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## Creating Communities, Forming Families: Black Women in the American City

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The urbanization of the black population of America began since 1900. During the two World Wars, owing to the need and demand for unskilled labor in the cities, blacks migrated in large numbers from the rural South to the city. By the 1950s, only 40% of black population lived on farms and by the 1970s, blacks had become completely urbanized.

The World Wars also resulted in the movement of black women from the farms to the industrial work force. A direct result of the integration of black women into the urban economy was that they became economically independent and were freed from their dependence on black men. By the 1980s, approximately 41% of Black families in the United States were headed by women. This structure of the black family and the importance women assumed in it was in direct opposition to the traditional white nuclear family, where white women played a passive, subordinate role. Therefore, the white racist society of America propounded the theory of the disordered black family, and laid the entire blame for this instability on the shoulders of the black women (who were stereotyped as powerful, assertive, sub-human women, who castrated the men of the house). Black women were labeled as matriarchs and this myth furthered their image as masculinized, domineering creatures. Through it, whites not only sought to devalue black womanhood but also pitted black men against black women.

Writers like Franklin Frazier claimed that the black family, headed by black woman was “unable to withstand the disintegrating forces in the city” and “unable to stem the tide of family disorganization that has followed as a natural consequence of the impact of modern civilization upon the folkways and mores of the simple peasant folk” (*The Negro Family in the United States*, P 363). The black woman was denigrated both by the white and the black society and these attitudes culminated in US government policies such as the Moynihan Report.

In 1965, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan published his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In this report, Moynihan argued that the black American family was undermined by female dominance. According to him, the unconventional matriarchal structure of black families in the cities not only retarded the progress of the black male but also led to the disintegration of family life. Children born in such families committed more crimes. Moynihan argued that the matriarchal structure of black families was out of line with the white American norm and it was this that prevented the black race from being accepted into the mainstream of American life.

Afro-American women writers of the 1970s and the 1980s responded to the black and white society's denigration of black women and black womanhood by showcasing in their fiction strong communities of women. These women writers countered the negative views about families headed by black women, by portraying alternative families of women in the city. In my paper, I am going to look at Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) to demonstrate how black women break away from traditional male-dominated families, bond with each other, share female values, form women centered communities within the city and manage on their own in an urban environment. It is this female solidarity that gives them the strength to cope with the alienation and oppression they face in the city.

### ***The Women of Brewster Place* (1982)**

Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* centers on a community of colored women who live in Brewster Place, a housing development in an unnamed city. The genesis of Brewster is explained in the first few pages of the novel itself.

"Brewster Place was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company." (1)

Naylor uses sexual imagery to describe how Brewster was 'conceived' (1). It emerged from the 'consummation of their respective desires' (1); though it was born in the city legislature, its 'true parentage was hidden' (1). According to Maxine Sample, through the use of sexual imagery, Naylor refers to and appropriates 'the stereotype of black urban woman as sexually profligate mothers of children born out of wedlock, a fixture in the urban landscapes as imagined in the American psyche'. The sexual imagery proves how place and people are products of a self-serving society.

Brewster Place is a ghetto, a place where the discards of urban planning are pushed. It is "cut off from the central activities of the city" (2) by a wall. It is primarily populated by black women, all of whom have migrated to urban America. Apart from Kiswana Browne, all the other women of Brewster have been forced to take refuge here because they are poor, black women who are a blot on the face of the city and cannot be accommodated elsewhere. Naylor states that the people who came here 'had no choice' (4) and therefore would continue to remain here.

Instead of giving a single idealized figure of an urban black woman, Naylor disperses life of black women into seven different stories. Mattie Michael, the first of this community of women lands up in Brewster because of the void created in her life by her adult son's flight from criminal prosecution. Etta Johnson arrives in Brewster after experiencing a series of failed relationships. The lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa come looking for a 'home' that would accept them as they are. Cora Lee looks for a life which is an endless stream of babies. Lucielia Turner looks to Brewster as a refuge that would shelter her from the sorrow of her husband's loveless attitude and his eventual desertion. Unlike all these women, Kiswana is the only woman who has come here out of choice. She is a black activist who wants to bond with her own people and improve the lives of this impoverished community of women.

The black women of Brewster Place ‘clung’ to it ‘with a desperate acceptance that whatever was here was better than the starving Southern climates they had fled from’ (4). They ‘milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home’ (4). The wall that separates Brewster from the rest of the city symbolizes the neglect and indifference with which this neighborhood of black women is treated by the rest of the city. It is a symbol of the ways racial oppression, sexual exploitation and class discrimination constrain the lives of these black women. However, within these very walls of oppression, these black women create lives for themselves.

When Mattie helplessly wanders with her child in search of a new home, it is Eva Turner who extends her a hand of help. When Mattie and Eva meet for the first time, both establish a sisterhood that would sustain them in a constraining urban environment. Miss Eva insists on feeding Basil, and Mattie gradually starts opening up to the old woman.

“Mattie didn’t know if it was the seasoned food or the warm air in the kitchen, but she felt herself settling like fine dust on her surroundings and accepting the unexplained kindness of the woman with a hunger of which she had been unaware. In the unabashed fashion of the old, Miss Eva unfolded her own life and secret exploits to Mattie, and without realizing she was being questioned, Mattie found herself talking about things that she had buried within her. 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)

Miss Eva refuses to accept any rent from Mattie. She is willing to accept Mattie as a family member, rather than as a boarder. Maxine Montgomery states that Miss Eva’s guidance, friendship and intervention sustain Mattie in the face of displacement and loss. Eva becomes Mattie’s surrogate mother and a sister friend (“*Navigating a Blues Landscape: The Women of Brewster Place*”). After Eva’s death, Mattie inculcates the female values of mothering and nurturing she has learned from her, and becomes a mother figure for the entire women of Brewster.

When Etta Johnson comes to Brewster to meet Mattie, she is conscious of the ‘freedom she found in Mattie’s presence’ (58). Other urban landscapes such as Rock Vale or Rutherford County might not have been ready for her since she was a black woman who refused to play by the rules and rebelled against the white racist and sexist society. Whites considered her an ‘uppity nigger’ (60). But with Mattie, Etta had no choice but to be herself. America might not have been ready for her but she at least had the comfort of Mattie’s presence. Despite the plurality of characteristics, both of them end up on Brewster because of their class and race location. As the narrator states-

“Both Etta and Mattie had taken totally different roads but with all of their deceptive winding had both ended up on Brewster Place.” (61).

After her last effort at forming a stable relationship with a man failed, Etta stood looking at the wall that separated Brewster from the rest of the city. The place that had looked so illuminating and beautiful to her, before her sexual encounter with Revd. Woods, now ‘crouched’ (73) in the predawn light. However, as soon as Etta approached

Mattie's window, she realized that someone was waiting for her. All her dreams of marrying Revd. Woods had been shattered a few moments before but the very thought of Mattie's warmth and love revitalizes her.

"Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her." (74).

While Etta is revitalized by Mattie's presence, Ciel is literally brought back to life. After her daughter Serena is electrocuted, Ciel loses even the last resort which had spurred her to continue living. She is completely isolated after Serena's death. But Mattie's mothering draws her out of her death-like silence. Mattie bathes Ciel like a child and washes her body.

"She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it- a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled- and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal." (104)

This ritual of togetherness gives a new life to Ciel. Her sorrow is washed away in tears, under the effect of Mattie's motherly love and care.

In her work "*Who set You Flowin'?*": *The African- American Migration Narrative*, Farah Griffin states that residents in Afro-American fiction search safe spaces to escape the negative affects of urbanization, and construct an alternate subjectivity. Such spaces include extended families which become spaces of healing and retreat. Mattie embodies such a space in Naylor's novel and emerges as a nurturing ancestor figure in *The Brewster Place*.

In an urban space where black women are largely powerless, it is only the strength of their bond with other women that gives them the strength to survive against all odds. Kiswana might have left her home at Linden Hills but her mother is concerned about her welfare, despite their disagreement. Despite Kiswana's protests, her mother financially supports her. Kiswana, in turn, 'mothers' Cora Lee. She takes Cora and her children to watch the play 'The Midsummer Night's Dream'. It is during this play that Cora is persuaded to think about alternative possibilities for her children, who are no longer babies.

She imagines Maybelline 'standing on a stage, wearing pretty clothes, and saying fine things' (125). The thought of her children's education also crosses her mind. She hopes that they would study in schools and colleges and then go on to 'good jobs in insurance companies and the post office, even doctors or lawyers' (126).

However, it is not as if Brewster Place is a utopian space for the black women residing here. If it offers hope and refuge to some women, it provides only despair to others. This is illustrated in the case of the two lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa. Both of them had moved from their earlier apartments at Linden Hills and Park Heights because the society there was homophobic. They came to Brewster to claim it as their 'home' and

had hoped that Brewster would provide a much more conducive environment to them. However, the society at Brewster proves as homophobic as elsewhere in the city.

When the residents of Brewster realize that ‘the two in 312 were that way’ (131), their behavior towards ‘the two’ changes instantly. Lorraine notices this shift in attitude of the people around her.

“But she noticed that some of the people who had spoken to her before made a point of having something else to do with their eyes when she passed, although she could almost feel them staring at her back as she moved on. The ones who still spoke only did so after an uncomfortable pause, in which they seemed to be peering through her before they begrudged her a good morning or evening.” (133)

These homophobic attitudes culminate in Lorraine’s gang rape by C.C. Baker and his friends. Baker knew only one way to ‘please or punish women or extract favors from them’ and that was ‘by execution of what lay curled behind his fly’ (161).

“It was his lifeline to that part of his being that sheltered his self-respect. And the thought of any woman who lay beyond the length of its power was threat.” (161-62).

Since Lorraine is a threat to his masculine sexual power, Baker finds it convenient to strangle her voice altogether by brutally raping her. Lorraine’s rape proves that Brewster is not a fool proof defense against oppressive forces that afflict the larger white society. It might be separated from the rest of the city but the negative forces that assail people in the city afflict Brewster too. Unlike other female residents of Brewster who are readily accepted within the community, Lorraine and Theresa are viewed with skepticism because of their ‘aberrant’ sexual orientation.

At the end of the novel, all the women of Brewster get united in Mattie’s dream of the block party. All the women collaborate and break the bloodstained brick wall that separates Brewster from the rest of the city (as if to atone for Lorraine’s rape).

“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 over-turned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. They came back with chairs, and barbecue grills and smashed them into the wall.” (186)

By removing the bricks that constitute the oppressive wall, the women of Brewster transcend the limitations that the city imposes on them. However, Brewster Place remains a temporary abode for these black women. It is eventually abandoned and the residents are forced to find another space in another community.

“Brewster had given what it could- all it could- to its “Afric” children, and there was just no more. So it had to watch, dying but not dead, as they packed up the remnants of their dreams and left- some to the arms of a world that they would have to pry open to take them, most to inherit another aging street and the privilege of clinging to its decay.” (191)



The women of Brewster fashion an alternative family within the restricted city space. They form 'liberating and redemptive friendships' and 'constitute an alternative world', becoming 'families of choice' ("The Fathomless Dream: Gloria Naylor's Use of the Descent Motif in *The Women of Brewster Place*"). Even though these friendships with other women might not have brought a substantial change in their lives, yet they remain a strong support system.

### Conclusion

For the black women of America in the twentieth century American city, the experience of being a woman is compounded by the reality of racism. For black lesbian women, it is even more compounded by the reality of homophobia, and by the fact that there were more Black closeted lesbians than whites. The city, for these black women becomes a hostile terrain, which does not accept the plurality and difference of women. However, black women devise their own survival strategies and negotiate the hostile terrain of the American city through their relationships with other women. Obioma Nnaemeka describes the refashioning of oppressive spaces by women.

"Restricted feminized spaces are simultaneously sites of exclusion and inclusion, oppression and solidarity, speech and silence, abuse and respect, neglect and friendship. Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves."

If the city is seen as an oppressive space, women form and fashion certain communities which are equivalent to feminized spaces. The black women in Gloria Naylor's text bond with other women, understand their differences, yet are united by certain shared interests and beliefs. It is this that lays the foundation for a 'sisterly' solidarity that sustains them in a conflicting urban space.

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