

Interpersonal Conflict in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract: Conflict in a piece of literature doesn't always involve people swinging axes or firing weapons, but it does explain or describe the way characters interact with each other, themselves, or their environments. *The Women of Brewster Place* defines the black experience and illustrates the strength of friendship among women, never once suggesting that often-accepted view that women cannot be friends to other women. Men are shown as base.

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Conflict is a struggle between two or more forces that create a tension that must be resolved. Conflict is important to literature because it provides the basic materials for the construction of the plot. Without conflict nothing would happen, the conflict within a piece may be central to the author's view of life or the point he or she is trying to make. A conflict results in heated arguments, physical abuses and definitely loss of peace and harmony. Man and woman relationship is subject to conflict. In our day to day life, we can see the fight between father and daughter, brother and sister, husband and wife and lovers. In *Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor brings out the fact that women face some disheartening circumstances that are usually caused by men, who are seen generally as malign forces. Throughout the book Gloria Naylor portrays male as causing the adverse condition of women. Naylor narrates the story through the stories of the women characters in her novel. The stories are woven in such a way that each woman character is subject to suffering because of her relation with men and she gets peace and solace with the company of other woman. Mattie Michael was a pleasant, God-fearing church going woman with moral strengths who without the support of other women might not have survived. At the age of twenty three Mattie Michael was seduced by Butcher Fuller, a hand some young nigger. When she became pregnant, her father beat her to reveal her unborn child's father. Mattie knew very well that if she reveals Fuller's name, for sure her father will kill him and her father would be behind the bars. Mattie loved her father and knew his great love towards her, so she moved from home in RockVale, Tennessee to North Carolina, where her friend Etta Mae Johnson took her in. Butch, when he impregnated her, he not only destroyed her relationship with her father but also changed the course of her life, possibly for the worse. After Mattie's son was born, Etta Mae moved on to a different place in search of good fortune. She also invited Mattie to come with her so that she could also search for a wealthy man, but Mattie suggested that her son

was her only property and she didn't like any one to comment on his parentage in future. Mattie feels that her life is bound to bring the child, "This child would tie her to that past and future as inextricably as it was now tied to her every heartbeat." (25)

This passage makes us to understand that Mattie loves Basil as a person, who is going to erase the pain that she undergone in her past and he would be the person to fill her future with happiness. Naylor brings the story in such a way that a man in any way position i.e. a father or brother or son will leave the woman and he won't be able to give support to a woman all the time. Mattie found it very difficult to survive in that place because she didn't find enough time to spend with her baby and most of her salary amount was spent for the baby-sitter. Mattie started working over time in order to bare the expenses but her heart broke into pieces when her son Basil called the baby sitter as 'mama'. She decided the place has become unlivable because of rats (a rat bit Basil in his lips when he was asleep) and moved to another place where Miss Eva helped her. Miss Eva allowed Mattie to stay with her and her granddaughter Ciel. After several years, Miss Eva died, Ciel's parents came for her, and Mattie was left with the responsibility for paying mortgage and raising her son Basil. Miss Eva always said that Mattie was too indulgent and protective of Basil, but Mattie would not listen. When Basil grew up, he made a fight in barroom and accidentally killed a man. He allowed his mother to put up her, now mortgage free home as bond for his bail. He was not ready to face the slim possibility of going to prison, through conviction was unlikely. His lack of moral fiber was apparent. He skipped the town and disappeared. Mattie, homeless again found a home through Etta Mae in Brewster place. Each time, a woman helps Mattie to survive. Her mother rescues her from her father savage beating by firing a shot gun close enough to his head to get his attention. Etta Mae gives her sanctuary so Mattie can have her child. Miss Eva gave her a house when the one she lived had become unlivable because of rats. The men in her life gave little or nothing. Etta Mae used men all her life and apparently asked no more from them than she wanted. She was a kind of floating concubine for most of her adult life, learning at an early age in Tennessee that her sexual charms attracted men who were willing to pay. When she reached the age where, as she said to Mattie, "each year there's a new line (on her face) to cover" and her body "cries for just a little more rest", she decided that it was time to find a good man, marry and settle down. When Mattie gave an idea of getting job Etta said,

"A job what? come on, Mattie, what kind of experience I got? Six months here, three there. I ought find me a good man and settle down to live quiet in my old age." (61)

Naylor narrates that the basic need for a woman is love and support. Most of the women struggle hard to live a peace life but the men characters in the novel tries to use them for pleasure. Etta is tired of moving with guys, she now feels to avoid all sorts of enjoyments and she likes to settle in life with a good man. She thought Reverend Mr. Moreland Woods was right for her. He seemed "well-off", with his "manicured hands and a diamond pinkie ring" but he turned out to be a

hypocritical opportunist, he knew that Etta Mae was a “worldly” woman whom he could use and discard with no fear of entanglement. Etta Mae finally understood that her friendship with Mattie might be the only abiding relationship left to her. Through Etta's character Naylor justify the statement that men long for pleasure and he won't be in a position to support her at hard times whereas woman needs love, affection and support from men but she can get it only from another woman. Ciel, Mattie's young friend (Miss Eva's granddaughter) dating back to their days in North Carolina married Eugene and had a baby girl, Serena. When Ciel was pregnant a second time Eugene felt trapped. He lost his job and blamed Ciel for all his trouble. He was a whiner and an emotional abuse who took flight whenever the going was tough. Ciel, out of love for him, abort the baby which depressed her and caused her to be unhealthily focused on Serena. Ciel ultimately realized that he was worthless when he complained that her love for him just 'ain't good enough' to compensate for the life he was being forced to live as husband, father and provider. Ciel then saw him at last as a “tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness” whom she knew that she would soon grow to hate. The day Eugene decided to leave, ostensibly to take an out-of-town job, Serena was accidentally and fatally electrocuted when she struck a fork into an electrical outlet. Ciel nearly died of despair, but Mattie helped to pull her out of her painful despondency.

Lorraine and Theresa moved to Brewster place when their lesbianism was suspected at their former residence. Lorraine, a first-grade teacher was afraid of losing her job if her sexual orientation became known. The people of Brewster place, especially a self-righteous busy body named Sophie, began to suspect that the two women were lesbians and some of them began to ostracize them. Sophie comments on the two to Mattie

What they doin'-livin' there like that-is wrong, and you know it.” She turned to appeal to Mattie. “Now, you a Christian woman. The Good Book say that them things is an abomination against the Lord. We shouldn't be havin' that here on Brewster and the association should do something about it. (140)

Mattie's view towards others life is of great generosity, she is ready to show motherly affection to any woman in Brewster place but at the same time she is not willing to find faults with their personal life and trouble them. Lorraine has a run-in with one of the areas thugs, C.C. Baker, who called her a freak. Lorraine maintained a father-daughter relationship with Ben, the Jaanitor, who saw in her the same qualities as were in his long-lost daughter. One night, Baker and his gang trapped Lorraine in an alley and raped her. Brutalized she lay in the alley, unseen and unheard, all night. The next morning Ben, nearly drunk, took his usual early morning seat on a garbage can in the alley Lorraine, deranged from her brutalization, attacked him with a brick and killed him whereas she never knew what she did. Ben is the kindest male figure and he is emotionally crippled and morally bankrupt as revealed in the story of his spineless passivity regarding his daughter's adversity. He is kind and supportive to Lorraine and for his trouble he is killed by her, a woman with whom he has a father-daughter relationship. The only relationships that work out

consistently in the novel are those among women. Naylor brings out her great love towards women through Mattie's character, while talking with Etta she mentioned,

"But I've loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man." Mattie was pondering. "And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did". (141)

Gloria Naylor portrays women as survivors who must deal with the damage done to them by men. Usually the men are those with whom the women have a close relationship. Gloria Naylor moves a step forward and says that men are the most dangerous species in existence. Naylor also makes the reader to see that there are two sides in most of her male characters, for instance, even though Mattie's father rejects her, he loves her. But for a man like that - an old man, a hard man who is demanding obedience, it is not possible for him to accept disobedience. To him, love equals obedience so, when he beats Mattie, he is beating out the disobedience. Naylor is balancing the man and the woman relationship, she also brings out the generous side of the male character but even such generosity doesn't favour the female. As a father he might have thought about the pain that his much beloved daughter is going to face in future but he beats his daughter and sends her out. From that time onwards Mattie's life has changed and she has to face many fire ordeal to survive in the male dominated society, finally she shares the pain of other women and console them with care and affection. Each woman character gets love and affection from another woman in the novel for the trouble caused by male. *The Women of Brewster Place* defines the black experience and illustrates the strength of friendship among women. Many accept that women cannot make friends among women as they are long lasting; on the contrary, Naylor proves that women characters of this novel give fillip to other women.

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