

# The Theme of Homelessness in Afro-American writings: The Quest of the Home in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* appeared when the Harlem renaissance and Afro-Americanism had been established as mainstream genres. The novel portrays the deprived and Coloured sections of society. The residents of Brewster Place represent the lower class; primarily Black women who have come to Brewster Place in search of peace. They are constantly searching for home, both as a literal place to live and as a metaphorical state of mind. They share their struggles and make efforts to live in unity with compassion and consideration. They stick to Brewster Place as they find none to help out in the world. They narrate stories of narrow escapes from unfriendly and soul-destroying forces of their past. The novel also symbolises the failure of the American Dream, as characters weave dreams of macabre, dark and dismal visions; nightmares which any American would hate to come across in life. There are also instances of fractured relationships that further signify the characters' quests to find home in a bewildering urban environment.

**Key words:** *Afro-American, ethnicity, racism, fractured relationship, American Dream.*

## Introduction

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel full of macabre visions and dark and dismal portrayals of characters. The characters in the novel are those women who belong to a small Black community. They belong to different spheres of life but care for one another and live lives of sisterhood (Whitt, 1999; Procházková, 2012; Fetters, 2016; Bharati, 2008). They are shown trapped in a society full of discrimination and greediness. They fight against

these traps, learn about humaneness, care and attention, and crave empowerment (Collins,2000). *The Women of Brewster Place* also identifies with the pain and suffering of women who have been broken and separated on grounds of race and sex (Amoloku, 2019). Mowatt & Bryanna 2014; Melancon, 2014). Women like Mattie, Cora Lee and Luciela are at Brewster Place because they have no other place to go. They have reached the end of the road. For Mattie, her search for a home other than the one in which she was raised takes her from a rundown apartment in the city to a wonderful home in which she raises her child, and finally, to Brewster. Their miserable lives have all reached this dead-end because of their racial and sexual identity. Brewster place is separated from the rest of the city by a tall, brick wall. The avenue becomes a womb in which the people look after one another and search for methods of endurance.

Gloria Naylor's novels usually contain portions of her own life and ancestral parts in the common forms of places, names and stories. Her characters and places are linked with each other in all her novels. As revealed in her interviews, readers find her novels to reflect an ethical and spiritual emotional responsibility to society (Naylor and Morrison, 1985; Naylor, 2004; Goldstein, 1983). She is great at creating the corrupt imaginary worlds in which her characters have to find some kind of a shelter to be secure. Naylor portrays the depressed conditions of her characters step by step. Mattie, a protagonist, suffers from the hurting of rape and unwanted pregnancy. It is unlucky that her own community's man rapes her and her father treats her roughly. At last, Mattie leaves her family and goes to live out of Brewster Place. Mattie's great courage motivates Etta to gain confidence in facing darker times. Out of the seven characters in the novel, only Etta apparently rejects the White's order and enacts her female heroism against male chauvinism. Etta is also a case of rape prey. She was entirely tricked by Reverend Moreland Wood, who very shrewdly confused her and spoiled her virginity. After destruction, she comes to Mattie, and Mattie responds as a true friend. Kiswana is another example of female heroism in the novel. It is due to her heroism that she deliberately rejects her own name ('Melanie') and adopts an African name ('Kiswana'). She continually faces her mother's dissatisfaction, but in spite of it, she does things that yield her a kind of recognition in Black society.

The novel illustrates how *The Women of Brewster Place* tolerate and experience the domination of Black and White people. These people are like a vigorous and strong wall of Brewster Place standing against all kinds of dominance. They succeed in constructing a new Black community that becomes sturdy, powerful, confident and strong-minded among White society. Within this new community and relationships, the people of Brewster Place can live with their own requirements and endurance with respect. They make their own rules and laws and stand by them all. Nobody can challenge and disgrace them.

This study illustrates how Brewster Place becomes a symbol of dehumanisation where the quest for a blissful home, the craving to have a harmonious relationship and living the American Dream are all agonised, distorting the view of life (Gowthami, 2017; Chassot, 2018; David & Clive, 2007). However, the seven women characters come out of this suffering and try to live their life in their individual ways. The breathing place, as a ‘dead-end-street’, becomes a painful and dictatorial place for the seven characters of Naylor. The wall of control in Brewster Place always separates Blacks from the White community, so to eliminate the separation between Whites and Blacks, the women devastate and breach the wall of Brewster Place, a show of female empowerment (Chowdhury, 2006; Vijayalakshmi & Mekala, 2018). The wall is the dismal, main sign of lower quality life and partiality towards Coloured people. By means of breaking the wall, the women’s first efforts initiate progress, but the process is not completed. With all these efforts, it is unknown whether Gloria Naylor succeeds in developing a sense of belongingness in the minds of her characters (Fraser, 1993; Chassot, 2018; David & Clive, 2007).

### **Problem Statement**

This research study is an attempt to decipher the problem of homelessness as it emerges for each resident of Brewster Place. These residents are constantly searching for home, both as a literal place to live and as a metaphorical state of mind. The journey from one home to another is repeated for every character in the novel. They have migrated to Brewster Place from their parents’ homes in the south, from the Mediterranean, from the middle-class suburbs in the city, and from more secure lives and homes. Regardless of where they come from, they have ended up there, and they have chosen, or been forced, to call it home. Migration, in addition to being a central theme of the novel, is also a central theme in Afro-American history. From the slave migration to the north prior to the Civil War, to the Great Migration of millions of Afro-Americans following the post-World War II industrial boom, the idea of escaping to the north has always held hope and promise of a better future. Just as important as any physical location is the security and comfort attached to the idea of home.

This study investigates the issue of the migration of Black women, which Naylor presents not as an issue of fulfillment of a dream but the culmination of a long, frustrating life (Kundhavi, 2007; Hooks, 2014; Koolish, 2004). For instance, Mattie loses her home and ends up in Brewster Place, while Etta arrives after a series of failed relationships. This offers Etta a form of security and comfort she has long lived without. It offers Kiswana the opportunity to live out her ideals, and it offers Mattie the opportunity to become a surrogate mother to a host of women. The problems unearthed in each character are that in their search for a home, what ultimately defines the idea of “home” is not the condition of the walls but the strength of the relationships within those walls. For instance, Ben comes to Brewster Place after being abandoned by his wife and daughter, while Lorraine and Theresa are forced out of their more



comfortable middle-class existence because of their sexuality. Despite the frustrations and difficulties of life in Brewster Place, it brings all of its residents hope. A light is left on all night, a late-night conversation brings comfort, and many of those searching for meaning find some version of it here. Gloria Naylor has attempted to offer a resolution to this problem, but it is short-lived.

## Literature Review

An alarming number of people both nationally and internationally experience homelessness. While there are many different reasons people become homeless, statistics and logic indicate that poverty is the leading factor contributing to homelessness (Wesely, 2009). Another reason for homelessness is sexual victimisation involving being a female of a low socioeconomic status, coming from a single-parent home, and being non-White. These factors increase the risk of being sexually assaulted (Kennedy, Bybee, Kulkarni, & Gretchen, 2013). Race may also play a more significant role for African American women. Research has indicated that African Americans or Native Americans are more likely to include women forced into having sexual contact (Kennedy et al., 2013; Rajput, 2019; Melancon, 2014). Not only can a history of sexual victimisation increase the risk of becoming homeless, but when interwoven with homelessness, it may increase the likelihood of experiencing sexual assault or physical abuse in future (Dickson-Carr, 2005; Valli, 2017).

Naylor, in her novel, seems to address to the fact that women who are homeless and live on the streets are more likely to be victims of sexual victimisation and physical abuse. Prostitution and selling sexual services may become a means for survival when a woman is homeless and living on the street. Turning to prostitution is a “high risk survival option” for a homeless woman (Wesely, 2009). When one takes into consideration women’s subordinate roles in society, particularly societies in which women are often victims of violence, women’s decision to sell sex in order to survive are strongly embedded with the dominant narrative (Wesely, 2009).

Gloria Naylor, like many other female, Afro–American writers, has been the focus of study among research scholars. Several theses and articles have been written on this writer. Self-identity, protest, violence, motherhood, sisterhood, Black feminism, racism, slavery, portrayal of the Afro-American community, women’s quests, violence, ethnicity and self-recuperation have been the themes of most research (Ranveer, 1995; Bagwari, 2008; Gholampour, 2007; Rajathi & Shanmuga Devi, 2019; Sonal & Singh, 2018). In amassing such literary popularity, Gloria Naylor appears as an influential Afro-American writer. Even though Naylor exists in the same category of other writers and shares a few of their emotional responses, she deviates and shows differences from other writers in different ways. It is true

that Alice Walker and Toni Morrison were the great inspirations for Naylor, however, her uniqueness in writing exposes a distinction in her sensibility (Naylor and Morrison, 1985).

In praise of Gloria Naylor, the Detroit Free Press states: “Naylor’s prose makes readers want to shout for joy about the power of love and the strength of language...Naylor is a master at creating an emotionally charged page-turner.” Bagwari (2008), in her unpublished thesis, finds protest as a weapon to assert one’s identity and to attain dignity. According to the author, protest is an effective tool to generate change. It also highlights the plight of the exploited. The author has registered her voice as follows: “Protest is respected, celebrated, and analysed as a source of inspiration because it is essential for survival.” In the concluding chapter, Bagwari (2008) clearly explains that Naylor, as a successful contemporary female Afro-American writer, has multi-dimensional representations of males and females that brought her appreciation to the publication of *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Gholampour (2007) also analyses the journey of Black women’s empowerment. Their study reveals how Naylor knowledgeably conveys the causes of racism and gender relations regarding the female Black identity. Naylor’s demonstrative journey of Willa in Linden Hills took her to the past and to the life of other oppressed people like her. This journey gives Willa self-confidence and results in self-actualisation. To construct such a creative communal identity, Naylor finds the independent African-American society within the governing White society to provide a chance for her female characters to get development in the absence of racist oppression.

### **Research Methodology**

In this study, Gloria Naylor’s novel *The Women of Brewster Place* was analysed by using qualitative and descriptive methods. The study adopted a close reading technique and a socio-cultural and humanitarian approach to understand the ethnic and sexual discrimination among the Afro-Americans, particularly in migrated communities. The close reading technique gave the opportunity to question the text, whereas the socio-cultural and humanitarian approach and ethnic considerations of the themes offered investigation of the clash of communities based on race, colour and sex. The objective was to investigate the interactions between culturally distinct communities, the element of victimisation of one at the hand of the other, and how such victimisation or discrimination led to issues including that of homelessness. This approach helped the researcher to study how African women are subjected to sexual annihilation and humiliation to the extent that a few of them revolted while others silently succumbed to pressures.

## Findings and Discussion

### *The Failure of the American Dream*

The seven women characters are forced to come to Brewster Place as they find no other options in their lives. They come to Brewster Place after their personal tragedies. Soon they become neighbours, then close friends, and finally sisters. Brewster Place becomes a miniature American Dream (or the world of a Black community). Their knowledge becomes part of the experience of the Black community. While these women see the American dream together, they also jointly share the bitterness of the same dream turning into a nightmare for each of them.

The novel begins with Langston Hughes's poetic line: “What happens to a dream deferred?” (Naylor, 1985: 1) The prologue is Langston Hughes' celebrated Harlem from his mixture of a “Dream Deferred”. The poem reveals a direct warning of the dangerous impact waving through the group of people. The American Dream continues to be held beyond the reach of Afro-Americans. According to Naylor, this place is “the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company” (Naylor, 1985: 1). The American dreams of Brewster’s residents make them lead their lives in spite of their hardships.

The dreams bond them together and give a background of sharing. Sigmund Freud’s theory of dreams proposes that various stimuli of our daily lives force us to respond with dreams during our sleep at night. But the daily routine of our lives makes us wake up in the morning. This theory is beautifully handled by Naylor in this novel, where she visualises the fulfillment of the dream in every character; redeeming themselves from the inequality they suffer in American society.

The shattering of dreams starts with Etta being engaged in illegal relationships. When she decides to move back to Brewster Place to meet Mattie (to rebuild her dream of reunion with her adopted daughter, Etta, who was growing old), she finds the American dream turning into a nightmare. In her younger days, she had considered that marriage could be a permanent solution, and she started to hunt for a suitable person. But soon she understood that there could be no everlasting relationship with men of her choice. She became attracted to Reverend Morelands Woods, a Black preacher, when Mattie took her to church. She started dreaming of marrying him and settling down respectably and wealthily. She dreamt of him becoming her personal saviour, who would deliver her from the sins of her past and guide her to a superior place. But after living with him, she understood that it was all just a dream. After that, she decided that she should not permit her courage to be broken.

Reverend Moreland had destroyed her dream, but after facing that dishonesty, Etta understood her reality and started her life. Like Mattie, Etta is always outplayed by the person with whom she is concerned. When she returns to Brewster Place, she has lost her happiness, bravery and self-belief, but still there is someone waiting for her. This person is none other than Mattie, her best friend, who always eases Etta Mae. It seems Etta's dreams are delayed but not yet destroyed. The American dream is alive but only for individuals.

However, in the American dream perspective, Etta Mae Johnson's story emphasises chauvinist domination that women sometimes suffer even at the hands of their lovers. She now again dreams of a guy who can shift her from Brewster Place for betterment, but she is totally frustrated by the dream each time when the man irritates her. Every time She... "laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps towards the light and the love and the comfort that awaited ....But just as the pigeon she watches, fails to ascend gracefully and instead lands on a fire escape "in awkward, frantic movements (Naylor, 1985: 74 - 75). On another occasion in the novel, when Mrs. Browne visited her daughter, Kiswana's apartment on Brewster Place, it culminates that their relationship marks another American dream being created. Mrs. Browne tells her daughter, "You don't have to sell out, as you say, and work for some corporation, but you could [dream to] become an assembly woman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighbourhood. That way, you could really help the community" (Naylor, 1985: 84).

Despite her particular individual problems, Kiswana Browne, another character, is depicted as "a dreamy woman-child of Black middle class," and a doubtful young African American innovative, functions as a religious leader in this novel. She tries to get them interested in taking delight in themselves, their inheritance and their society. But Kiswana's dreams of a revolution will be put down by the discouraging actuality of Brewster Place and the awkward, worried actions of the people who are hectic and are merely trying to endure. However, Kiswana has a sense of dreaming about the functions of power because she has come from a place named Linden Hills which focused on money and power. Started by her dreams, Melanie Browne of Linden Hills, thus changes her name to Kiswana and goes down to dwell with "the inhabitants" in Brewster place, dream of living a life like that of "the Whites."

The story of Lucielia and Eugene creates yet another story of a shattered American dream. During one of the revisits of Eugene, Lucielia once again becomes pregnant but he compels her to abort the child. Eugene becomes upset and exasperatedly shouts: "What the hell we gonna feed it when it gets here, huh-air? With two kids and you on my back, I ain't never gonna have nothin. 'Nothin', do you hear me, nothin!" (Naylor, 1985: 95). This outburst of the Dream shattered clearly shows Eugene's dissatisfaction due to monetary predicaments, though he is not careless but looking to overload himself without economy, and he shouts at



Lucielia and again chooses to move away. But Lucielia begs Eugene to stay as her partner and as her daughter's father, helplessly trying to stop her dream to vanish away. She strives hard to stop Eugene to move away but all her actions go in vain. He yells upon Lucielia that, "I lost my job today, he shot at her, as if she been the cause" (Naylor, 1985: 94). The joblessness of the American Blacks was another issue that Naylor has inadvertently related here and it gets linked with the failure of the American Dream for the common man (Smethurst, 2011; Martin, 2012).

The failure of the American dream that underlies the plot of this novel also indicates the suffering that Black men and women felt by discrimination and economic devastation. Finally, Eugene compels Lucielia's submission to his authority. At one instance, Lucielia left the suitcase go before he jerked it away. "She looked at Eugene, and the poison of reality began to spread through her body like gangrene. It drew his scent out of her nostrils and scraped the veil from her eyes and he stood before her just as he really was – a tall, skinny Black man with arrogance and selfishness twisting his mouth into a strange shape" (Naylor, 1985: 100) Lucielia Louise Turner who had dreamt of love, from her boyfriend, daughter and unborn child, but her dream shattered with unwanted abortion, death of her daughter, and the rejection by her boyfriend cruelly marking the failure of the American Dream.

### ***Fractured Relationships***

The seven female residents of Brewster Place are strung together in relationships with people, since they live on a dead-end street and they share the general destiny. What Naylor suggests in the fractured relationship that each of these seven characters would try to weave around themselves. The story of a fractured relationship begins with Mattie's father who had warned her daughter about Butch: "...a no'-count ditch hound, and no decent woman would be seen talkin' to him" (Naylor, 1985: 9). Mattie commits fault and conceives a baby, the beginning of an illegitimate relationship. The father is distressed to see her daughter's disobedience. His relationship with his wife, Mrs. Michael, is also very harsh, since she has a soft spot for her only daughter Mattie. This signifies the aspect of the difference of outlook in every individual regarding the problems of childbearing and beginnings of relationships.

The negative approach of her father makes Mattie worn out. She works hard to promote her son Basil and gives the best to him expecting nothing in return. Basil goes to college and easily falls into a bad friendship and fails to think about his mother Mattie's hardships in nurturing him. One day, Basil commits a murder and goes to jail. To get him out of jail, Mattie sells her house, which belonged to Miss Eva Turner, who was very supportive to Mattie in her hardship and tragedy. After her death, the rights of the house come to Mattie. After this dreadful incident, Basil runs away leaving Mattie alone. Being detached and

depressed, she thinks, "...there just wasn't enough life left for her to do it all again" (Naylor, 1985: 7).

Violence and sexual abuse are at the hands of both White and Coloured (Black) men. Loving fathers beat their lovable daughters ridiculously and send them out of the house. Naylor has exposed the different faces of male characters, such as a heartless father, an abandoned lover and a useless son in Mattie's story. At the same time, Etta extends an illegal relationship with different men in different places and environments. This is so even though she discards sexual advances of certain Whites as well as Blacks. While running from one place to another, she happily makes some physical contact with different men. At last she decides to move back to Brewster Place to meet Mattie. Etta is growing old and so she needs to settle down.

Mattie and her son are protected by Miss Eva, who receives her as a daughter. This is a curious relationship, despite the disunion in familial relationships. She turns into a mother to Mattie, Basil, and her own granddaughter. She connects them into a family in the ruined city location. The immigrant discovers a secure space in Miss Eva and her home. She acts as the "predecessor". Miss Eva grasps the tenderness of life even after the prettiness and enthusiasm of youth have passed. Mattie recognises Miss Eva as a substitute mother. After thirty years, Mattie gets ready to take Miss Eva's place. She considers the messages the substitute mother taught her, and also takes over the duty of protecting the weak women. However, Mattie has no house or family of her own.

The novel also portrays the husband-wife relationship. It regards the suffering from worry between Black men and women caused by discrimination and economic devastation. This is expressed by a quote: "I'm fucking sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you are good for..." (Naylor, 1985: 94). Finally, Ciel realises that Eugene is totally selfish and self-centred. Hence, she decides to deliver a baby and gives up a plan of abortion. During their argument, baby Serena goes near an electric socket and gets electrocuted, which is the beginning of the fractured husband-wife relationship.

In another relationship, Mrs. Browne relates to Kiswana as personal evidence of a mother's love. Kiswana trusts that she can have some outcome in this kind of society. They have no money, only a relationship that exists between the two as humans and as Blacks. "Kiswana no doubt believes herself the epitome of radicalism until she listens to her mother's theatrical recounting of her proud heritage and commitment to the Black cause. Suddenly, she comes to understand and appreciate the source of her own dynamism, idealism, and dedication to her mother" as noted by Ebele Eko (Naylor, 1985: 145).

The novel ends with the “Dusk”. Brewster Place has been condemned and deserted in the end, as Naylor states. But the Coloured daughter of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wakes up with dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they’re diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear (Naylor, 1985: 192).

A patriarchal society is the model in this novel. Patriarchal communities may not directly allow domestic cruelty, but they are rarely framed to stop it from incidence. When order is endangered or broken down in a patriarchal society, women are usually the first to be punished. Sticking badly onto the shreds of their self-esteem, some men give way to their baser character. However, it must be noted that there is a marked difference between the varieties of patriarchy experienced in Brewster Place. In the African American tradition, as revealed in *The Women of Brewster Place*, the women imagine more than their men. They strive to accomplish their roles as thoughtful wives and good mothers as signs to grasp their rights expecting monetary support and emotional loyalty from their partners.

However, some women in the African American society command respect and receive it, even from the most unwilling men. For example, Eugene even resents her, and in his anger, he is vulgar to her, but he does not dare refuse her doorway into his residence. It may even be against his force, but he has a firm respect for her. Writing as she did in the early 1980s, Naylor consciously "bent over backwards not to have a negative message come through about the men" ( Naylor and Morrison, 1985). When Sam Michael beats his daughter, he is still painted in shades of grey, and he is still a character one could pity. His anger is awoken by his dejected feelings of disloyalty in his love of his daughter. "Sam Michael looked at it, saw it was his daughter, and he dropped the stick and wept" (Naylor, 1985: 24).

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this study is also to prove Naylor’s artistic excellence despite the trauma she felt when she was subjected to ethnic discrimination and failure to be recognised as a mainstream writer. With the help of a contemporary and historical approach, this study attempts to highlight the struggles and anxieties of Gloria Naylor and how she rose to be an important Black American writer in the post-colonial era.

Brewster Place is full of colour, as seen in the clothes the children wear on a summer afternoon and the colour of its residents. Despite being a home to several homeless people, Naylor describes Brewster Place as “ruined” and unable to offer protection. The sky may be grey and the walls “ashen,” but the residents of Brewster Place are full of life, vibrant, and rich. Characters are described in a spectrum of shades and experiences peculiar to African American culture. There is a diversity of experiences evident not only in the lives of the



characters but in the characters' own concepts of home and their points of view about Brewster Place.

The setting of the novel is the wall of Brewster Place. It is a dead-end street and is also a symbol of triple jeopardy that is being continually faced by Black women. The novel has seven short stories. Each story focuses on different female characters that experience and accept disputes in male dominated scenarios where the males torture and disgrace women by various means. However, these women accept the disgrace with courage and strength of mind. They will not live happily always, but they live on. They survive by developing and maintaining enthusiasm, dedication and flexibility. The victory of Brewster Place as a home for all women is a discreet one, a victory which lies not in conquering marvellous odds but in organising to endure them.

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