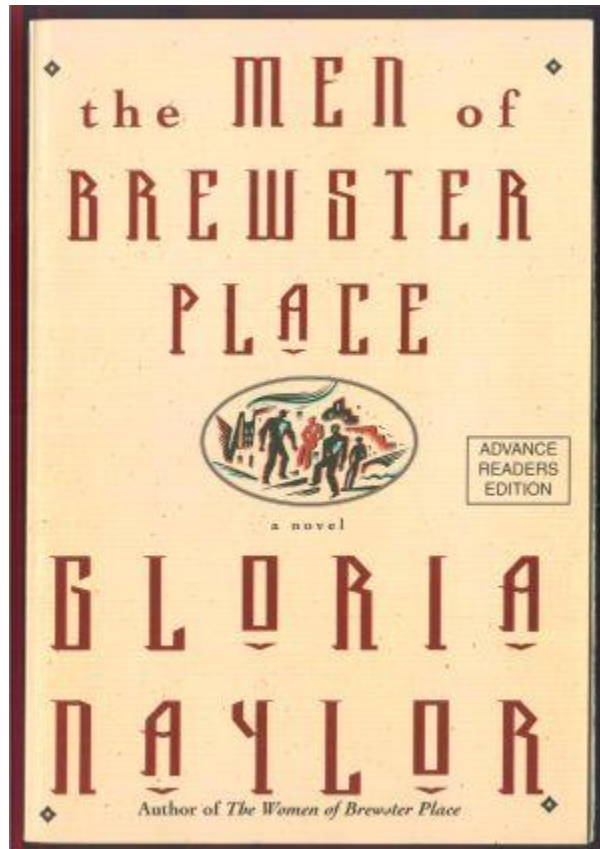


**Guilt and Redemption:**  
**A Study of Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place***

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**Abstract**

Social issues like deprived destitution, racial discrimination, homosexuality, ill treatment of women, parochialism, denial of justice and apathy of a callous society towards the poor and the needy are the recurring themes in the novels of Gloria Naylor. The novelist deals with the traumas of the failing man - women relationship and its irreparable impact on the shaping of the society. Nevertheless, the images, the characters and the incidents culminate in a certain way, to ascertain that self-awareness etches the present and the future of fellow beings to be individually independent in American society. This article throws light mainly on two characters, namely,

Basil and Eugene. Gloria Naylor reveals the familial and societal life of the rural Afro-Americans in this novel and shows the complexity of their lives.

**Key words:** Guilt, redemption, American society, racial discrimination, self-awareness, destitution

## **Introduction**

Gloria Naylor, the Afro-American novelist presents the experiential dealings of black women of America intensely and interestingly in her novels. The recurring themes in her novels are the social issues of the deprived destitution, racial discrimination, homosexuality, ill treatment of women, parochialism, denial of justice and apathy of the callous society towards the poor and the needy. Gloria Naylor after her fifteen years of success with her debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1985) revisits the ghetto to speak for the men in the Brewster Place. The novel that adjoins this theme is *The Men of Brewster Place* which is a sequel to the novel *The Women of Brewster Place* that has been published fifteen years ago. Though not an entire justification of the men's attitude toward their woman, the men of Brewster Place are aware of what they are and they come into terms with reality. Through the voices of Ben, Eugene and Basil the patriarchy seeks redemption. Although they do not acquire it fully in the end, the men are complacent over their confessions. In fact, Gloria Naylor lime lights how a woman is necessary for a man and vice-versa. Probably the writer touches the traumas of the failing man-woman relationships and its irreparable impact on the shaping of the society. victims of circumstances and fears

## **Victims of Circumstances and Fears**

Naylor's men are victims of circumstances and fears. These revelations are articulated by Gloria Naylor in such cohesion with the reality, making it well received amongst the male contemporaries and the audience. Though there are several men with their stories narrated by Ben the janitor of Brewster Place, this article throws light mainly on two, Basil and Eugene. Basil the hopeful son of Mattie Michael, as a young man involves himself in a brawl in the pub and accidentally kills a man. His mother tries to bail him out of the situation by forfeiting her house, but diffident Basil forsakes his mother and absconds to escape from the law. Eventually

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he feels bad for his act and resolves to meet his mother after earning enough, staying away from her for three years.

I used those three years, when I didn't have the courage to call or write, doing exactly what I promised myself: I'm gonna pay her back. I worked two full-time jobs and a part-time on Sunday until I had enough money. I was starting to feel like the man I always wanted to be. (43)

### **Basil's Context and Character**

This was Basil's first milestone in his act of seeking redemption for being a prodigal. But he goes to meet his mother who was already dead and buried. He takes a vow at his mother's grave, that he would find a woman and become a responsible father unlike his own. Following that Basil goes to his hometown to meet his father, Butch Fuller and expresses his spite which he had developed for the man who had estranged his mother and himself. Unfortunately, Basil could only inherit the condition of low sperm count from his father and even the diagnosis confirms it. Like his father he entices women easily for affairs, but Helen was the one who was ready to marry him unaware of his infertility.

At the church, after the Sunday's sermon, Basil wants to reveal his past to his new girlfriend Helen, before getting married to her. But events do not take place as he expects he gets attracted to two little boys Jason and Eddie. They are no one but the sons of Keisha who is the cousin of Helen. During a brief conversation between the three, suddenly Eddie the younger one asks a very inappropriate question of Basil, asking if he was his father. Basil is immensely touched by the question and just for the love of these kids eventually convinces Keisha and marries her and also legally adopts the kids. Keisha was always fascinated by different kinds of men and was away with them at night. Basil's concern was only with the kids and he never interferes with Keisha's activities provided she did not hit the boys. For Basil it was more for the relationship with the kids than anything with Keisha who was still an acquaintance.

It was very clear to both of us that I wasn't marrying Keisha, I was marrying her boys. And the next time we went to City Hall it was for me

to adopt them officially. Jason Michael and Eddie Michael – mine forever.  
(59)

### **Keisha and Her Conspiracy**

Keisha could not change her bad ways, she invites men to the house, which is abhorred by Basil and their quarrels turned to fights. Keisha insults Basil saying he could never claim the kids as he was sterile to have any. Basil's ambition is to bring up the kids in a healthy ambience as they were already very disturbed. So Basil tries to put an end to all this turmoil and claims to take away the kids with him to help them grow up in peace under a good shelter. This is a lesson that was imbibed by Basil from Mattie, for Basil also grew up his natural way at peace.

Knowing the intentions of Basil, Keisha conspires by calling the detectives, informing them that Basil is a fugitive who has escaped the bench warrant in a manslaughter case. Basil is arrested and taken away by the cops, and is released after six long years. When he comes to meet his adopted sons, Jason the elder one has already spent time in the juvenile detention and Eddie the younger one has remains secluded, shunning Basil, telling him that he could not recognize him. Basil does not give up his journey of redemption; he starts his battle again to win the hearts of his sons and to give them the better life which he had planned for. Basil is determined to struggle, with only with one daunting question in his mind, if he could bring any difference in their lives and change them for the better.

So I did come back. And I am going to fight for the hearts of these boys again? I'm going to fight like hell. But the question that will haunt me for the rest of my life is whether or not I could have made a difference. (64)

### **Eugene, an Escapist?**

After we have delved into the redemption of Basil, the next one who comes in the sequel is Eugene. A familiar character of the novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*. People would have recognized him as an escapist and a cruel person responsible for his own daughter's death. But Eugene has altogether a different story to tell. Eugene starts his story with a question to his wife

and the audience reading his part. He says that he was always censured for leaving, but nobody ever thought why he often returned.

Why did I keep leaving? Baby, that's not the right question. It never was.  
The question is, why did I keep coming back? (70)

### **Realization as a Gay**

Eugene cherishes every moment of his life with Luceilia, he feels proud to be a father like every other man when his daughter Serena is born. His dreams burgeoned along with the meager amount of fifteen hundred dollars that they are saving. Everything has been going fine until he meets Bruce at the dock during his first job. It is Bruce who makes Eugene aware of the fact that he is a homosexual. However hard he tries to refrain himself from that thought, he is dragged close to it. As Eugene eventually starts to realize his sexuality, he loses interest in women, especially his own wife. Maybe this was the way to stay aloof from her and he has also expected that Luceilia would either go away with the child or he would be driven away out of their lives.

### **Tragedy – Death of the Child**

Chino the homosexual friend of Eugene advocates that he divorce Luceilia. If Eugene has done so he could have saved his child from being dead. Instead the way he chooses to drift away from his family, is to show aversion towards them and plainly withdraw from the responsibilities. However, Luceilia who was unaware of Eugene's dual state does not allow him to go. Their fight leads to a state, where both totally forget about the baby, who sticks a steel fork into the electrical socket in an attempt to catch a cockroach. Serena is electrocuted and this death has paved way to Eugene's guilt.

And I saw in your eyes, finally, the beginning of the end. Then we heard the scream from the kitchen. What did I feel after I murdered Serena? You must understand that I did not dare to feel anything at all. Anything I hid behind two masks to get through the next few days with neighbors and friends. (91)

## A Double Role

Eugene plays a double role in the novel. One to not let others know about his sexuality and the other one is not to cheat his own awareness. Eugene does not abandon his wife; he loves her so unconditionally that he strives to release her from the clutches of defeatism. As for the guilt of Eugene killing his daughter Serena, he goes to a Chino a man who has been destined to satisfy desires. So he knows what sort of redemption Eugene was seeking. Chino whips Eugene until he says to stop and while doing so the entire room is splashed with blood except for the ceiling. This was the type of redemption to replace his pain.

This was a man who was used to satisfying desires. And so he knew I had come for redemption- I had come searching for his type of pain to replace mine. (94)

Deserting the family is the sin committed by Eugene and for which he seeks a severe punishment by getting whipped. Redemption comes to him only this way.

## Conclusion

Redemption is one of the vital essences of any religion and it is through this gesture a transgressor or a transgression can seek remedy to gain salvation. Redemption can also take place by the guilt of one's consciousness. Seeking redemption could also be a gesture to make peace with oneself and feel relieved from the turbulence in the mind. Humans often think to redeem themselves by reasoning out his/her deed, which always has an adverse impact on the person who has been closely associated with the redeemed. Here we can see that real redemption can come only through the person's sincere remorse, and he/she gaining the forgiveness of God. All other redemption will fall short of real peace of mind. Gloria Naylor reveals the familial and societal life of the rural Afro-Americans in America in this novel and shows their complexity of life. She does not approach a case of study exclusively meant for a particular gender, instead she holistically dissects details to predicate the fact.

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