

The Parent- Child Relationships in *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract—Gloria Naylor is one of the outstanding African American black female writers. Her novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel in seven stories about the human survival, the collective support or independence and the issue of racism. Parent- child relationships is also a point the novel focuses on. Some parents overprotect their children so that their children do not support their parents as their parents are old. Several parent- child relationships in the novel have great impact on how to deal with relationships between parents and children in reality. We can draw a conclusion that over protection and overindulgence are extremely bad for children's development.

Index Terms—*The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor, parent- child relationship.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gloria Naylor is one of the outstanding African American black female writers. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and Naylor can be regarded as the Holy Trinity of African American female literature. In her lifetime, she created several fictions and many other articles and essays. In her works, Naylor gave an intense and vivid depiction of many social issues, including poverty, racism, homophobia, discrimination against women, and the social stratification of African Americans. She had wanted to be a writer from the time she was twelve or thirteen years old. But whether that was going to be a probable goal for her didn't come up as an issue for her until her college years. She received her B.A. in English from Brooklyn College in 1981 and her M.A. in Afro-American Studies from Yale University in 1983.

As an older student at Brooklyn College, she had discovered black women writers like Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Discovering all of their work led her to believe that she could also add her own voice. She said that having those role models around her helped when I began to feel that she could be a writer. In fact she dedicated *The Women of Brewster Place* to Rick Pearce, a white male teacher for nurturing and helping her to shape her dream.

Published in 1982 and winning the National Book Award for first fiction in 1983, *The Women of Brewster Place* is one of the great novels of Naylor Gloria. The novel organizes around the lives of seven women, all of whom live on Brewster Place. Each chapter, or story, is devoted to detailing the circumstances of one of the women' lives,

Mattie who was lured to rape, pregnancy and away from home, Etta who wanted to find a man who stayed with, Kiswana, a political activist who lived with her people to fight for equality and a better community, Ciel who lost her daughter and was abandoned by her husband because of her poverty and unemployment, Cora Lee who only considered her children as dolls and discarded them after boredom, Lorraine and Theresa who were isolated from others because of homosexuality. Naylor's intent is not to present all the different possible types or situations of Afro-American women, but to present a range that illustrates the difference in detail but the sameness in effect.

In the novel, there are many relationships between parents and children, like between Sam and Mattie, Mattie and Basil and so on. Because parents want for their children to enjoy a life better than the one they have endured in the face of racism and economic oppression, they often overindulge their children or overprotect them.

II. PARENT- CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

In the modern society, the issue about the parent-child relationship is heated. In the male- dominated society, a child must obey his/her father. As a daughter, her future and her sexuality are in the control of her father. In the story of Mattie, her father, Sam, loved Mattie very much. When Mattie had a week of blinding scarlet fever, Sam had not ignored his farm and insisted on sitting by her bed everyday until Mattie opened her eyes. Even he had gotten the white doctor from town to make that long trip to the house for her. However, Sam knew Mattie was pregnancy and refused to name her baby's father, being disappointed and furious with his daughter and considering the pregnancy dishonor and shame. Sam yanked her face and picked up a broom to beat her body. A week later, Mattie left her parents' house in Rock Vale. It is because Sam needed Mattie's "unquestioning obedience" that Mattie rebelled and betrayed him. Sam overprotected Matter so that Mattie yielded to curiosity of being a willing sex partner for Butch, seduced by his language and looks, although Sam had ever warned her Butch was a hound. Butch told her many tales of the happenings in the places that were too foreign to her, and even could read Mattie's thoughts. Mattie thought "Butch had a laugh like the edges of an April sunset." Sam sacrificed for the betterment of Mattie, but his efforts went away.

The same as Mattie, Lorraine and Eva are girls under the patriarchal society. As Lorraine was seventeen years old, her father kicked her out of the house, because he found a letter from one of her girlfriends. She did not lie to him about what it meant, so she was told to get out of house and left behind everything he had ever brought her. Therefore, she walked

out of his house with nothing only the clothed on her body. Later she worked in a bakery at night and put herself through college. She would send a birthday card to him every year, but he always returned them unopened. Although she did not write the address, maybe he burn them.

Eva had the same plight as Lorraine. Eva ran off with her first husband, a singer. Her father hunted them down for three months and then drugged her home, even kept her locked in her room for weeks with the windows all nailed up. However, soon as her father let her out, her first husband, Virgil, came back and got her, and they were off again. They joined the Vaudeville circuit and went on stage. Her father did not speak to her for years because of this, but she could not stay away from her husband. Because of out of the control of the sexuality, not only Lorraine's father but Eva's father regarded it as a betray of him.

The same as Sam Michael, Mattie overprotected her son, Basil. There's no doubt that Mattie gave him enough care and love. Mattie found a job in a book bindery and spent her lunch break in seeing her baby. When a rat bit Basil's chin and lip, screaming because of confusion and pain, Mattie sat up all night and decided to go looking for another place to live. In Mattie's heart, Basil had always been a child, who she slept with in a bed and was always in need of her. The counselors said Basil was an irresponsible young man, however, Mattie did not think so. After Basil grew up, he ran school to school and job to job, and Mattie was his eternal refuge. When people around him reflected Basil being an indifferent person, Mattie was still proud of her son, because he always sought help to her in the face of difficulties. However, it's noticed that in their large house, only Mattie stayed alone, and that even no one helped her upstairs and downstairs. As Basil was held for involuntary manslaughter and assaulted a peace officer, Mattie did not wear the socks even and rushed from the house. Although she was shivering with coldness, she was anxious for not being able to appear in time when Basil needed her. Mattie posts bail after offering up her house as collateral. Basil was anticipating the evasion of the trial and the escape on the same day. In fact, what Mattie has done for him gave rise to irresponsible Basil, unable to bear the consequences for his own mistakes and face the difficulties in his life. Mattie's selfless dedication and overindulgence led to Basil as an immature and irresponsible adult man.

In another parent- child relationship, it is not the same as the relationships mentioned before. Parents were unable to protect their child well, and even hurt their child on purpose. Ben and his wife worked as a sharecropper. Their daughter was crippled so that she could not go to work in the fields. Therefore, her mother forced her to clean the house for a white man, Mr. Clyde, a land owner. As she related to Ben and Elvira that she was being molested, Ben tried to protect this abuse, but Elvira retaliated by questioning Ben's manhood. Therefore, his daughter was forced to have sexual relations with Mr. Clyde. Although Ben was angry with his wife Elvira, even wanted to kill her, he finally turned to alcohol as a way of tolerating the sexual abuse of his daughter. In this relationship, Ben did not take his responsibility well and protect his daughter from sexual abuse.

A spoiled child will be destroyed by her/his parents. Cora Lee was an easy child to please. She asked for only one thing each other, and although her parents supplied her over the years with the blocks, bicycles, books and games they felt necessary for a growing child, she spent all of her time with her dolls. Later her parents realized that Cora Lee was old enough, if she played with dolls, so they bought expensive foreign figurines with porcelain faces and so on. The next week they found the dolls under her bed with the heads smashed in and arms twisted out of their sockets. They caressed and soothed her by giving her cheaper and cheaper baby dolls. Her parents hoped her to go to play like other children, but her father thought if he was going to deny Cora Lee the one thing that made her happy. Out of his guilty and bewilderment he spent more money on her at that Christmas present. When her father finally refused to give the 13- year-old girl any more dolls, Cora Lee turned to sex, which for her is enjoying "the thing that felt good in the dark." After her mother belatedly warned her that she must not engage in sex "because her body can now make babies and she was not old enough to be a mother,"[1] Cora Lee began to use the real babies to please her as a means of gaining her enjoyment of baby dolls. She had babies "for the sole pleasure of having babies." [2] When her babies were not infants any longer, she would not take care of them.

Qualified parents are good examples for their children. Kiswana and her mother Mrs Browne had generational differences with abundant references to the civil rights movement and the growing popularity of reclaiming African roots. Kiswana refused her original name Melanie, while Mrs Browne criticized that it was strange that she could forget a name she answered to for twenty three years; Kiswana dropped out of university to find a job, while her mother told her she was sitting here moping and day dreaming; Kiswana wanted to live with those people at Brewster Place, while her mother wanted to distance these people from herself and from her daughter; Kiswana wanted to form an organization to work for black people in the community, while Mrs Browne undertone that Kiswana did not have to live in a slum to be concerned about social conditions. In their discussion, Mrs Browne was mature and articulate, while Kiswana was young and idealistic. However, as Kiswana found her mother's toenails were painted and her father encouraged her mother to do that she changed her mind suddenly and stared at "the woman she had been and was to become."

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, there are also many relationships between surrogate parents and children, like the relationship between Eva and Mattie, between Mattie and Etta, between Mattie and Ciel and between Ben and Lorraine. Eva was a surrogate mother of Mattie, whom Eva helped alter her and her son's destinies. As Mattie was determined to look for another place to live because of a rat's biting Basil's face, she did countless attempts, but failed. The reasons why she was refused were that she did not have her husband but only a baby. She knew that there was no need in wasting her time and energy in the white neighborhoods and that she kept away from some manicured black neighborhoods. She was tired because of not only the aching feet but Basil's growing heavy as the evening approached. During her lingering around the block, an old white opened

her door and invited her to enter the room. Eva was very kind to “get that boy out the night air.” Eva also considered Mattie must be hungry and went to the kitchen to heat and stir the food. From then on, Eva took care of Basil and Mattie, not only providing Basil with the toys, but offering free accommodation to Mattie. Sometimes, Eva would lead up to a suggestion for Mattie of how to take care of her son. For example, Mattie could not keep Basil running away from things that hurt him and should teach him how to go through the bad and good of whatever comes. However, every time Mattie would get snippy, just because Eva minded her business. “Miss Eva unfolded her own life and secret exploits to Mattie, and Mattie found herself talking about things that she had buried within her.”[3] The young black woman and the old white woman acted just like a mother and a daughter. Like a mother, Eva talked about which it’s not natural for a young woman to live with no man, only with a child. Eva thought Mattie should have her own life, not get her hands full raising her son. However, Mattie was always defensive even if she had felt the need for filling and caressing of inner spaces. After Miss Eva passed away, Mattie descended upon the beautiful house. Mattie learned Eva had wanted her spirit to remain in the house through the memory of someone who was able to love it as she had. From above on, we can find that Eva performed like a mother to be concerned about Mattie and that Mattie performed like a daughter to try her best to keep the house.

Under the influence of her surrogate mother, Miss Eva, she acted like a community mother at Brewster Place. Ciel was the granddaughter of Miss Eva, growing up with Basil. Ciel was just like Mattie’s daughter. Ciel’s husband Eugene refused to accept adult responsibilities like Basil, selfish and oblivious to the needs around him. Ciel still took him back and tried to please him despite Eugene’s treatment of her and his yearlong abandonment of her. She always convinced Mattie that it was the new job and their daughter Serena that took him back into her life. As Eugene abandoned her again and they argued with it, their daughter stuck a fork into an electrical socket, screaming from the kitchen and electrocuted. After Eugene’s abandonment and Serena’s death, Ciel stopped eating and drinking water unless forced to; her hair uncombed and her body unbathed. As Mattie entered in the room, Ciel opened her eyes fully to look at the woman, worse than lifeless and death. Mattie desperate to protect Ciel, “like a black Brahman cow,” and rocked Ciel’s body back and forth without a break. Finally Ciel moaned. Propelled by the moaning sound, Mattie rocked her out of the room, underneath the sun. After constant rocking, the bile began to rise in Ciel’s stomach and Mattie rushed her to the toilet, following by Ciel’s retching phlegm, which exorcised the pain. Later Mattie gave Ciel the ritual cleansing. Mattie drew a tub of hot water, slowly bathing Ciel’s hair, the back of her neck, her armpits, breasts and legs, even cleaning under the toenails. The ritual bathing means a newborn of Ciel. After the ritual bathing, Ciel began to cry, the tears dripping down to her stomach and onto her hair. With this her pain was given vent to absolutely. That Mattie snatched Ciel from the despair and gave her comfort was resemblance to what a mother could do for her child.

Etta is the same as Ciel, abandoned by lovers. Etta was not only unwilling to play by the rules, but her spirit challenged the right of the game to exist. Therefore, Etta spent her teenage years in constant trouble. Rutherford County was not ready for Etta’s independence, so she left Rock Vale. She went to Memphis, Detroit, Chicago, and even to New York one after another. However, Etta discovered that “America was not ready for her yet- not in 1937.”[4] As Mattie asked her why she did not get a regular job, she had to worry about her ultimate fate. She must find a place to settle down, a job to earn money and a good man to live with. Mattie had a suggestion for Etta of meeting with her, because there were a few “settle- minded men” in her church and she could go and see. Etta met a magnificent man, the minister in the church. Because of the tone of his skin and the fullness around his jawline, Etta thought he was well- off even before she got close enough to see the manicured hands and diamond pinkie ring. After the song and prayer, Etta maneuvered Mattie to the front of the church and into introducing her to Reverend Woods. As a matter of fact, Woods also noticed Etta from the moment she entered the church. He was fascinated by the girl “like a bright red bird.” Mattie took Etta to greet Reverend Woods, and Woods beamed down on Etta and purposely held her hand a fraction longer than usual. They opened the conversation with Wood’s work, so Woods planned to escort Etta home if Etta wanted to discuss with him. Mattie advised Etta to patent the speed and that Etta should find a man who was serious about settling down with her, and that Etta should see what he’s got in his mind. However, Etta firmly considered herself as the wife of a big preacher. Mattie suddenly felt helplessness, so she went home. Once Etta realized that Reverend Woods was no different from the countless other men, she knew without looking the cheap hotel.[5] Although Etta’s experience with Reverend Woods was familiar its impact on her is devastating. When Etta got to the block, she noticed there was a light under the shade at Mattie’s window. She heard the records that Mattie was playing. She knew someone was waiting for her, and “the love and comfort awaited her.”[6]

Lorraine and Theresa were lesbians, but they had different characters. Lorraine was soft and wanted to be accepted by the community, while Theresa did not care for others’ thought. As they were monitored by Sophie, finding some intimate behaviors, Sophie told it to everyone in The Brewster Place Block Association in Kiswana’s apartment. Lorraine left the apartment and Ben showed her his concern and love. He took Lorraine to his home. He pulled out a chair to be able to take the weight off of her shaky knees, made tea for her. And then they talked about Lorraine’s father and Ben’s daughter. Ben liked her because she reminded him his daughter. After the conversation with Ben, Lorraine began to change. Theresa sensed a firmness in her spirit that had not been there before.[7] She said more whether the subject was the evening news or bus schedules or the proper way to hem a dress. Lorraine did not defer to her any longer. She would not apologize for seeing things differently from Theresa. As Lorraine was raped by C.C. Baker and his friends, Ben asked her with concern what happened to her. Ben performed like a father to be concerned about Lorraine.

Eleven pairs of parent-child relationships are mentioned above. The contrast to how parents treat their children and

how children treat their parents is shown clearly in the Table I.

TABLE I THE CONTRAST TO HOW PARENTS TREAT TO CHILDREN AND HOW CHILDREN TREAT PARENTS

	How parents treat their children	How children treat their parents
Sam-Mattie	Sit by her bed as she was ill; beat her as she was pregnant	Leave her father
Lorraine-her father	Kick her out of his house; not receive her any presents	Send birthday card to her father
Eva-her father	Keep her lock in her room; not speak to her	Be off with her husband
Mattie-Basil	Look for another house; do much more jobs; offer up her house as collateral	Ran school to school, job to job; not take care of his mother; let his mother lose her house
Ben-his daughter	Not protect his daughter sexual abuse; forget her by drinking	Leave his house
Cora Lee-her parents	Buy the dolls for her constantly	Not deal with her parents
Kiswana-Mrs. Browne	Persuade her daughter how to help black people	Listen to her mother's advice
Eva-Mattie	Tell her how to raise a child; share her house with Mattie	Preserve Eva's house after her death
Mattie-Etta	Heal her soul	Help with each other
Mattie-Ciel	Heal her soul	Help with each other
Ben-Lorraine	Help her build her confidence	Let Ben remember his daughter; accompany with him

From the above form, we can know in these relationships, there are natural parent-child relationships, and also surrogate parents. That some parents overprotect

their children is a terrible action to the child. In the modern society, we should notice it.

III. CONCLUSION

From above on the relationships between parents and children, we can know it's important for children to how their parents educate them. nowadays that children are the focus of families, shouldering the hope of their parents. Parents arrange everything for their children and spare no effort to pave the way for their success. As a consequence, children become so reliant on their parents that they have no independent thought or creative ideas. Such a situation is of great concern. In my opinion, over protection and overindulgence are extremely bad for children's development. Instead of doing everything for them, parents should encourage their children to overcome difficulties and inspire them to develop by themselves. Only in this way can they grow up to be independent and become truly successful.

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