactic scene between Nel and Sula when the girls join together in “grass play”:

In concert, without ever meeting each other’s eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. (*Sula* 58)

Rather than allowing this erotic “grass play” to move from the representational to the actual, Morrison metaphorically buries the potential for a sexual relationship between her two characters. When Nel’s twig breaks she throws the pieces into the depression with “a gesture of disgust” (*Sula* 58). Sula throws hers in as well and, together, the two girls “replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. Neither one had spoken a word” (59). However, destroying the hole they have made together may also be read as “… the future burial of their relationship” (Suranyi 21). Shortly thereafter, the girls witness a literal death, Chicken Little’s
drowning, and the event that marks their entrance to adulthood and foreshadows their later destructive romantic relationships with men.

Jude doesn’t marry Nel because he loves her; he wants to marry her to prove to himself and the world that he is a man. He wants the marriage to Nel to “replace the need he so intensely feels to have some impact on the world” (Christian, *Black Women Novelists* 169). Their relationship is thus an example and a result of both racism and traditional gender roles in society. Nel is a victim of something similar, “Nel’s indifference to his hints about marriage disappeared altogether when she discovered his pain” (*Sula* 83). She too is an embodiment of the gender roles in society, illustrated by Ajax’s comment, “that ‘all they want, man, is they own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life’” (83). Married women are seen as “folded . . . into starched coffins” (*Sula* 122). Nel’s husband, Jude shows an awareness of this social contract, and his image of wifely subordination indicates one of its usually unspecified costs, “whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem-the tuck and fold that hid his ravelling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her” (*Sula* 83). The obliteration of the serving woman’s personality becomes explicit in his complacent forecast, “the two of them together would make one Jude” (83). For Nel, sexual awakening produces a kind of death; it leads her to a death of self in her marriage to Jude.

“Nel’s response to Jude’s shame and anger selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” (*Sula* 84). The marriage endangers the friendship. Barbara Christian argues, “This wedding seems to mean death, not only for Nel and Sula’s girl friendship but for Jude and Nel’s previous sense of
themselves” (*Black Women Novelists* 82). Viewing marriage as compounded of convenience and caution, Sula avoids such ties. Karen F. Stein argues, “While her repudiation of these bonds renders her an outcast in the eyes of her community, she perceives herself as free and therefore, able, as none of the other women are, to be honest and to experience life and self fully. Her journey is the enactment of that freedom” (54).

Morrison juxtaposes the relationships which Nel has with Sula and Jude. Both because Sula and Nel’s friendship takes root during their childhood and because the two girls have antithetical upbringings, their relationship is distinguished by its openness and the two girls complement one another in such a way that each constitutes a “balance wheel” for the other. Neither Nel nor Sula has a need to dominate or posses the other. Jude is prompted to marry by “rage and a determination to take on a man’s role” (*Sula* 82) in spite of the economic barriers which thwart his job search, so Nel is moved by a desire “to help, to soothe” and thus provides the “milkwarm commiseration” (83) which it is attendant upon a wife to provide. Christian sums up the girls’ experiences in *Sula*, “Nel and Sula’s friendship is sustained not only by their recognition of each other’s restrictions but also by their anticipation of sexuality and by an ultimate bond, the responsibility for unintentionally causing the death of another. However, although the two girls share these strong bonds, they are different” (*Black Women Novelists* 81-82). In their quests for wholeness both women find their world rife with contradictions and tensions. They experience a profound sense of alienation in a patriarchal world which evolves no terms for their existence.

On Nel’s wedding day, Sula, with an amused smile, leaves town, returning ten years later. She remembers her years at college and her travels most as boring. The wisdom she attains
is the cynic’s. Sula’s sexuality breeds only boredom and despair. Sexual intercourse, rather than promoting human relatedness and mystic insight, increases her isolation and misery. Her one human relationship of significance, the friendship with Nel, provides her with a centre, a place she can call home, “Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits” (Sula 120). Her need to reestablish her link to Nel brings her back.

In Sula’s ten years absence, Nel has developed into the very conventional feminine voice “proclaiming its worth on the basis of the ability to care for and protects others” (Gilligan 79) for which her family has trained her. Sula, in contrast, has learned to take care of only herself and to take responsibility for her actions. Sula’s lack of interest in social appearance unfits her for social conversation “because she could not lie” (Sula 105). Significantly, among the lies that she cannot tell are those denying the cost of women’s self-sacrifice in their service to husbands and children.

Nel and Sula are finally back together again after many years. Together they laugh and remember old times. For Nel, “talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (Sula 95). For Sula, lacking a central core, Nel is “the closest thing to both an ‘other’ and a ‘self’” (119). Rubenstein points out how both women have suffered from the other’s absence; both have a “limited vision” without the other (131). Nel’s home-centered life is expanded and enriched when Sula returns to the Bottom; she “felt new, soft and new” (Sula 85). As Betty Jean Parker argues, “Nel has limitations and she doesn’t have the imagination that Sula has . . . Yet she and Nel are very much alike. They complement each other. They support each other. I suppose the two of them together could have made a wonderful single human being” (61). Nel compares Sula’s return to getting an eye back.
Despite many years without contact, their friendship seems stronger than the relationship between Nel and Jude, and seems to even affect Nel’s feelings for Jude. Even Nel’s love for Jude, which over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart, became a bright and easy affection, a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking (Sula 95). Nel tries to develop with Jude the sense of connectedness she found with Sula, but in doing so, she loses her sense of self in a way she never did with Sula. Nel becomes subsumed in the relationship, so Sula feels some sense of betrayal and retaliates by having sex with Jude (Stein 148).

Nel becomes devastated when finding her best friend and her husband having sex together in their bedroom, “but they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor . . . on all fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs. Nibbling at each other, not even touching, not even looking at each other, just their lips” (Sula 105). She approaches the acceptance of her own needs which characterizes moral maturity and authenticity:

Hunched down in the small bright room Nel waited. Waited for the oldest cry. A scream not for others, not in sympathy for a burnt child or a dead father, but a deeply personal cry for one’s own pain. A loud, strident: “why me?” she waited. The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her own howl. But it did not come. (Sula 108)

Nel is not only the mother to her children, but also mother to Jude who had married her ten years ago to prove his manhood and yet to have someone care for him emotionally and physically, a role his mother had once played for him. She had learned to be all her mother, and
society, had taught her to be in a wife and in a marriage. Marriage means a symbolic death of
self, it means sacrifice; it means learning to allow your husband to mould you into his idea of
woman and wife. Morrison said in her “Conversation” with Gloria Naylor that she wanted to
establish that strong friendship and then “have one [of the women] do the unforgivable thing to
see what the friendship was really made out of” (“Toni Morrison: A Conversation” 200). At first,
it seems that the friendship is not made of very strong stuff at all, and Nel feels doubly deprived
at the loss of her husband and best friend, “here she was in the midst of it, hating it, scared of it
and again she thought of Sula as though they were still friends and talked things over. That was
too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left
her for” (Sula 110).

The wound that Sula inflicts upon Nel is something which Sula is unable to comprehend.
Nel, who sees sex as something belonging to marriage, feels she is all at once robbed of both
love and sex— in addition to her friendship with Sula. Reddy argues, “The wish to be Nel is what
drives Sula into her sexual experimentation with Jude” (9). When Sula sleeps with Nel’s
husband, she does not want to be mean, but as a means to more intimacy with Nel, remembering
that as children, the two shared everything.

Contrary to Sula, who is sexually liberated, “Nel’s sexuality is not expressed in itself and
for her own pleasure, but rather, for the pleasure of her husband and in obedience to a system of
ethical judgment and moral virtue . . . . Because Nel’s sexuality is harnessed to and only enacted
with the institutions that sanction sexuality for women—marriage and family—she does not own
it” (McDowell 82). When Sula betrays Nel’s trust and sleeps with Jude, she is unintentionally
pushing Nel into a void of despair and loneliness, “Nel marries Jude out of sheer pity for his
plight, but when she loses her husband to Sula’s careless seduction, she knows that she will have no other men” (Sumana 72). Sula not only destroys her relationship with Nel, but she contributes to the growing distance between herself and the conventional people in the Bottom.

Sula cannot conceive of the possibility of hurting Nel if Sula herself is pleased and she has sex with Jude with no idea of the likely consequences to her friendship with Nel. Nel, on the other hand, sacrifices her real feelings for those socially expected and earns Sula’s disgust for her dishonesty. Nel joins with the community to view Sula as a “pariah,” a “selfish” woman who has only her own interest at heart (Sula 122). Sula, for her part, judges Nel as “one of them. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web . . . It had surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have” (Sula 120). Nel’s rejection of Sula is a microcosm of the community’s rejection, for the Bottom’s judgment of a woman living an experimental life is severe. Nel cuts herself off from the only relationship that she has ever had which allowed her to be her own person. This, according to Morrison, is Nel’s fatal flaw, “Nel does not make that ‘leap’—she doesn’t know about herself. Even at the end, she doesn’t know. She’s just beginning.”

Sula is “dangerously free,” and only her own freedom matters. Robert Stepto argues, “Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not. She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignores them” (14). Thus, from a moral perspective, Nel, whom the town pities because of Sula’s betrayal, is the person of whom they should be wary. Cedric Gael Bryant puts it another way, “Nel lays claim to the pathetically small domain of the Bottom and her own house. In contrast, Sula’s concern is with domination—that is, sovereign authority over the self—which, in effect,
makes the world her domain” (738-39). For this reason, Sula does not care about the moral issues involved in her sleeping with her friend’s husband, Jude. Nancy J. Peterson observes, “Neither self nor other takes shape or acquires form in Sula’s experience . . . Sula has no form of keeping anything and so every slip turns into a dead loss” (51).

Sula’s status as a woman without a man and a woman without children simply does not translate into a life that the Bottom understands. Sula’s grandmother, Eva, speaks for the whole community, when she asks Sula, “when you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you down” (Sula 92), Sula’s answer is telling, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Sula 92). J. Brooks Bouson notes that Sula’s “shameless” sexuality and refusal of the maternal has made her a “feminist heroine” to some, but as this view originates from a “white, middle-class perspective, it becomes complicated when told through a black perspective, and, thus in Morrison’s novel, the drama of gender identity is also race-inflected” (Bouson 47). By rejecting acceptable standards of sexuality and motherhood, Sula simultaneously refuses the play the roles of “good girl” and “good black girl.”

To Eva and to people in the Bottom, children are part of the order of things, the literal outgrowth of a concept of womanhood that is valued by what it produces and tends. Maggie Galehouse indicates, “To Sula, however, being a wife and a mother are not pre-requisites for selfhood. Her own ‘business’—the business of being, of living—is not dictated by family or community” (352). Sula’s refusal of motherhood infuriates Eva, even though she herself was a woman who had “made herself” after her husband deserted her and her three young children. Eva has conformed to at least some of her community’s expectations, so she is angered when Sula refuses to do likewise. She declares Sula to be “selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’
around without no man.” “You did.” “Not by choice.” “Mama did.” “Not by choice, I said. It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself” (Sula 92). Agnes Suranyi argues that Sula “. . . rebels against the role she is assigned to take within the black community. Consequently, she becomes a transgressor and an outlaw . . . .” (20)

When the gossip of the Bottom whisper that Sula had slept with white men during her time away, the community sees her as “guilty of doing the unforgiveable thing—the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion” (Sula 96). Sula’s sexual involvement with white men is viewed as monstrous and a test of her personal need for autonomous expression. Within the inverted moral confines of the Bottom, there is no comprehension of Sula’s behaviour. Irrational within the cultural context, her heroic search falls beyond the ethical code of the community. She is denied by all. Sula’s numerous encounters with different lovers illustrate how her sexuality is crippled and thwarted. She “. . . challenges her community’s definition of a woman, and since that definition is intrinsic to their philosophy of life, they turn her into a witch” (Christian, Black Women Novelists 247).

Although the community could begrudgingly tolerate Sula’s sexual independence, she commits an unforgivable crime upon her grandmother when she put her in an old folks’ home. Although Eva seems shocked by Sula’s refusal to “mother the mother,” Hortense Spillers reminds us that Sula’s “moral shape . . . does not come unprecedented or autonomously derived. Merging Eva’s arrogance on the one hand and Hannah’s self-indulgence on the other” (47), Sula becomes the self-centered iconoclast who rejects the maternal. Sula’s rejection of the maternal can be viewed as a refusal to succumb to the pressure to play within a narrow range of acceptable roles in an effort to undermine racist stereotypes. Sula rejects traditional ordering principles, like
marriage, children, grandparental care, and sexual mores, partially because of the restrictions they create, but that rejection is an automatic response of rebellion. In a discussion of Sula’s character, Bouson describes Bell Hooks’ assertion (in “Ain’t I a Woman?”) that many black women became involved in the “cult of true womanhood” to counteract the racist assumption that African-Americans did not care about their children (70). She notes that Sula’s rejection of the maternal can therefore be viewed as “undermining the middle-class idealization of motherhood” (53). By resisting maternity, Sula undercuts both race and gender assumptions.

When the two women meet for the last time, Nel still sees Sula as her enemy, but goes to visit her when she hears that her friend is dying. Talking to Nel during their final clash, Sula says, “but my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (Sula 143). Nel is still angry at Sula for not seeming to understand the consequences of her actions:

“Why? I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?”

“You can’t do it all. You a woman and a coloured woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t.”

“You say I’m a woman and coloured. Ain’t that the same as being a man?” “I don’t think so and you wouldn’t either if you had children.”

“Then I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children.” (Sula 142-43)
Sula’s refusal to comprehend how she is supposed to act according to the gender codes in society illustrates the severity of the conflict between her and Nel, a conflict created by their different family backgrounds. When Suranyi comments on this conversation she points to how it illustrates how Sula, in her own way, tries to put up “. . . a rebellion against racism and sexism” (Suranyi 21). *Sula* centres on self-in-relation rather than self-in-community. The Afro-American tradition has, however, always been steeped in context, and assumed self-in-community. Morrison refuses to privilege the individual female in relation to any particular other. For female residents of the Bottom, the self exists in relation to the entire community; there is no alternative.

Victoria Middleton argues that Hannah’s lack of love actually frees Sula because she isn’t neglectful and her openness about how she feels allows Sula to accept her pain and live an experimental life (374-75). But such a proposition discounts Sula’s imbalance in her interaction with the community which directly results from her misunderstanding of love. Sula’s loss of mother-love, or thinking that her mother did not love her, can therefore be viewed as an explanation of Sula’s impeded and stymied emotions, as Rubenstein’s labelling of her as an “emotional orphan” suggests (131). For Sula, love is synonymous with freedom. Sula and Nel view their place in society differently; they have a different understanding of love:

“And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.”

“What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?”

“You laying there in that bed without a dime or a friend to your name having done all the dirt you did in this town and you still expect folks to love you?” (*Sula* 145)
Despite their closeness when small, their differences as adults are too great, “Sula is emotional and adventurous and Nel is cautious and consistent. Whereas Nel becomes a slave to sexism and racism, Sula becomes a liberated woman” (Sumana 71).

Sula’s refusal to allow herself to be categorized by the community is a form of self-defence in that “if the self is perceived as perpetually in process, rather than a static entity always already formed, it is thereby difficult to posit its ideal or ‘positive’ representation” (McDowell 81). Sula’s loneliness occurs on a deeper level than losing Nel; she believes that there is no one she can “be” with, so she turns inward. Such withdrawal can only end in death. However, Sula recognizes the high price she has paid for this refusal to conform to what McDowell describes as “the normative female script” (84); this active resistance, and the last thing she thinks as she dies, “wait’ll I tell Nel” (Sula 149), poignantly exemplifies this loss. Thus, the price Nel pays for conformity is a life of single parenthood, being left with only a love for her children that “like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove, had cooked out, leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off” (165).

At the end of the novel When Nel goes to visit Eva in the nursing home, Eva confuses her with Sula which makes Nel realize how connected they had been. Eva calls Nel’s smug self-assurance into question when she accuses Nel of killing Chicken Little. Nel at first denies her involvement and blames Sula but is clearly unsettled when Eva insists she admit her responsibility in the boy’s death. Eva’s words haunt her. She reminds Nel, “you, Sula. What’s the difference? You was there. You watched, didn’t you? Me, I never would’ve watched” (Sula 111). Nel finally allows herself to remember the day the boy died. Still denying her responsibility, she declares to herself that she had merely been a passive observer, “I did not
watch it. I just saw it” (Sula 170). In spite of her denial, the feelings that day return to her and she remembers “the good feeling she had had when Chicken’s hands slipped. She hadn’t wondered about that in years. ‘Why didn’t I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?’” (170). She is now able to recognize that she had enjoyed the power she felt when she was able to remain calm but Sula had fallen apart. She now can attribute her feelings to “the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation” (Sula 170). Reddy states, “Nel finally does reach self-understanding, and it is Sula who leads her to it; her recognition of her true feelings provides her with that speck around which to grow” (10).

Nel realizes that Sula was not the one who had been wrong or bad. It was Nel, in her refusal to feel beyond what was comfortable, to look beyond the obvious, that had failed Sula, and it was Sula not Jude that she had missed all along. Finally, the full impact of her loss, a loss generated by blind conformity to the narrow limits of her community, hits her, “‘all that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude . . . We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.’ It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (Sula 174). Thus, at the novel’s end, Nel realizes that her failure to act in a “masculine” way—to grab what it was she truly desired, her friendship with Sula—is at the heart of her unhappiness and lack of fulfilment. Karen Carmean argues, “The story ends with Nel’s painful comprehension that much of what she has believed has led her away from herself instead of leading her to truth” (69). By playing the culturallyacceptable role of the good mother/daughter/wife, Nel curtailed her choices and expended her creative energies in keeping the “ball of fur” at bay. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos argues, “The novel thus suggests the cosmic value in women realizing how much they do love each other, of how much joy and pain they share. But still, at the end Nel is
alone; Sula dead; and we see how much of the pain is solitary. Even the realization of loss is often too late for the relationship itself’’ (90).

Morrison criticizes a society that encourages such unimaginative living through the oppression and discrimination it uses to play on the fears of people. In unimaginative living, there is little room for intimate friendships which could lead to communal sharing and a possibility of social change. It is within the realm of female friendship that the problems of gender and sexuality can be read. Hooks states, “[w]e must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood’’ (Feminist Theory 43). For Morrison, true friendship, particularly among women, represents a radical act that must occur if people want to survive whole.

However, although Morrison acknowledges the power of patriarchal institutions, she also highlights the healing power of female friendship that may heal the wounds resulting from the impact of race and class. Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place also conveys a similar message in a different way. She highlights the healing power of female friendship and sisterhood that allows women to overcome patriarchy. Hooks explains, “sisterhood wasn’t just about what we shared in common—things like periods, obsessive concern with our looks, or bitching about men—it was about women learning how to care for one another and be in solidarity, not just when we have complaints or when we feel victimized’’ (Communion 130).

2.3. Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place

Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place portrays a sisterhood that helps black women survive their estranged relationships; it also reveals about self-searching of black women. Its characters are caught in the traps of society, stereotypes, racism and greed. But as they fight
against these traps, they learn about humanness, change and life. The Women must become friends and accept one another as individuals; otherwise, their social structures will crumble. Elizabeth Schultz, in her critical essay “Out of the Woods and into the World,” states, “women characters in novels by black women come to appreciate one another as individuals, as women or the relationship dissolves” (75). Black women must share sisterhood if they are to be liberated. Although these women suffer abuse and violence at the hands of men and society, they can be resilient if they support one another. Black women are tough and enduring; they are survivors as well as victims.

*The Women of Brewster Place* is synonymous with the pain and suffering of women who have been oppressed and discriminated against on the score of race and sex. Women like Mattie, Cora Lee and Luciela are all at Brewster Place because they have nowhere else to go; they have reached the end of the road. Their pathetic lives have all reached this dead-end because of their racial and sexual identity. Traumatized and economically vulnerable, these poor women cannot survive in the white world. They have been abandoned by their men and look after themselves and their children single-handedly. In Brewster Place, the women rely on one another for survival and for psychological support in combating the forces of “oppression and isolation” that Rae H. Stoll believes all women face (918). Stoll argues that women who cannot bond between themselves and other women isolate themselves unnecessarily; therefore, they cannot effectively combat problems.

Annie Gottlieb praises Naylor’s work for its feminist theme of female relationships and sisterhood. She writes:
In Gloria Naylor’s fierce, loving group portrait of seven black women in one housing development . . . the bonds between women are the abiding ones. Most men are incalculable hunters who come and go. They are attractive—but weak and dangerous—representatives of nature and of violence who both fertilize and threaten the female core. (11)

Brewster Place is a deteriorating, dead-end street. It is cordoned from the rest of the city by a tall, brick wall. The street becomes the womb in which “its daughters” nurture one another and seek methods for survival. The street takes on the form and function of a character similar to the Bottom in *Sula*. As Thomas McFarland argues, “the wall, symbol of obdurate thingness, symbol of the separation of humans from one another, symbol of all blockings, holding back, keeping out, pennings in, is here—wondrously—not a wall. Not a thing at all, but a person” (89). In this novel, the structure is a constant reminder of the racism and sexism that walls off the women’s lives and defers their dreams. Brewster Place offers a time and place in which the women can gain courage and strength. None of the women seek to remain outside the protective womb of Brewster Place. Unlike Sula who returns to the Bottom because she has no choice, these women fly home to a sense of belonging.

Brewster Place is largely a community of women; men are mostly absent or itinerant, drifting in and out of their women’s lives and leaving behind the pregnancies and unpaid bills. The women defend themselves against their men as well as white society. They share common concerns such as the raising of children and these women-centered communities are defences against sexism and racism, in other words against the abuses that are inflicted on black women. Brewster is a reality that they are “obliged to share” (Smith 32). Obliged comes from the
political, social and economic realities of post-sixties’ America—a world in which the women are largely disentitled. Share emphasizes to what they are common: they are women, they are black and they are poor.

Each of the women has come to Brewster Place, on a dead-end street with few possibilities of becoming more, after some sort of personal tragedy. The women become neighbours, then confidants and finally sisters. Their world, Brewster Place, becomes a microcosm of the black community in general. Each woman and her experience are part of the experience of the black community. When one needs help, she knows she can count on the others, but especially on Mattie. When Ciel needs help overcoming the loss of her child, everyone pitches in to cook for her and to visit her. They try to talk her out of her mourning, her trance and finally Mattie breaks through by showing her love, support and strength; she takes her in her arms and rocks her through centuries of loss, pain and fear and back again. The women befriend one another; they do not compete among themselves, so they live in concord.

The women who live on Brewster Place are drawn together because they live on the same dead end street and also because they share the common fate. The dreams of Brewster’s inhabitants are what keep them alive. The dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection. In their community, Mattie is concerned about improving Brewster Place; she becomes a survivor and giver of advice only after she is befriended by Miss Eva. Mattie becomes the backbone of Brewster Place, she counsels the women on the street. “What is extraordinary about Mattie is that, in spite of having many problems, she is generous and calm—almost magic yet very human. She allows people to feel free in her presence. Like an earth mother, I guess” (Carabi 39).
Mattie, the surrogate mother of Brewster Place, is described by Wickenden as the novel’s standard-bearer, “Mattie Michael hold[s] together the lives of the others through strength of will” (Wickenden 38). She becomes community mother to the young women of Brewster Place, comforting them and being there in times of crisis. Mattie is the spiritual centre of the seven tales. Her character is the harbour to which the others are moored. Linda Metzger states:

While *The Women of Brewster Place* is about black women’s condition in America, I had to deal with the fact that one composite picture couldn’t do justice to the complexity of the black female experience. So I tried to solve this by creating a microcosm on a dead-end street and devoting each chapter to a different woman’s life. What they share is a common oppression and, more importantly, a spiritual strength and sense of female communion that I believe all women have employed historically for the psychic health and survival. (322)

Like Morrison’s *Sula*, in Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, marriage means a symbolic death of self, it means sacrifice. The marriage between Ciel and Eugene is much the same. Ciel sacrifices her happiness so she might have a father around for her baby daughter because “Serena needs a daddy” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 92). Her husband comes and goes as he pleases and every time he returns and promises he has changed, Ciel takes him back, explaining to Mattie that “he’s really straightened up this time” (91). Not until he forces her to have an abortion and then Serena dies does Ciel, with the help of Mattie, understand that she needs to live for herself, not for a husband and a marriage that do not work for her. Like Nel, Ciel’s role of wife and mother had become her identity. Without the role, Ciel’s life means nothing. Again, marriage proved a destructive force.
Women have allowed themselves to fall into marital and maternal roles. Often the second results from the first, though not always. Throughout history to the present, motherhood has often been the sole responsibility of the woman. This responsibility has many times created horrifying results. Mattie and Ciel represent a horror of motherhood: overprotection. Both of them want their children and when the children are born, live their lives for those children. As a result, the children run away from home or when they die, the mothers no longer feel a need to live.

When Mattie becomes pregnant, her father kicked her out of the house. Realizing she cannot marry the unborn child’s father, she leaves the family home to live with a friend in another state. The birth of her baby permits her to “name” her self. She views her motherhood as a door toward self-actualization. From the start, Mattie is determined to make a good life for both her child and herself; she sets out to find a job. She walks thirty blocks on her lunch break every afternoon to see him. “She had just enough time to rush in, pick him up, see if he was wet or marked in some way, and then go back to work” (The Women of Brewster Place 27-8). Mattie is a good mother and she loves her role, even if it is difficult.

When a rat crawls up to her baby because it can smell the milk on his face and bites the child, Mattie spends her saving to take the baby to the hospital. She will not allow her child to live in dirty, unsafe conditions. She walks from early morning to early evening searching for a suitable place for her child. Eventually, Mattie and Basil settle into a secure life with Miss Eva and her granddaughter, Ciel. Miss Eva is an older woman whose sense of kinship with Mattie is immediate, “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”

*(The Women of Brewster Place 34).*

Mattie’s love for Basil is so strong that she crosses the line between healthy love and unhealthy love. She cannot see his harming and not protecting her child. She gives him everything and never requires anything except his love in return. “Mattie spoils Basil incessantly so that by the time Basil is thirty, he has no sense of responsibility to himself, his mother, or society” (Wilson 39). She invests all of her energy and her spiritual and emotional self into her son. When Basil is accused of killing a man after a brawl at a bar over a woman, Mattie unwisely uses her house to bail Basil out of jail. His decision to leave town costs his mother home and forces her to move to Brewster Place.

Ciel, too, represents the same horror of motherhood. She loves her daughter Serena so much that she accepts Eugene back. She becomes pregnant but her husband does not want another child. They fight until he finally convinces her to have an abortion. Reluctantly, Ciel goes through with the operation, believing her marriage will become better, even though she feels the abortion has stolen part of her identity, “the next few days Ciel found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world. Everything seemed to have taken on new textures and colours. When she washed the dishes, the plates felt peculiar in her hands and she was more conscious of their smoothness and the heat of the water” *(The Women of Brewster Place 95).*

To recreate the lost part of her identity, Ciel becomes over-possessive of Serena, “[s]he refused to leave her alone, even with Eugene. The little girl went everywhere with Ciel . . . . When someone asked to hold or play with her, Ciel sat nearby, watching every move. She found herself walking into the bedroom several times when the child napped to see if she was still
breathing” (The Women of Brewster Place 96). Ciel cannot lose the rest of her identity, so she holds on it as closely as possible. But one day, when she and Eugene fight, Serena uses a fork to dig the bug out of the socket and is electrocuted. Ciel is in shock over the death of her child. She is really grieving not only the loss of two of her children, but also the loss of herself. She is “forced to slowly give up the life God had refused to take from her” (The Women of Brewster Place 101).

The spiritual kinship between women is offered as a mother-daughter exchange. Alternating between these two roles, the women bring courage and comfort to one another. They grieve with one another over losses and serve as midwives to each other’s spiritual births. Unable to comprehend the loss of her child, Ciel retreats to her bed. Because Ciel has lived her whole life for that child, for the role of mother, she has lost everything in her life that gives her an identity. Mattie arrives and finds Ciel near death with silent grieving. She forces her to take nourishment. The food Mattie gives Ciel is not the only form of nourishment the older woman gives Ciel; she also gives the younger woman emotional nourishment, love. Mattie imparts courage to Ciel, enabling her to express a sense of loss. After giving Ciel a bath, Mattie takes her in her arms and rocks her. She rocks her back in time, through all mothers to the first mother and back again:

Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her 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. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. (The Women of Brewster Place 103)

Both Mattie and Ciel share together their isolation, their burden of responsibility as mothers, and the loss of their children. As mothers, they have made mistakes and have lost children, but these same mothers have been able to continue in life, overcoming the consequences of errors and loss.

In this novel, Naylor tries to aware the readers of men who have used to seduce even emotionally vulnerable women throughout history. She also emphasizes the abuse women suffer when they do not follow the standards that men have set for them. Cora Lee who has several illegitimate children suffers at the hands of her older children’s fathers because of the physical and psychological abuse. Cora has learned to view her subsequent sexual partners as shadows, men “who came in the night and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark, and often left before the children awakened” (The Women of Brewster Place 113). These are the irresponsible men who look for a few minutes of sexual release with no commitment.

Etta Mae Johnson’s story highlights sexist oppression that women sometimes suffer at the hands of their lovers. Her childhood filled with repeated rapes by a white man of her small rural community. After the negative experiences that she had, now she longs for lasting love; when she meets Reverend Moreland Woods, she convinces herself that she has finally found someone to settle down with. Mattie tries to stop her but she also understands, “sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it’s
all over” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 70). Later, Etta realizes that Reverend Woods is not different from the other men she has known; he is as abusive as Butch Fuller, but handles it differently, even his violation seems worse than Butch’s because he is a man of the cloth. To Rev. Woods women are nothing more than empty vessels in which to release himself. He makes love to Etta and leaves her; he has no intention of establishing a stable relationship. When he drops her at the corner of Brewster Place, first she is devastated and stands there, but then accepts the facts and returns again to Mattie, as to a centre. When Etta reaches the stoop there is a light under the shade at Mattie’s window. “Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 74). The scene demonstrates the healing power possible with a true bond. Mattie turns horrific experience into an opportunity for closer sisterhood between herself and Etta.

Kiswana Brown wants to see her black race gain equality with the white race. She is described by Loyle Hairston as “naive, middle-class apostate given to revolutionary idealism” (283). She joins a college activist group and to get in touch with her roots, she changes her name from Melanie to “Kiswana,” an African name. She also moves from her hometown of Linden Hills, a community of black persons she describes as “white man’s nigger[s] ashamed of being black” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 85), to the poor, rough, black neighbourhood of Brewster Place. She thinks that the way to best know her true self is to live, work and grow with those who she perceives to be more her people than the middle class blacks of Linden Hills.

The nurturing presence of female kinship on Brewster Place facilitates reconciliation between Kiswana and her well-to-do mother. A visit from Mrs. Browne to Kiswana’s apartment on Brewster Place culminates with the two women realizing that their kinship ties mark more
than generational lines. Mrs. Browne tells her daughter, “You don’t have to sell out, as you say, and work for some corporation, but you could become an assemblywoman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighbourhood. That way you could really help the community” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 84). As Ebele Eko notes, “Kiswana no doubt believes herself the epitome of radicalism until she listens to her mother’s theatrical recounting of her proud heritage and commitment to the black cause. Suddenly, she comes to understand and appreciate the source of her own dynamism, idealism, and dedication: her mother” (145). Mrs. Browne relates to Kiswana a personal testimony of a mother’s love. In this community, Kiswana believes she can have some effect. They have no money, only the bonds that exist between them as humans and as blacks. Despite her particular identity problems, Kiswana Browne, “a dreamy woman-child of black middle class,” and an unlikely young African-American revolutionary, functions as a spiritual leader in this novel (Donahue D2). She tries to get them interested in taking pride in themselves, their heritage and their community.

Kiswana rediscovers her mother’s love that nurtures her and extends her own motherly affection to the community by inviting Cora Lee and her children to attend a black production of Shakespeare in the park which has been directed by her boyfriend, Abshu. Now Cora is able to see her own condition through Kiswana’s eyes and begins to see the need for change in her own life. Cora Lee “is almost lifted out of the inertia of her life by the power of art when Kiswana takes her to see a black production of Shakespeare in the park” (Gottlieb 25). As Cora watches the characters she begins to make plans for future, she decides to walk her kids to school every day and to send them all to summer schools. She dreams of good jobs for them. Her new mothering energy will be directed toward her children’s education, and she has found a sisterhood in Kiswana that lifts her out of her isolation. Everybody feels happy when they reach
home. Despite this experience Cora jumps into bed with one of the many men who come in
darkness. Like her clothes which “drop to the floor” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 127), her
dreams are dropped and forgotten, for she has left the magical world of the forest.

Two lesbians, both professional women, have moved into the neighbourhood. As the
personification of female separation in the world of Brewster Place, Theresa and Lorraine pose
an emasculating threat to the men and an intimidating reflection to the women. Initially, the
lesbians are tolerated, then shunned and later, harassed. Lorraine and Theresa embody the
ultimate commitment of woman to woman and their neighbours react to their relationship with
the same social rejection that drove them to this street in the first place. Just like the world put a
wall in Brewster Place, they put a wall between themselves and Lorraine and Theresa.

When “the two” arrive, the circle of sisterhood closes temporarily, except for Mattie. The
women of Brewster Place refuse to talk to “the two” and even avoid physical and eye contact
with them. Theresa, already hardened toward “straight” people and their reactions to lesbians,
appears unaffected by this treatment. But Lorraine, who cannot understand the reason of other
women for not accepting her and Theresa, tries hard to become part of the group of women. She
wants the approval of the women because she does not fully accept her role as a lesbian. Theresa,
in a fit of anger, reveals that Lorraine, not the people of all the other communities, has been the
reason they are continually on the move. Lorraine is hurt when she is rejected and the two lovers
fight between themselves.

It is also a type of violence of a woman to the other one when Sophie tries to condemn
Lorraine before all. “There were soft murmurs from the corners, accompanied by furtive glances
while a few like Sophie stared at Lorraine openly.” Sophie in front of all neighbours told that
Lorraine and Theresa are lesbian. The next day Lorraine says to Kiswana that, “she’s [Sophie] just a very sick lady, that’s all. Her life must be very unhappy if she has to run around and try to hurt people who haven’t done anything to her” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 160).

When the other women condemn Lorraine and Theresa for their lesbian love, Mattie says that their type of love may “not [be] so different . . . Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it . . .” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 141). Etta Mae does not understand how the love between two women can be the same as the love between a man and a woman until Mattie says, “I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man . . . And there [have] been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did . . . It kinda gives you a funny feeling when you think about it that way, though” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 141). They accept this new realization that women can, in fact, love other women more deeply than men.

Robert Staples, a sociologist who researches the black family and community, says that though the black community has accepted homosexuality more readily than the white community has, “there has never been full acceptance either” (Staples 31). Except Mattie and possibly Kiswana, none of the other women accept “the two.” The women step aside when the two walk by and they believe the two women have ulterior motives for all their actions. Once when Theresa was helping a small girl with a scraped knee, the mother came rushing over, “grabbed the child to her side,” and asked, “what’s going on here?” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 157)

The males of the community also feel threatened by the lesbian relationship. So to “validate [themselves] in a world that was only six feet wide” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 170), one night they rape Lorraine. The gang rapists, led by C. C. Baker, commit rape as a
punishment of homosexuality, a disciplinary act designed to reinstate gender positions, both their own male dominance and Lorraine’s role as a woman. They want her to notice them, not women. “Lorraine, rejected by the others is gang raped in a blood sacrifice brutally proving the sisterhood of all women” (Gottlieb 25). The rape is a physical as well as emotional terror. Unable to get the young men to see her as a person, Lorraine’s ego retreats to her senses:

Then she opened her eyes and they screamed and screamed into the face above hers—the face that was pushing this tearing pain inside her body. The screams tried to break through her pain inside her body. The screams tried to break through her corneas out into the air, but the tough rubbery flesh sent them vibrating back into her brain, first shaking lifeless the cells that nurtured her memory. Then the cells went that contained her powers of taste and smell. The last that were screamed to death were those that supplied her with the ability to love—or hate. (The Women of Brewster Place 170-71)

Naylor emphasizes how Lorraine’s rape is about the gang’s need for power, rather than sex. C. C. needs to reassert his dominance over Lorraine, and thus reestablish his status amongst his peers. Yet Naylor moves beyond this solely personal motivation to demonstrate how the larger societal restrictions upon young black men led to the venting of their frustrations upon members of their own community, in particular black women. Naylor argues that these young men have no other means of proving themselves as powerful and with agency, other than attacking a woman who, at that moment, commands less power than they. C. C. has reestablished his sense of superiority as a male; he has forced the lesbian to have sex with him and his friends, shattering her mental and bodily integrity. Kubitschek argues that Naylor shows Lorraine’s
destruction as the result of “concretely oppressive social conditions” (“Subjugated Knowledge” 47). The reader’s sympathy is entirely with Lorraine as a human being about to suffer a terrible physical and psychological trauma.

Lorraine lies in the alley throughout the night. In the morning fog, Lorraine is so devastated that she does not distinguish between Ben, her only male friend and the rapists. The growing friendship between Ben, the sentinel of Brewster Place and Lorraine is born out of each character’s sense of personal loss, Ben’s loss of communication with his crippled daughter and Lorraine’s with her father. Both see one another as a vehicle for the redemption of their guilt and heartbreak. Lorraine reminds Ben of his daughter. Jill L. Matus reads this friendship as a relationship meant to correct the characters’ earlier father-daughter relationship, “the banished daughter and the bereft and guilty father connect” (Matus 55). Each of these two characters fulfils for the other the role of absent family; therefore, they feel they are “livin’ in a world with no address” (The Women of Brewster Place 149).

Ben suffers from the memory of his daughter’s rape and forced prostitution. As a sharecropper in the depression era south, he is powerless to protect his daughter from the white landlord. She is raped as a woman, but more significantly, her violator victimizes her because she is black and he, a white man, can get away with it. Here, Naylor makes the black women visible as a rape victim. Ben is the father who has betrayed and lost his daughter; Lorraine is the daughter who has been rejected by her father. Ben’s daughter is lame, and Lorraine’s “inner limp,” which defines her as a victim, reminds Ben of his daughter, “you remind me lots of my little girl” (The Women of Brewster Place 147).
Lorraine needs someone with whom she can share in order to discover her own worth and become stronger. Through talking to Ben and making a connection, she establishes a sense of community that helps her create her own identity. Yet, the hope gained from her transformation disappears when she is brutally gang-raped and the message is that transformation alone will not provide security or survival. When Lorraine sees Ben, through tears and hate over the rape, sitting on the trash can rocking in a drunken stupor, she mistakes him for one of the rapists. Believing she is protecting herself, she beats Ben’s head in with a brick. Virginia C. Fowler writes of Ben’s death, “Lorraine’s unwitting murder of Ben . . . provides a kind of poetic justice for all the women who have been assaulted by men in the course of the novel” (54). Mattie witnesses the beating from across the street. She runs toward them and pulls Lorraine away from Ben. Lorraine dies in Mattie’s arms. James Robert Sanders argues that the murder of Ben is “the symbolic end” to “the lack of proper action when proper action was so desperately needed” (260). The novel punishes Ben for his inability to occupy a traditional male role and for his indirect facilitation of his daughter’s rape.

Lorraine’s murder of Ben echoes the violence that C. C. enacts upon Lorraine herself. Just as Lorraine, with her shattered psyche, cannot understand that the swaying Ben is unrelated to the searing pain in her gut, C. C. too misdirects his aggression. He does not see that his lack of power in the world derives from larger forces of oppression: racism, poverty and illiteracy. He only knows his own frustration; and that one way to relieve his anger is to lash out at those people who have even less power than he: black women.

A few weeks after Lorraine’s rape and Ben’s death, both direct results of what Christian calls “death-obstacles” against lesbians (“No More Buried” 199), Mattie dreams about the block
party Kiswana has friendly convinced the women to throw to raise money to repair the building. Mattie’s dream takes on particular authority because she is what Linda wells calls the “central consciousness in the novel”, the “moral agent” representing the “voice of charity and sensitivity” (44). These women become short-tempted and anxious, they join in the block party in order to protest against the power of men over women and against the barriers of racist and class oppression. The men often mistreat the women and that sisterhood is often a reaction against men. Naylor explains in a Publisher’s Weekly interview that, “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” (Goldstein 36).

The power of love between these women becomes a force that heals, bringing them peace and wholeness. They heal their heart and soul as well as body. They work together to destroy the wall between the city and Brewster Place, symbolically destroying the walls which kept them from being one body, non-acceptance to others. The wall is a metaphor for the dead ends of their lives, their “outsiderness,” as black women in an American culture controlled by whites. The wall serves as a means of segregation. It is a symbol of social structures which produce a world in which young men become monsters, old men become drunks and women are victims. With this wall destroyed, all the problems and fears the women feel are “counter-balanced . . . by the love and comfort which [the] women provide one another” (Stoll 919).

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

The Women have learned to live together in sisterhood. The wall symbolizes the barriers to their individual identities which each woman must recognize in herself before she can become more than just a poor black woman wanting more for herself. She must accept her heritage and must realize she cannot allow the white community to shut her off. She must actively participate in her growth.

That wall is the place where C.C. and his friends rape Lorraine. It is where a dazed Lorraine kills Ben. Brewster Place’s wall represents, for Lorraine, the end of her journey. She has attempted to run away from her identity problems, but she is incapable of running any further. The wall represents the “closed economy of oppression” that dominates the lives of those who inhabit Brewster Place (Fraser 102). The wall also represents for C. C. Baker and his gang the reality of their subordinate positions in life. In fact, all of the residents of Brewster Place are victimized by racism and the wall is a constant reminder. This is the wall that separates all residents from the rest of society, and now in the drenching rain while “all of the men and children now stood huddled in the doorways” (*The Women of Brewster Place* 185), the women destroy the wall and open the way for future. Brewster Place, “the dead-end street, cut off from the city’s main arteries is doomed; its death is certain, only a second behind the expiration of its spirit in the mind of its children” (Wickenden 37). Ultimately, it becomes apparent that the street’s life is not independent of its inhabitants.
The women’s arguments and distrust fall away like the drops of rain. “Suddenly, the rain exploded around their feet in a fresh downpour and the cold waters beat on the top of their heads—almost in perfect unison with the beating of their hearts” (The Women of Brewster Place 188). Many references to devastated motherhood are purified through the rhythmic imagery of the rain, suggesting birth and rebirth. Now these women continue to nurture, cleansing the lives of one another. The rain becomes an agent of purification and community in this final story. Rain demonstrates a sense of harmony between nature and women, between outside and inside. The dissolution of the wall represents their growing power both in fighting the system and in achieving individually.

The blood these women see on the bricks is their own; blood from menstruation, rape, beatings, births and deaths. They must come together to cleanse the blood of Lorraine and Ben and by implication the blood of all those who have suffered under the wall’s oppressive weight. The women become heroic. They are able to re-vision their story and create a new myth. They collaborate as a community of women intent on the redemption of one another. Personal autonomy is measured by the willingness to acknowledge kinship and collective action. The women’s new myth is the sum of each woman’s experience, just as the book is a collection of each woman’s story. The author offers her characters the potential for love and hope. They must be able to give witness to their willingness to actively confront evil, here defined as racism and sexism.

The more strongly each woman feels about her past in Brewster Place, the more determinedly the bloody bricks are hurled. The women have different reasons, each has her own story, but they unite in hurling bricks and breaking down boundaries. The collective dream
constitutes a “symbolic act” which, as Frederic Jameson puts it, enables “real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, to find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm” (79). The immediate source of Mattie’s dream of the block party is a violent rape and murder of Lorraine, but the dream comes from the disappointment, the frustration and anger, the resentment and humiliation that all of these black women have experienced in their relationships with the men in their lives. Given the possibility represented by the women’s dreams, it is clear that these women have the power to overcome the external limitations placed upon their lives and to escape their spiritual and emotional dead-endedness.

Naylor moves the community of women into the scene as well. The rape is no longer an isolated act committed against one woman. Each of the women on the street dreams about the rape as it occurred. The attack on Lorraine, according to Christian, 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” (“No More Buried” 196). Ciel returns to Brewster Place, she is haunted by a dream that suggests her in distinguishability from Lorraine (whom she has never met), “and something bad had happened to me by the wall—I mean to her—something bad had happened to her. And Ben was in it somehow” (The Women of Brewster Place 179). Despite Ciel’s lack of knowledge about the events, she is united with the women on Brewster Place and understands that she must return there in order to participate in a ritual act of communal resistance. Naylor perceives the women as the saving grace of this community. If the women act, then indeed, there is a chance of revolution or social change.

The children and the men stand apart; they have no need to destroy the wall because they do not feel the rage that the women do. The women share a moment of communion, bond
together by the recognition of their sexual identity which is the source of their unique identity and also of their powerlessness and oppression in the male-dominated society. The novel’s “healing, life-affirming vision” utilizes the journey motif in order to represent the growth in travelling from emotional isolation and spiritual death to self-affirmation and life (Olsen X). Although black women face violence and degradation, they can fight against and sometimes overcome with their courage and collective struggle.

This novel focuses on the bond between women of different generations. These women become the victims of class, race and sex and also their previous sense of isolation and their mistreatment by men. All these make them to share their experiences together to help each other; thus, they finally find their identity, purpose and strength for survival. They connect with each other emotionally in order to help each other becomes self-affirming individuals. Therefore, Gloria Naylor in particular values independence for women, rather than their being controlled by men. She privileges women’s connections to other women and establishes a model of family continuity in distinct opposition to the broken African-American families found in many other novels. *The Women of Brewster Place* is a long journey in the saga of Black Womanhood. “The black woman has found the freedom to love her race, her family and herself” (Smith 164).

In their novels, Morrison and Naylor believe in the power of sisterhood. The black women must turn to their gender in a loving manner to help and care for the other. If these women can live in unity and respect, they can survive; they can find their identities. They should avoid competition or hatred. Hooks states that, “no woman who chooses to be self-loving ever regrets her choice. Self-love brings her greater power and freedom. It improves her relationships with everyone. But most especially it allows her to live in community with other women, to
stand in solidarity and sisterhood” (*Communion* 137). The women should support each other in order to keep the bond of sisterhood. If they learn to forgive and to accept one another, they become stronger and their lives are enriched by everyone’s presence. Demetrakopulos observes, “It is to other women that we go for the deepest understanding, for the most uncontingent love. Women without female bonds are, in my opinion the most lost and alienated of human beings” (51). She foregrounds female solidarity between women as a means of survival and healing.
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