

ISSN: 2347 - 503X

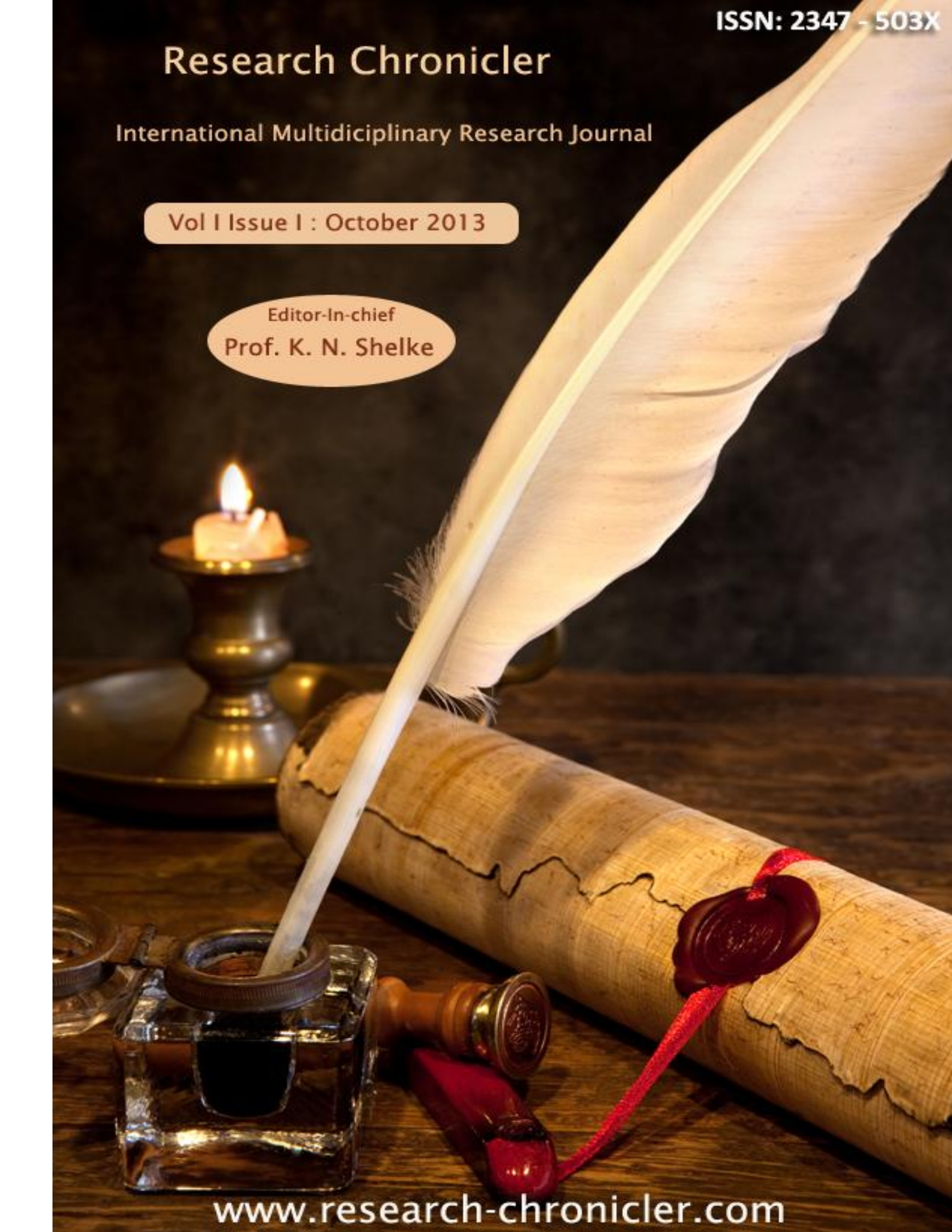
# Research Chronicler

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol I Issue I : October 2013

Editor-In-chief  
Prof. K. N. Shelke

[www.research-chronicler.com](http://www.research-chronicler.com)

The image is a cover for a journal. It features a dark, textured background. In the foreground, a quill pen is positioned diagonally, resting on a scroll of parchment. The scroll is tied with a red ribbon and has a red wax seal. To the left of the quill is a small glass inkwell with a dark liquid inside. In the background, a lit candle sits in a brass holder, casting a warm glow. The overall scene is set on a wooden surface.

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A peer-reviewed refereed and indexed international multidisciplinary research journal

**Volume I Issue I: October – 2013**

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## Re-reading Motherhood: A study of Four Matriarchs in the Literature of African Diaspora

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### ABSTRACT

Literature is considered to be the reflection of the place and time in which it is created, though no reputed author directly expresses his/her particular ideology in works of fiction. It is observed that the writers try to express their ideas and emotions through the works of literature and during the course of analysis critics try to examine and explore its various currents and streams flowing under the thin layer of apparent non-committal literature. With this oft proven assumption, this paper attempts to study the works of women writers and show how under the guise of literature, they have tried to open up their minds to expose the false traditions of the patriarchal social setup of the world.

**Key words:** Feminist literature, protest literature, patriarchy.

Although no reputed author directly expresses his/her particular ideology or intention in works of fiction, critics always try to examine and explore its various currents and streams flowing under the thin layer of apparent non-committal literature. Feminist literature too, at times openly or at times subtly, assumes the form of 'protest literature.' Black women writers while protesting against various issues of racism, sexism, patriarchal power structures, seem to become propagandist in the course of time. They make the readers, male and female alike, aware of various issues, ideologies, set myths intending to change their attitude towards stereotypical images of women. While exposing the patriarchal ideology mirrored or inscribed in works written by men they hit hard at the stereotypical images of the woman as mother, wife, temptress or enchantress. While doing so, some writers like Toni

Morrison, have taken the precaution of avoiding the risk of becoming a counter stereotype. An assertive image of a strong woman overcoming all hardships is given pre-eminence. Among all the images of women, the two recurrent images are that of a wife and a mother. A strong mother, even a grandmother figure, is a celebrated recurrent phenomenon. A mother's role in sustaining, nurturing and still trying to give a meaningful life to her children against all odds is highlighted repeatedly.

'Speech is silver, silence is golden' is a popular dictum, but one can not apply it while reading feminist text as the silence could be a suppressed voice. The four mother figures, selected for study are - Eva from Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Lena from Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Nnu Ego from Buchi Emcheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Mattie Michael from

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. These strong mother figures are marginalized, dominated, exploited and even victimized racially, socially, and predominantly sexually, and they need to be given a voice. Though the ideology of motherhood is a much-researched theme, the present paper attempts to highlight these four mother figures, because they belong to different time and place and yet share some similar undercurrents. Although the disastrous circumstances are same, due to poverty as well as racial and gender inequalities, the apparent solutions found out by them are unique and varied and worth the comparison. Except Nnu Ego of Buchi Emcheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, all are round characters and the paper tries to examine how they evolve as a mother in the course of the action.

Emcheta, through her protagonist, underscores the dangers of surrendering to or drifting toward the outdated, unchecked, slavish societal norms, whereas Morrison's Eva represents a controversial and aggressive matriarch, while Lena stands for all positive values of dignity, familial bond, and welfare of community and Mattie stands for female bonding as well as a support system to other women. In spite of having different situation and destiny, Eva and Lena manifest commandeering force while taking charge of the house and also while asserting their identity. However, Nnu Ego surrenders to the social traditions, hence had to face the coercing effect on her personality without being aware of it. Though Mattie fails as a

mother to her biological child, she proves to be a support system to many women of her community. Looking at these texts, one observes not only a less peaceful, battling, resourceful mother figure but also an anguished, outraged mother who embodies the value of sacrifice for the children. Thus, the mother is a symbol of sacrifice and suffering in the form of Nnu Ego, a symbol of nurture and dignity in the form of Lena Younger, a symbol of comfort and overprotection in the form of Mattie Michael so also a symbol of death and destruction in the form of Eva Peace.

The mother figure is respected, worshipped, idealized and at times even canonized universally. However, ironically enough, an individual mother is ill treated, insulted, exploited and even victimized unnecessarily. Andrea Benton Rushing says in her essay on Afro-American poetry, "The most prevalent image of black woman is the image of mother," and that "almost all images of mother revolve around her strength under stress."<sup>1</sup> The present paper highlights, how this stress, mitigates not only their strength but also their survival instinct.

The novel, *The Joys of motherhood* begins with the hysteria, madness and an attempt at suicide by a mother owing to the death of her first child. She is conditioned by the social conception (rather misconception) that a woman without child is a 'failed' woman. She, along with her society, values her life only because of her ability of child bearing, little knowing that this 'value' will take away her identity and

individuality from her. She becomes cautious when she conceives for the second time. To facilitate safe delivery she avoids going out to trade. As a result, she suffers from poverty thereby surrendering her economic independence. Although it guarantees her a good childcare, as a result, she becomes cut off from the outside world. Unfortunately, she comprehends and applies only restricted aspect of motherhood and even in poverty keeps on begetting children. Her children may starve, but she continued to have more children because she sees them as a “mother’s investment.”

Thus, her life deteriorates, until she dies alone at the end of the novel, expecting to hear the news from her sons in America and Canada. Her family is dispersed in Lagos; hence, she goes back to Ibuza, her native place where she goes slightly mad until one night, as the novel describes, “She died quietly there with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her.”<sup>2</sup> Emecheta adds, “Nnu Ego had been too busy building up the joys as a mother, to indulge in friendship.”<sup>3</sup> Nnu Ego inadvertently overlooks the very positive principle of female bonding, which would have mitigated, if not avoided her sufferings. Eventually she admits to her co-wife Adaku, “Try to forgive my condemning your leaving Nnaife when you did, I am beginning to understand now.”<sup>4</sup> However, this understanding dawns too late upon her. The novel ends on an ironic note as her children who had no time for her during her lifetime come home to give her the “the noisiest and the most costly burial Ibuza had

ever seen.”<sup>5</sup> Her family and tribeswomen are angry with her even after her death because she never answered the prayers of people who called her a “backward woman.” She is blamed for the destruction of her family, for her daughter’s bad behaviour, for her husband’s imprisonment and her sons’ departure to West.

Ironically, although she mothered many children, she faced a lonely old age, and a miserable death of a stray animal, like a barren woman. Nnu Ego’s tragedy is a tragedy due to a lack of self-awareness and a loss of sense of right to life. She places value of motherhood above the value of dignity making her life a saga of suffering.

However, unlike Nnu Ego, Eva’s sacrifice is by choice. Suffering and sacrifice are probably predominant features of black mothers. Sacrifice is what the black mother might easily make for her children. After all a collective racial memory recalls how slave women were not allowed to bring up even breast-feed their own children. Eva, who had lived in Virginia (the South) was closer to these tragic separations. Hence, she wished to do everything she could for her children. Although Sula is the central character of the novel, her grandmother, Eva, merits reader’s attention due to her unconventional and controversial solution to fight back poverty.

Eva’s house in Bottom is an embodiment of love, lust, generosity, possessiveness, evasiveness, duty, tenderness, denial and deceit. Thus, her house is both life sustaining and moribund. This mother figure shows exemplary

courage to shoulder her responsibility though she appears to be weird, or even eccentric.

Abandoned one November by her husband Boyboy, Eva struggles to feed her three starving children until, sensing futility, she leaves them with a neighbour and disappears. Eighteen months later, Eva returns, with one leg missing but with notable prosperity, to reclaim her children and build her own home. Precisely how Eva loses her leg becomes the topic of speculation in the Bottom, though it is suggested that Eva scarifies it in a train accident for an insurance settlement. Whatever the case, Eva's experience changes her from a passive victim to an active manipulator. Her motive shifts from love to hatred. "Hating Boyboy she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistence of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her and to protect her from the routine vulnerabilities."<sup>6</sup> Karen Carmean in her book *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction* appraises Eva's character aptly - "Finding an embodiment of evil, a locus for her hatred, Eva participates in the community's use of fear and hatred as a defining, strengthening, and protective emotion, and her reaction brings her positive results. Eva's hatred also frees her from conventional solutions to routine problems. She becomes "creator" and "sovereign" of her home, directing the lives about her with unquestioned authority. In effect, Eva assumes godlike proportions, her removed authority indicative of

emotional distance, and her power over life and death unchallenged."<sup>7</sup>

We see the results on Eva's authority throughout the novel, especially in relation to male characters: the Deweys, Tar Baby, and Plum. All receive Eva's care and all, to some extent, become her victims. Eva's rescue of the Deweys from indifferent mothers is fraught with paradox. While they doubtless benefit from whatever care they receive, these boys, originally so different in age and physical features, never grow to physical or emotional maturity. Tar Baby, a white alcoholic, receives same treatment.

This is not so with Plum, Eva's only son. Back home from his military service in World War I, he gets addicted to heroin. He seems to have suffered psychic war injury. As the agent of death, Eva acts primarily out of love. Tears stream down her face as she tightly holds Plum. Grieving, she sets him on fire. No one questions Eva's act. Her primary motivation is to allow Plum "to die like a man" instead of suffering as a drug addict. Her act saves herself also, "God have mercy, and I couldn't birth him twice." Her deep-rooted-ness despite having only one leg and her resourcefulness in turning the other into capital, all makes her an awesome character. There is a hard practicality about Eva. To her, practical care implies love.

Eva is a rebel but only in a limited sense. She believes in maintaining the traditional values. Despite her own 'failed' marriage, she tries to impose the same institution on Sula. She wants her to get into the conforming patterns of the community, that is, to have a husband and babies to

“settle” down. Eva becomes a matriarchal force too powerful to handle; so Sula puts her in a nursing home.

We meet a unique a mother figure in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and we realize that a mother can be awe-inspiring and nurturing. Hence, Lena Younger becomes a powerful image of black motherhood, rarely glimpsed in earlier American literature. Although belonging to the working class, she displays a nobility of spirit and a commandeering position in her home. Lena has the self-confidence that comes to only those who know they have deserved a place in the world. She is the matriarch who has her family's welfare, moral and economical, at heart. Hansberry “wanted to explore the specifics of black life...”<sup>8</sup> hence, “The Younger living room would be a comfortable and well ordered room... Everything has been polished, washed, sat on, used, scrubbed too often.”<sup>9</sup>

Lena will not permit aesthetic cynicism to her educated daughter, Beneatha because it goes against her own religious principles. Similarly, she is deeply grieved when she senses that Ruth, Walter's wife, is to abort her child due to lack of space. This drives her to go and buy a dream house where the next generation can grow and live in an expensive manner, something that was denied to her and husband. This deep-rooted unselfishness is noteworthy. Her decision to buy a house in a white locality is really a bold one. She denies Walter the money to invest in the liquor business, as, she fears, it will ruin many black Native Americans by becoming habitual alcoholics. Thus, she

proves how positive black women can be not in supporting their men, but their principles and human dignity. Walter's self-pity and his feeling of being less than a man because he is a chauffeur are brought out as the wrong set of values. Lena corrects him telling that freedom and dignity are more important. When money becomes an aim of life, the life of another human being becomes less important. This obviously implies to Ruth's plan for abortion. Walter's dream might have spoiled the future of the whole family without Lena's firm steering. Her son's reputation would have become a stink since his morals are on the verge of rotting in his desire to fulfill his dream of living in wealth and luxury. However, Lena is a mighty mother figure with powerful faith in her beliefs and principles. The old ruggedly looking plant symbolizes Lena herself having survived in minimum sunlight for so many years. It is the hope, sustenance and promise for better things to come.

Unlike Lena, Mattie Michael of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is a mother who learns hard way the lessons of motherhood and becomes an “awakened mother”. Mattie is dark as “rich, double cocoa,” who defies her overprotective father to take a man who was pure temptation, almost a force of nature - a Pan. Mattie's journey to Brewster Place begins in rural Tennessee, but when she becomes pregnant she leaves town to avoid her father's wrath. Pregnant and disowned, she made the instinctive matriarchal decision to live without a man and invest all

her love back into her child. As a price she had to work all alone to survive and ultimately never finds her way out of poverty. Mattie's life portrays a common trend in African American society, where one is born into poverty and is never able to rise above it. For a while she manages to earn just enough money to pay rent on the room she shares with her baby, Basil. One night a rat bites the baby while they are sleeping and Mattie begins to search for a better place to live. Just as she is about to give up, she meets Eva Turner, an old woman who lives with her granddaughter, Ciel. Eva invites Mattie in for dinner and offers her a place to stay.

“The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable.”<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after Mattie Michael and Eva Turner meet, they begin to share their life stories with each other. They are separated not only by age but by experience. The content of their lives varies in almost every regard, from the fact that Eva has had a number of different husbands while Mattie has had only one brief lover, to the differences in the quality of their lives. Eva is a relatively prosperous woman with a large, beautiful house, while Mattie is poor and homeless. Their differences are highlighted even more by the contrast in their skin tone and age. Yet as the passage stresses, these differences are only superficial. The women are connected to each other by their gender and colour. The

above quote also foreshadows what lies ahead for Mattie. After Eva dies, Mattie inherits her house, and just as Eva's children eventually abandoned her, so too will Mattie's son Basil abandon Mattie. The hardship and joy that Eva has experienced during her life will come to mirror Mattie's own experiences.

The ability to connect to another human being essentially to a woman is a source of strength, hope and stability. Mattie and Eva's connection is the first in a series of life-altering relationships that have the power to restore hope to an otherwise hopeless situation. Mattie finds Eva shortly after she flees her rundown apartment, Etta Mae Johnson, Mattie's childhood friend, finds Mattie waiting up for her when she is at her lowest point.

As a boy, Basil had been sickly, which made Mattie spoil him a lot. She always thought she needed to defend him at school, too. When things did not work out at one school, she moved Basil to a new school. She always gave into him rather than disciplining and disappointing him. Eva had pointed this out to Mattie, offering her this simple piece of advice on how to raise her son, Basil.

“Ya know, you can't keep him runnin' away from things that hurt him. Sometimes, you just gotta stay there and teach him how to go through the bad and good of whatever comes.”<sup>11</sup>

Mattie is ferociously protective of her son. He's all she has, she wants to be there to comfort and protect him from any injustice.



Eva's words are prophetic. As Basil grows older, he never learns to deal with life's hardships. He is unable to accept any responsibility for his actions. In this regard, Basil is exactly like his father, Butch Fuller and many of the other men who appear in the novel. In the face of adversity or challenge, they run away. Butch Fuller is the first male character in the novel to openly maintain that running away is his life philosophy. He indirectly passes this legacy on to Basil.

Years later when the old woman dies, Mattie has saved enough money to buy the house. Ciel's parents take her away, but Mattie stays on with Basil. She refuses to see any faults in him, and when he gets in trouble with the law she puts up her house to bail him out of jail. When he jumps bail, she loses the house she had worked thirty years to own, and her long journey from Tennessee finally ends in a small apartment on Brewster Place. She fails as a mother, rather her son fails her. In spite of all her hardship she has not lost her human touch and her heart is still full of forgiveness and kindness. She is therefore like the proverbial mother figure for all the abandoned women living in Brewster Place. Her constant optimism and determination is a pillar of support for women like Etta Mae Johnson and Lucielia Turner.

She is a surrogate mother figure to several of the other women, a source of comfort and strength. She has endured her share of hardships - losing a child, fleeing her parents' home, and losing her own home - yet she continues to persevere. Her

constant strength is a source of support especially for Etta Mae Johnson and Lucielia Turner. Etta Mae Johnson is a survivor and good-time woman, who comes home to Mattie when her dream of redemption by marrying a "respectable" preacher is sordidly ended. Only at the end of her chapter in the novel does Etta realize that she has already found in Mattie at least some of what she's searching for. Etta is Mattie's childhood friend, and she is, in almost every regard, Mattie's exact opposite. While Etta is sexually adventurous and bold with no true religious devotion, Mattie is solitary and devout. In Mattie she finds a true friend, someone who can help make her life matter. Ciel Turner, whose husband, Eugene, ominously resents her fertility: "With two kids and you on my back, I ain't never gonna have nothin' ... nothin'!"<sup>12</sup> Mattie saves the long-suffering Ciel Turner from self-destruction after she barely endures a series of personal disasters.

Her generous heart and deep faith represent the best elements not only of Brewster Place but also of African American women in general. In many ways, Mattie is the bedrock of the Brewster Place community. When she arrives, she does so knowing that it may very well be the last place she ever lives. However, she is determined not to be broken by that knowledge. She continues to live her life the best way she knows how, and, in doing so, she is able to add a measure of comfort to almost everyone she encounters. In Mattie's dream the seven women of Brewster Place unite to tear down the wall that the city

legislature built. Mattie awakens from this dream but the epilogue tells us that the dreams of “The coloured daughters of Brewster....ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the four mother figures bring home the common positive qualities of unconditional love, sacrifice, endurance, dignity, freedom, nobility of heart, moral values etc. They are the strong personalities having ability to transform their lives for better and thereby transforming their communities substantially. Each of these women cope with enormous loss in their lives, but each manages their grief differently. They are capable of enormous love, but they are often hurt by their loved

ones, to the extent that a reader feels their loved ones were not worth it and these women would have been happier if they had hardened their hearts to those who eventually let them down. Not all black women are strong and enduring, yet a core of resistance to emotional and physical oppression and a will to discover the path to survival and beyond, resides in these women.

Breaking the silence of these mother figures should serve as a guiding force for next generations of not only black mothers but also mothers at large to map their future life.

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