

Sisters and Healers in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract:

*Sisterhood and reciprocal female friendship have emerged as the interesting and culturally significant metaphors in African American literary discourse. These themes are seen reflected in the works of Tony Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and other African American women writers. It is possible to explore the cultural, political and the psychological significance of such women centered networks which stabilize to certain degree the lives and community. This paper examines Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* to see the link between sisterhood and healing as conceived by the novelist. This paper also makes an attempt to explain how female-bonding helps Black Women to overcome racial discrimination. The paper deploys the paradigms of Black cultural feminism and it unpacks the enduring images of Black sisterhood that Naylor constructs in the novel.*

Key words: Sisterhood, collective survival, female-bonding, kinship and marginalization

Sisterhood as a term has also been instrumental in mobilizing women and encouraging feminist solidarity, in the face of cultural discrepancy of women. It is a term that has to be redefined on the basis of functional duties and experiences of a woman being a Sister. The term 'Sisterhood' has also been widely used in contemporary feminist discourses and in the literature of marginalized women. In a patriarchal society,

Sisterhood also becomes an institution of operation or an agency of power. Functional sisterhood can be redefined as a relationship between two women, who are not necessarily biological sisters, for their mutual benefit they share the duties and tensions of each other.

A close reading of the novels of Gloria Naylor reveals that sisterhood and sisterly relations form a significant part of the thematic concern. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, African American women who are relegated to a dead end of the society fight back by weaving an alternative kinship relation in the form of the sisterhood. At the level of society, black sisterhood, as revealed in *The Women of Brewster Place* generates a network of kinship that fosters caring, nurturing, healing and collective survival.

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel that tells a series of stories of a group of black women, who finally find their living space, at the edge of the society, the Brewster place. The novel stands out in its life-like portraits of characters, especially, the portraits of lower class black women. These women represent the group of people who are oppressed among the oppressed – women who are oppressed and marginalized by various agencies like racism, capitalism and patriarchy. These women, who develop a kinship model for their collective survival, work along the principles of Sisterhood. In its structure and thematic concerns, the novel upholds the principles of Black Sisterhood.

The novel is developed in terms of patches of narratives, which stand for the life of each black woman, after whom it is titled as “Mattie Michael”, “Etta-Mae-Johnson”, “Kiswana-Browne”, “Lucielia Louise Turner” and “Cora Lee”. These chapters, though present separate stories of these women, also present the impact of one black woman on another. For instance, the story of Lucielia has Mattie at the hub of the narrative. By inserting the life sketch of another character

within the life-sketch of another, Naylor weaves out a quilt like narrative pattern that becomes a metaphor for sisterhood.

Further, Sisterhood becomes a survival strategy in the novel, as it enables the women of color to join hands against various forms of oppression. The first chapter of the novel is about Mattie Michael, who is finally relegated to one of the dingy apartments in Brewster Place. Her life bears the scars of oppressive abuse at the hands of her father, who starts hating her when she falls in love with Butch. Later, she is ditched by Butch and she is beaten and thrown out of the house, by her father. Her mother is rendered helpless though she feels for Mattie. In her time of trouble, Mattie is helped by a series of women, who play the roles of her sisters. Etta-Mae-Johnson and Miss Eva are such women who help Mattie emotionally and economically. Etta fills Mattie with enthusiasm and conviction, which enable her to look forward in life. Etta's act of kindness is aptly described by Naylor, "Etta left Mattie six weeks later with eight cases of condensed milk and coupon books for fifty pounds of sugar. Mattie didn't dare ask where they had come from because she knew Etta would tell her". (Naylor 1982, 27)

Mattie also faces problems of single parenthood; she has to bring up her son, Basil, all by herself. She cannot even afford a decent baby sitting as what she earns is barely sufficient for that. Later, Mattie meets Miss Eva, who extends her support to Mattie. Miss Eva uses narrative as a device to relate her experiences and also to strengthen Mattie, by indicating that women have always endured various forms of oppression. She tells Mattie about her own story, which unburdens Mattie of her own depression:

Child, I know what you talkin' about. My daddy was just like that, too. I remember the night I ran off with my first husband, who was a singer. My daddy hunted us down for three months and then drug me home and kept me locked in my room for weeks with the windows all nailed up. But soon as he let me out, Virgil came back and got me, and we was off again. (Naylor 1982: 34)

Etta Mae Johnson has a different temperament as compared to Mattie; she and Mattie take two different roads in their life and yet both end up in Brewster Place. When they meet at Brewster Place, both are shattered as they are abused by men. Yet they try to inspire each other with life and positive thinking, Etta tells Mattie: "Let's face it, Mattie. All the good men are either dead or waiting to be born." (Naylor 1982, 61) In her playful kindness Etta installs in Mattie good humor and life. Mattie also understands Etta's need to find a respectable black man. She shows the sisterly concern in Etta's personal life.

The bonding between Mattie and Etta is so perfect that they can communicate even in their silence; Naylor explains the nuances and subtle understanding in their relationship, "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". (Naylor 1982, 70)

Kiswana Browne, another inhabitant of Brewster Place also draws Mattie's sympathy. She is estranged from her mother and finds consolation in the Brewster Place community. Her mother finds it demeaning to find her daughter amidst dropouts and derelicts. Kiswana is the one who stands against the mindless pursuit of money that relegates women and children to a marginal existence. She shows that only the values of sisterhood can lead to true liberation. Barbara Christian explains how Kiswana stands for sisterhood in *Linden Hills*:

Kiswana is, in fact, the link between Naylor's first novel and her second, *Linden Hills*, in which the pursuit of money and power is a central issue. Given the nature of the power in this society, many powerless groups have experienced the ineffectiveness of sharing and nurturing communities as a means to liberation. (Christian 1990, 368)

Mattie gets more close to Lucielia Louise Turner, another battered woman, who lives in Brewster Place. Mattie is more than just a helping hand for Ciel. She often comes to Ciel's place to play with her daughter, Serena. Ciel is also comforted by the presence of Mattie and her joys and sorrows. Ciel talks to Mattie as if she is talking to herself. When Ciel loses her child, it is Mattie who brings her back to life. Mattie relieves Ciel of the guilt and agony that Ciel develops after her daughter's death. Ciel's loss is easily understood and shared by the black women in the neighborhood. One of them comes to Ciel and tells her: "Child I know how you feel, but don't do this to yourself. I lost one, too. The Lord will..." (Naylor 1982, 102) Mattie instinctively knows that Ciel is in trouble; she tries her level best to bring Ciel back to life. Naylor describes Mattie's efforts in bringing Ciel to a positive frame of mind. She holds Ciel, rocks her back to her childhood and effectively manages to cleanse her of her guilt and physical ailment. Mattie enables Ciel to connect herself to a series of myths that deal with mothers losing their children. By doing so, she connects her to the legacy of black mother's endurance – to the pain and survival of slave mothers:

She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mothers' arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on. (Naylor 1982, 103)

Mattie helps Ciel to exorcise the evilness of pain. It is through a ritual that that involves water that Mattie cleanses Ciel. She gives Ciel a ritualistic bath, which symbolizes her rebirth. Ciel couldn't have achieved this transformation without

the help of the other woman. Naylor describes this scene, which is the finest specimen of the bonding between two black women: And slowly she bathed her. She took the soap, and, using only her hands, she washed Ciel's hair and the back of her neck. She raised her arms and cleaned the armpits, soaping well the downy brown hair there. She let the soap slip between the girl's breasts, and she washed each one separately, cupping it in her hands. She took each leg and even cleaned under the toenails. Making Ciel rise and kneel in the tub, she cleaned the crack in her behind, soaped her pubic hair, and gently washed the creases in her vagina – slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn. (Naylor 1982, 104)

The Women of Brewster Place is also a tribute to the African American female community that is formed on the basis of the experiences of being black and women in a racist-capitalist society. The novel focuses on seven women who in their struggle to live in a world that has never been kind to African Americans or women, try to create a network of love for their collective survival. Though the environment of Brewster Place further complicates their lives in its impoverished, threatening neighborhood, they try to convert the place into a site of meaningful healing, interpersonal connections. Further these women, each in their own way, plays an integral role in the making of Brewster Place. At Brewster Place, they are forced to rely on each other when the world seems to shut them out. Despite their differences, these women of Brewster Place are bound by a sense of community and sisterhood that enables them to tackle the everyday pressures they face in the male dominated society. This model of connectivity and sisterhood is best exemplified in the relationship between Cora Lee and Kiswana Browne and the relationship between Mattie and Ciel.

Cora Lee faces the pressures of being a single mother. She struggles to raise her children, though she adopts the philosophy of having new babies like a girlhood longs for new dolls. She is obsessed with new babies and spends all her time

caring for the baby of the family. Once a baby becomes a toddler, she's tired of the child and she is ready for the new baby. Subsequently, she has seven children by different fathers. Her relationship with two men also fails as one of them beat her and the other men in her life are referred to as shadows, who come to her in the night and often leave before the children wake up. In Cora's mind men are simply a means to give her new babies and she lives in this fantasy world till Kiswana Browne comes to her to tell that one of her children has eaten from the thrash-can. Cora feels offended thinking that Kiswana is implying that she is a bad mother. However, Kiswana simply tries to be a good neighbor and she even invites Cora Lee to bring her kids to a black production of Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. To prove that she can be a good mother Cora accepts the offer. Kiswana, however, manages to make Cora think that her children are no longer babies. Her concern also helps Cora to realize the importance of all her children, not just the babies. Kiswana contributes by restoring Cora Lee's self-esteem both as a person and as a mother. Their relationship emerges in the novel as an example of the ability of women to be there for each other, in the times of need when men are nothing more than shadows. Cora Lee's new found sisterhood with Kiswana enables her to see the possibility of a better future.

Mattie's relationship with Ciel has a different trajectory as compared to Kiswana's relation with Cora. Unlike Kiswana and Cora, Mattie and Ciel represent two different generations. However, they rely on one another and complement each other. Mattie is very soothing with her words. She does not have to say a lot or talk too loudly to get her point across. Ciel on the other hand has a trouble in expressing what she wants to say. Her words "kept circling in such a confusing pattern before her that she couldn't seem to grab even one." (Naylor 1982, 91) She looks unto Mattie for knowledge and wisdom about how to handle situations in her life. She values Mattie's experience

and looks up to her motherly approval. And for Mattie, Ciel is like the perfect child. Compared to Basil, Mattie's son, Ciel appears to be loving and well behaved for Mattie.

Even when Ciel is an adult and struggles in her relationship with her live-in boyfriend Eugene, she wants the support of Mattie. Unlike Cora, Ciel has a dream that one day she will be able to form a real family with Eugene and their child. She also dreams that Eugene will be a wonderful husband and a loving father to their daughter Serena. Her fantasy is crushed when Eugene loses his job and feels incapable of supporting her, Serena and their unborn child. Ciel feels that she has no other option and to keep her dream alive, she aborts her unborn baby, in hopes of keeping Eugene. This experience causes her tremendous grief and eventually she becomes terribly possessive of Serena. Ciel reaches her lowest point in life, shortly after her abortion when Eugene announces that he is leaving the town, without taking her and Serena with him. While arguing with Eugene, Ciel briefly takes her eyes off Serena and Serena puts her finger into an electric socket and she dies instantly. The death of Serena and the desertion of Eugene shatter Ciel and she starts dying slowly of grief and guilt. This is when, she needs Mattie the most. Mattie's nurturing nature helps Ciel and she shows a genuine desire to protect Ciel from hurt and danger: "like a black Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young, she surged into the room, pushing the neighbor women and the others out of her way." (Naylor 1982, 103)

The magnitude of Mattie's maternal love regenerates Ciel. She rocks Ciel back to life, makes her realize the pain that she has been holding inside. By doing so, Mattie makes Ciel realize all black women share similar experiences. Mattie makes Ciel learn that they are connected deeply in their common experiences and responsibilities of being black mothers. Mattie helps Ciel to look at her life differently to realize that she has been dependent upon what her man

wanted. With Mattie's help, Ciel is able to recover and start over. Mattie also gains in this relationship by helping herself in the process. To some degree when Mattie saves Ciel, she also saves herself, and the ritual bathing that she performs on Ciel becomes a metaphor of the healing powers of the sisterly love and bonding. The relationship between Mattie and Ciel exemplifies the powerful sisterhood and a community that the women in Brewster Place share.

In '*The Women of Brewster Place*', black women find themselves in situations where they are forced to rely on each other, but they are also connected in a community by their common experiences of loss. Every woman in Brewster Place has suffered some loss. Yet Naylor's women are not just victims. In her vision of community, one woman's knowledge of pain and ability to survive can be passed on to another, just as Mattie's understanding and strength can save Ciel. Cora Lee gains the knowledge better life from Kiswana. She manages to redefine herself and her responsibilities as a mother. In each of the stories of the novel, readers can see a woman overcoming an obstacle with the help of the women around her. Together the women of Brewster Place form a network of healing relations that enable them to withstand the pressures of loss and pain that threaten to destroy their lives.

The Women of Brewster Place, appeals to the readers as a particular lesson of Black Feminism – of black sisterhood which is not only taken to heart but also deeply absorbed. The novel implies that it is perfectly natural for women to form regenerative bonds of sisterhood regardless of their involvement with men. Naylor's group of seven black women living in one housing development testifies the bonds between women that are healing and supportive. Naylor's women have their backs literally to the wall – a brick barrier that has converted the Brewster Place into a dead end. The women then stand together, fighting a hostile world with love and nourishing sisterhood. Mattie, though she herself is left

abandoned by men, becomes the anchor for other women of Brewster Place. Etta Mae Johnson gets back to Mattie when her dream of marrying a respectable black man is shattered. Similarly, Ciel looks up to Mattie, when she is left by her boyfriend. Kiswana Browne moves into Brewster Place with her ideology of sharing life with common black people. Theresa and Lorraine, who share a lesbian relationship, configure a bond that embodies the ultimate commitment of woman to woman. Naylor takes up their cause to indicate black lesbian women are further marginalized in the community of black women.

The Women of Brewster Place presents a series of earthy characters that are on the verge of breaking out into womanly magical powers. The novel has two climaxes, one of the healing and rebirth and the other one of destruction i.e. rape of Lorraine and the death of Ben. In the first, Mattie magnificently revives Ciel and this becomes a symbol of enduring sisterhood. In the second, when Lorraine is gang raped, she symbolizes a blood sacrifice proving the sisterhood of all women.

Mattie's friendship with Etta Mae, exhibits the powerful and preserving quality of female friendship. The novel proves that these two women are allied in their common struggle and are essential for each other's survival. Throughout the novel, Mattie serves as a friend and guide to Etta. When Mattie's son reaches adulthood, he gets into trouble. Mattie sacrifices even her property to bail him out of trouble. However, her son walks away from her life, and Mattie loses her house. This event causes great pain and sorrow for Mattie. She is also forced to move into Brewster Place. She nurtures others and gets nurtured by them. Especially, Mattie is supported by Etta Mae. Etta is a long time friend of Mattie. Etta is quiet unlike Mattie as she rebels against everything she does not believe in. Despite their differences, Etta and Mattie remain good friends. Though Etta leaves Mattie in search of a better life, she returns to the care and comfort of Mattie later.

Etta tries to hide her real life behind her fancy clothes and car. She is unlike other women of Brewster Place. Those who do not know her, think that Etta has everything, but Mattie knows her differently. Mattie's presence gives Etta a sense of calmness and she breathes deeply of the freedom she finds in Mattie's presence. Thus Mattie helps Etta to be true to herself. Further, both of them know that they have no secrets among them and hence, the friendship that they share is deep and real. They also complement each other. When Etta is with Mattie, she has no reason to pretend, and even if she did, it would be pointless. With Mattie, Etta is able to drop her guard and be herself, for a change. To Etta, love is like a game. She enjoys the chase and prides herself in the company of a man. For her, love is also a matter of conquest. Though she has been hurt in the past, she continues to play the game. When Etta wants to go out with Reverend Woods, Mattie knows that it is not a good idea, but she does not say a word to Etta. This indicates that there is time for silence between two good friends – a time to let go and allow people to throw themselves into the arms of destiny. Mattie recognizes that at this point, Etta does not want her unsolicited advice; she knows that being a true friend, sometimes means not doing or saying anything. Though Mattie admires Etta's skill, she knows the game better than Etta does. Reverend Woods echoes this understanding:

He marvelled at how excellently she played the game. A less alert observer might have been taken in, but his survival depended upon knowing people, knowing exactly how much to give and how little to take. It was this razor-thin instinct that had catapulted him to the head of his profession and that would keep him there. (Naylor 1982, 71)

Etta Mae realizes that Reverend Woods had used her, the way she would use men. This leaves her emotionally bankrupt and she knows that to love and to be loved by someone is extremely difficult. Then she turns to Mattie to receive love and guidance. Etta realizes once again that a man

leaves her empty. However, with Mattie's friendship she realizes that there is some hope. Naylor puts this metaphorically: "She noticed that there was light under the shade at Mattie's window." (Naylor 1982, 74) Mattie is waiting up for Etta, when she returns from her date. It is this fact that someone is waiting up for her, that brings joy for Etta. She also realizes that the love that she was searching in a man was right upstairs in the comfort of her best friend. Mattie's window provides a way back for Etta. Mattie provides the security and comfort which Etta misses out in her meaningless relationships with men. This indicates that Mattie is there for Etta, when she needs her. And, on that night she makes a difference in Etta's life.

Mattie Michael has been hurt in the past and she uses this experience as a weapon for survival. She also uses this knowledge to pass it on to other women. She tries to shatter the idealistic fantasies that Etta has built for herself. She counsels Etta about her choices and relationship. When Etta arrives at Brewster Place, she continues to play the games that she always has. But Mattie is able to see through her façade. Naylor's portrayal of the friendship gives an enduring image of female bonding. When the love between men and women fails, the friendship is still alive.

In addition to Etta Mae, Mattie has deep bonds with other women of Brewster Place. She has a special relation with Ciel. She helps Ciel to get over her guilt, pain and loss. Such relations are scattered throughout the novel and they indicate how women together can resist the pressures of time in a racist-patriarchal society.

The narrative structure of *The Women of Brewster Place*, also upholds the spirit of sisterhood by bringing together seven stories into a unified whole. Naylor indicates that black women's lives overlap like the very fabric of a quilt. Michael Awkward explains how Naylor weaves a women's community into the narrative design of the novel:

Naylor's narrative tasks are seemingly complicated by the means she chooses to demonstrate an achieved Afro-American women's community. In a novel in which unrealistic dreams are the source of much of the female character's pain, the author's depiction of the scene of female coalescence – the women's unified efforts to tear down the wall that separates Brewster Place from the rest of the city – as the grief-inspired dream of one of these characters prevents a reading of Naylor's portrait of female nexus as either an actual narrative event or a realistic possibility. (Awkward 1989, 112)

Despite living in a black ghetto, the women in Brewster Place try to cling on to their relation with other women. Awkward comments that the novel represents the collective dreams of black women. He also argues that such a dream brings black women together even when realities fail to bring to do so. He also explains how Naylor uses dream motif to create an inter-textual sisterhood by evoking earlier African American women novelists:

These dreams are evident in textual information from Etta Mae Johnson's desperate need for social respectability that "stuff[ed] up her senses" to the point that she totally misreads the intensions of a visiting minister (70) and Kiswana Browne's mother's characterization of her daughter as one who "constantly live[s] in a fantasy world – always going to extremes – turning butterflies into eagles" (85), to Mattie Michael's dream of female community that concludes the novel. Naylor's most successfully rendered depictions of the consequences of disappointed dreams occur in "Lucielia Louise Turner". This section offers not only profound insight into Naylor's precise intensions where the novel's major theme is concerned, but also the author's subtle refigurations of both Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston. (Awkward 1989, 112)

Thus sisterhood in *The Women of Brewster Place* is not just a thematic concept. Naylor uses sisterhood as a structural device in the novel; and it also becomes Naylor's strategy to connect her text to the legacy of other black women writers like

Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hursten and Alice Walker, whom she considers as black sisters. Naylor also uses intertextuality to comment her novel to the experiences of other black women novelists. She implies that sisterhood is a natural outcome of the marginalized black women's urge to survive and to lead a life of dignity. Naylor illustrates in *The Women of Brewster Place* how such a network of Afro-centric women centred relation can challenge the traditional gender and social roles. Black women are often forced to live all by themselves, without an adequate support system provided by their men. In such a situation, sisterhood becomes a reciprocal responsibility among women who cut across the barriers of age and regional differences to nurture and heal one another.

To conclude, one can say that readers will have to understand that African American sisterhood is defined not just by a location in gender or relationship but rather in sharing and understanding another person's experience. Naylor builds up a sisterhood community where the marginalized women comes together, becomes sisters, helps each other to fight out their problems and in turn heal each other's wounds by their solidarity. In this context, sisterhood becomes synonymous with sensitivity, tolerance, understanding and cooperative living.

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