



Overarching matrix of Self- affirming: The culmination of Naylor's ideological discrepancy in *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract:

In The Women of Brewster Place, the pain and suffering of women out of race and sex have forced them to face the evils of oppression and discrimination. In this novel, the women characters have reached the dead-end of their life because of sexual and racial discrimination. They find it very difficult to survive in the white world. Their trauma has been doubled when their own men have abandoned. This forces them to look after themselves and their children. The study 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 to become self-affirming individuals.

Keywords: oppression, sexual, discrimination, violence.

Brewster Place is a dead-end street of deterioration. It is cordoned by a tall, brick wall of the city. In this street, the women nurture one another and search the methods for survival. As Thomas McFarland argues: "the wall, symbol of obdurate thinness', symbol of the separation of humans from one another, symbol of all blockings, holding back, keeping out, penning in, is here—wondrously—not a wall. Not a thing at all, but a person" (89). The structure, in this novel, reminds anyone of racism and sexism. But, Brewster gives a place and time for the women to gain courage and strength. Here, women do not like to remain outside sanctorum in place. It is largely the community of women, where men are in different and drifting away from the lives of

women.

These women have to support themselves against their men as well as white society. They share common concerns. Though their society is women-centered, there is no one to defend them against sexism and racism. Brewster, a world of reality, is "obliged to share" (Smith 32). It comes from the political, social and economic realities of America in the 1970's: a world in which the women are disempowered. They have common thing within them: they are women, black and poor. The women, who come to Brewster, have personal tragedy. These women become neighbors, confidants and sisters. In Brewster Place, their world becomes the universe of the black community. Each woman and her experience



becomes the part of the experience of the black community. Whenever the woman of Brewster needs help, she depends on others, as seen in the case of Mattie. Ciel, longs for the help, in order to overcome the loss of her child. At that point each and every Brewster woman visits her. These Brewster women try to take her out of mourning. Among them, Mattie is exceptional to her by showing love, support. These women never considered another woman as their rival. These women are friendly to one another, and live in concord. They share the common fate, and their dreams help them to live alive. These are the other reasons for these women to attract each other. The dream brings them together and this also pave ways for them to share and to connect. Mattie, in Brewster community, works very hard to improve the conditions of her women. She begins to give advice to Brewster woman, when she becomes friend of Miss Eva. In fact, she is the backbone of her community. She is also viewed to be a counselor. This is observed by Carabi in the following lines: “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” (39). Also, Mattie, the surrogate mother of Brewster Place, is described by Wickenden in the following manner: “Mattie Michael hold[s] together the lives of the others through strength of will” (38). Being the mother of her community, especially to the young women, she tries to comfort her women at the time of their crisis. She is not only an anchor, but also the spiritual center of the women. Linda Metzger observers the Brewster women in the following manner:

While *The Women of Brewster Place* is about black women’s

condition in America... What they share is a common oppression and, more importantly, a spiritual strength and a sense of female communion that I believe all women have employed historically for the psychic health and survival. (322)

The Women, of Brewster Place, considers marriage as sacrificial death. In fact, marriage slaughters their self. This is witnessed in Ciel case, when she has got married to Eugene. Though, marriage brings bitterness, she tries to be with Eugene at the expense of her happiness. This is because her baby daughter meets her father around her. This is expressed by her in the following manner: “Serena needs a daddy” (92). Eugene, her husband, behaves like gunge. His gumple-foisted visit to his home makes Ciel feels herself to be wacky. Every time Eugene returns and promises Ciel that he has changed, she takes him back thinking that “he’s really straightened up this time” (91). When he forces Ciel to have an abortion, Ciel, with the help of Mattie, understands that she has to live alone to avoid it. When Ciel comes to know that her marriage does not work for her, she begins to work for attaining her identity. Without it, Ciel feels that her life becomes nothing. So, marriage becomes erythematic to Ciel. Marital and maternal roles are trusted upon women. As a result, motherhood has gained its important in their life. But, this has created depressing results. In this novel, the novelist has presented the horror of motherhood through Mattie and Ciel. Both of them have tried to live their life for the sake of their children. Unfortunately, the mishap in their life, through their children, has



forced them to feel that they are unfit to live on the earth. Still, they are forced to live. Mattie, for instance, is forced to leave her home to live with the friend in the other state at the time of her pregnancy. She, at that time, has considered motherhood as a step towards self-actualization. She is determined to make a good life for her child and to herself. In order to fulfill this wish, she goes out for her job while undertaking her work, Mattie as a good mother “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” (27). In spite of her difficult motherhood, she loves to take her role as a mother. Mattie’s incline for the sake of her son Basil is tremendous. She spends almost all her time with him amidst her other duties. From morning to evening, she searches for lively-hood of her son. 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” (34). She gives him everything and never expects true love from him. She spends all her energy for the sake of his son Basil, this includes her spiritual and emotional self. Unfortunately, she spoils him. This is observed by Willson in the following lines: “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). This is seen when he kills the man at the bar over a woman, his decision to leave the town overhauls his mother home and forces her to move to Brewster Place. Like Mattie, Ciel has also

experienced the horror of motherhood. Her love for daughter Serena is too much. When she becomes pregnant, her husband does not want another child. He forces her to have an abortion. She goes through it reluctantly. This, she feels, has stolen 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 colors. 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” (95). To overcome the loss of her identity, she becomes more possessive to Serena. This is observed by the writer in the following lines: “[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” (96). Unfortunately, Serena dies out of electrocution. She is really grieving not only the loss of her child, but also the loss of herself. She is “forced to slowly give up the life God had refused to take from her” (101). Spiritual kinship between women is offered as a mother-daughter exchange. As seen in the case of Mattie and Ciel, this brings courage and comfort to one another. They agree with one another over loss and serve as midwives to each other’s spiritual births. Unable to comprehend the loss of her child, Ciel retreats to her bed, she has lived her life for the sake of her child. 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, but also she gives the younger woman emotional nourishment, that is 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. Both Mattie and Ciel share together their isolation, their burden of responsibility as mothers, and the loss of their children. Still, these mothers have been able to continue life, overcoming the consequences of loss. Gloria Naylor, in this novel, has brought out how they abuse women to suffer at the hands of men, to try to set standard for them, Cora Lee undergoes physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her husband, she considers her husband as a shadow, men “who come in the night and shows her the thing that felt good in the dark, and often left before the children awakened” (113). He is irresponsible man, who looks 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 men. Her childhood has been marked by repeated rapes, especially of white men of her small rural community. In spite of her nightmarish experience, she longs for true love. She meets Reverend Moreland Woods. She convinces herself that he is a suitable man to settle down with. Mattie tries to stop her. At the same time she 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” (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. 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 center. 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” (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, She is described by Loyle Hairston as, “naive, middle-class apostate given to revolutionary idealism” (283). She longs to attain equality of the black race with the whites. When she has her studies at the college level, she has joined activist group in order to search for her roots. So she has altered her name from Melanie to “Kiswana,” an African name. She also moves from Linden hills, her home town to the poor, rough, black neighborhood of Brewster Place. Here, she has the mind to get true self to live along with the hope that the people of Brewster tend to be her people than the middle class black of Linden Hills. Brewster place, a nurturing place, brings reconciliation between Kiswana and her mother, Mrs. Browne, her mother, of Kiswana, visits her daughter’s apartment. This visit helps them to realize not only their kinship between them, but also with Brewster community. This is observed by Mrs. Browne, “You don’t have to sell out, as you say, and work for some corporation, but you could become an assembly woman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighbourhood. That way you could really help the community” (84). Further,



EbeleEko observes: “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). Kiswana believes that Brewster community brings her some effect. In fact, the existing bound between them brings ecstasy, the joy gives is more than the material joy which a black woman derives. In spite of her identity problems, Kiswana Browne, Donahue observes, is “a dreamy woman-child of the black middle class,” and an unlikely young African-American revolutionary, functions as a spiritual leader in this novel (Donahue D2). For the sake of her community, she works very hard to retain not only a pride, but also their heritage. Kiswana loves for her mother and to her community as a chain reaction. Kiswana loves for her mother helps her to develop and in turn extends her over affection to the black community. For instance, Cora Lee and her children have been invited to attend the black production of Shakespeare, which has been directed by Abshu, her boyfriend. Cora, with the self of her own, has to understand her condition, and begin to realize the need for change in her own life. This is observed in the following lines: “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). The movement Cora watches the character of Shakespeare she begins to plan for her future. In fact, her repletion energy pushes her towards the education of her children and also her new founds sisterhood in kiswana erases her isolation. Two lesbians, namely Theresa

and lorraine, pose a threat to men and intimidating reflection to the women in Brewster place. At first, these lesbians are tolerated, then shunned, and harassed later. Though their relationship is a kind of commitment women to women, their relationship with social reduction has driven them to the street of Brewster. As a result, within the Brewster wall, there exist a wall between women and lesbians. Except Mattie, the circle of sisterhood is out of their sight temporarily. The women of Brewster refuses to talk to these to, and even avoid physical and eye contact with them. But, Theresa is unaffected by this treatment. On the other hand, Lorraine tries very hard to become part of the group of women. So, Lorraine is hurt when she is rejected and the two lovers fight between themselves. This is observed in the following lines: “There were soft murmurs from the corners, accompanied by furtive glances while a few like Sophie stared at Lorraine openly. To Lorraine and for Theresa, Mattie is a source of solace to them. Further, she says that their type of love may “not [be] so different . . . Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it . . .” (141). This proves that a woman’s love for another woman takes place out of realization of self between human beings. Except Mattie and Kiswana, none of the other women in Black community accept these two. When these two walk together, other black women step believe that Lorraine and Theresa have ulterior motives for all their actions. In black community, a black male has also threatened by lesbian partnership. C.C.Baker, the gang rapists, commits rape as a punishment of homosexuality, as a mark of gender dominance. The rape is a physical as well as emotional terror. Gottlieb observes this in the



following lines: “Lorraine, rejected by the others is gang raped in a blood sacrifice brutally proving the sisterhood of all women” (25). In spite of physical intimidation, Lorraine’s ego tries to retreat her senses.

Here, Naylor tries to bring the attention of the readers that Lorraine’s rape is done for the sake of general power rather than sex. C. C. Baker’s dominance over Lorraine is to reestablish his status amongst his peers. Still, Naylor tries to prove that how societal restrictions upon black men have led frustrations upon black women. The writer, further, tries to bring the attention that young black men have no guts to prove that they are powerful other than attacking the black women.

After the day Lorraine has been forced to lie in the alley throughout the night. In morning, the devastated Lorraine finds it difficult to distinguish between have a male friend Ben and therapist. Ben and Lorraine have developed friendships out of each one's personal loss, Ben’s loss of communication with his crippled daughter and Lorraine’s with her father. So, they see one another as a modicum of redemption of their guilt and heartbreak. Lorraine needs someone to discover her worth to become stronger. This has been done through Ben, which helps her to establish a sense of community that helps her to attain her own identity. Her hope is totally shattered, when she is brutally gang-raped. The message is that longing to transform alone may not provide security or survival. When Lorraine beats Ben, believing to be a rapist, with the brick, Ben dies. Lorraine’s murder of Ben echoes the violence that C. C. Baker enacts upon Lorraine. These women become short-tempered 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. 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).

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 and 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. 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).

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