CHAPTER V

THE GOTHIC AND THE AMERICAN IDENTITY IN

BECAUSE IT IS BITTER AND BECAUSE IT IS MY HEART AND AMERICAN APPETITE

The term American dream was coined by James. T Adam who in the work, The Epic of America (1931) mentions that irrespective of individuals’ class, position, Americans need to strive for equality:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

He further tries to define American dream in this manner:

The American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily, it has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as a man an woman, unhampered by the barriers, which had slowly been erected in the older civilization, unpressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (405)
These words of J.T. Adams had been used in the context of the statement made in the Declaration of Independence which stated, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (July 4, 1776)

American dream is the idea in one’s mind about one’s development if one settles in America. It is what people all over the world dream of America. Naturally there is a variety of American dream as different minds think in different ways. The American dream has attracted millions of people all over the world. It has attracted people not merely towards material prosperity. It is for something more than that. It stands before people as a great force providing chances to grow to the fullest development as man and woman. For the development of an individual now there is no any barrier which prevailed in the older civilization.

The Americans always imagine that the unseen lands are better than those in which they are already settled. The American dream encourages children to grow up and get a good education without any barrier. It provides equal opportunity to the individuals irrespective of their caste, religion, race or ethnicity. The immigrants from Germany enjoy the political freedom in the New World. Everyone could travel and settle wherever he pleases. By American dream each man and each woman is able to attain the fullest position of what they are innately capable. The use of American dream is found in Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography, Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Willa Cather’s My Antonia, Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby,
Tony Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. A majority of Americans are of the opinion that American dream is something to do with spiritual happiness rather than accumulation of material. Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt* and Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* satirize materialism as the target of American dream. It is due to aspect of materialism that one does not realize who one is and there is a constant strain to remake oneself. It is in this vein that Oates uses her works to question the American values and the need to create an identity for oneself.

*Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart* is about the murder of Little Red Garlock, a notorious boy in Hammond. The murder is witnessed only by a young girl. She wants to protect the murderer because the murder happens only for her sake. The other novel taken for analysis in this chapter, *American Appetite* narrates the unwanted and unpredictable troubles that the innocent man, Ian Mc Cullough enters into.

In *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart*, the American dream is best revealed through the Courtney family. The Gothic theme contained in *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart* is the murder of Little Red Garlock who is a notorious boy in Hammond. He is a sixteen year old boy. One day his body is found in the Cassadaga River. A fisherman finds the body and told Al Neeley, the proprietor of Neeley’s Diner who in turn rings up the Hammond police. Little Red Garlock’s real name is Patrick Wesley. His mother is sick at home and his father, Vernon is not living with the family. Only his brother Morton comes to the spot along with his
relatives. The photographer from the leading newspaper comes and clicks everything. The police comes to a conclusion that the probable cause of death must be multiple blows to the head with a blunt instrument or a rock. The police officer Eddy Furlong enquires the matter. Except a fourteen year old high school girl, nobody says anything about this murder. Only she tells the officer that the Garlock boy is in trouble with some drunken motorcyclists from out of town.

The girl who gives the police some details about Little Red Garlock is Iris Courtney. However, she does not want to expose the actual murderer. Joyce Carol Oates gives a sketch about the family from which Iris comes. Duke Courtney is Iris Courtney's father. He is a gambler and also he has lost so much in the race. He has borrowed money from many people including his brother, Leslie Courtney. He thinks that he could get back the money from where he has lost. He takes alcoholic drinks too much and returns home very late in the night. His wife is Persia Courtney. They pick up quarrels even in the presence of Iris Courtney. Sometimes, he beats his wife and leaves the home hurriedly. Then Persia Courtney scolds him like anything. Persia Courtney keeps a secret lover. She gets things done by her lover. It is very embarrassing for Iris Courtney to find Virgil Starling who is Persia’s lover in her house. But Persia often leaves with her lover and comes home late. Iris does not like that kind of life. The Courtneys move to a new apartment at No: 927, Jewett Street in Hammond. One day Duke Courtney telephones his daughter and asks her whether the mulatto, Virgil is with her mother. Further, he asks a very delicate question whether she is on her mother’s side or on his side. Leslie Courtney is the brother of Duke
Courtney. He is known in Hammond as a Negro photographer. Duke Courtney is very unhappy with his brother for damaging his reputation by having many Negro clients. But Leslie Courtney is of the opinion that there is beauty in children of any color. Amidst many Negro pictures, he keeps the photographs of Persia and Iris in his studio.

Little Red Garlock’s mother, Vesta Garlock is in her thirties. One day she sees Persia Courtney standing near a drugstore. Vesta Garlock goes near to Persia Courtney and asks her for a help. She tells her that she is afraid of the Negroes. Then Persia takes her safely to Garlock’s house and there her son picks a quarrel with her for creating this scene. Actually she is ugly with her teeth and she thinks that the Negroes may stare at her. Persia thinks that it will be absurd to think that somebody may stare at her with lust. There is no cleanliness in the house of Vesta Garlock.

Iris Courtney faces terror from the Black girls when she is in sixth-grade class in Peter B. Porter Elementary School. In that school, there are mostly Whites. The Whites and the Negroes do not mix together. Mrs. Rudiger is her mathematics teacher. Lucille Weaver is a Negro girl sitting beside Iris Courtney. For mathematics question Iris writes the correct answer and Lucille copies it. Mrs. Rudiger asks for explanation from Lucille how she has written the correct answer. She knows that Lucille might have copied from Iris. This creates a misunderstanding between Iris and Lucille. When Iris is going home, Lucille and two of her friends knock her into the gutter of dirty water and calls her a ‘white bitch’. Iris picks herself up and later calls
them “dirty nigger bitches.” A few days later, Iris attacks Lucille and her friends with her school books. She sees the blood coming from the black girl’s nose.

Persia wants to celebrate Leslie’s fortieth birthday by giving him birthday gifts. August 20, 1955 is Leslie’s fortieth birthday. That afternoon the sky is very cloudy. Persia and Iris go to Leslie’s studio with birthday presents and cake. They forget to carry an umbrella. Staring through the window of Leslie’s studio, they see their old photographs being displayed amidst black people. Persia feels that the old photographs should have been thrown out. Persia gives Leslie a handsome wallet and Iris gives a blue silk necktie as birthday gifts. Persia has got these two presents through a friend who is the manager of a men’s clothing store in Hammond. The studio is very small. He has a fancy for new cameras and buys many. But he never throws away the old ones.

Like Duke Courtney and Persia, Iris too starts smoking but never in the presence of adults. Persia tells Leslie that she is going out to make a telephone call to someone. Leslie and Iris are left alone. Leslie is thinking that he should tell Iris about Duke’s behavior for several months. Persia comes back to the studio and stays there for a long time along with Iris. Leslie takes a snap of Persia and Iris. All of a sudden power goes off and it starts raining. Leslie and Persia take wine and Persia is telling Leslie that it looks as though they were near Niagara Falls.
Iris remembers the strained relationship between her father and her mother. Duke Courtney has more love for his daughter. Many times he has told Iris that it is very painful to have the people whom he loves going away from him. He tells her that he will kill any man who tries to interfere between him and his family members. Even the slightest thing could set off a quarrel between Persia and Duke Courtney. Sometimes, Duke will strike the wall with his fist and may even give her an open-handed slap. Duke Courtney then will leave the apartment and Persia may be calling him a bastard and liar. Persia will be standing there frozen with her face wet with tears.

Peach Tree Creek is a dirty creek carrying all kinds of waste from factories, garbage, used condoms and sewage. It empties itself into the Cassadaga River. White girls are not expected to be swimming there. One afternoon the White girls, Iris Courtney and Nancy Dorsey are swimming along with some Black girls. Two Negro brothers, Sugar Baby Fairchild and Jinx Fairchild come there and tease them. Nancy tells Iris to ignore the Fairchilds. Jinx is darker than Sugar Baby. Iris has seen him playing basket ball in the neighbourhood park and at school. Jinx’s true name is Verlyn Rayburn Fairchild and Sugar Baby’s true name is Woodrow William Fairchild. Sugar Baby is a star basketball player at school. On another day Iris goes to theatre along with her two White girl friends. Jinx Fairchild with his friend follows her up to the theatre. The Black boys make noise in the theatre and the manager comes to the spot. He sends those two boys out of the theatre.
Little Red Garlock’s behavior is quite uncivilized and savage. He used to urinate in the alley standing spread legged and deliberate. Iris could not fail to notice this detestable scene many times. There are many complaints against him. His father, Vernon is also very notorious in the area for beating his wife and children. Altogether there are many complaints in the police station against the father and the son. Once the mother of an affected girl complains to the sergeant about the misbehavior of Little Red Garlock but no action is taken. Oates gives a clear picture about the indecent behaviour of Vernon and his son:

Yes, there are eyewitness accounts of Vernon whipping the boy with his belt, chasing him half naked in the street, even in bad weather: Vernon roaring and drunk, the boy whimpering like an animal. May be that was Little Red, or may be another boy; there’s a changeable number of children in the Garlock household, and they’re all the kind that need to be whipped now and then.

Vernon Garlock has been jailed several times, his longest stretch thirty days (assault, drunk-and-disorderly), Little Red too has been hauled into the station and slapped around by police and frightened into docility, but in general the seventh precinct is bored with these calls; they have more serious crimes to deal with: murders, armed robbery, nigger punks. When Nancy Dorsey’s mother telephoned the precinct to complain that the Garlock boy was “touching” and “doing thing to” and “threatening” her daughter, then aged eleven, the desk sergeant
told her may be she’d better move out of the neighborhood or keep her little girl in the house. (96)

People speak that Little Red Garlock is born dirty. He is not simply sucking his mother’s breast but is biting, kicking and crying for more milk even as milk dribbles out of his mouth. His mother tries to correct his dirty activities even when he is five years old. His father tries to discipline the boy as he has done all his children. He is forced to lose interest even in whipping. Little Red Garlock’s brothers and sisters learn to keep their distance. His mother tries to correct him many times. When Little Red Garlock is six years old, his mother makes a final attempt to correct him. She boils five gallon pail of water and pours into a tub. She tries to push Little Red Garlock into the water but he runs off and hides away for three days. He feeds himself out of garbage. When he comes back, his mother becomes lunatic.

One day Iris goes out to buy a cigarette packet. She sees Bobo Ritchie and Jinx Fairchild standing near the shop. Bobo is actually a quiet boy. Iris asks Bobo for match box. The time is around eleven o’clock. While she is going back home, it is very dark. Somewhere from the bush Little Red Garlock appears. He comes very near and frightens her. Oates describes how Little Red Garlock comes and frightens Iris:

Little Red has emerged out of the bushes, loose-limbed, grinning.

“Hiya, Iiiiiii-ris! Where ya going!”

He’s advancing toward Iris as Iris retreats, stepping backward—she doesn’t want to turn and run—clownig around as if this is a game and
Iris really want to play it; she’s just pretending to be frightened and angry.

Iris says, “I see you too. I know who you are.”

Iris says, trembling with hatred, “I’m going to tell my father ….

He’ll call the police on you.”

Little Red laughs, jogging amiably forward. He’s crooning obscene words in a singsong. Iris doesn’t want to hear and making ugly twisting gestures at his crotch she doesn’t want to see.

In this awkward but seemingly coordinated fashion, the one in retreat, the other coming forward, Iris Courtney and Little Red Garlock emerge from the alley onto East Avenue at approximately 11 p.m. of April 2, 1956. Evidently no one sees them. Or will remember seeing them, afterward. (108)

She runs back to the Chenoy’s shop and tells Jinx about Little Red Garlock. She tries to make a phone call to her parents but only the ring goes and nobody responds. Jinx offers to call the police.

Jinx tells Iris that there is no need for police. He offers to reach her safe in the house. While he is taking her, they are blocked by Little Red Garlock on the way. Little Red Garlock comes to attack Jinx Fairchild when the latter questions him why he is frightening Iris. They are fighting with each other. In that duel, they are injured. Little Red Garlock picks up a chunk of concrete and brings it against Jinx Fairchild. As Jinx Fairchild is injured, he takes something wedge-shaped and heavy in his hand
and hits it against Little Red Garlock’s head. Due to this heavy attack, Little Red Garlock dies. Little Red Garlock’s death is given an extensive coverage in the newspaper. The death of Little Red Garlock affects his mother much. She is simply missing for a few days and comes back home afterwards. The police take the Garlocks to the station to see the suspects in the murder of Little Red Garlock. But they could not accuse anyone. So, the police could not arrest anyone in this case.

Jinx is worried about his future. He is afraid that the police might arrest him at any time. Jinx looks at the Peach Tree Creek and remembers his past childhood days. Immediately he is reminded of his murder and the dead body of Garlock thrown into the creek. His mother, Minnie has a steady, good-paying employment in the office of Dr. O'Shaughnessy, a famous doctor in Hammond. After his wife’s death, Minnie is given more importance. Some people even suspect that Jinx’ sister Ceci is born of the doctor. Jinx could not relax and take things light. Whenever he thinks about his murder, he feels disturbed. He wants to tell his mother everything about the murder of Little Red Garlock. In the meantime the police arrest two motorcyclists as the murderers of Garlock. But Jinx is afraid of his father for his father is a staunch believer in God. His father could easily diagnose him and say what is wrong with him. His mother asks him whether he is suffering from any fever. Finally Jinx tells his father about his murder. On hearing Jinx’s confession, his father cries. Iris too wants to tell her mother about the murder of Garlock. She is afraid that one day the police may come to her college and arrest her. One day, she comes across Jinx and both of them stare at each other. She seizes his hand and kisses it. She tells him that only she
The American dream that Oates discusses in *American Appetite* is not materialistic but it is innocent magnanimity. We cannot always expect the American to be oriented towards wealth but sometimes persons like Ian Mc Cullough give a new dimension of meaning to the American dream. The unplanned murder is the celebrated Gothic feature in Joyce Carol Oates’s *American Appetite*. Ian Mc Cullough is the head of a demographic study funded by the National Health Service. It conducts investigation into the minute and mysterious correlations among age, employment, economic status, illness, death etc. Glynnis Mc Cullough is his wife. She is an expert in preparing food and a compiler of cookbooks. They have a nineteen year old daughter whose name is Bianca. Another child, a boy, has died a few days after birth. Ian has consoled himself. Glynnis also asks him to think of other things rather than thinking about it always for “there is a world smiling of other things.”

One morning Ian Mc Cullough receives a call from Sigrid Hunt, his wife’s friend. In a breathless voice, she tells him that she wants to talk to him. Ian calls his colleagues and tells them that the luncheon is postponed as he is leaving on an emergency. He has written Sigrid’s address and keeps with him. It is half an hour drive in a car. He has met her along with his wife somewhere. During his previous meeting Sigrid has confided in him that she has difficulties with her fiancé. Ian reaches Sigrid’s house at 119 Tice in the area of Poughkeepsie. He knocks the door
but nobody comes. He envisions the picture of a stabbed or raped or murdered Sigrid lying dead on the upstairs. She lives in an apartment above a garage. Trash has been strewn everywhere.

Then Sigrid comes and after thoroughly confirming that it is Ian, she opens the door. She asks him to come inside and then closes the door. She tells him that she wants to talk to someone who does not know her and does not judge her. She cries and finally tells him that she is pregnant and that she wants to have abortion. But her lover will not permit her to do so. She needs money to carry out abortion. He wants to help her. He has cheque book with him. So he gives her a cheque for $1000. She accepts it as a loan. Ian leaves her house immediately. He wants to tell his wife everything about his visit to Sigrid’s house. But he does not know when he could tell her.

Ian celebrates his 50th birthday in his house and it is well arranged by his wife. Their daughter comes and leaves in the middle of the party. Even before the guests leave, Ian goes into his study room and tries for Sigrid over the phone. He could not reach her. One day he goes in person to her apartment. He asks the caretaker about Sigrid. But he does not tell him anything except that she is not killed. He comes back but he looks much worried about Sigrid.

One day Glynnis is very silent. She says she has got headache and she asks Ian not to disturb her. Then she tells him that she has accidentally come across his
cancelled cheque given to Sigrid for $1000. She asks him whether Sigrid is his love. He says that there is no such thing. He has intended to give this amount only as loan. But she refuses to believe this. She doubts that there is some secret relationship between her husband and Sigrid. She tells him that he will bring disease and death into the family by having sexual affair with Sigrid. She says that she has loved a friend of Ian and for his sake she has given up her love. But he is worse in taking another woman. She takes a knife and cuts his nose and also is trying to cut his head. Again and again she goes towards him to attack him. At that moment, Ian pushes her aside and she goes and hits against a glass window. It is broken and Glynnis bleeds profusely. She is carried to the hospital in an ambulance. A neurosurgeon diagnoses her and immediately performs an operation.

Ian’s daughter arrives and asks the doctor what has happened. The doctor, Flex tells her that they should go for another operation for Glynnis. Ian and his daughter give their maximum care for Glynnis in the hospital. Every day he expects good news from the doctor that his wife has improved. Ian’s friends offer all kinds of help. Some of them give their willingness to meet out the medical expenses. But on the sixteenth day Glynnis dies. The funeral is attended by many people.

Ian’s friend, Denis’s wife, Roberta comes to Ian’s house and tells him that the day before Glynnis’s accident, she is told by Glynnis about Sigrid Hunt. Roberta tells Ian that she does not have any doubt but she says Glynnis has believed that there is an affair between him and Sigrid Hunt. Later two policemen come to Ian’s house and see
the window where the accident has taken place. They ask him many questions including whether he has pushed his wife against the window. The police file a murder case against Ian. Lederer is the lawyer on the government side and Ottinger is the defendant lawyer. The trial is conducted in the court of Judge Harmon.

The police collect the details of the phone calls made by Ian to Sigrid Hunt. The medical report says that Glynnis has been pushed by someone and has died. The caretaker in Sigrid Hunt’s flat confirms the visit made by Ian. So everything goes against Ian. The police say that Ian has killed Glynnis for the sake of Sigrid. Then Sigrid is also missing. They believe that only Ian is responsible for the supposed death of Sigrid. But Sigrid comes alive. She appears in the court and tells the judge that Ian is a good man and that he is not responsible for her pregnancy. She has been helped by Ian on the occasion of aborting her child.

Sigrid Hunt reveals her mind that she loves Ian. She is ready to live with Ian. In the court, Ian frankly accepts that he has pushed his wife away in order to save himself from his wife who has come towards him with a knife. He says that he has never thought of killing her. But it is accidental that he has happened to kill her by pushing her away against the window. The court finally acquits Ian of murder charge. But his daughter, Bianca starts hating her father. She understands in the wrong way that only her father has killed her mother. However, it is understood that Ian is not fully responsible for the murder. Moreover, the murder is the result of a sudden instinctive attack. It is purely circumstantial and there is no any trace of intention to
murder his wife found in this case. The novel, *American Appetite* beautifully charges a man murderer but at the same time provides ample support for his innocence.

The notoriety of Vernon Garlock and his family is well described in *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart*. There are many complaints against both Vernon Garlock and his son Little Red Garlock. It seems Little Red Garlock is worse in his behavior right from his childhood days. When he is a grown up boy, he does not allow girls to walk freely on the street. That is why when he is found murdered, people do not take pity on him. Even among the members of the family there is no much affection. Little Red Garlock is considered a beast and he is happened to be killed by Jinx. So Jinx is destined to murder Little Red Garlock and the former regrets a lot after murdering the boy. As far as the family of Iris Courtney is concerned, her parents do not fit to be her parents. While her father is a gambler, her mother is interested in extra-marital relationship. Our appreciation goes to her uncle, Leslie Courtney who does not differentiate Black people and White people. In *American Appetite*, Ian Mc Cullough is a magnanimous man. So he tenders his help for a lady who is in trouble. But he is destined to be the murderer of his wife when there is a misunderstanding between him and his wife followed by a dispute. The court is convinced that Ian Mc Cullough has not committed any murder rather his wife has died due to the unwanted quarrel between the husband and the wife. He is acquitted of the charge of murder since it is purely an unplanned one. The death of Glynnis is the gothic incident in this novel.
The researcher through a critical analysis of the two novels selected in this chapter feels that Joyce Carol Oates through her novels has been able to successfully depict the quest for an American identity. She has through the plot, the setting and the characterization in *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart* and *American Appetite*, depicted how the American dream which at one point of time spoke about human freedom and equality has become corrupted and has led to a life of violence and meaningless. Using the Gothic structure, she has probed the nature of American individualism and seems to remark on the inability to gain an identity.