The Contradictory Faces of “Sisterhood”: A Case-Study on Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Its Theatrical Adaptation by James Willing and Leonard Rae, Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, and Liane Moriarty’s Big Little Lies and Its Miniseries Adaptation on HBO

Lama Alsulaiman

Chapman University, alsul113@mail.chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_theses

Part of the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English (MA) Theses by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.
The Contradictory Faces of “Sisterhood”: A Case-Study on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Its Theatrical Adaptation by James Willing and Leonard Rae, Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies* and Its Miniseries Adaptation on HBO

A Thesis by

Lama Alsulaiman

Chapman University
Orange, CA

College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2019

Committee in charge:

Joanna Levin, Ph.D., Chair
Myron Yeager, Ph.D.
Brian Glaser, Ph.D.
This thesis of Lama Alsulaiman is approved.

Joanna Levin, PhD., Chair

Myron Yeager, PhD.

Brian Glaser, PhD.

May 2019
The Contradictory Faces of “Sisterhood:” A Case-Study on Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Its Theatrical Adaptation by James Willing and Leonard Rae, Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, and Liane Moriarty’s Big Little Lies and Its Miniseries Adaptation on HBO

Copyright © 2019

by Lama Alsulaiman
ABSTRACT

The Contradictory Faces of “Sisterhood”: A Case-Study on Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Its Theatrical Adaptation by James Willing and Leonard Rae, Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, and Liane Moriarty’s Big Little Lies and Its Miniseries Adaptation on HBO

by Lama Alsulaiman

Feminist “Sisterhood” has been a debatable term throughout multiple generations and its ideology is mostly rejected by feminists in the younger generation. The concept mainly denotes a sense of collectivity and it is viewed as a gendered term due to its coinage by second wave feminists as a response to patriarchy. Hence, “Sisterhood” authorizes a collective identity that portrays women as victims and thereby the ideology that is associated with this term reduces the complexity and fluidity of female identity. Various representations of female bonds, in the political, literary and filmic spheres, have valued the idea of collectivity among females, even up to our present day. In order to deconstruct the attempts to redeem “Sisterhood” as an all-inclusive term, I trace representations of the ideology of “Sisterhood” in selected literary, theatrical and televisual works from multiple generations to argue for the rejection of this term and the inability to validate it as inclusive due to its insistence on a collective identity that imposes a blindness to and an underrepresentation of otherness. I explore how “Sisterhood” results in the objectification of females’ experiences in order to serve identity molds that restrict a female’s representation as an individual. I highlight this problematic ideology in Jane Eyre (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and a theatrical adaptation of the novel by James
Willing and Leonard Rae (1879); *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by Gloria Naylor; *Big Little Lies* (2014) by Liane Moriarty and an adaptation of the novel as a miniseries on HBO (2017). While deconstructing the ideology of perceiving female bonds through the lens of “Sisterhood,” I conclude that the concept is problematic in relation to the portrayal of “other” females, and I demonstrate how it is also flawed on a general level since it takes away from the individuality of each woman portrayed throughout this ideology in order to meet specific commonalities among her “sisters.” Although the ideology of “Sisterhood” is outdated and restrictive, we can’t deny, as I further explore, that the investment in portraying it has contributed to raising important female issues.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Section 1:** Introduction 1

**Section 2:** The Ideology of “Sisterhood” in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and its Theatrical Adaptation by James Willing and Leonard Rae 9

**Section 3:** Black “Sisterhood” in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* 19

**Section 4:** Contemporary “Sisterhood” in Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies* and its Miniseries Adaptation on HBO 27

**Section 5:** Conclusion 35

**Works Cited** 38
Section 1: Introduction

Throughout the generations of the feminist movement, “Sisterhood” has been a highly controversial term regarding its legitimacy and scope within social and political movements. Second wave feminists, like Gloria Steinem who made “Sisterhood” popular in 1971, utilized the term to denote collectivism amongst women. The concept, as Elizabeth Evans points out, “celebrates the close-knit bond that was in evidence in sections of the Women’s Liberation Movement whilst simultaneously conveying a commonality amongst women” (112). The choice of “Sisterhood” by feminists as a term for female bonding is mainly presented as a response to patriarchy since the earliest white feminists, as Helena Michie recounts in her article “Not One of the Family,” have attempted to “mirror each other and not their father” by referring to their bond as “Sisterhood” as opposed to “Daughterhood” (58). Under the name of “Sisterhood,” feminists aimed to create a sense of universal unity and compassion among women, and numerous authors and producers have attempted to invoke the essence of this concept in their literary and filmic works by portraying bonds amongst female characters that are also meant to extend to female readers and viewers and are expected to mirror their experiences. Cheri Register, a second wave feminist critic, articulated the need for empowering and inclusive representations of female bonds, stating, “The feminist movement in America is seeking to create a feeling of sisterhood, a new sense of community among women, in order to overcome group self-hatred, the animosity that many women feel for others of their sex as a result of isolation, competition for male attention, and belief in female inferiority” (21).
Regardless of such awareness of the necessity of female empowerment and bonding, “Sisterhood” has been at odds with the need for feminist inclusivity since the very premise of the concept, which emphasizes close familial bonds through a recognition of similarity, works against the representation of multi-dimensional and authentic female experiences. Across multiple generations, and through ongoing conversations between numerous literary, theatrical, filmic and televisual works, authors have exposed the ways in which the ideology that “Sisterhood” adopts can be exclusionary, failing to represent the authentic diversity of female experiences. Indeed, throughout their utilization of “Sisterhood,” second wave feminists, who happened to be mostly white, attempted to promote the idea that women should be drawn towards one another in order to create a collective identity by which all differences should be marginalized, including racial ones.

As a response to white second wave feminists who coined and exclusively utilized “Sisterhood” to meet a restrictive range of issues that were mostly focused on domestic oppression, authors of color, by the end of the second wave of feminism and the beginning of its third, introduced more multi-dimensional female experiences into their portrayals of female bonds. This awareness of the need for inclusivity was raised by women of color from the early inception of “Sisterhood” at the beginnings of the second wave of feminism. For example, in *Sisterhood is Powerful*, the canonical anthology of essays by diverse feminists, Eleanor Holmes Norton, in her piece “For Saddie and Maude,” writes, “At the moment when the white family is caught in a maze of neurotic contradictions and white women are supremely frustrated with their roles, are black women to take up such troubled models? […] There is no reason to envy the white woman who is sinking in a sea of close-quartered affluence, where one’s world is one’s
house” (356). Accordingly, some feminists of color focused on creating collective identities for their own communities and used expressions such as “Black Sisterhood.” However, as the feminist movement has progressed up to our present day, we notice an increasing number of feminists who refuse to refer to their bonds as “Sisterhoods” since the focus on a collective identity, as Evans argues, makes the rejection of the term “not simply rhetorical but also ideological” (111).

Throughout the collection of works I analyze in this essay, the idea of female bonding is demonstrative of such exclusive ideology adopted and promoted by the feminist “Sisterhood.” Indeed, the word “sister” is frequently used in these texts. I have chosen to analyze a collection of works from different generations, including our present day, in order to highlight a pattern and advance an argument that, regardless of all the efforts made by feminists to validate “Sisterhood” as inclusive, the representations of this ideology have only gone in a circular motion and maintained the same problem it started with: the investment in communicating a collective identity imposes an underrepresentation of otherness and reduces the multidimensionality of a female’s experience. This problem could not be simply solved with racial inclusion of women of color in the representations of “Sisterhood,” or any “other” female who is represented as different from the group of females she bonds with, since the focus of the ideology is on highlighting similar female experiences. Such exposure of the consistency of the term’s emphasis on similarity is meant to evidence the incompatibility of its ideology and denotation with the need for greater recognition of females’ individuality on many levels, and the need to reject female objectification. Accordingly, this paper will focus on and trace the representations of “Sisterhood” in a collection of five literary, theatrical and
televisual works to explore how the ideological implications of the term are problematic in relation to the reality they constitute, as bonding on the basis of a collective identity works against the representation of authentic and diverse females’ experiences.

As a disclaimer, whether or not the authors of the works I am analyzing are criticizing or promoting the ideological stance of “Sisterhood” cannot be definitively established. But my criticism of these works will focus on the ways in which each work reflects “Sisterhood” to female audience. In section 2, I analyze Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre to explore the ideological implications of its representation of female identity and bonds. Although the novel was published before the official feminist coinage and use of “Sisterhood,” I analyze some of its elements in order to argue that the restrictive ideology of feminist “Sisterhood” coincides with a pattern from Victorian patriarchal times in which females’ bonds were based on the recognition of their commonalities. Thus, these females appear as stereotypical. In the novel, racial otherness is represented as an aesthetic and moral difference as opposed to it being recognized as an identity that effects distinctive experiences and backgrounds; this approach has stereotyped “other” females and created a racist, exclusionary tone within the novel. Given the varying critiques of racial ambiguity in the novel, the purpose of offering my racial reading of it is not to determine whether a specific female character was intended by the author to be white or not; to me, both options are possible since the writer was historically positioned in an imperialist, racially-mixed society. But my analysis aims to explore how racial otherness is represented in this proto-feminist portrayal; Bertha Mason and Blanche Ingram, who are assigned racial otherness in the novel, are portrayed restrictively and stereotypically as morally-corrupt, yet seductive sexual rivals whose experiences are only narrated in
parallel with Jane’s. This problematic approach to otherness in the novel, I argue, was adopted by the ideology of “Sisterhood” when it began the attempt to reflect more inclusive representations of female bonds.

I will also analyze an adaptation of the novel by James Willing and Leonard Rae as a play (1879). This adaptation attempts to modify the way female bonds were portrayed in the novel with regard to the exclusion of “other” females for being consistently portrayed as Jane’s rivals. At the time of the play, feminist “Sisterhood” had not yet been coined to refer to and reflect female bonds, but there were Victorian portrayals of sisterly bonds that considered the notion of inclusivity by combining “different” sisters as opposed to more obviously similar ones, like this adaptation of Jane Eyre that attempts to present a broader sense of collectivity amongst females. In the play, the novel’s events were adjusted in order to create seemingly more inclusive female bonds, focusing on the sisterly relationship between Jane Eyre and Blanche Ingram. I analyze the play in order to highlight how otherness plays into portrayals of female bonds. I will explain how the incorporation of Blanche’s otherness is meant to serve a collective identity she shares with Jane. Blanche’s stereotypical otherness in the play works against its feminist message; the play popularizes turning a blind eye to and minimization of female differences as a proto-feminist ideology, since the portrayal of these sisterly bonds depends on females’ role-playing to in order to construct a narrative of their collective identity.

In section 3, I will explore how the ideology of “Sisterhood” is demonstrated in Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place (1982). After the official coining of “Sisterhood” and its exclusionary approach to female bonding, writers of color have aimed to introduce
more diversity and individuality into the portrayal of females’ relationships as novels like *The Women of Brewster Place*, with its depictions of the diverse experiences of black women who empower each other, can be seen, as Astrid Henry notes, “as a challenge to feminism’s whiteness” (169). Naylor deconstructs color-blind and static portrayals of the racial “other” in white females’ discourse, since the women in Naylor’s novel are more diverse and their experiences are complex. In the novel, Naylor devotes a chapter to each of her black main female characters to describe their experiences separately as they, as diverse as she portrays them to be in terms of class, generation and background, live their sisterhoods and grapple with a variety of issues including struggles with poverty, racism, homophobia and classism. Nevertheless, I explain how Naylor’s novel is lacking in its representation of the experience of the “other” females through the novel’s portrayal of “Sisterhood”: the experiences of the lesbian Lorraine and Theresa and the bourgeois Kiswana Browne are underrepresented in terms of their otherness. This lack of demonstration in the novel seems to be a result of the ideology appropriated into feminist “Sisterhood” that exploits otherness in its mission of creating collective identities as a means to communicate female unity. Hence, the inclusion of “sisters” created by authors of color like Naylor partially counteract white portrayals of “Sisterhood” by communicating more diverse female experiences, but the insistence on counteractive collective identities is still problematic and continues to work against an authentic communication of otherness in feminist portrayals.

In section 4, I explore how the ideology of “Sisterhood” is still problematic up to our present day by analyzing Liane Moriarty’s novel *Big Little Lies* (2004), a novel that demonstrates bonds among white female characters who team up against male
oppression. In the novel, Jane Chapman is the low-middle class “other” in relation to the higher-class females she bonds with. Throughout Moriarty’s work, the ideology of “Sisterhood” proves itself as restrictive of the experiences of all the females engaged it. The relationships among the novels’ female figures and their experiences are mutually tied to the problem of male oppression and therefore “Sisterhood” appears as limited and exclusionary; it is based on shared oppression and the other dimensions of the female characters’ life experiences are not thoroughly portrayed. These different dimensions, like some of these female characters’ jobs, are only briefly mentioned. Jane’s social experience as the “other,” the economically unstable female character, is an ambiguous part of the novel as it is only briefly brought up by her mother. A dramatic adaptation of the novel as a TV miniseries (2017), that I will also look at, incorporates a black female character into the sisterhoods that the novel initiates amongst its white females, aiming to broaden the range of the feminist inclusivity of “Sisterhood.” Nevertheless, the miniseries received criticisms of its representation of racial otherness in the sisterly relationships formed among the female characters, as some have referred to the miniseries as being color-blind through its portrayal of the only black female character Bonnie Carlson. Her point of view and background are lacking and ambiguous in the miniseries as it attempts to maintain her characterization, regardless of her representation as a black woman, and to emphasize the similarity of her situation to those of the other white female characters with whom she bonds in the miniseries’ psychological battle against victimization by male dominance.

Viewing all these works together along with considering the points of view they reflect outline the problematic aspects of the ideology of feminist “Sisterhood” that
continued throughout multiple generations. The ideology of “Sisterhood” reflects sexist and racist tones due to its underrepresentation of otherness within the limited range of female issues this ideology focuses on for the sake of portraying similar “sisters” and constructing collective identities. Nevertheless, the investment in representing female bonds has undoubtedly shed light on important female issues and models of experience. But the insistence on collectivity throughout the ideology of “Sisterhood” is at odds with the goal of recognizing and promoting multiple and fluid female identities, since a female’s individuality cannot be attained when she is categorized by the assignment of a fixed collective identity that reflects an ideology initiated to victimize her.
Section 2: The Ideology of “Sisterhood” in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and its Theatrical Adaptation by James Willing and Leonard Rae

Brontë’s Jane Eyre has received various opinions about whether the novel could be considered a feminist one, up until the current third/fourth wave of feminism. Written before the official beginning of feminist movements in the UK and the US, the novel raises important questions about female relationships and anticipates many of the problems associated with the ideology of “Sisterhood” that communicates female bonds and experiences within different political, literary and filmic domains. If a reader is to examine the novel from a feminist lens, the novel appears exclusionary in its portrayal of female experiences and bonds with each other, which makes the novel’s representations of females’ individuality and bonding highly controversial and renders such portrayals as easily deconstructed. The novel’s problem of being exclusionary of diverse female’s experiences begins with the fact that, as Virginia Woolf argues, “Always to be a governess and always to be in love is a serious limitation in a world which is full, after all, of people who are neither one nor the other” (462). Such statement by a female critic implies that the novel’s protagonist, Jane Eyre, is difficult to relate to the majority of female readers due to the novel’s restriction of female experiences since it invests in victimizing both Jane and her “other” female rivals as well as emphasizing Jane’s commonalities with other females in the novel. In order to trace such exclusive nature that extends to the portrayal of the sisterly relations formed between Jane and some of the novel’s female characters, a reader should begin with addressing the problem of the novel’s exploitation of racial otherness in order to serve the portrayal of Jane’s experience with her “other” rivals. The female characters who are assigned descriptions
of dark complexions and physicality, mainly Blanche Ingram and Bertha Mason, represent the racial “other” in relation to “fair” Jane. Racial otherness presents as a factor that fuels the rivalry between the morally corrupt yet exotically seductive “brown” Blanche and Bertha and the plain yet virtuous “fair” one. Therefore, race is used superficially as an aesthetic and moral discrimination tool, which contributes to the formation of the novel’s racist tone regarding its approach to the “other” female who is objectified and stereotyped. This restrictive view of Blanche and Bertha as Jane’s rivals imposes the exclusionary nature of “Sisterhood” in the novel; a “dark” female is objectified by being represented merely through her stereotype as a morally-corrupt female rival with an exotic beauty. Patricia McKee notes that, throughout the novel, “whereas the dark woman contaminates whites, the white woman exercises influence over them” (71). Jane’s relationship with her cousins, Diana and Mary, as Jane states, comes as a result of “the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles” (Brontë 312). The language used in describing Jane’s relationship with her cousins is one that communicates a problematic ideology of portraying sisterly relations based on females’ commonalities: an approach that reduces the complexity of female identity by presenting women as types.

Given that the novel predates the conceptualization of “Sisterhood” within feminist studies, it could have been possible that, as Bonnie Zare argues, “if Brontë were writing in twentieth century she would have resolved the story by having Jane find contentment in the company of her sisters [Diana and Mary] at Marsh End” (215). Another critical sisterhood is formed in the novel amongst Jane, Miss Temple and Helen Burns; Zare emphasizes that “while the text does not overtly endorse female-to-female romantic
union, it is nonetheless significant that Miss Temple’s, Helen’s, and Jane’s intimacy leaves the reader with a lasting memory of strong sisterhood” (219). Nevertheless, the ideological implications of female bonds in the novel are problematic for some readers as they highlight the exploitation of racial otherness in white feminist portrayals. In “Reading Jane Eyre while Black,” an article by Tyrese L. Coleman on lithub.com, she states, “Much has been written about Jane Eyre and its revolutionary feminism. But many of these readings are not intersectional. Instead, they promote a particular understanding of white feminism, one that erases women of color and fails to consider the demeaning ways Brontë draws any woman who isn’t white. A present-day analysis of Jane Eyre that does not address the racial complexities of this book is being deliberately dismissive of readers like me” (2017). Women of color, like Coleman, would note how Jane portrays the white female characters with whom she feels a bond as opposed to her description of dark-complexioned Blanche. Jane notes that Miss Temple is “naturally pale as marble” (Brontë 60), Helen Burns’ face is “pale and bloodless” (68), and Jane’s cousins’ faces are “fair complexioned […] full of distinction and intelligence” (Brontë 299). On the other hand, Jane describes her rival, Blanche, who has an “olive complexion, dark and clear” (Brontë 199), by stating, “She was not good; she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her” (Brontë 120). Accordingly, Coleman argues, “Brontë starts her own trick, one we will see her practice throughout the book, of illustrating untoward and morally corrupt characters in terms of their relationship to nonwhiteness or non-Englishness,” and she further notes Brontë’s
exploitation of racial otherness in a manner that communicates an exclusive sisterhood to female readers of color like Coleman who admits, “I would be barred from ever seeing any part of myself in Jane, because to be Jane would mean to be in direct opposition to myself” (2017). This statement by Coleman problematizes white feminist portrayals that fail to communicate authentic representations of women of color, since these portrayals silence “other” women by objectifying them within restrictive identity molds, stereotyping them and exploiting their experiences. Subsequent feminist portrayals of “Sisterhood” that include “other” females are meant to oppose such discriminatory approach to otherness that Coleman points out. Ironically, as I will further demonstrate in this essay, the inclusion of otherness in depictions of sisterly bonds continues to underrepresent and exploit the portrayals of the “other” female as a means to establish a broader sense of collectivity among females.

In order to explore this approach that was adopted by the ideology of “Sisterhood” regarding the experiences of “other” females, the view point from which Blanche and Bertha are represented in the novel shall be examined. Since the novel is narrated through Jane’s point of view that focuses on her experience as a reflection of male-oppression, her rivals, Blanche and Bertha, lose their value as multi-dimensional characters through Jane’s restrictive view point. Namely, Blanche and Bertha, despite their representation as the “other,” are portrayed in terms of their shared experiences with Jane as her rivals and as victims of Rochester’s manipulation, while they are both silenced in the novel since their backgrounds are presented to Jane (and the reader) by Rochester who further emphasizes their stereotypes as corrupt and seductive women. This restrictive portrayal of the experience of the “other” as a sexual rival causes the exploitation of racial
otherness by presenting it as an aesthetic aspect, as both Bertha, before Rochester imprisons her, and Blanche are represented as the exotically beautiful, yet morally unattractive seducers of men. Thus, Rochester, as Susan Meyer argues, “directly compares Blanche to African women,” and he expresses his fascination with Blanche’s beauty “when he describes Blanche to Jane to as ‘a real strapper… big, brown, and buxom’” (500). Nevertheless, when racial otherness is imposed on these female characters, it is undermined by the novel’s attempt to represent it as a mere physical difference instead of an identity factor that distinctively influences a female’s life experiences beyond the novel’s white portrayal of female issues. Although Jane’s “Sisterhood” explicitly excludes “other” women as a requirement of narrating Jane’s story with her rivals and Rochester, the novel exploits racial otherness to imply and build towards the conclusion that even different females can share a larger narrative of collectivity that subsumes all female experience.

Similarly, the character of Bertha Mason is criticized through her portrayal as the racial “other” in the novel by postcolonial critics. Lisa Sternlieb argues, “some critics have moved away from reading Bertha as Jane’s dark double and see her instead as the racial other. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reads Jane as gaining her position as the first great heroine of the Victorian novel at the expense of the colonized Bertha” (470). Similar to Blanche’s, Bertha’s experience as the “other” lacks multiple dimensions by being viewed restrictively through the aspects it has in common with Jane’s experiences. Bertha’s encounter with domestic oppression and her imprisonment by Rochester coincides with Jane’s experience throughout her childhood when she was confined in the red-room as her cousin, John Reed, abuses her. Bertha’s running on all fours in the attic,
as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, “recalls not only Jane the governess, whose only relief from mental pain was to pace ‘backwards and forwards’ […] but also that ‘bad animal’ who was ten-year-old Jane, imprisoned in the red-room, howling and mad” (480). This assimilative incorporation of otherness restricts the authority of the “other” as Bertha’s point of view and voice are completely missing from the novel; her portrayal as the “other” is exploited in documenting the collective experience of the male-oppressed woman, as Rochester narrates her story from his unreliable point of view and objectifies her “brown” body that attracted him at one point. Rochester objectifies and stereotypes Jane’s rivals, the “other” females, by stating that Bertha is a “fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram tall, dark, and majestic” (Brontë 273). In addition, the absurd portrayal of Bertha’s plight as an intellectually disabled individual who is described as a mad woman with animalistic behavior objectifies her as well and undermines the reality of her experience, as she is also “other” regarding her mental state. Her imprisonment in Rochester’s house while Jane witnesses her mental instability is a scene merely created for Rochester to gloss over her experience by stating, “She was only mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too, a complete dumb idiot” (Brontë 274), and for Jane as well to claim a feeling of a common experience since Bertha reminds her of her torturous past. Ironically, some critics, according to Zare, “recuperate Jane Eyre as a feminist text by focusing on the book’s middle section, in which Jane rebels against objectification and shows that she and Bertha are similar” (215). When parallels are drawn between Jane and Bertha as being victims of male oppression, the cost becomes the novel’s failure to present Bertha as an individual with a distinctive voice. Hence,
Bertha’s characterization through her otherness is used as an aid to communicate a collective identity, and not as a subject matter in itself.

*Jane Eyre* seems to function as a novel that communicates the idea of female oppression, but does so in a manner that prohibits many female readers, in all their diversity, from relating to the experiences that are represented through female stereotypes. Bertha and Blanche are no more than “partial depictions of persons” (80), as McKee notes, since their experiences are only viewed in parallel with Jane’s. Broader representations of Bertha and Blanche are denied by the restrictive lens by which Jane portrays them and the offensive patriarchal voice of Rochester. Bertha and her plight, Reginald Watson emphasizes, “were considered noteworthy, but only if she was linked to the true and ‘pure’ white womanhood represented by Jane Eyre” (464); in other words, only if she was not portrayed as a racial “other” in the novel: a female who mainly represents her role in Jane’s narrative as her morally corrupt seductive rival.

In 1879, after Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* was published, James Willing and Leonard Rae adopted the novel for a theatrical performance that focuses on sisterly bonds between Jane and Blanche as a means to establish, as Helena Michie in her article “There is no Friend like a Sister: Sisterhood as Sexual Difference” argues, “an alternative family for Jane that is based on sisterhood rather than marriage” (401). The authors of this adaptation seem to build on the conclusion that the novel implies: even “other” females that Jane excludes from her sisterly relations by her narrative share a common ground with her. The play’s authors twist the situation between Jane and Blanche in the novel by turning their rivalry into a sisterly relationship. In the play, Blanche’s character differs between the play and the novel, but she is still an “other” female in the play in
comparison to Jane who continues to represent the “essence” of womanhood by being a “pure” female in the play just as she had in the novel. The play’s Blanche is sexually “ruined” by John Reed, who is represented as an adult in the play, after Blanche feels distressed by Rochester’s choice of Jane as a lover. As Blanche is left to starve and suffer, she meets Jane, and they turn their rivalry into a sisterly relation and even call each other “sisters.” Jane addresses Blanche, “I long for the ties of home and friends—Blanche, will you be my sister?” and Blanche responds, “your—Sister—am I awake […] I came here to curse you—and I stay to bless—to adore you” (Willing and Rae 330). Jane offers to share her home with Blanche who expresses her gratitude to Jane by guiding her to Rochester as she encourages her to pursue her love for him despite his loss of eyesight after Bertha burns his house. This theatrical adaptation, as Michie argues, “simultaneously dramatizes and domesticates the anger of the novel by containing it within a master trope of sisterhood” (404). Nevertheless, the play seems to exploit the experience of Blanche as a means to emphasize female unity and a collective identity between Blanche and Jane. Namely, the play incorporates otherness in order to exploit it towards a conclusion that these two women are similarly male-oppressed after all. Thus, Blanche’s experience in the play seems identical to Jane’s as Blanche emphasizes the similarity of her situation to Jane’s by addressing her, “‘Then you too have been deceived?’” (329). Similarly, the authors of the play highlight the similarities of Blanche’s experience to Jane’s in order to strengthen the base of their sisterly relationship as Blanche’s homelessness is presented as a means to rekindle the reader’s memory of Jane’s similar situation in the novel. The play brings together opposite sexist female stereotypes in a sisterly bond, which facilitates highlighting these stereotypical females’
common experience as male-oppressed rivals, and overlooking their individualistic differences. Throughout communicating a collective identity, Michie notes, “sociological constructions of sisterhood depend on the notion of role-play” (405). Hence, a “sister” is only a partial depiction of herself since the “other” female, through representations of this ideology, cannot be defined by her otherness when envisioned in a “Sisterhood.” The portrayal of sisterly relations in the play promotes this restrictive idea of sisters’ role-play that invests in the construction of a narrative of their collective identity: this approach reflects the ideology adopted by feminist representations of “Sisterhood.”

Before Blanche and Jane declare their sisterly bond in the play, Blanche addresses Jane: “I loved Fairfax Rochester – You, with your smooth face and mock humility tore his love away and crushed my heart. John Reed poured into my ears the taunt – I was a jilted woman. Furious at Rochester’s preference for you, I threw myself into the tempter’s arms” (Willing and Rae 329). The introduction of Blanche’s stereotypical, melodramatic experience as the “other” in the play is meant to lead to the mutual compassion she shares with Jane after the latter mentions that she was also deceived by Rochester who was hiding his marriage to Bertha from her. Blanche, triggered by her newly established sisterly emotions and compassion with Jane who is similarly oppressed, helps in reuniting Jane with Rochester. Noting such restrictive portrayals of sisterly bonds, Michie argues, “if we can rewrite sexual difference to include the difference(es) between women, we can also begin to reframe Simon de Beauvoir’s influential notion of the ‘other,’ and begin to do the work of looking at what otherness might mean if it were applied to women’s relations with each other” (404). The stereotypical portrayals of females throughout their bond in the play should raise the
awareness to start considering the opposite idea of allowing difference to function thoroughly as it obtains the ability to define a bond instead of a restrictive collective identity. Representations of female bonds need to become spaces where a distinctive female’s reality is enough on its own to connect her to other females instead of subsuming her experiences and identity into a restrictive narrative of collectivity.

Accordingly, Michie realizes that “contemporary feminists need themselves to provide rhetorical and political room for the expression of female difference” (407); representations of female bonds should offer richer and more authentic contexts to express and value these differences and deconstruct female stereotypes by communicating female identity as fluid. If representations of female bonds could lead to a conclusion that each female is different rather than a focus on highlighting and imposing collective identities, sexist and racist female stereotypes would begin to dissolve. In addition, it appears that the ideology that “Sisterhood” adopts of assimilating females to each other tends to restrict the experiences of both “other” females and those who are portrayed as ordinary in comparison. Accordingly, as Michie argues, “Jane must learn that she is not Helen, Eliza, Georgina, Blanche, or Bertha before she can emerge as an independent woman” (403). Though both *Jane Eyre* and its theatrical adaptation were written before the official coinage of the feminist term “Sisterhood,” its representations of Jane’s relationships with “other” women prefigure many of the difficulties that would continue to make the concept problematic well into the era of second and third wave feminism.
Section 3: Black “Sisterhood” in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*

By the end of the second wave of feminism and the beginning of its third, numerous women of color fought to raise their voices in the literary and political fields in order to move the racially “other” female, who was confined and stereotyped by white representations of a “Sisterhood” that overlooked her experiences, from the margins to the center of feminist theory. When bell hooks in her essay “Postmodern Blackness” emphasizes “the significance of ‘the authority of experience,’” (2514) she speaks on the behalf of the black population in general, and black females in particular, including authors. The early feminist exclusion and marginalization of the work and experiences of black women has made their voices invisible and they could not find themselves in “Sisterhood,” nor were they given as many chances to communicate their experiences.

Michie, in her article “Not One of the Family,” attempts to deconstruct representations of the “other” female in white feminist portrayals of “Sisterhood” as she wonders, “What about the woman who is not one of this family, the ‘other woman’ who comes from outside to disrupt the home? […] The Other woman is the mistress, the rival, the sexual threat. She is, however, Other in other senses: she is the third world woman, the lesbian, the antifeminist, the one who is excluded from or resists the embrace of Oedipal sisterhood” (60). Thus, in keeping with the attempt to open representation to “other” women, Gloria Naylor in her novel *The Women of Brewster Place* presents female characters with a diverse range of experiences. Naylor assigns a chapter for each of her female characters to describe their diverse experiences separately.

The novel paints a picture of Brewster Place as a place born out of a racist and classist community. The narrator states, “Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored
daughters” (Naylor 4), foreshadowing the bonds that would be formed between these daughters/sisters as the novel progresses. As these women live in one place, they begin to develop their security and find strength through each other’s company and shared compassion. The novel, nevertheless, reflects the reality of a patriarchal world as most of these female characters are represented as male-oppressed, in various forms, throughout their experiences. However, the novel deconstructs white portrayals of “other” females by communicating more multidimensionality and diversity in a black female’s experience. Mattie Michael is one of the main characters in the novel and she provides most of the other female characters with feelings of security and compassion. Mattie is first kicked out of her family’s home after her father discovers her shameful pregnancy and physically abuses her, which eventually leads her to live with an old woman, Miss Eva Turner, whom she befriends for 30 years. After Miss Eva’s death, Mattie buys her house. Nevertheless, she arrives to live in Brewster Place in poverty as a result of losing this house in efforts to bail her son, who eventually leaves her, out of jail. Etta Mae Johnson is another female character who goes through multiple relationships with men but finds eventual stability through the support of her friend Mattie. Etta Mae’s characterization also reflects her struggle with racism; the narrator states, “Etta spent her teenage years in constant trouble. Rock Vale had no place for a black woman who was not only unwilling to play by the rules, but her spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist” (Naylor 59). This portrayal of Etta Mae’s character implies a defiance against the blindness by which white feminist portrayals have approached racial otherness; Etta Mae refuses to “play by the rules” by accepting a white culture with its limited and hegemonic scope of perspectives. This representation of multidimensionality
in portraying female characters is reminiscent of bell hooks’ argument in her essay “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women” in which she imagines a movement in which “our energies would not be concentrated on the issue of equality with men or solely on the struggle to resist male domination” (47). Another attempt to deconstruct white female portrayals is evident in Kiswana Browne’s chapter. There is a strong indication of a racial oppression that Kiswana goes through in her predominantly white society in Linden Hills, which she escapes by moving to Brewster Place, a community that is mostly occupied by poor black people and where she can live her true blackness.

After Kiswana moves to Brewster Place, her mother comes to visit her and she addresses her, “sometimes we don’t hear from you in two weeks—anything could happen—especially living among these people” (Naylor 83), and Kiswana responds, “What do you mean, these people. They’re my people and yours, too, Mama—We’re all black. But maybe you’ve forgotten that over in Linden Hills […] My place was in the streets with my own people, fighting for equality and a better community” (Naylor 83). Through this demonstration of Kiswana’s concerns and her response to her mother, Naylor emphasizes racial otherness as a distinctive factor that is usually underrepresented by white feminist portrayals and their blind depictions of women of color. Accordingly, Naylor’s writing, as Judith Branzburg argues, “takes its substance from the experience of being black, not non-white” (116). Kiswana paints her mother as a black woman who is absorbed by the perspectives and attitudes of a white culture that silences racial identity as a way of life. The narrator states, “Kiswana had still insisted on cutting her own hair, but it was so thin and fine textured, it refused to thicken even after she washed it. So she had to brush it up and spray it with lacquer to keep it from lying flat. She never forgave [her brother] for
telling her that she didn’t look African” (Naylor 81). Her mother addresses her; “I remember how worried you had me, putting all that lacquered hair spray on your head. I thought you were going to get lung cancer—trying to be what you’re not” and Kiswana replies; “I’d rather be dead than be like you—a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black!” (Naylor 85). Through such statement, Kiswana criticizes the model of her mother who, as a result of subjecting herself to the mindset of a white society, is unable to fully acknowledge her distinctive identity as a black female. Thus, in Naylor’s novel, the attempt to deconstruct white female portrayals is made successful by focusing the majority of events on navigating diverse black females’ experiences and bonds.

Kathleen Puhr argues that, in Naylor’s novel, “a network of females serves as protagonist in Naylor’s collection of six interwoven stories” (520). Although Naylor provides various angles to look at the experiences of women of color, the novel’s portrayal of “Sisterhood” nonetheless remains beholden to an ideology that values a collective identity as the basis of female bonding. The female characters unite in order to construct a single protagonist whose portrayal requires a minimization of otherness. Accordingly, the way the otherness of the lesbian couple, Lorraine and Theresa, has been perceived by Mattie Michael shall be examined as a reflection of the ideological limitations of “Sisterhood.” When the lesbian couple, Lorraine and Theresa, comes to Brewster Place and encounter homophobia and rejection, Mattie begins sympathizing with them by addressing Etta Mae, “Well, I’ve loved women, too. There was Miss Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery as you can get, I’ve loved you practically all my life […] I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man […] And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did” (Naylor 141).
After Etta Mae brings up the fact that a homosexual love is an “other” kind of love, Mattie responds, “Maybe it’s not so different […] Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it, ‘cause they know deep down it’s not so different after all” (Naylor 141). Mattie’s attempts to reduce the couple’s difference foreshadows the female bonding that occurs later in the narrative: it is after Lorraine is raped that the rest of the female characters, who struggle through the patriarchy in Brewster Place, could finally envision her within a “Sisterhood.” When Mattie implies a possibility of a common lens through which these female characters can look at lesbian women by emphasizing that they should also be looked at as victimized sisters by viewing them throughout the binary opposition (men vs. women), she sets the tone for the novel’s conclusion that all these women share a collective identity of being male-oppressed and devalued in a sexist society. This implied viewpoint by Mattie explains the novel’s use of Lorraine’s experience as the “other” for the sake of building the novel up towards its end. Namely, the rape incident seems imposed on the “other” female to decrease her otherness within a seemingly more significant collective identity. Accordingly, although Theresa accepts her difference and realizes it, the novel does not invest in portraying her experience as a different female since characterizing Lorraine throughout her collective identity is the novel’s priority, and is in conflict with Theresa’s insistence that both she and Lorraine are different. Thereby, Theresa’s portrayal as the “other” remains underrepresented for the sake of validating Lorraine’s sense of her collective identity after her rape casts her as another victim of the male-dominated society that is oppressive to all Brewster Place’s women. Only after Lorraine’s rape does Naylor’s portrayal of Lorraine’s experience become paramount as the other women finally feel a bond with her; the narrator states,
“Every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of [Lorraine] the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of a cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of fitful sleep. Little girls woke up screaming, unable to be comforted by bewildered mothers who knew, and yet didn’t know, the reason of their daughters stolen sleep” (Naylor 176). Lorraine’s place in her newly established “Sisterhood” is also expressed in the novel’s party block, as recounted by Larry Andrews, in which all the female characters “join in an act of protest against the power of men over women (the gang-rape of the lesbian Lorraine), and, more broadly, against the barriers of racist and class oppression” (3). Her identity as the lesbian “other” loses its significance, and her collective identity as a black victim of male oppression within a race-oppressed community becomes of central importance and is what these women accept her for as they aim to communicate a common image throughout black “Sisterhood.” The diminishment of Lorraine’s identity as the “other” in this representation of a collective identity through “Sisterhood” is also evident in Lorraine’s language as she states, “Why should [Theresa] feel different from the people she lived around? Black people were all in the same boat” (Naylor 142). As an “other” female, Lorraine’s experience is objectified in the novel by presenting her as an embodiment of a collective identity that marginalizes her otherness. Lorraine even comes to Ciel, a woman who had never met Lorraine, in Ciel’s sleep and generates a strong sense of attachment. Ciel states, “There was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess. She didn’t look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was me […] And something bad had happened to me by the wall—I mean to her—something bad had happened to her” (Naylor 179). This collectivity sensed between Ciel and Lorraine is validated by Ciel’s
experience with her abusive, irresponsible ex-husband whose characterization contributes to the formation of the patriarchal society that contains and affects the novel’s black women, including Lorraine.

Branzburg argues, “Kiswana, the Black Power activist and the two lesbians are flat characters, especially Kiswana” (118). Kiswana represents the “other” bourgeois female who comes to Brewster Place to discover her blackness as she begins her mission to improve the economic and social situations of her black people. The portrayal of Kiswana’s character, as Branzburg argues, is not fully developed as “Naylor fails to show the seamless intermingling of the political and the personal and resorts to a lecture from Kiswana’s middle class and bourgeois, yet very proud mother” (118, 119). Kiswana’s characterization is not fully illustrative of the way her class shapes her differently from the rest of the females. Although her background is outlined by her mother, the portrayal of her identity as the “other” seems to mainly serve a larger collective identity of the race-oppressed patriarchal black society as opposed to communicating her distinctive experience from those of the women she bonds with. Although she is not necessarily as oppressed as these women, her characterization imposes a collective identity on her as the author invests in depicting her through her attempts to highlight the commonalities she shares with the other racially-oppressed women in a sexist society, including the incident when she defends Lorraine against the sexist attacks of C. C. Baker and the gang that later rapes Lorraine and leaves her to bleed in an ally. While defending Lorraine, Kiswana also gets verbally abused by the gang members, which casts both her and Lorraine as other victims of a patriarchal society. Throughout her underrepresented otherness and emphasized commonality, Kiswana can better see herself in a “Sisterhood”
with Lorraine and the rest of her oppressed sisters; indeed, Kiswana sees Lorraine’s blood on the wall after her abusive rape as her own, and the narrator states, “Kiswana looked down at the wet stone and her rain-soaked braids leaked onto the surface, spreading the dark stain. She wept and ran to throw the brick spotted with her blood out into the avenue” (Naylor 186). This emphasis on a collective identity coincides with Branzburg’s suggestion that “Naylor seems to have difficulty portraying women whose life choices or circumstances have separated them from the pain of financial struggle and heterosexual relations that mark all of Naylor’s other women” (119). Otherness in the novel is underrepresented in an effort to communicate a collective black “Sisterhood.”

Based on such observations of Naylor’s novel, although it represented a shift to more varied of black females’ experiences, “Sisterhood” continues to prove itself as problematic due to the focus on a collective identity that takes its substance from an underrepresentation of diversity and a reduction of otherness. Thereby, “Sisterhood” communicates a devaluation of otherness as a sufficient means to a female’s individuality and acceptance by her community. Naylor’s novel reflects the problem of “Sisterhood” as a gendered term that results in disempowering the female figure, despite the fact that her identity is complex and fluid, by confining her in a binary opposition with men by which she is assigned a collective identity of being victimized. Accordingly, Tingting Qi argues, “Feminist scholar Allison Weir (2008) reminds us that this collective identity for all women reduces the complexity of women’s identity as something that is given and objective. Women do not feel supported and safe, if they are assigned to be women” (329).
Section 4: Contemporary “Sisterhood” in Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies* and its Miniseries Adaptation on HBO

The ideological focus on a collective identity throughout females’ “Sisterhood” continues as an inseparable part from literary portrayals of female bonds. The search for commonalities amongst females, as explained throughout the previously analyzed works, has evidenced that the historical sentimental inception of “Sisterhood” as a resistance tool is ingrained in many of its portrayals as they tend to focus on females’ mutual victimization that takes several forms throughout their alliances. Accordingly, bell hooks, in her essay “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women,” argues, “the shift away from an emphasis on Sisterhood has occurred because many women, angered by the insistence on ‘common oppression,’ shared identity, sameness, criticized or dismissed feminist movement altogether” (44). Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies* (2004) can be looked at as a case study for bell hooks’ criticism of representations of “Sisterhood.” The novel portrays sisterly bonds among a group of white women based on their shared oppression within the domestic sphere of troubled motherhood and relations with men. Hooks emphasizes that “this concept of bonding directly reflects male supremacist thinking. Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim” (45). The investment in portraying such vision of a collective identity throughout shared victimization has always come at the expense of insufficient portrayals of other dimensions of female figures’ experiences. Throughout Moriarty’s novel, there is a demonstration of the two levels on which “Sisterhood” proves to communicate a restrictive ideology; both in relation to otherness represented by the character of Jane: the low-middle class single mother who comes to bond with relatively economically stable
female characters in an Australian city, as well as in regard to the general portrayal of female individuality communicated through the characters of the rest of the females with whom Jane bonds.

A demonstration of this exclusive ideology of “Sisterhood” that is based on a shared female victimization that affects the experiences of the novel’s female protagonists in general can be spotted in a conversation between Madeline and her husband Ed. Madeline addresses Ed: “They seem so different, Jane and Celeste, but I feel like they’re also sort of similar. I can’t quite work out how.” And Ed responds to her, “They are both damaged” (Moriarty 101). Although Madeline communicates that these two women are individuals who seem to have distinctive dimensions to their personalities, the novel focuses on their mutual victimization by the same male figure. Nevertheless, it can’t be denied that the female characters in this novel support each other through their different situations in many incidents, like when Celeste helps Madeline by paying her daughter, Abigail, a large amount of money to donate in order to stop her from auctioning off her virginity to serve a cause against child slavery, and when Madeline stands up for Jane and her son when he is falsely accused of bullying. But what reduces the value of these events and decreases the multidimensionality of the experiences of the women involved in them is that all these women are mainly portrayed as damaged by male oppression, which makes their actions towards one another seem sympathetic as they are tied to a mutual understanding of male oppression and the difficulties that come with it. Madeline seems to sympathize with Jane, in the incident regarding her son, for being a single mother, and Celeste helps Madeline in the problem with her daughter with the consideration of the parenting issues that Madeline faces with her irresponsible ex-husband. Thus, having the
plot revolving around male oppression makes it difficult for such female bonds in the novel to appear as inclusive of diverse female experiences since the novel seems to focus on how all these female characters are similar to one another throughout their hardships, and this similarity drives their actions towards each other. Some of these female characters’ experiences with their jobs are only briefly mentioned, since the novel’s priority is communicating a “Sisterhood” through mutual victimization. This lack of demonstration is noted in Quinn Keaney’s “The 9 Biggest Differences Between the Big Little Lies Novel and TV Show,” an online review on popsugar.com, that compares Moriarty’s novel with its miniseries adaptation. Keaney writes, “In the novel, Madeline references her part-time job helping out in the marketing department of local theater a few times in passing, but we don’t really get to see her in action,” and Keaney notes how the miniseries redeems such insufficiency of portrayal since “the show turns that small part of her life into its own full-blown storyline” (2017). The novel rarely discusses any other dimensions of the female characters’ experiences outside of the domestic realm that is troubled by male dominance. Celeste endures Perry’s abuse while constantly pulling up the excuse that he is a good father to her children, and she gives up her job as a lawyer as a fulfillment of his request.

Jane’s experience as the “other” female is portrayed only in relation to her oppression by Perry, as her situation as a lower-middle class female is only briefly pointed out by her mother, Di, as she converses with Madeline, with whom Jane deeply bonds. The novel minimizes a perspective on Jane’s otherness when Di addresses Madeline, “It’s true that Jane is doing a beautiful job bringing up Ziggy, and she supports herself, won’t take a cent from us! I slip money into her pockets like a pick pocket” (Moriarty 123). The only
aspect that introduces the reader to Jane’s psyche and point of view is the part of her experience that assimilates her to the women she bonds with: male oppression and dominance. Jane’s economical struggle as single mother is not expressed thoroughly from her personal perspective but through a brief comment by her mother. Jane only speaks of her sexual assault by Perry throughout her relationship with Madeline, who views her as a sister. Even Madeline, who stands out as the most supportive of the other female characters, portrays herself as a victim; when Ed mentions to her that Jane and Celeste are similar because they are both damaged, she responds, “I was damaged too? […] Yes I was! […] I was heartbroken when you met me,” and the narrator comments, “She wanted to be interesting and damaged too” (Moriarty 101). Such point of view of Madeline’s about herself validates the possibility that she senses a shared victimization between herself and the women she bonds with and defends, and her protective nature of other females seems to function as a rebellious resistance strategy against her own insecurities after her ex-husband leaves her. Accordingly, after Jane’s mother talks to Madeline about Jane’s heartbreak by her ex-lover, Madeline responds, “I’ll keep an eye on Jane […] I promise,” and an interviewee comments, “Madeline sort of adopted Jane. She was like a crazy, protective big sister. If you ever said anything even mildly critical of her Jane, you’d have Madeline snarling at you like a rabid dog” (Moriarty 125).

Similarly, the incident of bullying is another dimension of Jane’s experience that is exploited for the sake of contributing to her sense of a collective identity. The accusation of bullying is reduced by the end of the novel to the effect of Perry’s abuse of Celeste, as Max, their son, is revealed as the class’ bully as a result of witnessing his father’s actions. Alternatively, this incident could have been used to explore intersectional class issues.
Ziggy, Jane’s son, is falsely accused of bullying after he and his mom arrive as newcomers. Yet such classist assumptions about the lower-middle class Jane and her son are not explicitly explored in the novel or the miniseries. Instead, the incident is used as a tool to strengthen the effect of a shared male oppression and its harmfulness when it could have also been explored from Jane’s perspective as the “other.” Even Jane herself, before her son’s innocence is revealed, starts wondering whether her son might have inherited his father’s genes that are responsible of the abusive nature; she states, “it even occurred to me, that he might, that he might have, you know, inherited something from his… his father […] Whenever Ziggy behaves in a way that seems out of character, I worry. Like on orientation day, when Amabella said he choked her” (Moriarty 208). Jane does not consider and emphasize the possibility that her son is only facing a classist discrimination by the parents and the children of that society that is mostly populated by wealthy people. “Sisterhood,” we recall, was an attribute that second wave feminist critic Cheri Register valued in literary texts, yet she also warned, “Before literature can begin to perform the other functions […] it must express female experience authentically, in all its variety” (19).

Bonnie Carlson is another female character in the novel whose main role contributes to highlighting a collective identity that she shares with the other female characters within a “Sisterhood.” Bonnie pushes Perry, Celeste and Jane’s abuser, down the stairs and causes his death. She feels enraged by his abusive treatment of Celeste, which reminds her of her own oppressive childhood when she witnessed her mother being abused by her father. Being Madeline’s ex-husband’s, Nathan’s, wife, she is portrayed restrictively throughout the novel as Madeline’s sexual rival, and the view of her
character is limited by the bits and pieces of information that other people in the novel gossip about her. She is mysteriously portrayed as a peaceful character with a lack of personal perspective; for example, readers get some hints about her life through conversations among characters like Abigail and her mother Madeline; “‘Bonnie and her mum are both members of Amnesty International,’ said Abigail. ‘Of course they are,’ murmured Madeline” (Moriarty 114). This lack of a personal perspective on her life, as the readers mostly learn about her from other characters, marks Bonnie as a flat character throughout the novel until she murders Perry. Only when Bonnie loses her calm by the end of the novel does the mystery around her personal experience unravel and both the reader and the other characters of the novel understand more about her life choices that have been briefly outlined throughout the plot. Bonnie’s interest in the call for human rights and her meditation are deeply connected to her domestic abuse as a child within a patriarchal household. This aspect of her life enables her to join a “Sisterhood” by the end of the novel as Madeline and Celeste sympathize with her after she exposes her motive for killing Perry and they learn that she is another victim of the male oppression that dominated their lives in various forms. Bonnie turns from a rival to a sister as the narrator states, “How could [Madeline] possibly explain to Ed that she didn’t particularly like Bonnie, or understand her, but that it turned out that she was prepared to lie for her in the same way that she would automatically lie for Ed, her children, her mother? It turned out, as strange and improbable as it seemed, that Bonnie was family too” (Moriarty 460). Bonnie’s collective identity provides the only view of her personal perspective as her experience remains lacking in multidimensionality.
Although “Sisterhood” attempts to become more inclusive with integrating more diversity into its portrayals, its foremost ideology is creating collective identities while using the minimization of differences as a means to an end. Hence, “Sisterhood” has always seemed, as Elizabeth Evans argues, to emphasize “relationships between women that are horizontal instead of vertical” (111). Accordingly, as Danielle M. Giffort argues, “diversity and inclusivity remain unresolved challenges in the feminist movement” (114). Another problem that reflects the conflict between “Sisterhood” and the sense of inclusivity is apparent in the miniseries adaptation of Moriarty’s novel. The miniseries incorporates several changes to the novel’s main plot regarding the setting of events, in addition to several subplots and minor changes of details. The biggest change to the novel’s plot was the miniseries’ inclusion of a black female actress to play the character of Bonnie Carlson. Interestingly, a black actress was chosen to play the character of Bonnie who is perceived as a rival as well as being the least multi-dimensional female character in the novel with the lack of personal perspective surrounding her experience up until her collective identity is revealed. Given such characterization and choice of actress, “Sisterhood” proves the circularity of its ideology that only goes as far as incorporating otherness into female portrayals in order to restrict and exploit it towards portraying collective female identities. In this white portrayal of “Sisterhood,” race continues to serve as an aesthetic difference as opposed to it being represented as significant factor that effects distinctive female experiences. In the miniseries, Bonnie, as a black female, communicates a stereotypical image of the seductive woman of color that is mostly defined by her sexual energy and exotic beauty, and this portrayal is reinforced through the language of other female characters in the miniseries and their comments on
her physical appearance and ability to attract men. This portrayal of the black Bonnie has created a base for the criticism directed towards the miniseries’ colorblind racial inclusion. In her article “‘Bonnie and The Brilliant Racial ‘Tension of Big Little Lies’’” on Huffington Post website, Zeba Blay writes about the portrayal of Bonnie’s race: “it’s a tedious color-blind approach to diversity. As Refinery29 writer Sesali Bowen expressed it, glossing over Bonnie’s ethnicity merely added ‘diversity in visibility only,’ presenting race ‘as a mere aesthetic difference between people, not one that affects how they interact with the rest of the world’” (2017). Although the miniseries incorporates changes in the novel’s plot, it fails to recognize that a change of race suggests different portrayals of female reality. For instance, regarding Max’s bullying of Bonnie’s daughter, Skye, Evette Dionne argues in her article “‘Big Little Lies’ Biggest Flaw Was Its Treatment of Bonnie” on Bustle.com, “if [Skye] is bullied about having a black mom or having darker skin, the show fails to mention it. Yet biracial children are subject to bullying” (2017). Bonnie’s representation as the non-talkative, usually static female character until her final breakdown along with the exposure of her collective identity by the end of the miniseries prohibits an authentic representation of Bonnie’s experience that would be more elaborate if her race would be acknowledged as an effective factor that serves her portrayal as an individual throughout the miniseries. The multi-dimensionality of her experience as a black female is caused by her portrayal as another victim of male abuse through the pretense of colorblindness. To highlight Bonnie’s limited characterization in the miniseries and the failure of “Sisterhood” to acknowledge otherness, Blay argues, “Bonnie, with tattoos and waist length braids, is the only black mom amongst a slew of predominantly older, white mothers, and it’s a point that, conspicuously, never comes up”
Both the novel and the miniseries remain invested in the ideology of “Sisterhood,” with its emphasis on a collective identity, that prevents females from understanding that emphasizing and accepting each other’s differences would promote unconditional female bonding more authentically. Accordingly, Qi notes that feminist representations of “Sisterhood” “overemphasize shared characteristics among women” and ignore “the complexity and plurality of identities” (329).

Section 5: Conclusion

By tracing the representations of “Sisterhood” and its operative ideology throughout different generations, I conclude that the term “Sisterhood” is difficult to redeem as inclusive through feminist portrayals because, due to its ideological stance that focuses on communicating a collective identity as a means to assert female authority, it fails, to varying extents, to sufficiently represent the differences among females and the multidimensionality of their experiences. Recent calls for the revival of “Sisterhood” through media and social networking have been avoided by many in the younger generation who are alert to the negative connotations attached to “Sisterhood” throughout the feminist movement. A growing awareness of the complexity of female identity and gender roles has developed: many women now seek a less gendered and more inclusive term for their bonding than “Sisterhood,” which was initiated to communicate and prioritize sameness, and instead seek to individualize the female figure. “Sisterhood” is rejected, as Evans argues, “by those who view the idea of female solidarity as outdated in this highly individualistic age” (112). Accordingly, the problem with “Sisterhood” seems to transcend its critiques as racist and color-blind to prove that the root of its problem stems from its general underrepresentation of any form of otherness through its emphasis
on patterns of sameness amongst females. Numerous fictional representations of “Sisterhood” have helped in demonstrating the ideological flaws within “Sisterhood” that lead to its political incorrectness in relation to female empowerment. Accordingly, Susan Weisser and Jennifer Fleischer emphasize the rejection of the term “Sisterhood” and its ideological connotations as they consider “how to cross similarity with difference, to reach a ‘family relation’ that is neither as sentimentalized as sisterhood nor as distant as strangers” (14). Despite these important critiques of the concept of “Sisterhood” and the rejection of such a term, it can’t be denied that the historical literary investment in representing female bonds has helped in shedding some light on many female issues and experiences. If literary portrayals of female bonds would take a different approach to differences among females by basing these females’ connections on their thorough understanding of each other’s’ differences instead of insisting that different females are eventually the same, then the idea of female bonding would probably have a better reputation and influence today. The hoped-for change in the ideology of carrying out female unity should begin from the consideration that female bonds are not felt solely among activists and female fictional characters; they also extend to a variety of female readers and viewers who expect authentic and empowering representations of their experiences and identities. Hence, it is important to portray females’ experiences multidimensionally and not horizontally, and invest in the illustration and acceptance of diversity as a means to bonding that rejects the restrictive molds of a collective identity. Each of the works I analyzed in this essay concludes that every female represented throughout the ideology of “Sisterhood” is merely performing a role in the process of forming a narrative of their collective identity. Thus, through representations of
“Sisterhood,” each woman who acquires a collective identity is given a position to speak for her “sister.” Namely, these “sisters” become authorized to identify each other. Accordingly, in a parallel political sphere, the ideology of “Sisterhood” proves problematic since, as Linda Alcoff argues, its “scholarship has a liberatory agenda that almost requires that women scholars speak on behalf of other women, and yet the dangers of speaking across differences of race, culture, sexuality, and power are becoming increasingly clear to all” (286). Feminist fictional representations, as Sharon Monteith realizes, should “work to compensate for a lack of hope in feminist movements, for a death of political activity, and for lack of faith in contemporary society” (74). Thus, an author or producer should no longer hold onto the disempowering notion of a collective identity that communicates a fixation of a female’s identity as a natural victim. Fictional representations of female bonds should allow each female to speak for herself while her characterization is thoroughly demonstrative of her distinctive aspects. A female character should derive her sense of bonding with other females from feeling empowered by her own distinctive sense of individuality and the diverse experiences that her female mates have to offer in a way that reflects her identity as plural and fluid against a collectivity that imposes a definitive mold that confines female identity.
Works Cited


