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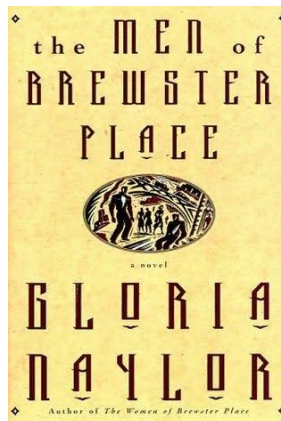
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## Resurrection of Ben in *The Men of Brewster Place*

Sadia Tabasum, M.A., M.Phil.

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### Abstract

Naylor here has resurrected Ben in the novel *The Men of Brewster Place*. Ben comes from beyond the grave as the Greek chorus; he sees it all and comes as close as one can to understand

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the men, women of Brewster place. In her debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor has given importance only to the women and men that have been presented as trouble makers. But in *The Men of Brewster Place*, almost all the men characters reappear and Naylor has given them a chance to repent for their deeds. In this remarkable work, she brings their voices to life with her *characteristic* grace, technique and compassion.

**KEY WORDS:** Frustration, racism, oppression and repentance.

### **Introduction**

Gloria Naylor was born on January 25th, 1950, in New York City, the daughter of Roosevelt Naylor, a transit Worker and Alberta Mc Alpine Naylor, a telephone operator in New York. Naylor's interest in literature was generated at an early age; she wrote poems at a very early age and began drafting a novel at sixteen. At Brooklyn College she happened to read Toni Morrison's inaugural novel, *The Bluest Eye*, an experience that both introduced her to the world of African American literature and provided assistance for her own writing, and she proceeded to write, with an advance from her publisher for *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982).

### **Relationship between Women**

In *The Women of Brewster Place* Naylor explores the relationships between women and gives us an insight into what makes them successful. Here she focuses on seven women, struggling to survive in a world that has never been kind to African-Americans, especially towards women. The men here have been given much less importance and the reasons for their actions and behavior have not been revealed. Naylor revisits the lives of these men, while gifting society with another heart-warming novel, *The Men of Brewster place* (1998), written fifteen years after the publication of her best-selling novel *The Women of Brewster Place*.

### **Voices to Life**

In this remarkable work, Gloria brings their voices to life with her characteristic grace, technique and compassion. We shall specifically concentrate on the character called Ben because he has been resurrected, and rises from beyond the grave, as the Greek chorus; he sees it all and comes as close as one can to understand the men, and women of Brewster place. Hence, his

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return completes the geographical location of her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, which was completely dedicated to women. And now Naylor has taken up *The Men of Brewster Place* with the previous memories recalling the “colored daughters”. And here Ben is the narrator of the text; it is he who unifies the whole novel. He is the male parallel to Mattie, and here both of them will share their part of disappointments and tragedy.

### **Focus on the Character of Ben**

In this paper we shall see the character of Ben in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place*. He is the first African American to live in Brewster Place and he is the most consistent figure in the community, almost all the time drunk. Ben’s life, like the life of many of the women of Brewster place, has been steeped in loss. Abandoned by both his wife and daughter, Ben has settled in Brewster Place. However, Ben is actually an incredibly compassionate man whose death proves to be a great loss to the community. Before dying Ben was able to at least temporarily play the role of father to Lorraine, and he offers Lorraine both comfort and sanctuary. In doing so, Ben is trying to right a wrong that has plagued him for quite a while, from the time, when Ben and his former wife Elvira worked as sharecroppers in rural Tennessee, along with their slightly crippled daughter. On weekends the daughter did house work for the land owner Mr. Clyde, who insisted that she should stay overnight. Later, his daughter tells him that she is being molested and Ben the father tries to question Mr. Clyde about the accusation. Elvira doesn’t allow him to do so, angrily criticizing Ben for believing the daughter, and for not providing the family with better circumstances. Ben is being split in two, on one side his wife’s shrewish ways, and on the other his daughter being molested, and Ben begins to drink heavily.

### **Lorraine and Ben**

Therefore, Ben extends his helping hand to Lorraine, who reminds him of his helpless daughter. Consequently, he informs Lorraine that she is welcome to visit him any time. Unfortunately, one night Lorraine decides to go to night club without Theresa; later, as she returns to the Brewster neighborhood, Lorraine is attacked by C.C Baker and his companions, finally raped and left in the alley to die. The next morning, Ben who goes near the alley sees

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Lorraine sprawled on the ground, with blood all over her. Lorraine, being completely disoriented, attacks Ben with a brick, ultimately causing his death.

And now we shall move on to *The Men of Brewster Place* and see what it tells us about Ben, who is being resurrected to provide the reason for the misbehavior of the male characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* and there are other characters too who appear for the first time. The first chapter is about “Ben” - here we get to know Ben’s journey from childhood to his present sixty-eight year old life; he gives us details of his family history, especially that of his grandfather. He was raised by his Grandma and Grandpa Jones. Ben grew up hearing much about their young lives during slavery, and he watched as his grandfather turned into a silent and bitter man. As the days pass, Ben discovers the reason for his grandfather’s anger. When the old man was twelve years old, his sister is raped by the plantation overseer. The boy is sent to get the doctor, but by the time the doctor arrives, his sister has died. He is terribly shocked and cries “No, No” at his sister’s funeral, his own mother slaps him and admonishes him to be quiet and act like a man.

### **Heart-ache and Frustration**

So this is what Ben has experienced in his life, heart-ache and frustration. The thing that the black man learns is that, to be a man one needs to be strong and silent, to suppress weakness and not raise voice against the oppression and the oppressor, but to be a silent spectator. And much of Ben’s pain stems not only from the fact that the majority of the people ignore or repress his manhood, but also from the realization that though much has changed for black men to move on and claim their dignity, unfortunately, many black men have not risen up to the challenge and their lives seem not to have changed since the days of slavery.

This is what Ben has experienced in his life - he could not save his daughter from the clutches of Mr. Clyde, and so the only thing he could do was to, “be quiet and act like a man”, instead of defending his daughter’s honor and redefining manhood for himself. Finally, his daughter flees from home, stating that if she has to prostitute herself to Mr. Clyde, she could well go to Memphis where she can really make some money. He had behaved just like his Grandpa who was also asked to be quiet at his sister’s funeral.

### **Conclusion**

So we see the men, especially the black men who have their personal problems. Here, Naylor has depicted these men as more responsible and rational, able to think for themselves, having realized not only that they have problems, but have also pushed others into problems, specially the women around them. Naylor's positive depiction shows them as men struggling to correct their faults, or as individuals trying to make sense of their lives. The Technique Naylor uses here is very vital, though Ben died in "The women of Brewster Place," the "Author's Notes", in this sequel states that Naylor "takes her poetic license to resurrect (Ben's) spirit and voice to narrate major portions of (the) novel.

The positive note about the men of Brewster Place, with which the novel ends, really lifts it up out of melodrama, infusing hope and a possible better life for the black men and women. This reveals the love of the downtrodden and the deep compassion in the heart of the writer. Through the works of such writers like Naylor, the world can one day be a better place for all men and women of this universe, especially the oppressed and unfortunate ones.

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