CHAPTER – 3
THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me...
You my Beloved
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine.¹

The practice of women relying on one another for direction and strength crops up with notable regularity in the novels of African American women. During a 1993 talk in St. Louis, Nikki Giovanni had asserted, “Black love is Black wealth.”² Almost nowhere has black love, manifesting itself in women caring for each other, been better presented than in Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place. The novel shows an inner city neighbourhood suffering the frustrations of poverty and the determination of the black women to survive despite the oppressive marginalization in terms of race, class, and gender. In this novel, “a friendship based on the shared experience of black womanhood exists sometimes in the form of the mother-daughter relationship.”³ Naylor here presents a new picture of relation among women, of female friendship, sisterhood, and community. As Barbara Christian puts forward:

(p)artly because of the matricentric orientation of African peoples from which they were descended, partly because of the nature of American slavery, Afro-Americans as a race could not have survived without the ‘female values’ of communality, sharing and nurturing.⁴
The culture of sharing and nurturing evident in the community in Brewster Place reflects the need to be together in days of isolation and fracture of the family as happened during plantation slavery when the men were not available for protection and nurturing. The women had to band together to fill up the absence.

The novel consists of seven interconnected short stories which revolve around an imaginary street symbolic of racist and sexist society. It features a group portrait of seven black women in one housing development. Naylor has used “a unified physical setting, a spirit of place...to provide a communal framework for the varied descriptions of the women who come to live in it.” These women rely on one another for survival and for psychological support in combating the forces of oppression and isolation. Each of the woman has come to Brewster Place after some sort of a personal tragedy: Mattie Michael, who put her house up for collateral and lost it when her son jumped bail; Etta Mae, the attractive but aging blues singer, no longer able to permanently attract with her sexual favours a “promising rising black star” who “could move her...off of Brewster Place for good”(66); Ciel, a caring and devoted mother, burdened with entire responsibility of the family because of her faithless husband; Cora Lee, the single mother of six, trapped in a cycle of poverty and despair; and “the two” after being ostracized wherever they lived together. The only exception is Kiswana who has by her own choice come to Brewster Place to live with the poor people to improve their condition. Each leaves the world she recognizes as a dead end and enters a world that is literally dead-ended. These women, once they come to Brewster Place, become neighbours, then confidantes 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 community at large. Because each woman has different skills, insights, and experiences, their needs can be met by someone or some group. The novel’s introductory chapter titled ‘Dawn’ refers at least to three communities, the Irish, those whom she refers to as the Mediterranean, and then the blacks, the first representative being Ben, who was hired as a janitor and handyman. Naylor points out that migration has been one of the common experiences of the inhabitants of Brewster Place because all the mothers here have lost children to the call of a more comfortable life leaving behind the old. The succeeding generation is that of the “multicolored Afric” (4) and they are to remain.

Any narrative that intends to represent a particular community faces the possibility of dealing exclusively with stereotypes preoccupied with a desire to find homogeneity. Interestingly however, Naylor is equally concerned with achieving and understanding of the individual selves, more as prototypes than as stereotypes and this is true of the portrayal of all the women of Brewster Place. Heightening “the individuality of her characters so that they are not merely seen as faceless ‘female heads of households’, while stressing their interrelationships”, Barbara Christian points out that ”Naylor establishes Brewster Place as a community in spite of its history of transients – a community with its own mores, strengths and weaknesses.”

_The Women of Brewster Place_ brings to mind the fact that the black woman’s survival relies on her willingness to turn to her own gender for love, support, and understanding. African American communities have always recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, “othermothers” – women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities – traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood. Collins says that
the “notion of Black women as community othermothers for all Black children traditionally allowed African-American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families.”^9 This idea finds poignant expression in the novel in Mattie Michael, who demonstrates an almost magical ability to mother the other women. The world of Brewster Place is constructed around Mattie, the community’s central mother figure. Mattie is the community’s stabilizing force whose influence is boundless, and one of the distinguishing features of African American fiction is the presence of characters like Mattie who are “sort of timeless people whose relationship to the characters is benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.”^10 Mattie’s wisdom is born out of the hardships she has faced because of being both black and a woman. Naylor uses Mattie’s relationships with the other women to substantiate her argument of strength through sharing. “As an alternative to unquestioned acceptance of an ideal patriarchal family”, Fraser feels that Naylor in this novel “offers a federation among the women of the street, headed by Mattie….^11 She is the epitome of motherly love and affection and is also an interlinking point with all the other women of Brewster Place.

This woman to woman contact, acting as a redemptive force, in fact starts even before Mattie takes refuge in Brewster Place. The bonding between Mattie and her mother is one such instance. Fannie Michael (Mattie’s mother) is the one who comforts her when she is pregnant and is ashamed of herself, “Ain’t nothing to be shamed of. Havin’ a baby is the most natural thing there is. The Good Book call children a gift from the Lord. And there ain’t no place in that Bible of His that say babies is sinful.” (20) She is even ready to kill her husband for the sake of her daughter’s safety and threatens him:
"So help me Jesus, Sam!" she screamed.
"Hit my child again, and I'll meet your soul in Hell!"
She cocked the gun again and this time aimed for the center of his chest. (24)

The idea of bonding also finds poignant expression in the case of the relationship between Mattie and Miss Eva where it goes beyond blood ties. The core African notion of 'everyone is family' is highlighted by the strange bond between Mattie and Miss Eva, and the inexplicable attachment that the former has for the latter. As Sobonfu Some states, "Our ancestors believed family went beyond bloodlines, and community was the core, the very substance, of human existence." The bonding may be traced back to the root culture and philosophy that "the community’s role is to make sure that each person is valued and encouraged to know and appreciate his or her own gifts and give them to the world." In Miss Eva’s companionship, Mattie, maybe for the first time, started talking about such things in her life that all the while had been buried within her. Mattie’s bonding with Miss Eva was so strong that even after Miss Eva’s death, if there was a problem or some complex decision to be made, Mattie used to come to Miss Eva’s room, sit there and pray. She felt that “Miss Eva’s presence was there in the few pieces of china bric-a-brac that (she) had saved over the years.” Sobonfu Some also states that “…the dead are not remote from the living because everyone is supported by an ancestor’s spirit.” For the African Americans, the notion of bonding is carried over across generations and time-span. A dead ancestor is very much a part of the community of the present, and Mattie’s seeking Miss Eva’s spirit as a guiding and comforting factor reveals the same.
This mutual supportiveness continues all throughout the novel and is highlighted throughout the narratives of the lives of the other women living in Brewster Place. Naylor widens her circle of ordinary permissible family structure in her representation of the "black tradition of the extended family (which) grew out of the primary need to survive, an urgency that for the most part made gender largely irrelevant." This relationship finds clear expression when Mattie serves as a spiritual substitute for the husband Etta Mae failed to obtain. Even though middle-aged, the urge to get married was still very much present within Etta, but she ultimately realized the impossibility and accepted it. Standing at the corner of the street after Reverend Woods had left her, Etta felt that this was the first time she was coming home with a broken spirit. But ultimately, her uncanny fear went away with the realization that there was at least someone in this world (i.e. Mattie) waiting for her, and who would not even like to make her realize that it was a trouble. Montgomery highlights that "Mattie offers the warmth and support which Etta Mae needs at this crucial moment, and they share an important common bond based on the disappointments which each has faced in romantic relationships." The narrator describes their bond as one which has strong roots way back in the past which "claimed co-knowledge of all the important events in their lives and almost all of the unimportant ones. And by rights of this possession, it tolerated no secrets." Their love for each other is so strong that when Etta falsely accuses Mattie, she feels that "there was no need to defend herself against Etta’s accusations. They shared at least a hundred memories that would belie those cruel words." It is because of this bonding that Etta ultimately got comfort when she saw "the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" in the form of Mattie and which she knew would always be there for her throughout her life.
Indeed, at the end of her narrative, her mood is hardly one that is suggestive of the depth of gloom.

Not only is the bond of friendship among the women in the community liberating and redemptive, the mother-daughter bond is rejuvenating as well, for Mattie plays a pivotal role in the personal transformation that Lucielia Turner (Ciel) undergoes. Lucielia is a single mother who uses Mattie’s strength and power to help her determine herself as a woman. Mattie is Lucielia’s “motherline”.17 Susan Willis defines motherline as “a woman who passes on survival knowledge to another generation.”18 Such a woman can be a mother, sister, aunt, cousin, or another woman in the community, country, or world. This survival knowledge enables the next generation of women to learn from the successes and failures of the previous generation. Worley identifies that “(t)he physical descriptions and the portrayal of the women’s actions substantiate the motherline relationship between Lucielia and Mattie” and further points out that “(w)enever Naylor depicts the two women together, the image is that of mother and daughter.”19 An older, mature woman, Mattie stands beside Lucielia, who is described as having a “girl’s spine”, (103) a “girl’s mouth”, (104) and “young breasts.” (103) The extent of Mattie’s maternal love and protectiveness for the younger woman is clearly seen when Mattie, realizing that Lucielia is about to let go of life after her daughter’s death, takes charge: “Like a black Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young, she surged into the room, pushing the neighbor woman and the others out of her way.”(103) By rocking Ciel in her arms, Mattie takes her “back into the womb” (103) to create a new birth for her. To accomplish this, she universalizes the deaths of children and the grief of mothers by taking Ciel on an historical or even epical tour of mothers and daughters, from ancient Greece to modern
times and this rocking “unites Mattie and Ciel with a broad community of dispossessed women who are denied the luxury of grief.” Mattie’s rocking heals as it educates. As if to reveal Ciel’s new mode of existence, her narrative points toward new beginnings—“And Ciel lay down and cried. But Mattie knew the tears would end. And she would sleep. And morning would come.” As a representative of African American women and all women’s culture/history, Mattie allows Ciel to examine her life “in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race [and gender], the struggles of her community, and the relationships that have developed within her family.” The final maternal actions baptize Lucielia and give her a clear view of her static role in her fantasy life. Thus, through a motherline, from the wisdom passed on by an experienced woman, she learns that truth is worth far more than self-delusion.

Naylor has no doubt portrayed Mattie as the main interlinking character in this novel, but in some cases the bonding between different women is achieved even without Mattie’s presence. This can be viewed in the case of Cora Lee, a single mother of many children. Obsessed with plastic baby dolls right from her childhood, Cora had never appreciated the dolls intended for an increasingly mature child. Michael Awkward views Cora’s responses to her dolls as an urge “to maintain a willful ignorance of the world and of herself.” Cora’s inability to mature occasions her incapability later in life to care responsibly for her own growing children. Taking little thought of the psychological and economic consequences for her children, she still remains attracted to infants and does not hesitate in bringing them to the world. However, her care and love remains secluded only when they are infants; once they grow up they become simply incomprehensible
nuisances for her whom she does not know how to care and nurture. As a result, all her children are undernourished, dirty, scholastically weak, and indisciplined.

Despite such disturbing beginnings in the narration of Cora’s life, Naylor traces a hopeful transformation in her, encouraged by Kiswana Browne, another resident of Brewster Place. Cora’s attitude changed when Kiswana entered her apartment one day. She grew restless thinking that Kiswana probably had got the impression that she was a bad mother and she wanted to disprove it. She took a lot of trouble, most probably for the first time, arranging her apartment and making her children ready on time on the day of the play that Kiswan wanted to take them to. Even her children had never seen her like this before and the narrator describes the feelings of the children thus:

They had never seen their mother so active. The feeling had begun after breakfast when she took their plates from the table, washed and stacked them, and swept the kitchen floor before moving into the living room to leave it dusted and in some semblance of order, and then on to the bedrooms, where she had even changed their sheets – there was something in the air…. they exchanged troubled glances and moved cautiously about with only token protests to the stranger who had awakened them that morning. (122)

The troubles that Cora had taken did not escape the notice of Kiswana and she was “…touched as she sensed the amount of effort that must have gone into the array of roughly patched trousers, ill-fitting shirts, and unevenly hemmed dresses that the woman proudly presented to her.” (122-123) The play, a black production of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream to which Kiswana took Cora, had a profound effect on Cora, making her realize her maternal responsibilities and she resolved from then onwards to take good care of her children. Thus, Kiswana helps Cora transform her view of life and attitude towards her children from merely a superficial to a truly practical one.
Kiswana’s own narrative, apart from focusing on women bonding, also deals with certain issues central to African American experience. It depicts conflict between a Black Nationalist daughter and her “politically incorrect”\textsuperscript{23} mother whose reservations about Black Nationalism grew out of her high regard for the matrilineal heritage. Kiswana, according to Korenman, “regards her mother as a bourgeois reactionary whose material prosperity has cut her off spiritually as well as geographically from the majority of her people.”\textsuperscript{24} Mrs. Brown insists on calling her ‘Melanie’ rather than the Africanized ‘Kiswana’, and she regards her daughter’s poor black neighbourhood with obvious distrust, fearing that “anything could happen – especially living among these people.”\textsuperscript{(83)} Her words enraged Kiswana, who has dropped out of college, moved from her parent’s comfortable Linden Hills home into a low-income housing, and adopted an African name, hairstyle, and décor in order to put her Black Nationalist beliefs into practice. She responds to her mother’s remark with indignation, “What do you mean \textit{these people}. They’re my people and yours too, Mama – we’re all black. But maybe you’ve forgotten that over in Linden Hills.”\textsuperscript{(83)} Naylor, infact, establishes Kiswana as a link between her first novel and her second novel \textit{Linden Hills}, in which the pursuit of money and power is a central issue. Kiswana’s remark made to her mother paves the way for the readers to understand the emerging issue of class differences and hints at it becoming the central issue in the next novel.

However, Mrs. Brown’s willingness to visit Kiswana in Brewster Place and her concern regarding her daughter’s welfare, despite all their disagreements, is an indication of their strong bond which even the daughter cannot negate. It is ultimately the mother’s outlook and not the daughter’s that prevails, when Mrs. Brown gives a proud and
dramatic account of their family’s heritage. She tells Kiswana about her ancestors and remarks:

It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother’s name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her son’s to jail for ‘not knowing his place.’ Yet you needed to reach an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud. (86)

For the Africans and the African Americans, the naming ceremony of a child is of great importance, because “names are extremely important in African and African American culture as a means of indicating a person’s spirit.”25 As Sobonfu Some states, in most of the African tribes, “when a woman is only a few months pregnant, elders perform a ‘hearing ritual’ to receive information about the baby’s life and purpose, then choose an appropriate name.”26 The choice of name viewed in this context is a bonding with the ancestors. For Kiswana’s mother, similarly, naming her daughter had been a way to honour her maternal ancestor and to perpetuate their legacy, which her daughter could not comprehend. A similar case of conflict may be identified in Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use”27 where the elder daughter, embracing the Black Nationalist ethos, changes her name from Dee to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. Dee’s mother, Mrs. Johnson reveals that she had named her daughter after her great-grandmother, a woman who had kept her family against all odds. Helga Hoel comments that Alice Walker has intentionally misspelled the new African-seeming name of Dee (‘Wangero’ instead of ‘Wanjiru’, ‘Kemenjo’ instead of ‘Kamenju’) to show that Dee has only a superficial knowledge of Africa and all it stands for.28 Dee just follows the fashion because right now it is ‘in’ to celebrate the distant African roots. She fails to understand that the name, ‘Dee’, also “goes back several generations on the American continent and therefore is
more part of her heritage than an adopted African name which does not even make sense."29 For both Naylor and Walker, the name change that the daughters regard as a gesture of personal and racial affirmation is essentially an effacing of African American women’s history.

In an interview by William Goldstein, Naylor has explained her aim in writing *The Women of Brewster Place*: “I wanted to immortalize the spirit I saw in my grandmother, my great aunt and my mom.”30 Mrs. Brown’s sentiments regarding her ancestors reflect this intention. Reversing the priorities of Black Nationalism, she emphasizes motherhood over race. As Joan S. Korenman states, the late sixties and seventies viewed an “increased interest in women’s history and in female experiences such as motherhood.”31 An increased attention to motherhood as a positive force pervaded among black women in that period. Gloria I. Joseph’s research revealed overwhelmingly positive attitudes of black daughters towards their mothers:

> They showed tremendous respect, concern, and love for their mothers. The positive feelings that were expressed did not imply that all was sweet, kind, and loving between them. Rather, what was expressed was an undeniable respect and admiration for their mother’s accomplishments and struggles against overwhelming odds....The mothers were role models for their daughters.32

This affirmation of close bonding between mother and daughter is apparent in the works of many women novelists of that period, like Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor. Naylor also employs the same notion in Kiswana’s story by showing her to be deeply moved by her mother’s words and she begins identifying with her mother realizing “that her mother had trod the same universe that she herself was now traveling.”(87) No matter how strained the relationship between the mother and daughter is shown to be, the story ends with an affirmation of their closeness as it concludes with Kiswana hugging her mother.
tightly, recognizing how much the two of them have in common, and accepting her mother’s financial assistance.

In the different narratives of the women of Brewster Place discussed so far, we find Naylor highlighting that these women need each other to endure their sufferings. As put forward by Barbara Christian, “Women mothering other women is consistent throughout this novel as they hold each other in survival.” But in the story of ‘The Two’, the circle of sisterhood and mothering closes temporarily. In this section, we get a complete different picture of the community – rather a complex one which is slowly disintegrating. Here, we not only see a community which cannot hold itself together, but also view a complex personal relationship between the two important characters. Naylor’s ‘The Two’ emphasizes how notions of stereotypes about the right and wrong kind of woman exist in the small community of Brewster Place. She underscores how denigrating stereotypes are by having the people refer to the two women as “the lighter skinny one” (129) and “the short dark one” (129), their appearances rather than their names being their means of identification. Their presence constitutes an explicit challenge to the prevailing sexual status quo; they are described as a “difference that had been thrust into the predictable world” (132) of the neighbourhood. As the rumours regarding Lorraine and Theresa’s lesbianism spread among the women, they refuse to talk to ‘the two’ and even avoid physical and eye contact with them. Lorraine is the first one to notice this and unlike Theresa, it disturbed her a lot. Naylor in the portrayal of their relationship has not cast them in the same mould as that of the bonding between Mattie and Etta or Cora and Kiswana. Rather, Lorraine and Theresa stand poles apart in their opinions and attitudes towards life. Lorraine is one who is constantly seeking to surround herself with the
comfort of everyone’s goodwill, is always on the lookout for acceptance from others and shrivels up at the least touch of disapproval. She “functions as the women’s alter ego, or second self. She is the more passive in her tensed relationship with Theresa.” Theresa, on the other hand, is ready to fight against the community for trying to invade her personal territory. It is only that she had never found a sparring partnership in Lorraine to do so, and the strain of fighting alone was beginning to frustrate her. She was in fact, “growing tired of being clung to – of being the one who was leaned on. She didn’t want a child – she wanted someone who could stand toe to toe with her.” (135-136) Yet, “when Lorraine does begin to challenge her, Theresa is angered and jealous because she sees her lover’s growing rebellion as a result of her friendship with Ben, an old wino” and we are made aware that maybe over all these years without her knowledge, Theresa has grown accustomed to mothering Lorraine.

Naylor’s presentation of the tensions in their relationship hinges on the community’s rejection of ‘The Two’, which reaches its zenith in the Block Association meeting. Miss Sophie, the community gossiper, serves as the clarion voice of morality, labeling the couple’s lifestyle as sinful and unnatural, and the community bands together against what they consider to be the evil in their midst. It is Mattie who articulates the fear underlying the hysteria of those around her. When she asks her friend, Etta, what makes the two different, and Etta answers that they love each other the way you love a man or a man would love you, Mattie responds, “But I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man….Maybe it’s not so different…” She looked at Etta. “It kinda gives you a funny feeling when you think about it that way, though.” (141) Naylor points out the fear of heterosexual women about lesbians, even as she underscores the violence men inflict
upon them. In describing the men who rape Lorraine, she uses terms that express the community’s powerlessness as well as the male’s values:

They only had that three-hundred foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armored tank and executioner chamber. So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous specis in existence – human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide. (170)

The attack on Lorraine and her subsequent death may be viewed from different perspectives. Barbara Christian is of the opinion that the attack on Lorraine 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.” But Christian also instead of laying the blame entirely on men takes a different stance when she argues – “Although she is killed by men, the women of Brewster Place too share the blame for her death.” Lorraine, in fact, is destroyed by “the entire community that had created an environment in which she could be seen as an accessible scapegoat” and also "by a society whose racism exacerbates the fear and anger powerless men feel against women who reject their only visible sign of manhood...." As the men tear Lorraine up, her previous words that “Black people were all in the same boat....” (142) reverberate with horrible irony.

With Lorraine’s death, the essential bonding among the women of Brewster Place collapses and the community cannot hold itself together any longer. This idea is carried further by the death of Ben – “...the first black resident of Brewster Place, and his death at the wall is a sign of Brewster Place’s death as a community, of its inability to hold together much longer.” But Naylor offers a ray of hope of the continuation of communal bonding through Mattie’s dream. Kelly recognizes that the “dream is filtered
through the consciousness of Mattie Michael who, as principal female character, is both matriarch and chief ministrant to all the women is the novel." Mattie’s ambiguous, surreal nightmare prior to the long-awaited block party is the culminating event in the novel, the ultimate expression of a night world of horror, frustration, and chaos. The dream sequence not only recapitulates the female characters’ collective experience of the male, it also reveals their subconscious desire for rebellion and revenge. The image of Lorraine, “the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress” (175) haunts the other women because what has happened to her is an extreme form of what has happened to all of them. Their bodies have also been the human turfs on which men, in their roles as fathers, sons, lovers, and husbands have displayed their power. Mattie’s dream distills years of the suppressed longing and disappointment, the frustration and anger, the resentment and humiliation that these women have collectively experienced in their lives. At the block party setting of the dream, the women see blood on all the bricks in the wall and they join together to tear down the wall which serves “...a double function in both isolating the women and marking them as different from the rest of the town.” It is the blood on the bricks that inspires the frenzy of destruction directed at the wall. Kelly also identifies that the blood on the wall “recalls not only the violence of the rape scene but also menstruation, deflowering, and birth” and “is a universal symbol of female experience, of the birthright and right of passage to adult womanhood, and also of the biological entrapment that is the reason for these women being in Brewster Place.” Perhaps this is why the action to destroy the wall is a uniquely female one and the children and the men in the dream are described as standing apart. The latter have no need to destroy the wall as they do not feel the rage that the women do. And perhaps this
is also the reason that makes Kiswana and Theresa join in as they realize that their blood is also on the wall. By uniting in an exclusively female experience, the women of Brewster Place experience, in a broad sense, solidarity with all women. Even as we are aware that it is only someone’s dream, but its truth cannot be ignored as the dream gives way to the actual block party heralded by morning and sunshine. No doubt, the hope of the survival of the Brewster Place community is really bleak as vividly picturized in the concluding section ‘Dusk’ as it “....watched its last generation of children torn away from it by court orders and eviction notices, and it had become too tired and sick to help them....” (191), but Brewster Place is not entirely doomed. In an interview, Naylor has explained her idea on the ending of the novel:

I don’t see The Women of Brewster Place ending on a note of despair. The spirit of the street is still there even though the physical place is now deserted....This is because I believe that no matter how bad things might get, if there is still life within our bodies then there is hope.43

That is why, “…the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn….They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. So Brewster Place still waits to die” (192) and the novel ends on a note – however small – of survival.

While we notice the slow disintegration of the Brewster Place community and try to analyze the causes, an essential question probes our mind – what is the role of the men of Brewster Place in the formation and destruction of the community? In almost all the stories, Naylor shows that these men are in some way or the other responsible for a disaster in the lives of the women. In Mattie’s story, the three men who have changed her entire life and being – her father, Butch Fuller, and her son – were no doubt, not the
residents of Brewster Place. But "the image of man that emerges from this story is that of a rapist, an exploiter, a lusty man, a cruel father, a careless lover and an equally good for nothing son" and we hold them accountable for Mattie's landing up in Brewster Place. The struggle of black women and the ill-treatment which they get from men continue in the pathetic story of Etta Mae. She dreams of getting married to Reverend Woods, but her dream is shattered when she realizes that all that this man wants is to have a good time with her and is quite happy because he "...hadn't even been called upon to use any of the excuses he had prepared for why it would be a while before he'd see her again." (73) Kiswana's story, maybe, is the only one in which there is the absence of a relatively important male figure. But the effect of the absence of it is much more profound on the readers. Even though she has a father "...in real estate with a five-figure income and a home in Linden Hills" (83), interestingly it is Kiswana's mother who supports her and her father merely thinks her stubborn because she has her own attitude towards life. Such glaring instances are continued further in the moving story of Lucielia Turner. She has an irresponsible husband who comes and goes whenever he wants and she is always left behind with "...the frustration of being left alone, sick with a month-old baby...." (91) To keep the marriage intact, she even undergoes an abortion, but still her husband leaves her throwing her into a lonely, long, dark path of pain and despair. Cora Lee, the unmarried mother of many children, is also a highlighting example of black male treating their own counterpart merely as sexual objects to gratify their lust. No doubt, Cora does not prove to be an ideal mother, but her narrative makes us wonder at the roles of the absent fathers of her children, because the men "who had promised to marry her and take her off Welfare" (113) deliver only violence.
We see that “male violence in The Women of Brewster Place occurs not in connection with sexual appetites but with attempts to subject black women to patriarchal authority” and this attempt culminates in the narration of the gang-rape of Lorraine. We become aware that the “young men (of Brewster Place) do not rebel against the social forces that built the constricting wall”, which blocks them from access to full patriarchal power, “but rather resort to terror against black women to assert themselves as patriarchs.” These young men always moved in a group and needed each other continually to verify their existence, but their brotherhood is merely a survival strategy used to destroy the larger community. We cannot overlook the role played by the men in the process of the slow disintegration of the community. If the women are no longer able to hold the community together, the men also play no part in assisting them either. This negative role of the men of Brewster Place as we view in this novel is totally in contrast with Naylor’s latest book The Men of Brewster Place wherein these men, like the women, are shown to be committed to one another and to their community. But at this juncture when we are analyzing Naylor’s first novel, the view of the men is quite an antagonistic one to the formation of the community. This is what even Naylor herself explains in an interview when she says –

When I was writing The Women of Brewster Place I had not developed these male characters beyond playing the roles of antagonists for the women who were my central concern. At that time the men were used as dramatic devices to bring conflict, of some sort, into the lives of the women.

This is why even though most of the men in the novel may indeed be so ego-crippled by racism as to be unable to love their women, but Naylor still holds them accountable for the slow disintegration of the community.
While we analyze the causes of the slow disintegration of the Brewster Place community and the inability of the women to hold on to each other any longer, we are aware that this is a community of transients without any secure settlement and a shared long history. From this emerges the issue of class distinction because the women of Brewster Place do not have a shared past and they basically do not belong to the same strata of the society, even though some situation or the other has made them come and settle in this place. This was a peculiar problem of the 1980s which Gloria Naylor was facing when she started writing. In representing the reality of the African American women’s experiences opposed to the stereotypical controlling images, she was confronted with a constantly changing political and economic scenario where it was no longer possible to assume the African American community as a homogenous cultural entity. Particularly the class differences had become more pronounced. Naylor faced a wide variety of black sub-cultures and consequently the problem of constructing a sense of cultural identity which would not ignore but acknowledge this variety. In order to present a full-fledged picture of the community, Naylor not only portrayed the poor section, but also could not ignore the middle-class as she herself states – “I am myself from a working-class family, and so my perspective is always going to include characters from that class.” She subtly highlights this fact through Kiswana, “the product of a middle class upbringing in nearby Linden Hills, who has chosen to live with her people at Brewster Place in hopes of improving their lives…” But the women of Brewster Place cannot ignore the status distinction between Kiswana and themselves as they listen to “….Kiswana’s musical, clipped accent, look at the designer jeans and striped silk blouse….” (116) and wonder why she lived in such a place. A similar case is seen in the
story of Lorraine and Theresa who could afford to live in such posh places as Linden
Hills and Park Heights, but had to settle in Brewster Place only because of their
lesbianism. Brewster Place community’s slow disintegration thus can also be attributed to
the class distinction between the residents who find it difficult to hold on to each other
because of their different economic backgrounds. This idea finds poignant expression in
Naylor’s second novel *Linden Hills* where the situation is much more hopeless than
Brewster Place.

The message that Naylor wants to give through this novel is that genuine friendship
between the different members of the community is critical to the Afro-American
community’s search for empowerment. A community cannot exist if it is rigidly
controlled nor can it exist without a shared history or shared values. That is why, Naylor
weaves a pattern which highlights the variety, yet projects a culture which is a unified
entity despite the variety, as resistance to the attempted objectification of the black
woman in the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender.
NOTES

9. ibid.
13. ibid.
14. ibid.
18. ibid.
24. ibid., p-151.
<www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1264/is_8_30/ai_58361074_32k>
26. ibid.
29. ibid.
36. ibid., p-196.
46. ibid, p-101.
The days fall upon me;
One by one, they fall,
Like leaves

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They cover me,
They crush,
They smother.
Who will ever find me
Under the days?

(Gloria T. Hull)