

Unveiling the Multifarious Lives: Exploring Black Women's Struggles and Empowerment in Gloria Naylor's "The Women of Brewster Place"

Dr. K. SUNEETHA

Professor of English & Head of the Dept., S.V. College of Engineering , Karakambadi Rd,
Mangalam, Tirupati, A.P.India

Email Id: drsuneetha@gmail.com

Abstract:

Gloria Naylor's novel, "The Women of Brewster Place," delves into the experiences of black women in American society. Through her storytelling, Naylor sheds light on the struggles and hardships faced by these women, who endure suffering and destruction at the hands of white men. However, Naylor also emphasizes the importance of black women fighting for their own identity in America. In her work, Naylor aims to challenge racism and gender bias within a multicultural and hybrid cultural society. She seeks to promote female bonding and women's alliances, rather than perpetuating division and discrimination. Naylor's novel specifically focuses on the struggles faced by black women during the late twentieth century. This research article aims to explore various themes presented in Naylor's novel, including surrogate motherhood, black women's emancipation, and the experiences of unwed mothers facing family rejection. Naylor presents seven individual women characters, each grappling with different circumstances that conceal the complexity of black women's lives. These complexities, ranging from religious and civic involvement to passionate relationships, are unraveled throughout the narrative of "The Women of Brewster Place." By examining Naylor's novel, this research article seeks to shed light on the multifaceted nature of black women's experiences, going beyond surface-level portrayals and exploring the richness and diversity of their lives.

Key Words: women alliance, gender bias, female bonding, race, empowerment, unwed mothers,

Introduction:

Gloria Naylor's literary works serve as a poignant representation of African culture and history, particularly in relation to the experiences of black women. Through her novels, Naylor skillfully portrays the multifaceted reality of being a black woman. Judith V. Branzburg aptly acknowledges the success of Naylor's work, noting that she captures the essence of Afro-American women's lives through rich, sensuous, and rhythmic language, while also delving into the complexities of racial and sexual politics (116). Naylor's narratives do not merely dwell on the overwhelming sorrows faced by black women; rather, they provide a platform for understanding and tracing the history of race relations in America, as highlighted by Loris and Felton (1997, 1). Each black woman's memoir within Naylor's novel, "The Women of Brewster Place," contributes to the foundation of a modest yet profound structure. Naylor creates powerful and resilient female characters who offer refuge to those evicted by their families, with the protagonist, Mattie Michael, serving as the starting point for various interconnected stories involving Miss Eva, Etta Mae, and Ciel.

Furthermore, Naylor's exploration of womanhood and transvestitism adds depth to her examination of the lived experiences of black women in the United States. As Andrews, Larry R. suggests, friendships based on shared experiences of black womanhood often manifest in the form of mother-daughter relationships. Naylor's portrayal of these relationships further enriches the narrative tapestry she weaves. Gloria Naylor's literary contributions offer a profound glimpse into the realities faced by African-American women. Her ability to capture the essence of their lives, while addressing important social and historical themes, makes her work both compelling and thought-provoking.

The Dream Deferred Dawn and Dusk

In the myth of "The Women of Brewster Place," Naylor incorporates fictional methods that closely connect to Hughes' "Montage of a Dream Deferred." Hughes presents his poems as part of a whole, relating them to Lowney and John's explanation of Afro-American popular music and its progression. Similarly, Naylor develops Mattie Michael's character in "The Women of Brewster Place" through her interactions with Butch Fuller. Naylor skillfully portrays Mattie's character development from a young boy to a teenager in a single statement. Additionally, she uses the epilogues "Dawn" and "Dusk" to create a sense of self-culture within the novel. These sections represent the conceit of daylight and nocturnal, symbolizing the struggles and triumphs of black women in American hybrid culture. Naylor's use of the "Dawn" rhetorically defines the birth of the street and its significance throughout history.

The street in "The Women of Brewster Place" is depicted as an inverted world where reality is determined by the rich and powerful. Montgomery further argues that the street's birth was the result of an unscrupulous political bargain, leading to its eventual decline. Despite this, Naylor believes that the street deserves recognition and a better place in the canon of "The Women of Brewster Place," as it has been home to many ethnic people and generations.

Moving on to Mattie Michael's story, her journey from Rock Vale, Tennessee, to the city is significant in understanding Naylor's portrayal of the role a metropolitan setting plays in redefining one's place of origin. Mattie's character arc in the novel is extensive and serves as a monolithic epic. Throughout her life, she faces numerous struggles, especially before arriving at Brewster Place. One of the individuals who exploit her is Butch Fuller, the father of her son Basil. Butch is a charming, womanizing, and drunken individual.

Butch is aware of Mattie's mindset and knows that she does not want to associate with him due to his reputation. However, an unorthodox kinship develops between Mattie and Butch. Despite her reservations, Mattie allows Butch into her life, even though he is considered a "no-'count ditch hound." Butch's seemingly innocent request for a cup of water serves multiple purposes. It restores the conversation to a socially acceptable level, shifts the perception of their roles, and creates sexual tension between them.

Unfortunately, Butch takes advantage of Mattie's vulnerability and ruins her life. This highlights Mattie's susceptibility to falling into someone's trap, as she easily falls for Butch's pretense of a friendly and easygoing bond. Ultimately, Butch's actions demonstrate his selfish intentions, leaving Mattie devastated.

Naylor's "The Women of Brewster Place," Hughes' "Montage of a Dream Deferred," and the development of Mattie Michael's character and her interactions with Butch Fuller.

Family rejection and lost of identity Mattie Michael:

In the novel, Mattie Michael experiences family rejection and a loss of identity due to her actions and the strict beliefs of her father, Sam Michael. Butch, a man she becomes involved with, follows a philosophy of life called the "sugar cane theory." He compares eating cane to living life, explaining that one must know when to stop trying to extract every bit of sweetness from it, or else they will be left with coarse straw that irritates their gums and mouth.

Mattie is drawn to Butch's voice, face, and body, and eventually engages in intercourse with him on a summer afternoon. Butch and Basil represent two emotional aspects of Mattie's psyche, and although she faces invisible scars, her hidden kinship with them cannot save her from the consequences of her actions.

When Mattie's father, Sam Michael, discovers that she is pregnant without being married, he feels his power in the home dissolving. He demands to know the identity of the unborn child's father, but Mattie refuses to reveal it. This act of disobedience further deepens the rift between Mattie and her father.

The censorship of Mattie's actions by her father represents his need to maintain control and authority over her. It is an inexcusable act of ferocity that conceals the true nature of their relationship. Despite Mattie's attempts to maintain a sense of self and autonomy, she faces rejection from her family and a loss of her own identity.

Her silence stores the last sanctuary for his rage. ... Mattie's body contracted in a painful spasm each time the stick smashed down on her legs and. Back and she curled into a tight knot, trying to protect her stomach. He would repeat his question with each blow from the stick, and her continued silence caused the blows to come faster and harder. (WBP 23)

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor explores the theme of male violence and its connection to patriarchal authority. Fraser comments that the beating of the daughter by her father suggests that male violence in the novel is not driven by sexual desire but rather by attempts to exert control over Black women (98). The character of Mattie Michael, an African-American woman, experiences the consequences of patriarchal control when her abusive father evicts her from her home. This act of violence not only silences her but also strips away her sense of identity. It is indeed a vile act that highlights the oppressive nature of the paternal community she lives in.

The experiences of Black African-American women in the novel go beyond facing chauvinism and sectarianism. They also endure physical abuse, as seen in the case of Sam torturing his own daughter. This act of violence further emphasizes the destructive power of patriarchal authority. Additionally, Mattie's eviction from her house by her own father not only robs her of her voice as an ebony woman but also erases her sense of self. This loss of identity is a direct consequence of the patriarchal control exerted over her. Through these examples, Naylor sheds light on the intersectionality of oppression faced by Black women, including the violence they endure at the hands of men. The novel serves as a powerful

critique of the patriarchal authority that seeks to subject Black women to its control, highlighting the need for empowerment and solidarity within the community.

Black empowerment and female friendship:

The *Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor is a profound exploration of the lives of Black women in a patriarchal society and the obstacles they encounter. The novel sheds light on the issue of male violence, exemplified by a father's brutal beating of his daughter. This violence stems not from sexual desire but from a desire to assert patriarchal dominance over Black women.

Mattie Michael, one of the central characters, experiences the consequences of patriarchal control when her abusive father evicts her from her home. This event not only silences her but also strips away her sense of self. Despite these hardships, Mattie becomes a nurturing figure in *Brewster Place*, emphasizing the significance of sisterhood and community among Black women. She consistently supports her neighbor, Miss Eva, without expecting anything in return. This act of selflessness stands in stark contrast to the lack of support depicted in white family dramas, where such acts are almost inconceivable.

Female bonding plays a crucial role in the novel. Naylor portrays the relationships between women as enduring and steadfast, while relationships with men are often transient and unpredictable. The women of *Brewster Place* come together to help each other navigate the challenges posed by their fathers, lovers, husbands, and children. For instance, Mattie provides unwavering support to Etta Mae when she loses her will to live, showcasing the strength of their bond. These relationships serve as a source of resilience and support, enabling the women to endure the destruction and hardships they face.

Furthermore, the novel delves into lesbian relationships through the characters of Lorraine and Theresa. Their same-sex relationship challenges societal norms and exposes the discrimination and sexism experienced by the LGBTQ+ community. However, their relationship is met with hostility and ultimately ends tragically. This underscores the violence and oppression faced by marginalized communities, including the LGBTQ+ community.

Naylor's portrayal of the African-American community in *The Women of Brewster Place* is multifaceted. While she addresses the historical injustices and oppression faced by African-Americans, she also critiques the community for its own oppressive tendencies. The novel challenges the community's willingness to transform itself and confronts issues of sexual orientation. Naylor's work serves as a critique of societal norms and an exploration of female solidarity and empowerment.

Conclusion

The Women of Brewster Place delves into the experiences of Black women living in a patriarchal society and the challenges they face. Through themes of male violence, female bonding, and lesbian relationships, Gloria Naylor explores the complexities of African-American identity and the importance of solidarity among women. The novel serves as a powerful critique of societal norms and a call for transformation and empowerment within the community.

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