

**‘Female-centered’ Diversity: Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place***

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**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to read Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* as an expression of the heterogeneity of black women’s experiences. Published in 1982, the novel anticipates the focus on the diversity of women’s lives and the women of colour, that were to become the defining features of third-wave feminism. The text subverts the traditional notions of black identity by portraying African-American women as a diversified and divided community, even as it interrogates the very notion of blackness. Through the various lines along which the community is divided emerges a nuanced image of the black community in which blackness is an ontological category, not to be tied down to ugly, beautiful, or any other specifics.*

**Keywords: black woman, diversity, divided community, blackness, feminism**

To be female-centered, I think, is to see the world “gynecologically”, to see the world through the eyes of a woman.

-Gloria Naylor, Interview: “The Human Spirit is a Kick-Ass Thing”

Because one character couldn't be *the* Black woman in America. So I had seven different women, all in different circumstances, encompassing the complexity of our lives, the richness of our diversity, from skin color on down to religious, political and sexual preferences.

-Gloria Naylor, Interview to *Ebony* Magazine, March 1989

Gloria Naylor's debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* brought her tremendous acclaim and began her successful literary career. It explores the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality in the lives of the women of the African-American community. The novel is polyvalent in terms of narrative attention. It recounts the experiences of seven women; each woman's experience counts and each woman's story is significant. The structure of the novel suggests the diversity of black women's experiences as their interconnected lives bring out important issues of African-American womanhood. In an interview, Naylor insists,

my work is saying that the African American community is a diverse people... a community of people who are both saints and sinners, who have beauty and blemishes. I don't glorify the African American and say we're all perfect. We're all human beings and that means complexity, that means light and shadow (Naylor, Interview 257)

Mattie Michael's is the first account to be narrated. Through the course of the novel, she becomes the older woman whose presence exudes an air of wisdom and experience in Brewster Place. When Ciel tells Mattie that her daughter even knows her father's name; Mattie replies, “Better teach her *your* name” (emphasis added) (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 96). It is the black woman who is at the centre of Naylor's “female-centered” novel. In *Brewster Place*, Mattie finds a mother figure in Eva Turner. Eva fits into the tradition of matronly figures of African-American women whose wisdom is based on years of experience. She advises Mattie to make Basil sleep alone; Mattie does not pay heed only to regret much later “a void in his being that had been padded and cushioned over the years, and now that covering had grown impregnable” (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 52).

The black woman is often seen heavily investing in the mother-child relationship with an absent or estranged father. The socio-economic conditions of the African-American society are largely responsible for the black man's absence from the family and community. Consequently, motherhood is all that the black woman cares for and the child is all she has. The trope of motherhood is a central idea in the works of many African-American women writers. Mattie cannot see beyond her love for Basil and the law that convicts him is merely “blue loops, commas, and periods” for her (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 49). Cora Lee, obsessed with baby dolls since her childhood, grows up to

have many children “who had grown beyond the world of her lap” (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 112). She watches soap operas and neglects her children who live miserable life as Cora is blind to her responsibilities towards them. Kiswana attempts to make Cora acknowledge her responsibilities when she tells her, “But babies grow up” (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 120).

Etta Mae Johnson espouses freedom and her story is a search for a place. Through her seduction of the preacher Woods, she wishes to concretize the relationship into marriage. However, Woods exploits her and defeats her in her own game. Naylor exposes the hypocrisy of religious men as Woods employs the metaphor of playing cards and sexually exploits Etta. Etta realizes that she has lost the game and her search for place ends and we find her living in Brewster Place through the rest of the novel. Perhaps she finds her place within the community of black women.

The novel highlights female bonding and community ties. The sexism of black men in the novel divides the black community along the lines of gender. Mattie’s father is an authoritarian figure who embodies the patriarchal law. Lucielia Louise Turner is associated with domestic chores and motherhood; and shares a tense relationship with Eugene who is an unconcerned father. C. C. Baker and his friends ruthlessly gang-rape Lorraine and leave her to die. Naylor admitted that “in *The Women of Brewster Place* I was romanticizing the female condition a bit... the women are mostly victims who are trying to transcend a situation” (Naylor, Interview 254). There are visible crevices in the black community of Brewster Place along the lines of gender.

The female bonding, however, is far from perfect. The relationship between “The Two” lesbians – Theresa and Lorraine is described in terms of their difference from the so-called normative sexuality of the other women of the community. However there are differences in the approach of the two women towards their own sexuality – Theresa views it as the difference that alienates them from the other women while Lorraine emphasizes their similarities to other women in the community. They are different from each other despite their similar sexual orientation. Similarly, all African-American women are different and cannot be homogenized. The homophobia of Brewster Place divides the female community along the lines of sexuality. The ostracism that Theresa and Lorraine face is a symptom of the homophobia of the American society of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the women of Brewster Place can accept Lorraine only after she has been raped and her body violated by men. In the act of sexual violence, Lorraine loses her difference and becomes acceptable to the women of Brewster Place. Theresa, on the other hand, joins the women in tearing down the wall in Mattie’s dream. In reality, the women of Brewster Place cannot willingly accept the difference in sexual orientation despite being an oppressed community themselves. Writing about the homophobia of American society and its impact on the black community, Cheryl Clarke has argued that

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela E. Barnett in *Dangerous Desire: Literature of Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence Since the Sixties* analyses Lorraine’s rape in the context of the homophobia of the American society.

“Homophobia divides the black people as political allies, it cuts off political growth, stifles revolution, and perpetuates patriarchal domination” (Clarke 78). The women of Brewster Place fail to unite and are divided based on sexual orientation.

Another division in the black community surfaces as Mrs. Browne from Linden Hills comes to see her daughter Melanie in Brewster Place. Naylor’s first novel set in Brewster Place has few scattered references to Linden Hills which becomes the setting for her second novel *Linden Hills*. Barbara Christian emphasizes the importance of place and setting in Naylor’s novels.<sup>2</sup> She writes,

Perhaps Afro-American writers have been particularly interested in setting, because displacement, first from Africa and then through migration from South to North, has been so much a part of our history... Perhaps place is even more critical to Afro-American women writers. For women within the Afro-American community have functioned both inside and outside the home, have been conservers of tradition. (Christian 99)

For Melanie Browne it is important that she locate herself within the black poor and adopt a name that is reminiscent of her roots. The process of naming and naming themselves are important for Naylor. Mattie’s grandfather was hard of hearing and the people at the plantation had to call him twice to get his attention. After emancipation, a Yankee clerk of the Freedman’s Bureau put it down and he became Michael-Michael. Names are important for Melanie as markers of identity. She adopts the “African” name “Kiswana” in order to go back to her roots. Having adopted the “African” name she leaves Linden Hills to live in Brewster Place and work for the welfare of the black community. Linden Hills embodies the integrationist approach of middle-class black people while Brewster Place is presented as a squalid black neighborhood with poor living conditions. The two neighborhoods located near each other yet so different, spell out differences and diversity that characterize Naylor’s work. The class divisions between the blacks of Linden Hills and Brewster Place echo the class divide among the African-Americans. As Kiswana points out to her mother, Linden Hills is inhabited by “educated blacks with a terminal case of middle-class amnesia” (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 84-85). She calls her mother “a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black” (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 85). Kiswana has been a part of the Civil Rights Movement and has taken up the cause of her people at the grassroots level. Mrs. Browne reminds Kiswana that she has been associated with the NAACP for the last twenty-five years. Mrs. Browne represents the integrationist philosophy of the organization and believes that the black should be allowed to be what they are – “black isn’t beautiful and it isn’t ugly – black is” obliquely targeting the 1960s movement “Black is Beautiful” that encouraged straight hair and bleached skin among blacks (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 86). Kiswana is protected by her boyfriend Abshu and her own powerful class position. Through a verbal

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Christian in the essay “Gloria Naylor’s Geography: Community, Class, and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*” analyses the variety and complexity of the geographical world of Naylor’s fiction.

argument she incites Baker who retaliates by raping Lorraine. She stands out from other women of Brewster Place due to her class position. The African-American self stands divided by the barriers of class.

The women in Brewster Place struggle with the issues of class, gender and sexuality. Naylor offers no easy answer. It is only in a dream that the divisions along the lines of race, class, gender and sexuality are temporarily suspended. It is in Mattie's dream that the women appear to come together. Even Theresa joins them in the tearing down of the wall that isolated Brewster Place. It is near this wall that Lorraine was raped and Ben, who served as a handyman for the community and kept the community together, was killed. Critics have noted that Ben's predicament is suppressed to allow for the novel's "female-centered" viewpoint. Ben's effacement from the tragic scene is problematic as Naylor focuses attention only on the women of Brewster Place. The blood-stained wall becomes a symbol of the oppression of women and the bricks are relayed out of Brewster Place by the women as the men and children look upon them. In her book, *Understanding Gloria Naylor* Margaret Earley Whitt writes, "Each of Brewster's residents has a dream that has been deferred, and these dreams are referred to throughout as disappointments, life's plans and hopes dashed. But in Mattie's literal dream, all the women of Brewster Place find resolution, solace, and ultimately, vindication" (Whitt 53). But it is only a dream, not reality! The Block Party is prepared for never takes place within the purview of the novel.

*The Women of Brewster Place* begins and ends with "Dawn" and "Dusk" of Brewster Place, of how the "bastard child" came to be and how it "still waits to die". In the epilogue titled "Dusk" the death of the street is deferred. Even Mattie's dream is deferred as it awaits fulfillment and the novel awaits closure. Jill L. Matus notes, "Naylor resists a history that seeks to impose a closure on black American dreams, recording also in her deferred ending a reluctance to see 'community' as a static or finished work" (Matus 63). Brewster Place is a dead-end street inhabited by poor black people who have nowhere else to go. The tearing down of the wall never takes place in reality and Brewster Place remains cut off from the city. Its marginal position is juxtaposed with the marginality of women who inhabit it. The women of Brewster Place form a diversified and divided community and illustrate the complexity of African-American womanhood.

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