

To Tear Down the Wall—the Deferred Dream of the Black Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*

Xiaoyun Li

School of Foreign Languages
China West Normal University
E-mail: 804915019@qq.com

Correspondence:

Xiaoyun Li,
School of Foreign Languages,
China West Normal University,
No. 1 Shi Da Road, Nanchong, 637009,
Sichuan, China.

Abstract

After their shattered individual dreams, the black women in Brewster Place have recognized the value of the black sisterhood. Based on the description of the different individual dreams, this paper aims to discuss the power of the black sisterhood, though in Mattie’s deferred dream, is strong enough to tear down the wall symbolizing the racial and sexual isolation in Brewster Place.

Key Words: black sisterhood, wall, deferred dream

1. Introduction

The women in Brewster Place is the first novel written by Gloria Naylor, a black American female writer. Published in 1982, it received strong initial reviews in U.S. After winning the American Book Award for Best First Novel in 1983, it attracted the great attention of scholars and critics. The made-for-television film version brought the novel greater popular recognition.[1]

Although it has captured more attention of American scholars and critics, *The women in Brewster Place* still remains new in China. The western critical attention has often focused on discussion on the form and thematic function of the novel’s setting, the conception and presentation of the novel’s characters, the female politics underlying the novel and the relation of the novel to earlier fictions of the black American writers, especially Tony Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes* (1987), Jean Tomer’s *Cane* (1923), and Ann Petry’s *The Street*(1946). [2]

This paper aims on the discussion of the deferred dream to tear down the wall of racial and sexual isolation through the black sisterhood whose value is recognized after the shattered individual dreams. The structure of this paper includes four parts: After the introduction as the first part, the second part shows the

different dreams of the isolated women within the wall of Brewster Place; the third part discusses the spirit of unconscious and conscious black sisterhood and its power to cure the wounds of the Brewster women with broken dreams; the conclusive part turns to probe Naylor's writing purpose of this novel.

2. The different dreams of the isolated black women within the wall

The women in Brewster Place, as its subtitle *A Novel in Seven Stories* suggests, is composed of seven stories about seven black women in Brewster Place. Each story focuses on a character with a particular dream. The seven stories are framed by a prologue and epilogue, entitled "Dawn" and "Dusk". The description of Brewster Place in this prologue establishes the poverty and decay of the street. Naylor emphasizes that the street is both literally and symbolically a dead end, which is separated from the rest of the city by a tall brick wall.

Despite being isolated and poor, each female protagonist dreams. In order to emphasize the deferred dreams of the seven black women, Naylor chooses Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem". This poem presents seven questions or situations which parallel the circumstances of the seven Brewster women and their respective stories.

2.1 Mattie's broken dream to keep her son with her

Mattie's story is very simple: a single sexual encounter leads to her pregnancy, which results in expulsion from her parents' home. Consequently, she becomes a single mother in Brewster Place. Mattie's life has been influenced by three men. Butch's seduce makes her away from her former conventional life. Her refusal to name her baby's father is considered a betrayal to her father who has the power to control his daughter's life. Her disobedience causes her to lose parents' home after the violent beating by his father. The selfishness of her son Basil results in the loss of her thirty-year home given by Miss Eva. In one sentence, Mattie's life is destroyed by the three men representing three generations. From Mattie's life experience, Naylor suggests that men function as a wall of isolation of sexism which puts women into the suffering and isolated world.

Moreover, Mattie's dream focuses on her dream to keep her son Basil with her. Her absorption with Basil begins almost immediately after his birth. Despite the gentle warnings from her surrogate mother Eva and her friend Etta, Mattie insists that she has no need of the larger world because she has "everything I need right here [in Basil]"[4] Even Basil becomes an adult, Mattie continues to allow him to sleep in her bed and refuses to go out with any men. In doing so, she makes Basil become a man-child who is dependent and irresponsible. In the eyes of Basil, his mother is only his "refuge" when he meets troubles. However, Mattie persists in giving everything she can to her son and in trying to protect him from the consequences of his own behaviors. She even sacrifices her life-time home to guarantee Basil out of jail. Nevertheless, the result is Basil's departure from her into another city. Despite all her effort and sacrifice, Mattie has failed to realize her dream to keep Basil with her. Fortunately, the broken dream makes Mattie concern more about other Brewster women and finally becomes their mother and mentor.

2.2 Etta's fantasy to "shine" by attaching to any rising male stars

The second story focuses on Etta, Mattie's childhood friend. Opposite to Mattie, Etta is a childless woman who has spent her life by using her body to look for any men who can bring her respect and security. Because she believes that only by "attaching herself to any of promising rising black star" (60) can she "shine" as a woman. Recognizing that her age will not allow her to live the same life as before, she agrees to go to church with Maggie, hoping to find a "settle-minded men"(61) to marry. Ironically, what shatters

Etta's fantasy is the sexual act of Reverend Woods, the pastor of the Canaan Baptist Church. She finally realizes that men are all the same (72).

If Mattie's dream is to make her son into a man who would never leave her, Etta's dream is, similarly, to find a man to offer her self-definition and security by using her body as a bargain. The two women, who are completely opposite in almost every aspect, have experienced the same suffering of broken dreams. The shared experience explains that their race and gender are the primary factors that have led them to the dead end of Brewster Place.

2.3 Ciel's shattered dream to keep her husband

Ciel's life, like Mattie's and Etta's, is centered on a man whom she wants desperately to keep, even though he is verbally abusive and physically threatening. Ciel's man, Eugene, resembles Basil in his selfishness, especially his refusal to accept adult responsibilities. As a liar and a bully, he blames Ciel for becoming pregnant and regards the responsibility of children as an obstacle to his own advancement in life. However, despite Eugene's abusive treatment to her and his yearlong abandonment of her, Ciel continues to take him back and try her best to please him. Her naïvely believes that she can keep Eugene with her because their daughter, Serena, needs a father.

Ironically, shortly after her abortion, Eugene announces his intention of leaving. Suddenly, Ciel realizes that her child "is the only thing I [she] has ever loved without pain" (93). So she begins to focus her emotional life on her child. Unfortunately, the death of her daughter makes her lose of everything, even almost herself.

These losses establish an even stronger link between Ciel and Mattie, who has been a kind of second mother to Ciel after the death of Eva, Ciel's grandmother. It is Mattie who snatches Ciel from the despair into which she sinks after Serena's death.

2.4 Cora's funny dream to have new babies

Like Mattie's use of mothering as a way of defining herself as a woman, Cora is obsessed with having new babies. She provides excellent care for the infant, but is constantly frustrated by her other children who grow beyond infancy. Unlike Etta, or Ciel, Cora does not pursue her sense of self from her relationship with men. Her only use of men is for sexual pleasure and having new baby. Men just become "the shadows—who came in night and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark, and often left before the children awakened" (113).

Cora in effect usurps the stereotypical role of men who, like Reverend Woods, uses women (like Etta) for sexual pleasure and abandons them. In an ironic reversal of this pattern, Cora stops caring about even the names of the "shadows".

2.5 The dream of the lesbian couple to live a peaceful life

If Cora belongs to the women who want to overturn the stereotypical roles of men and women in the patriarch society, the two lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa, have taken another road to get of men in their life. They dream to live a peaceful life without men in Brewster Place. However, their dream turns unachievable and destroyed by the male violence.

The story of "The Two" concentrates on the description of the tragedy of Lorraine. The dead-end Brewster Place becomes the last stop of her young life. Kicked out of home by her father at the age of seventeen, Lorraine lives with Theresa first in San Francisco. As a pair, their relationship has been condemned and spited by other people. Hoping to live a peaceful life, the two black girls choose to live in Brewster Place, a street of black women. Nonetheless, their denied female relationship keeps them distanced

from the community of the street. The later discord within the lesbian couple results from their conflict about their relationship to the community. Theresa has no interest in the community, Lorraine, by contrast, wants to be secretary of the block association of Brewster Place. After the refusal of the community, Lorraine finds that Ben, the old janitor, is the only person to offer her friendship, because Lorraine reminds Ben of his daughter.

Unfortunately, alone on the way home from the gay club, Lorraine has been brutally raped by a gang of black boys, C.C. Baker and his friends. Ironically, Lorraine has murdered her only friend Ben in her insanity after her gang rape. The only positive male-female relationship dies in Brewster place.

Through Lorraine's tragedy, Naylor intends to establish the societal forces that have shaped C.C. Baker's gang, who try to define themselves as men according to the terms their culture itself uses. Like Lorraine's futile attempts to stop the brutal gang rape through her repeated begging with "please", the typical female way of confronting the world—begging mercy from a powerful male—is totally ineffectual in the racist patriarch world.

2.6 Kiswana's deferred dream to improve the lives of the black residents

Kiswana is the only educated young woman who has forsaken her middle class home to be with the colored people. Her choice to live in Brewster Place results from her dream to help her people improve their lives. Kiswana's story focuses on her mother's visit and their conflict. The conflict between the mother and the daughter is actually represents the typical generation one. The key symbol is their argument about the daughter's new name "Kiswana", which she has taken to emphasize her African roots. However, by taking an African name, Kiswana has rejected her mother's choice in naming her "Melanie", which is taken to honor her grandmother. Grandma Melanie was a great woman "who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for "not knowing his place" (86). When Kiswana drops the name Melanie, she loses a meaning that would fit her strong ethnic identity, as Wangloo does when she has given up her name "Dee" in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use for Your Grandma". In one sentence, Kiswana need not seek to prove that she has roots by taking a new African name because she has roots, a history and a name with a proud lineage.

Before her encounter her mother, Kiswana had little sense of the realities of the Brewster residents although she had a genuine interest in helping them. Kiswana's encountering with her mother changes her fanciful daydreams and makes her know how to better help the black people in Brewster place. We can see later that Kiswana organizes a neighborhood group to protest the living conditions in the apartments in a six-floor apartment, Kiswana can easily see outside *over* the wall. She is the most likely to bring the hope to unite the black sisters to break down the wall.

3. Black sisterhood—the deferred dream to break down the walls

3.1 The wall—a symbol of racial and sexual isolation

As mention in the beginning, the brick wall in Brewster Place isolates its black residents from the out-world and makes Brewster Place a dead-end street. The erection of the wall is passed by the legislature "in order to control traffic" and avoid being "offended by the pungent smells of strong cheeses and smoked meats hung in the local shops." (2) Brewster has experienced the effect of racism in American city. It has never become home to the white people. Instead, it was home first to "dark haired and mellow skinned Mediterranean" (2), then it becomes the permanent home to the suffering black women. Most of Brewster men flee away and the few left are ego-crippled by racism as to be unable to love. Like Eugene, they abandon the women to double burdens of work and domestic life without any help. Some of them addict

themselves to drinking like Ben. Some, like C.C. Baker, try to seek their male identity in the racist world in an abnormal way—brutal raping the women of their same race. Therefore, the black women in Brewster become the victims of both race and sex. The brick wall in Brewster Place naturally functions as a symbol of the racial and sexual isolation. In the condition of the isolation and suffering with the wall, the black sisterhood is not only a cure to the wounds of the black women, but also becomes a political necessity in the racist society.

3.2 Black sisterhood—the power to tear down the wall

Black sisterhood refers the friendship and love among black women. The special bond can exist between black women even of different generations. It “derives its power from women’s previous sense of isolation, from their mistreatment by men, from their regenerative discovery, through suffering of saving grace of shared experience.”[5] The black sisterhood shows the spirit and power of mothering and nurturing each other. Naylor’s exploration of the black sisterhood is clearly seen in her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, which is entirely centered on black women.

The black sisterhood in Brewster Place is evident in the friendship based on the shared experience of black womanhood. It exists either in form of mother-daughter relationship or sisterly friendship, the former is usually unconscious, which is passed down from generation to generation. In the meanwhile, the later turns to be conscious. Mattie and Kiswana are two representatives of the two types of black sisterhood.

Mattie, the dominant character in Brewster Place, serves as matriarch, surrogate, mother and mentor to the other Brewster women. After Mattie’s ejection from her parents’ home, Miss Eva, an old black woman, offers her a home as well as every possible help. After Eva’s death, Mattie recognizes the value of the gift Eva had bestowed in providing her spiritual and material home. The black sisterhood has been unconsciously passed down from Eva to Mattie, who offers the same mothering to Ciel, Eva’s granddaughter.

The black sisterhood becomes an effective medicine to cure the wounds of the black woman in Brewster Place. The best example is Ciel’s story, which plays the structural and thematic center of the novel. The power of the black sisterhood is evidently emphasized in the final part of the story. It is Mattie’s mothering that saves Ciel from the despair into which she sinks after the death of her daughter. Mattie’s rocking and cleansing of Ciel constitutes not only the emotional origin of the novel but also its emotional center as well. The comfort and the ritual cleansing that Mattie gives Ciel symbolize what all the black women need. The power that can soothe Ciel’s pain and bring her back from the desperation can be found in the “huge ebony arms” (103) in which Mattie enfolds her. Mattie’s huge ebony arms symbolize the nurturance and love the black women can give each other—the love that Miss Eva gives Mattie, the same love that Mattie offers Ciel and Etta; the love that Mrs. Browne gives her daughter Kiswana and the same love that Kiswana offers to Cora. Unlike the sisterhood deriving from the mutual sufferings, the mother-daughter relationship that becomes sisterhood emerges from their mutual understanding, especially the daughter’s discovery of her mother’s female identity. Kiswana is “healed” in her conflict with her mother by coming to identify herself with her mother as a woman. It is the consciousness of the reestablished bond of women over generation that makes Kiswana begin a productive life in organizing rent protest among Brewster women and returning to school. It is also the consciousness of the black sisterhood that enables Kiswana to bring sisterly nurture to Cora, who loses her balance in her mothering. Kiswana’s act of friendship and her offer to help contributes to restoring Cora’s self-esteem both as a person as a mother. With Kiswana’s sisterly nurturance, Cora determines to focus her new mothering energy on her children’s education.

The strength of the black sisterhood is clearly explained in “The Block Party”, the last story of the novel. This story presents a celebration in which the various Brewster women are united. Most of narrative in the

story consists of Mattie's cataclysmic dream of the women joining together to destroy the wall against which Lorraine has been raped and Ben murdered. In the description of the dream, Naylor deliberately creates narrative ambiguity, which makes "many readers fail, in their first reading of the novel, fail to recognize it as a dream"[6]. Both before and within the dream, the women of Brewster Place have been united in a new way by Lorraine's rape and subsequent insanity. They are perhaps aware of that what has happened to Lorraine will happen to them if not united. Mattie's dream suggests that the new black sisterhood is powerful enough to tear down symbolizing the barriers of racism and sexism that circumscribe women's lives.

4. Conclusion

Gloria Naylor, through her *The Women of Brewster Place*, has broken up "the novelistic tradition of centering a single protagonist" [7]. She makes the seven black women become "the foreground figures" [8] and focuses on the special bonds between black women instead of their female relationship with men. Naylor bestows the seven Brewster women with various characters and different ages. "Like an ebony phoenix, each, in her own time and with her own season, had a story."(5) Despite their different individual dreams, all the Brewster women have experienced the same suffering of the broken dreams. Their shattered dreams explain that their race and their different gender are primary factors that have led them to the dead end of Brewster Place, as suggested in the novel by their proximity to the wall. Yet, only after their broken dreams can they aware of the value of the love and friendship among the black women. The spirit of black sisterhood is inherited from generation to generation and it is valuable and powerful.

The black sisterhood mainly derives from the shared sufferings of racism and sexism. It can not effectively cure the wounds of the black women but also enables them to nurture each. The deep bond is perhaps superior to any other relationship with men in the distorted world of black gender relationship. The black sisterhood, as in Mattie's dream in the "Block Party" organized by Kiswana, is powerful enough to unite the black women to tear down the wall which symbolizes the isolation of racism and sexism. Although the Brewster women will grow old and die, their black sisterhood, like the ebony phoenix, will never be destructive. Naylor's mixture description of Mattie's dream and reality indicates her firm belief that Mattie's dream of the collective force in Brewster Place will come true.

Notes:

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. & Appaiah, K. A. eds., *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspective Past and Present*. New York: Amistad Press, Inc. 1993, p.21.
2. For the discussion of the relation of the novel to *The Bluest Eyes* and *Cane*, see Michael Awkward, *Inspiring Influences: Tradition, revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp.97-134; for the connection to *The Street*, see James Robert Saunders, "The Ornamentation of Old Ideas: Gloria Naylor's First Three novels," *Hollins Critic* 27, no.2 (April 1990): pp.1-11.
3. Margaret Earley Whitt: *Understanding Gloria Naylor*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999, p.12.
4. Gloria Naylor. *The Women of Brewster Place: A Novel in Seven Stories*. New York: Viking Press, 1982, p.26. All the further references to the text are from this edition and appear in parentheses.
5. Larry R Andrews. "Black Sisterhood in *Gloria Naylor's Novels*". *CLA Journal*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, September, 1989, p. 1.
6. Vignola C Fowler. *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary*. New York: Twayne Publisher, 1996, p.54.

7. Michael Awkward. *Inspiring Influences: Tradition, revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, p.126.
8. Annie Gottlieb. "Women Together", *New York Times Book Review*, 22 August, 1982, p.11.

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7. Hairston, Loyle. "A Review of *The Women of Brewster Place*". *Freedomways*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1983, pp. 282-85.
8. Jones, Robert: "A Place in the Suburbs". *Commonweal*, Vol. CXII, No. 9, May 3, 1985, pp. 283-85.
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