

SISTERHOOD, SURVIVAL, AND STRENGTH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TERRY MCMILLAN'S WAITING TO EXHALE AND GLORIA NAYLOR'S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

Dr. Sujata Tiwale

Assistant Professor, Department of English

K. M. Agrawal College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Kalyan

Abstract:

*This research paper undertakes a comparative study of Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) in order to examine African American women's collective experiences of survival, resilience, and empowerment. Focusing on McMillan's four protagonists—Savannah Jackson, Robin Stokes, Bernardi Harris, and Gloria Matthews—and Naylor's seven women—Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Cora Lee, Lorraine, Theresa, and Lucielia Turner—the study explores how women negotiate emotional deprivation, economic instability, motherhood, sexual marginalization, and systemic oppression. Drawing upon feminist theory, Black feminist thought, sociological and psychological perspectives, the paper argues that sisterhood and communal bonds function as essential survival strategies across class and generational differences. Through close textual analysis and comparative evaluation, the paper demonstrates that both novels foreground collective female strength as a means of resisting patriarchal, racial, and economic marginalization, thereby situating them within a broader tradition of African American women's literature.*

Keywords: African American women, sisterhood, survival, Black feminism, collective resilience, motherhood, emotional labor, Terry McMillan, Gloria Naylor, comparative literature

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Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the present study are to analyze the representation of African American women's lived experiences in *Waiting to Exhale* and *The Women of Brewster Place*; to explore the themes of sisterhood, communal survival, and emotional resilience in both novels; to examine issues of motherhood, single parenthood, sexuality, and economic dependency; to apply feminist and Black feminist theoretical frameworks to the selected texts; and to compare how women across different social and economic locations employ collective strategies to resist oppression and sustain identity.

Hypothesis:

This study is based on the hypothesis that African American women's survival, emotional resilience, and identity formation in both *Waiting to Exhale* and *The Women of Brewster Place* are deeply rooted in collective female bonds rather than individual achievement. The novels suggest that sisterhood, shared narratives, and communal care operate as powerful mechanisms through which women cope with systemic racial, gendered, and economic oppression.

Introduction:

African American literature has long served as a critical space for articulating the intertwined realities of race, gender, class, and identity. African American literature has long served as a critical space for articulating the intertwined realities of race, gender, class, and identity. From slave narratives to contemporary urban fiction, Black women writers have employed literature as a means of self-definition, resistance, and cultural survival. Writing functions as testimony, healing, and political critique, allowing African American women to reclaim voice within histories that have rendered them invisible or stereotyped. In this tradition, emotional truth and communal memory emerge as central to Black women's literary expression. Terry McMillan occupies a distinctive position within this lineage for her candid, accessible, yet critically incisive portrayals of urban Black women negotiating love, work, family, and selfhood in late twentieth-century America.

Waiting to Exhale (1992) presents a narrative deeply rooted in the everyday realities of African American women whose lives are shaped by racialized patriarchy, economic pressures, and emotional

vulnerability. Early in the novel, Savannah Jackson articulates an anxiety that resonates throughout the text: "I cannot lie. Now I worry... Never in a million years would I have ever believed that I would be thirty-six years old and still childless and single" (McMillan 21). This confession foregrounds the psychological tension between social expectation and personal fulfillment, situating the novel within feminist debates about marriage, motherhood, and women's autonomy. McMillan's women are not struggling for basic survival alone; they are struggling for emotional honesty, dignity, and wholeness.

The novel chronicles the interconnected lives of four African American women—Savannah Jackson, Robin Stokes, Bernardi Harris, and Gloria Matthews—whose shared narratives reveal that survival and self-realization are not solitary achievements but collective processes. Their lives unfold within a context of what Frances Beal describes as "double jeopardy," the simultaneous oppression of race and gender. Despite their education and relative economic stability, the protagonists remain constrained by patriarchal expectations, racial stereotyping, and unequal emotional labor. McMillan's achievement lies in exposing these structures through intimate, conversational storytelling rather than overt political rhetoric.

Savannah Jackson represents the educated, professional Black woman whose independence does not insulate her from emotional dissatisfaction. Her repeated introspections reveal a conflict between what society defines as success and what she personally desires. Savannah reflects, "I've done everything I was supposed to do—got an education, got a good job, took care of myself—and yet I still feel incomplete" (McMillan 34). Her insistence on emotional authenticity becomes a feminist assertion when she declares, "I don't want a man who needs me. I want a man who wants me" (McMillan 98). Savannah's

refusal to settle for emotional neglect challenges traditional narratives that demand compromise from women at the cost of self-respect. Her vulnerability underscores the psychological dimension of survival, where independence must coexist with emotional honesty.

Robin Stokes's narrative foregrounds the burden of familial obligation and emotional caretaking that frequently defines African American women's lives. Robin shoulders responsibility for her family, particularly her ailing mother, often subordinating her own desires. She confesses, "Sometimes I feel like my whole life is about taking care of everybody else, and there's nothing left when it comes to me" (McMillan 164). This admission reflects the sociological reality of gendered labor, where women's nurturing roles are naturalized and taken for granted. Robin's exhaustion reveals how survival often involves endurance rather than fulfillment, raising critical questions about the cost of self-sacrifice.

Bernardi Harris's storyline exposes the economic and legal vulnerabilities women face within marriage. When her husband abandons her for another woman, Bernardi confronts emotional betrayal alongside financial instability. Her anger is unapologetic: "I gave him everything I had, and he walked away like it was nothing" (McMillan 232). Encouraged by her mother, Jennifer, Bernardi seeks alimony, asserting, "I wasn't about to be broke and broken at the same time" (McMillan 279). Her pursuit of economic justice aligns with Marxist feminist critiques that link women's oppression to material dependence. Bernardi's narrative demonstrates that emotional recovery is inseparable from financial autonomy.

Gloria Matthews offers a nuanced portrayal of single motherhood shaped by discipline, moral accountability, and religious faith. Becoming pregnant as a teenager, Gloria refuses abortion despite stigma, believing she must accept responsibility for her

choices. The narrator observes, "She refused to abort the baby... knowing she had committed a major sin by having sexual intercourse before marriage" (McMillan 99). Gloria's motherhood is not sentimentalized; rather, it is depicted as sustained labor requiring emotional strength and ethical resolve. Her assertion, "I don't want to be your friend. I want to be your mother" (McMillan 187), reflects a commitment to authority and care that challenges stereotypes of single Black mothers.

What unites these women is the space of sisterhood they cultivate through shared conversation, humor, and emotional honesty. Their gatherings function as informal therapeutic spaces where disappointment, anger, and fear can be voiced without judgment. Savannah remarks, "When I'm with them, I don't feel like there's something wrong with me anymore" (McMillan 312). Their candid assessment of romantic relationships reflects collective frustration: "They are with white women... Or gay... Or married... too goddamn old and in their ways" (McMillan 450–451). Such dialogue, though provocative, enables emotional release and communal validation. Sisterhood thus becomes a central survival mechanism.

From a Black feminist perspective, this sisterhood exemplifies what bell hooks describes as solidarity rooted in shared struggle rather than idealized unity. Hooks argues that healing and resistance emerge through collective care, asserting that "sisterhood is a shared commitment to struggle" (*Ain't I a Woman* 138). McMillan's women embody this principle through honest critique and sustained loyalty. Their friendship resists isolation and affirms communal identity.

A comparative reading with Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* significantly deepens the understanding of collective female survival by foregrounding a broader spectrum of African American women's experiences across class, age, and

personal histories. Naylor's novel centers on seven women—Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Cora Lee, Lorraine, Theresa, and Lucielia Turner (Ciel)—whose lives intersect within the physically confining yet emotionally resonant space of Brewster Place. While McMillan focuses on four middle-class, professionally oriented women navigating emotional alienation, Naylor presents women grappling with poverty, domestic violence, sexual marginalization, and generational trauma. Despite these differences, both novels affirm that sisterhood and communal bonds function as essential mechanisms of survival.

Mattie Michael, often regarded as the moral and emotional center of *The Women of Brewster Place*, embodies maternal endurance and unconditional care. Betrayed by men and displaced repeatedly, Mattie learns that survival depends on communal empathy. Naylor writes, "What she had always known was that if you loved hard enough, it would be enough" (Naylor 89). Mattie's nurturing presence resonates strongly with Gloria Matthews in *Waiting to Exhale*, whose identity is similarly rooted in responsible motherhood and moral accountability. Both women prioritize care over romantic fulfillment, illustrating a form of strength grounded in endurance and ethical commitment rather than personal gratification.

Etta Mae Johnson represents a contrasting figure whose life is shaped by restless desire and repeated romantic disappointment. Her longing for male validation often leads to exploitation, yet she retains a fierce sense of independence. Naylor observes, "Etta Mae was tired of being strong, tired of always pretending that rejection didn't matter" (Naylor 56). Etta Mae's emotional vulnerability parallels Savannah Jackson's internal conflict in *Waiting to Exhale*. Like Savannah, Etta Mae seeks love that affirms rather than diminishes her, highlighting a shared struggle across

generations and class boundaries for emotional recognition.

Kiswana Browne, the young activist of Brewster Place, introduces a political consciousness that challenges both racial and generational complacency. Her commitment to Black pride and community empowerment is articulated when she declares, "I'm not trying to escape the ghetto—I'm trying to change it" (Naylor 134). Kiswana's activism contrasts with the more personal, emotionally focused resistance of Bernardi Harris, yet both women assert agency through confrontation—Kiswana through political organizing and Bernardi through legal and economic assertion. Each reflects a refusal to accept marginalization passively.

Cora Lee's narrative exposes the complexities of motherhood under conditions of poverty and emotional neglect. Initially seeking fulfillment through repeated pregnancies, Cora Lee gradually recognizes the emotional needs of her children. Naylor poignantly notes, "She loved babies, but she did not know how to love children" (Naylor 102). This evolution mirrors Gloria Matthews's disciplined approach to parenting, though Gloria begins where Cora must painfully arrive—at an understanding of sustained maternal responsibility. Together, these characters illustrate varied models of Black motherhood shaped by social and economic circumstance.

Lorraine and Theresa represent sexual marginalization and the violent consequences of societal intolerance. Their relationship challenges heteronormative expectations within both Black and broader American communities. Lorraine's tragic fate underscores the vulnerability of women who exist outside accepted norms. Naylor writes of Lorraine, "She wanted to be loved without having to apologize for it" (Naylor 171). Her longing resonates with Robin Stokes's quiet

desire for recognition and care in *Waiting to Exhale*, though Lorraine's story reveals far more brutal repercussions of isolation and exclusion.

Lucilia Turner, known as Ciel, embodies grief and emotional rupture following the loss of her child. Her suffering culminates in a psychological breakdown, from which she is restored through Mattie's nurturing embrace. Naylor describes this moment of healing: "Mattie rocked her gently, rocking her back into the world" (Naylor 146). This scene epitomizes the redemptive power of female care and mirrors the emotional restoration found in McMillan's depiction of friendship, where women metaphorically 'rock' one another through conversation, listening, and shared presence.

When compared collectively, the women of Brewster Place and the women of *Waiting to Exhale* represent different social locations but shared emotional truths. Savannah, Robin, Bernardi, and Gloria articulate survival through professional identity, friendship, and emotional honesty, while Mattie, Etta Mae, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Lorraine, Theresa, and Ciel navigate survival through endurance, community, and mutual care amid structural deprivation. Both McMillan and Naylor insist that female solidarity is not idealized harmony but a necessary response to systemic neglect. By juxtaposing these two novels, it becomes evident that African American women's literature consistently privileges communal resilience over individual resolution. Whether in the confined tenements of Brewster Place or the relatively comfortable homes of McMillan's protagonists, women endure through shared narratives, collective memory, and emotional reciprocity. The comparative lens thus reveals sisterhood as a transhistorical and transclass survival strategy, affirming the centrality of collective female experience in African American literary tradition.

Taken together, these women sensitize readers to the complex realities of African American womanhood

shaped by intersecting forces of race, gender, class, sexuality, and history. Through their lives, readers become acutely aware of emotional deprivation within romantic relationships, the psychological toll of economic insecurity, the weight of unpaid caregiving, and the vulnerability produced by social and sexual marginalization. Mattie Michael's endurance, Savannah Jackson's emotional honesty, Ciel's grief, and Bernardi Harris's anger collectively educate us about the costs of imposed strength and silence. These women sensitize us to the necessity of empathy, listening, and communal care as ethical responses to suffering.

Moreover, the narratives compel readers to recognize how systemic oppression is internalized and resisted in everyday life. The women of *Waiting to Exhale* sensitize us to the loneliness that can persist even within professional success, while the women of *The Women of Brewster Place* expose the brutality of structural neglect and social abandonment. Together, they challenge stereotypical representations of Black women as either endlessly resilient or irreparably broken. Instead, McMillan and Naylor present women who are fragile yet powerful, wounded yet sustaining one another. In doing so, these texts sensitize readers to the transformative power of sisterhood, urging a reimagining of survival not as solitary endurance but as collective human responsibility.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, *Waiting to Exhale* affirms that African American women's survival and identity formation are deeply rooted in collective experience. Through Savannah, Robin, Bernardi, and Gloria, McMillan demonstrates that resilience is cultivated through friendship, shared narratives, and emotional solidarity. The novel situates personal struggle within broader structures of race, gender, and class, revealing sisterhood as both refuge and resistance. McMillan ultimately suggests that African American women

endure not by exhaling alone, but by breathing together.

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