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## ***The Women of Brewster Place as a Celebration of Black Feminism***

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Gloria Naylor's first novel, 'The Women of Brewster Place' (1982), celebrates the hopes, aspirations, disappointments of the simple, middle class African American women living in a dilapidated tenement, Brewster Place. Naylor brings forth the emotional and psychological torments that these simple women undergo trying to assert themselves in a discriminatory world. Naylor presents seven African American women belonging to different ages in different seasons. Each woman has been failed by a male in life and each woman struggles to withstand the twin problem of racism and sexism. The novel wonderfully deals with the methods the women follow, to recuperate themselves from adverse circumstances and to live on. Naylor through her women, from Mattie Michael, the matriarch to Lorraine and Theresa, the lesbians, exhibits the heterogeneity of African American womanhood. Naylor in this novel celebrates African American physical and internal beauty and also provides valuable suggestions for their survival.

Gloria Naylor's first novel, "The Women of Brewster Place" was published in 1982. The novel was developed from Naylor's short story titled "Life on Beekman Place" written for Essence magazine. The story appears as 'Lucielia Louise Turner' chapter in the novel 'The Women of Brewster Place'. The novel 'The Women of Brewster Place' won The National Book Award in the category 'First novel'. It was also adapted as the 1989 miniseries 'The Women of Brewster Place' and the 1990 television show 'Brewster Place' by Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Productions. The novel acts as Naylor's mouthpiece to bring out the heterogeneity of African American culture in general and African American women in particular. The subtitle 'A novel in seven stories' reiterates this point of heterogeneity.

The novel 'The Women of Brewster Place' deals with happiness, sorrows, trials, tribulations of seven African American women covering a period of thirty years (1940 to 1970). The novel presents the lives of seven women with their unique experiences in life as Naylor states, "To talk about the black experience is to engage yourself into a vast field. It seems that a way you deal with it is by providing a variety of characters who come from different backgrounds, with different problems that illustrate individual

aspects of that experience. By bringing together these disconnected lives you try to focus on a unity.”<sup>1</sup>

All the events that happen in the novel takes place in Brewster Place described as “... a bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company.” (1) 3 ‘The Women of Brewster Place’ can be compared with Lorraine Hanesbury’s ‘Raisin in the Sun’ as both bring out the varied experiences- trials, tribulations, expectations, limitations of African American women belonging to different generations.

“Black Feminism” as defined by Pearl Cleage, is “the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities- intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic”.<sup>3</sup> Each chapter in the novel deals with a female protagonist highlighting her unique experience in dealing with the problem of racism and sexism in her attempt to maintain her individuality and dignity. Naylor names her prologue and epilogue as ‘Dawn’ and ‘Dusk’ respectively and introduces each female character in a particular season revealing her emphasis on setting.

The first vignette ‘Mattie Michael’ traces the youth, middle and upper middle age experiences of the protagonist Mattie. Mattie the only child of a strict father was brought up with utmost care and was strictly warned to never associate herself with Butch Fuller, a womanizer. Butch seduces Mattie to accompany him to the sugarcane fields promising to get her the sweetest cane. Mattie, in the prime of her youth, succumbs to the seducing charms of Butch; the hot and moist climate of Tennessee and the seductive smells of herb garden. Naylor uses olfactory images to present a wonderful picture of Mattie’s experience. Mattie leaves her home pregnant and temporarily finds solace with her childhood friend Etta Mae Johnson. Mattie’s strained relations with her exacting father and seducer Butch transforms her into a dotting mother. She showers all her love and hopes on Basil, her son. Mattie along with Basil stays with Miss Eva, a white woman, for several years. After Miss Eva’s death Mattie lives in the palatial house with her grown up son and Mattie’s blind love for her son prevents her to notice his indifferent behavior. The insecure Basil is arrested for his involvement in a brawl but abandons the trial whereby Mattie loses her home. Mattie failed by several men in her life- her exacting father, her seducer, and her son, lives on and continues to make the lives of other women in Brewster Place more meaningful. Mattie’s wisdom from previous disturbing experiences helps her to act as a matriarch to the simple women of Brewster Place. Naylor celebrates African American female beauty in her description of the women of Brewster Place. She describes her women with adjectives like “nutmeg arms, ebony legs, saffron hands, dark-chocolate, cinnamon body, etc.

Mattie’s close friend Etta Mae Johnson the ‘Untamed exotic flower’ is introduced in the spring season. Though, a close friend of Mattie, Etta differs from Mattie in several

respects. Etta has escapades with several men and continues to search a man of her dreams. In her attempt to search an ideal man she has a brief encounter with Reverend Woods, whom she meets at a Church, in spite of Mattie's warnings. Etta finally realizes that Rev. Woods is not serious about her and leaves him. Though momentarily disillusioned, she finds peace and happiness in rejoining Mattie. One finds that Mattie's bitter experience with Butch leaves her life bereft of men while Etta continues her look-out for the right man in spite of many disappointments. Throughout the novel Etta proves to be open and revolutionary in her thinking. She supports the lesbians against Sophie and does not hesitate to fight with her. She happily dances during the 'Block Party' in spite of Mattie's chiding. On the whole Etta Mae Johnson is an admirable woman who boldly faces challenges in her attempt to establish her individuality and dignity.

Naylor presents two opposing yet powerful personalities through the characters of Kiswane Browne and Mrs. Browne. Kiswane represents Pan-African ideology while her mother represents the spirit of Africanism. Kiswane changes her name and leaves her comfortable home at Linden Hills to live among the middle class women of Brewster Place. She is idealistic as she discontinues her studies and lives from hand to mouth in Brewster Place. She wishes to form a union of the simple women of Brewster Place, collect funds and file a case against the indifferent white landlord. Her intelligent, practical mother Mrs. Browne visits Kiswane and out wins Kiswane through her practical words. She states: "you constantly live in a fantasy world – always going to extremes – turning butterflies into eagles, and life isn't about that. It's accepting what it is and working from that."(85) She stands for African ideals and is not limited to peripheral things like change of a name or hairstyle. Her words, "I am alive because of the blood of proud people who never scraped or begged or apologized for what they were. They lived asking only one thing of this world-to be allowed to be. And I learned through the blood of these people that black isn't beautiful and it isn't ugly-black is! It's not kinky hair and it's not straight hair-it just is."(86), state the true African American spirit. However Kiswane brings out a momentary change in Cora Lee, the irresponsible mother, and also succeeds in unifying the women of Brewster Place to conduct a block party in order to collect funds.

Naylor chooses a cold spring morning to describe the meek and submissive Lucielia Louise Turner who ties her life with the unsteady Eugene "The last eleven months of life cling between the click of the lock and his "Yo, baby". (91) Ciel thoroughly pines her hopes on her unsteady husband and tries to find solace in her child when she states "This is the only thing I have loved without pain." (93) Naylor presents the fate of a submissive woman who meekly submits herself to the whims and fancies of her wavering husband. Ciel in her attempt to satisfy her husband undergoes an abortion, loses her dear child while trying to hold him from deserting her. Naylor brings out the black feminist approach in Ciel's character as she is presented as a weak woman

betrayed by racist and sexist tendencies in her community. Ciel's character seems to echo Civil Rights Activist Septima Clark experiences "I found all over the South that whatever the man said had to be right. They had the whole say. The woman couldn't say a thing." <sup>3</sup>(C. Brown 1986, 79) Through Ceil, Naylor brings this unique quality of black women, their ability to withstand the pangs of racism and sexism and to bounce back to life, rejuvenated. An important point that Naylor tries to drive home is the necessity for black woman to have her own identity. She seems to state that as long as black women identify themselves with their husbands and children there can be no salvation. Their self-confidence and self-identity will restore them to normalcy even after a pitfall.

The promiscuous Cora Lee is introduced to bring out the negative shades of black women. Cora Lee's obsession for new born babies leaves her with seven unmanageable kids.

"A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth, but that had been their fault for keeping her so tied up she couldn't keep the house straight. ...She still carried the scar under her left eye because of a baby's crying....Sammy and Maybelline's father had to go. Bruce's father...who went out for a carton of milk and never came back...And then only shadows –who came in the night and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark...there was no more waiting for a carton of milk and no more bruised eyes....The thing that felt good in the dark would sometimes bring new babies...shadows didn't give you fractured jaws or bruised eyes, there was no time for all that- in the dark..."pg 113, 114

These words describe the nadir of Cora Lee's personality. However Kiswane succeeds to temporarily bring Cora Lee to realize her responsibility as a mother. Naylor through Cora Lee's episode exposes the stark reality of the obsequious position of some black women and also reiterates that the solution for women's issues could be attained with the help of educated and enlightened women.

Naylor presents the lesbians Theresa and Lorraine to complete her heterogeneous presentation of African American women. Several African American authors like Audre Lorde's work 'Zami: A New Spelling of My Name'<sup>4</sup> bring out the double problem the lesbians face, one for being a woman and other for being a lesbian- they are shunned and unaccepted by both males and their own gender. Naylor in 'The Women of Brewster Place' speaks about, Lorraine and Theresa, the two lesbians of Brewster Place. Both of them are marked by different personalities and by their different attitudes towards men and matters. While Theresa accepts that she is

different from other women and does not bother to their reactions Lorraine yearns for acceptance, is disappointed and finally sexually assaulted by C.C. Baker and party.

Naylor's women are simple, with lots of emotional losses in their lives. However, they do not succumb to these tribulations and each woman holds on to a dream and continues to live. Naylor, while presenting the hapless lives of middle class black women struggling to establish their individuality in the face of racism and sexism, brings out the negative shades that black women should avoid. Naylor presents negative women characters like Sophie, Cora Lee and Elvira. Sophie involves herself in gossip and is the key factor in spreading the rumor about Theresa and Lorraine. She constantly spies them and spreads the news among other women. Elvira, wife of Ben goes to the extent of ignoring her lame daughter's pleas of sexual assault by her white employer and openly insults Ben for his incapacity. She is loud mouthed and lacks morals. Thus Naylor wonderfully succeeds in presenting the African American female experience with the positives and negative, highlighting its uniqueness.

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