

STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Literature is universal and any writer from anywhere around the world can express his or her ideas. These ideas never seem to be in isolation. Wherever human emotions are concerned and expressed in words – they are easily understandable by readers. But literature's duty and purpose are numerous. Some see literature as a moral vehicle to enlighten the conscience of the society, and others view it as simply an art. Nevertheless, literature has crossed borders in the past century; it has established itself in conveying the thoughts of the immigrants, feminists, and all sects of people.

KEYWORDS: *Alienation, Homeless, Unfulfilled dreams, Gender discrimination, Male chauvinism, Rootlessness, Loneliness, Isolation, in quietude, and loss of identity, need a bond to share. The racial, sexual and gender oppressions.*

INTRODUCTION:

The title *The Women of Brewster Place*, subtitled *A Novel in Seven Stories*, refers to the seven women whose lives are explored in the work. Each has come to live in the housing project on Brewster Place—a dead-end street in an unnamed city in the northern United States.

The Women of Brewster Place begins with a poem by Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes that asks, “What happens to a dream deferred?” The stories that follow explore the dreams of seven women and what happens when those dreams are sidetracked or shattered. While each character pursues a different dream, their quests all end up at dead-end Brewster Place. Here, they live isolated from the rest of the world by poverty and a wall. Their dreams have been derailed by racism, sexism, betrayal, unwise life choices, and violence.

Mattie Michael dreams of building her life as a single mom around her son, Basil, with the hope that he will never leave her. However, Basil ultimately betrays her, and Mattie's carefully constructed dream crumbles. Mattie's friend Etta Mae Johnson runs from racism in the South to chase the dream of finding a man who will bring her respectability and security. But she uses her body as a bargaining chip, attracting the kind of men who use her until her dream withers with time and age. Ciel Turner dreams of holding on to her common-law husband, Eugene, to provide a daddy for their daughter. An unwanted abortion and the death of her young daughter not only shatter her dream, they nearly kill her as well. Cora Lee dreams of having babies that never grow up, and is always disappointed and baffled when they do. Lorraine and Theresa's fragile dream is to live in peace without scrutiny or scorn from a homophobic society, but it ends in violence and death. Only Kiswana glimpses hope for her dream to help her people through the fundraising block party she organizes. Nevertheless, her dream to oppose the racism manifest in the neighborhood's neglect is never realized. A final deferred dream belongs to the community: the tearing down of the wall that alienates and isolates them from the rest of the world.

ALIENATION

Each woman in the novel has suffered physical, emotional, or spiritual separation from the people and places she once knew and loved, and from mainstream society. Their alienation stems from choices they have made or from the actions and misdeeds of others, and each endures associated heartache and loneliness.

Mattie's out-of-wedlock pregnancy and her father's violent reaction alienate her from her parents and force her to leave her home in Rock Vale, Tennessee. Her son's betrayal cuts her off from the hard-earned life she subsequently builds and relegates her to Brewster Place. Racism and segregation alienate Etta Mae Johnson from her home in the South. Her subsequent free-wheeling lifestyle separates her from an imagined life of security and respectability. Kiswana's radical idealism alienates her from her family, especially her mother, and brings her to Brewster Place. Here, her affluent background and college education set her apart from the people she wants to help. Death alienates Ciel Turner from everyone and everything in life she cares for. Despair and rage temporarily eliminate her will to live. While Cora Lee comes from a solid middle-class family, her unchecked pattern of having babies by nameless fathers alienates her from her relatives and any hope of a

better life. Lorraine and Theresa, as a lesbian couple, are arguably the most alienated of all. Not only are they cut off from family and society in general, but they are shunned by many in the small community they had hoped would accept them.

All these women arrive at Brewster Place alone in their alienated state. Even as members of the community, they are separated from the larger world by their poverty and isolation behind the wall. Yet, having been thrown together, their shared condition creates a sisterly bond from which most of them may draw strength, support, and some measure of love.

THE SEARCH FOR HOME

In the novel, Gloria Naylor explores the concept of home and what it means to people displaced and forced to live on the fringes of society. The literal home for the women of Brewster Place is a run-down housing unit in a badly crowded section of town. The women are isolated from the larger world, and for some, this is the last stop on long, hard journey. Yet they each harbor the belief that something better is attainable—a safe haven in which they might set down roots and realize their dreams. They yearn for the security, sense of belonging, and love that a home at its best can offer. Each woman tries, in her own way, to find or create a sense of that home; to build a physical and emotional place where she belongs.

Mattie's idea of home lives in memories of her parental dwelling and, more importantly, the home she built with Eva Turner. The remnants of the latter are the plants she brings with her to Brewster Place. They once flourished in sunlight. Now, like Mattie, they will have to fight to survive. For Etta Mae Johnson, home is an imagined future with a man who will provide her with respectability and security. However, that time and place remain elusive, while she finds love and comfort in the home of her lifelong friend, Mattie. Kiswana Browne rejects the warmth and security of her parents' home to seek one among "her people" in Brewster Place. This she hopes will become a spiritual dwelling where her true African identity and roots can emerge. Ciel Turner tries to create a physical and spiritual home around the ideal of a father-mother-child family unit. Cora Lee's vision of home has roots in the past where her carefully tended baby dolls remained infants forever. Lorraine and Theresa's ideal home is a place where they may live in peace. Finally, in Ben's damp basement rooms, Lorraine finds an emotionally safe place that permits memories of home and the father she misses.

The women's visions of home are rarely realized on Brewster Place. By the end of the novel, the street's buildings are condemned and waiting to die. Nevertheless, their walls are steeped in "odors of hope, despair, lust, and caring"—odors that once emanated from the lives of the determined women who "milled ... among its decay, trying to make it a home."

COMMUNITY OF WOMEN

The women of Brewster Place have traveled distinctive life paths, but they all end up living on this dead-end street. While sharing the experience, they come together as a community, forming bonds of love and supporting one another through life's joys and sorrows. The threads of their lives are woven into the community, and in turn, the community shapes how they live and how they will survive. It serves as a backdrop for daily life as well as a safety net when they fall.

The strength of the community resides in the women themselves. Their stories are laced with physical abuse and betrayal by men. Several women have even fled the segregated South to seek a better life in the North. In Brewster Place's dead-end setting, the women are drawn together in a mutual fight for survival. Their intertwined relationships provide a stable emotional anchor to cling to amidst life's storms. They are bound by compassion and sisterly love that stand strong despite the violence, disillusionment, and wrecked dreams they endure.

Mattie Michael is the heart of the community of women. She is mother, friend, and counselor—giving shelter to Etta, saving the life of Ciel, offering gentle advice to Cora Lee, and refusing to judge Lorraine and Theresa. However, she, like the other women, will not draw the lesbian couple into the community's protective circle. In fact, they are deliberately kept out. For these two, there is no bonding with the others and no refuge from the storms of life. The result is that Lorraine is brutalized and mistakenly murders her friend, while Theresa loses her partner and is displaced.

DISCUSSION:

Gloria Naylor is a well-known Black modern American writer hence needs no introduction. Yet the present work on her needs an introduction. I was deeply influenced by her when I read her novel *The Women of Brewster Place* which was cited by the American book award committee as the best first novel of 1982. Gloria Naylor has a talent for writing because she puts her personal life and familiar past into every story. All of her novels are linked together by referring to characters or places in separate stories. Her novels touched a deep chord in me. I endeavored to find out more about her and this thesis is the result of my pursuit.

Gloria Naylor has so far written five novels. The women of Brewster Place in 1982, it is very difficult for any researcher to cover all the aspects of any writer. So guided the recommendation of the research degree committee and being aware of our limitation we have confined ourselves to hear feministic approach in the novels. For the sake of convenience and clarity this study is divided into five chapters as summarized below

The historical account of black women writers it is divided into three sections. Section a gives the history of Afro-American literature which begins from 1414 A.D. the first age of Afro-American literature was over in 1830. Then from 1830-1895 is the Age of Abolitionists 1920-1940 was the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance. 1940-50 was the Age of Wright. 1960 the Age of Black Miltant and then onwards till 21st century there has been technology and scientific growth.

Speculates the term of feminism in *The Women of Brewster Place*. It exposes how the Afro-American women writers raised their voice against oppression, suppression and tried to compromise with the politics of Black feminist though. It presents the various reasons which influence the feminist theory. *The Women of Brewster Place* projects black women who are totally trapped by the iniquitous system. Gloria Naylor constructs a vision of gendered subordination, racial discrimination, and class-based difficulties in a way that is metonymic of the struggles many black and impoverished women face in the US. Most of the African American women writers have been preoccupied with the problem of the multiple oppression of racism-sexism-capitalism, which black women in America have undergone for years together. According to Maya Angelou, "The Black female ... is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power."¹ Naylor examines this "tripartite crossfire" in *The Women of Brewster Place*. She almost lives in her characters. Her fictional characters engage in a fierce struggle for survival in an environment of poverty and prejudice, violence and violation, and an almost crushing adversity.

It gives a brief theory of *Linden Hills*, it is in seven chapters. In the pattern of Naylor's first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, the Introduction presents the birth of Linden Hills and the following chapters are dated and named from December 19th to December 24th just a week before the day of Christmas. Naylor adopted the structure of *Linden Hills* from Dante's *Inferno*, circular in path towards the end where Luther's (also known as Lucifer) family resides. If one travels inside, one feels that the "bottom becomes the top." The lower one goes the materialistic one becomes and only the poor blacks dwell at the top of the Hill.

Bailey's Cafe is filled with life, albeit life in deep pain and it touches the readers, informs and enriches them. It serves as way stations, place to go when they are defeated, to gather the strength to re-enter their lives: "There is nothing in back of this cafe. Since the place sits right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility, the back door opens out to a void. It takes courage to turn the knob and heart to leave the steps.

American novel. Both male and female black novelists vent their emotions through the power of the word. While struggle for liberation, loss of African cultural past, servitude, pleas for emancipation were the major themes in the novels of the earlier writers, search for one's own identity, celebration of that identity, influence of black music, common bond in the form of community and sisterhood, and racial, cultural and sexual atrocities on black women are the prominent leading themes of present novelists. Major movements, wars, great personalities and National Associations have influenced the growth of this tradition.

CONCLUSION:

Black women are all the time projected as both objects and targets in the form of stereotypes in the mainstream American literatures by most of the white men and women writers. To add to this, the black men writers have contributed in their own way to this prejudiced notion of black woman. Unable to project the black women from their own point of view, they remained apathetic for the plight of black women. So it became the responsibility of the black women writers to make a valiant attempt to put in place the predicament of their race and gender in its historical experience. The "Black Woman" has carved a niche for herself in the genre of African American novel. Their sense of rootlessness, loneliness, isolation, in quietude, and loss of identity, need a bond to share. The racial, sexual and gender oppressions they encountered are all brought into focus through their writings and thus gained universal prominence. To survive and grow in those tough times, they need to rediscover then-lost selves and identities.

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