COLOR AND NAME – SIGNIFIERS OF POWER

"Black will make you... Or black will unmake you"- Ralph Ellison - Invisible Man

The term 'Black' and black race always carried a negative connotation as the dark continent and its people were considered inferior and projected to be in the bottom of racial hierarchy. The debate how to define blackness is still going on. Martin Favor claims that African American history has been “a struggle over the definition of black identity” and that “the definition of blackness is constantly being invented, policed, transgressed, and contested.” European images of barbarians and outsiders evolved subsequently from the Greeks and Romans. It was reworked and reframed in medieval and early modern Europe and the Biblical association with the descendants of Ham, Noah's bad son reinforced the stamp of evil. Further, Christian identity constructed in opposition to heathenism, created within the religious difference another index of racial, cultural and ethnic differences.

When the Europeans colonised or settled, the narratives of inferiority of the races of darker shades had won an indisputable legitimacy. For, the racial theory owes its origins to the Greek travelogues which had several editions strengthening that proposition of the African as an inferior monstrous subhuman ‘other’. Even before the enslavement and hegemony during colonisation of Africa racist stereotypes were well in place. Later it materialised into an ideological justification resulting in racial discrimination and the subjugation of Africans though forcefully transplanted in an alien soil.

Social sciences have justified and accepted that the Caucasians headed the racial hierarchy and African Americans were perceived to be in its bottom which warranted racial discrimination. ‘Race’ theorists associated certain moral values with certain races consequently black or white characterized a person
with physical as well as moral qualities creating boundaries between the two communities. Biological features like skin color and kinky hair for blacks determined their race and the names Negro, Nigger, Colored, black emphasized the darkness of skin color. Color eroded their very being and their potentials, merits and native talents.

As color is the ‘signifier’ of race it has been made the criterion by which men are to be judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated. Most of the traditional blues bring to light the problem of colour. Louis Armstrong sings: What did I do/To be so black/And blue? (qtd in Mc Kay 842). The query persisted even among gifted writers like Countee Cullen who moaned: “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing/To make a poet black and bid him sing” (qtd in Gates 1230)

The oppression of people of a particular race based solely on the color of their skin justified the exploitation of the blacks for the purpose of profit, privilege and power. The color ‘black’ and the correlative discourse about blackness stand as a witness to the power and antagonism of white racial superiority, which treated blackness as an anti-thesis of whiteness. As discussed in the introduction, ‘Sambo’ and ‘missing link’ theories justify the co-relation of all evil connotations to darkness and blackness. In the history of this world none other than whites have used so many terms to refer to their ‘otherness’: savage, heathen, slave, spear-chucker, jig-a -boo, spade, boy, sambo, darky, contraband, property, freedmen, nigger, kaffir, Negro, coon and black which meant dirty, unclean, impure, dismal, gloomy, threatening, foreboding, wicked, soiled, depressed, monstrous, forbidding and ominous.

African Americans found identity with darkness not only in their political and economic but also in personal history. The slaves, after a day’s labour
under the bright sun and the white master, had only the night for his personal life, needs and family. Frederick Douglass wrote in his *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* that he could “not recollect of ever seeing my own mother by the light of day: She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone” (23). The stark realism and truth of African American experience found expression in their literature. Even in the slave era the thirst to be accepted as they are, can be identified. “They think because they hold us in their infernal chains of slavery, that we wish to be white or of their color- but they are dreadfully deceived- we wished to be just pleased our God creator to have made us”. (Walker 21)

According to a culture-specific model of racial consciousness development in African Americans, Cross (1995) hypothesized a cognitive developmental model of racial identity in which it is proposed that as racial identity evolves, they progress through a sequence of five stages such as (pre-encounter, encounter, immersion emersion, internalization, and internalization commitment). Cross suggested that

Blacks begin their development at a stage called pre-encounter. This stage is characterized by dependency on White (not Black) society for definition and approval; attitudes are anti-Black and Eurocentric in nature. The encounter stage is entered when one has personally challenging experiences with white society. (21)

African Americans went through the process of assimilation by bleaching and passing for a white but Harlem Renaissance initiated the sense of pride in colour and race. “A white face goes with a white mind. Occasionally a black face goes with a white mind. Very seldom a white face will have a black mind” (21) views Nikki Giovanni. The conception of “blackness as a mediated, socially constructed practice, a process and not a product of discursive
conditions of struggle” would free us from clearly essentialist and perhaps inherently racist definitions of “blackness” (Wall 186). Whiteness always remained a threat to the blacks and vice-versa.

Addison Gayle, Jr. in his indictment of “the White Aesthetic” points out that beginning with Plato, for “most of the history of the Western World, [white] aestheticians have defined beauty in terms of whiteness” (41). Early in Europe’s Renaissance, for instance, Dante begins his *Divine Comedy* in a “dark forest” with “darkened air”, but he follows Beatrice's “eyes of light” to heaven, where God appears as a central “point of light”, “glow[ing] most luminous” (*Inferno* I, II; Paradiso XXVIII).

The western literature highlighted their virtues connecting it with light and equally emphasized the darkness of the African decent and their qualities. Africa was given the name, “the dark continent,” not only because it was pristine but also the skin colour of its inhabitants. The famous European explorer of Africa, Henry Morton Stanley coined the phrase and gave a title *Through the Dark Continent* to his book, it was followed in 1890 by *In Darkest Africa*; and his series concluded in 1893 with *My Dark Companions and their Strange Stories*. The stamp of dark colour of Africa was left indelible not only in their skin but in the psyche of African Americans. “The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness”, declared Frantz Fanon (109).

African Americans at first shunned their colour, rejected it and developed self-hatred. They were totally blinded by the white's concepts of blackness. There was a rebirth of African American culture, music, language constituting an identity during Harlem Renaissance of 1920s. It also embodied—in Patricia Taylor’s phrase—a “rebirth of blackness” (qtd in Gates 1591). Fanon asserts it: “I was resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an *inborn complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the
other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known” (32).

Unlike the western concept of moving from darkness to light, from evil to good, from condemnation to commendation, African Americans discovered their strength, solace and confidence in darkness (night) and in their darkness (color). Zora Neale Hurston in “How It Feels to be Colored Me” discerns this new value for the self which emerges in contrast: “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (10); and in Their Eyes Were Watching God, though Janie first sees herself as “a blossoming pear tree” on a “spring afternoon,” she learns the truth of her life only when “the night time put[s] on flesh and darkness” (8, 10). Likewise Hughes’s “Mother to Son” finds truth in darkness, as its speaker recalls “sometimes going in the dark / Where there ain’t been no light” (ll. 12-13). His poem “Mulatto” opens by placing the speaker's father, a “white man,” against the “Georgia Dusk” and “Southern Night” (ll. 1, 2, 8); reversing the poles of light and dark, however, the speaker is asked, “What’s the body of your mother?” and told to “Get on back there in the night,” the “nigger night” (ll. 21, 37, 41, original emphases). This foreshadows the framing and defining of their self, and identity in the spheres of individual and communal lives and their literature. The self that surfaced in darkness bloomed very powerfully and strongly in the next phase of African American History.

The Great Depression begins on the day white history calls Black Tuesday. The Harlem writers lost hope as there was sudden loss of economic growth and patronage and their contribution came to a standstill. “So in the dark,” Countee Cullen concludes, “we hide the heart that bleeds, And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds” (ll. 13-14). The seeds of the thirties fruitioned into the Black Aesthetics and Black Nationalism movements of the 1960s in the next generation.
The objective of Black Nationalism, a political and social movement was to acquire economic power and to infuse among blacks a sense of community and group feeling. Many supporters wanted to maintain and promote their separate identity as a people of black ancestry. With such slogans as “black power” and “black is beautiful,” they also sought to inculcate a sense of pride among blacks. Black Aesthetic is an umbrella term for number of definitions of the movement’s position in relation to art in general and literature in particular. The motto “Black is beautiful” is central, but art is expected to concentrate on black cultural experience, and moving beyond aesthetic and individuality, it is to inspire social change.

W. E. B. Du Bois, a renowned scholar and African American activist states "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea (Du Bois 54). His statement foretells the all-embracing dimension of black marginality experiences even in the recent days. Whiteness and lightness have long been equated with goodness and purity, as well as intellectual and spiritual superiority. In his Souls of the Black Folks, each chapter begins with two epigraphs – one from a white poet, and one from a black spiritual – to demonstrate intellectual and cultural parity between black and white cultures. This one sample is sufficient to prove the intellectual supremacy of the inheritors of the oral tradition.

By the late 1960s, color which was a visible marker of the exclusion by whites became a unifying force enabling the African American inclusivity or the black separateness. It also became a tool which raised the consciousness of the struggle against the rule of white supremacy and the general elevation of all things ‘black’. To be black was to embrace everything African, black culture and also reject assimilation and acculturation. To be black was to embrace the varying colors of blackness which included blacks under the ‘one drop rule’. In other words, where color once meant automatic inclusion or exclusion in the
society, one’s attitude or consciousness of color was the new marker of identity.

Black writer’s function became explicit: to erase the negative black image in the white mind and the liberation of blackness in the black mind. Emancipation, education, enlightenment and self-actualization, along with the reconciliation and the acceptance of the image and reality of black life, were motivations for black writing. As African American women were the storehouses of their rich and resourceful culture and preservers of their cultural practices, they became warriors in political and literary movements in asserting themselves. Their art became a weapon of revolution and rejuvenation. African American novels emerged in the course of the nineteenth century during the 1920’s. Later in the 1970’s, African American novels became a genre of expression of contemporary life and tradition. African American writers wanted their works to validate the complexity of their lives. They wanted to have an enhanced black consciousness in whatever they wrote about their people, and characters, tried to seek their black identity as an elucidation of their difficulties, and had a concrete purpose or the will to endure and improve their very living conditions.

How the color of the blacks – their racial identity is represented, performed, signified and embodied in the works chosen for study is traced in the chapter Color and Name as the Signifiers of Power. It also explores how the artists appropriate and negotiate with blackness. It also studies the fissures caused in individuals and their relationships in family and society and how they are rectified by constructing their identity.

Among all ethnic characteristics, the most striking and the most agonizing one, the color of African Americans had a great impact in their psyche, hence their self-esteem and life too. Skin color had many different levels of symbolism for African Americans, and they used numerous terms to describe
their various shades of skin, where as whites could see only their blackness. These terms include skillet blonde, coal black, tar baby, and blue-black to describe dark skin; and red, red-bone, high yellow, and light bright to describe light skin. In his wonderful poem- ‘Harlem sweeties’, Langston Hughes celebrates the different shades of colors of ‘the black women’ that whites refuse to ‘see’ and labels them as ‘black’. He also satirizes the white mind which is ready to enjoy and relish all the colors of coffee, honey, chocolates in everyday life but not appreciate the same in blacks.

Naylor in The Women of Brewster Place describes her ‘colored daughters’ these multicolored “Afric” children in nutmeg, ebony, saffron, cinnamon – red or gold colors. The writer seems to take pride in the various shades of color inherited from a succession of other ethnic groups. This physical or the biological feature which is the cause for racial identity turns into an identity of ethnic pride in the hands of the black women writers Naylor. The form of the novel is seven chapters– like a string of pearls– stories of seven women are linked together by the discrimination and sufferings they experience in the society. The mixture of genres reflects the biracial, bicultural nature of African, Americans. Naylor’s excellent blending of short stories into a novel is a perfect example, bearing the subtitle “a novel in seven stories” Each story is named after the central characters it deals with.

The last chapter is named after the Two-Lorraine and Therese – suggesting lesbian’s struggle for identity in a heterosexual society. The intensity of their love and emotions as lesbians is considered illegitimate, they are shunned and women are reluctant to accept them. Hence Naylor gives the title ‘The Two’. Man’s identity is defined by his relationship with his Creator and brethren. Black man’s identity is disfigured as his color mars not only his face but also his relationships. Fear of rejection experienced in the whites’ world affects the blacks’ psyche to extend the hands to establish new relationships. The relationship of the two is subject to internal and external
strife which is eventually similar to the conflicts experienced by African Americans in their relationships.

The chapter Dawn and Dusk gain significance in Naylor’s debut novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* the birth of Brewster place and the narrative in the dawn, the mild rays of light as the day breaks in Western literature is a sign of hope but for blacks it is to lead them to dusk. Any literary piece ending that with dawn or light is indicative of a new beginning, whereas in this novel Naylor leaves the desperate women ready to rise again as ebony phoenix and names it ‘Dusk’. ‘Light’ is not very bright and ‘darkness’ is not very dark but silvery, greyish colors in these two chapters propose revelation of harsh realities and truth of life.

The prologue ‘Dawn’ and the epilogue ‘Dusk’ with the seven stories held together resemble the quilt (metaphor) pattern of multicultural America. The focus of canonical Literature is on individual's progress and success. But the African American Literature or a literary subculture is that of a group or a community. *The Women of Brewster Place* begins with Dawn and ends with Dusk of Brewster Place reflecting the influence of darkness in the life of African Americans. With hope and dreams the women come together where as their dreams are shattered, deferred when they break the wall-dividing Brewster place from the main city- bringing it down brick by brick.

The omniscient narrator describes Brewster Place as conceived in “a damp, smoke- filled room”(WBP1) and calls it ‘the bastard child’ with ‘true parentage hidden’(WBP1) which is parallel to the experiences of people across time and space who were dispossessed from history. ‘Naylor uses a very effective metaphor of ‘bastardy’ referring to their exclusion owing to race experienced by the residents of Brewster Place. Their exclusion from a world that is characteristically white was perpetuated by the linear history which became an oppressive cycle for them. Naylor uses various shades of white and
black to highlight the physical and psychological condition of the blacks. The reality of their lives is determined by the rich and the powerful and the community itself is designed to fail by the racist society. Hence the 'inception of place, called baptism, is in “dull silver” (WBP 2). Youth are narrated with a hint of failure, “as if Brewster Place was to become part of the main artery of the town” identical to the literary subculture's strife to become part of the canon, the people of sub society's struggle to identify with the mainstream society. Powerless people with no political influence could not stop the wall which came up as “older residents were offended by the pungent smells of strong cheeses and smoked meal's that now hung in local shops” (WBP 2). The Brewster Place became a dead-end street and the wall was baptized the blood and vomit of a drunkard which is Mrs. Colligan's son.

From its origin till its death Brewster Place with its wall- in its lifespan- is very much parallel to the life of an African American from Dawn to Dusk signifying the colors correlated with them. The deferred dreams of the individuals seem to have an impact on the place and vice versa. It is very casually condemned and disintegrated as it was created like its residents. In spite of the deterioration of the place, its people have developed “a personality” of their own with their uniqueness. “The people had their own language and music and codes” (WBP 2). The sense of pride and belongingness, despite youngsters moving out for a comfortable life, make the old continue their life there. The attitude of the youth reflects the African American experience of assimilation and ‘passing’ for a white and inability to take pride in their culture and language.

Naylor's musical language becomes forceful in conveying the themes and in sculpting her characters. The description of the ‘colored daughters’, brings out the determination and the strife of making their ‘home’ in America – similar to their effort of establishing Brewster place their home among its decay. Naylor portrays the hardworking women — “Nutmeg arms leaned over
windowsills, gnarled ebony legs carried groceries up double flight of steps, and saffron hands strung out wet laundry on back-yard lines” (WBP 4).

Not only is their color specific, the smell – “perspiration mingled with the steam from boiling pots of smoked pork and greens and the Aroma of vinegar and Evening in Paris cologne” is also unique (WBP 5). The use of compound adjectives to describe the women drives home the point that in spite of being strong individuals, they tend to become a type. All of them seemed to fit into the description with “Hands on hips, straight-backed, round-bellied, high-behinded women and they are founded to be hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased” (WBP 4-5).

In Naylor’s Mama Day it is interesting to note that all the islanders call Mama Day’s grandniece christened Ophelia as Baby girl and in the family she is Cocoa - a nick name or pet name which is the shade of her skin color. Moreover Cocoa chooses to give names of food item to people she meets in New York – ‘fudge sticks kumquats, bagles, Zucchines’ (MD 96) and resorts herself to ethnic identity. George is ‘bow bow’. This reinforces the African Americans’ miserable plight in conceiving an identity of their own and establishing it in their voiceless, faceless, nameless existence in the country which is not ready to own them. Carolyn F.Gerald writes in “The Writer and His Role” in The Black Aesthetic that the “Primary function of the black writer is to overturn the Zero image of blackness projected in the white cultural texts”. (qtd in Dubey 21)

In her Bailey’s Café, Naylor explores the idea of defying boundaries and discarding labels which originated from black physiognomy. The café's back door is opened to an abyss space as if with wide opened arms stretched out to everyone sans nation race and gender. As in The Women of Brewster Place, in this novel, each chapter delineates the struggle and survival of a character against all odds. Bailey’s Café a way station, serves as a sanctuary for those
who have been victims of marginalization due to race and gender and been denied of solace of human compassion. As the original jacket of the novel states, Bailey's Café is “a magnet that draws wide variety of society's detritus” - the misfits in the society. It is a mythical place set “right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility” (BC 76). By making use of Bailey's Café as an abode for the marginalized beyond borders, Naylor shifts her focus from black women to women of color. By including a cultural mulatto Mariam - an Ethiopian Jewess in Bailey's Café, Naylor introduces new avenues for the writers to come. The tragic mulatto rejected by both whites and blacks are biracial stereotypes who fail to pass for a while or a full blooded black. One drop of black blood could make them black however white their skin was. In literature they were projected as gloomy characters with suicidal tendencies. The fluidity of the place suits the fluidity of their identity as well. It even celebrates the marginal people in the marginal place. The characters empathize with the oppressed and are keen on trying, keen on regaining their own equilibrium. Thus the café and its customers surpass the preconceived and rigid notions of fixed boundaries and labels including their blackness.

By introducing Gabriel, a Russian Jew and pawn shop owner and Mariam an Ethiopian Jew, Naylor has challenged the arbitrary social and religious boundaries. She has also connected the marginalization and displacement of blacks to that of the Jewish exiles and survivors of the Holocaust by setting the novel in 1948. With arguments over the issues of race, history, religion and politics, the love hate relationship between Gabriel and Bailey turns into one of mutual respect as they empathize with Miriam's plight. By bringing her characters marginalized for various reasons, from various places and countries. Naylor introduces cultural mulattoes in Bailey's Café as a New Black Aesthetic writer.
Stanley introduces himself:

My name is Stanley. My middle names are Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver. The T is Taliaferro. Most people don't know that's what the initial stands for in Booker T Washington's name, and they don't know that James P. Beckwourth was a scout who discovered the lowest point for wagons to cross the Sierras getting the Beckwourth, California, all thrown for the effort. (BC 165)

Stanley, who is Miss Maple at Eve's boarding house, goes on to say how people like Sugar Man tease him for his wearing loose fitting woman’s clothes, don't know anything about where Sierras are, or of colored pioneers like Beckwourth or what George Washington Carver did because “he's only been taught what we call American History” (BC 165). Naylor refers to the pathetic state of blacks not knowing their ‘real' history.

Stanley continues “Colored people weren't born in California” and he says “And colored men didn't have Ph.Ds” (BC 21) satirically pointing out that his place of birth or his qualification were not recognized. He applies for the post of statistical analyst but, “The offers accumulated: bellboy, mailroom clerk, sleeping-car porter, elevator operator. After all, who was I to turn down an honest living? There were other Negroes with Ph.Ds doing this work. Who was I indeed?” (BC 166).

‘Who was I?’ ‘Who am I?’ are the questions echoing in the minds of African Americans. Finally the statistical analyst ends up with a job of counting the mops and brooms. He laments, "The History lesson would have to be repeated a bit more tersely, condensed into a language that even they could understand. My training had been in the application not of mops and brooms, but of variance, square roots and bell curves” (BC 166)
Naylor traces the ancestry of Stanley. His grandfather came to California in 1849 through Arizona desert. There is no clarity about where he came from to Arizona but he recounts “I know he wasn't a slave, because that's how Aunt Hazel used to phrase it: My daddy wasn't a slave. There were only two types of Negroes then, she would say, those who were slaves and those who weren't slaves. She knew enough never to call him free” (BC167). His grand-mother was a Native American Shaman's daughter, speaking cuchan, her native tongue and Spanish and wanted to head further west and settle against the wish of her husband. He says:

But before their wedding, my grand-mother had done the dream dance: She saw the meeting of the red river and the black river, the waters swirling and forming straight as an arrow to leap through the hills and spring up and flood the desert. And she saw her sons, dark as the night, proud as the eagles, picking white gold from the ground. Translation: I could have had one of my own kind. But now that I’ve married you, Negro take me west. So they moved to California. (BC 168)

From Aunt Hazel's recounting the family history he continues “In 1868 my daddy became a real American- on paper. My grandmother was to live and die an alien”. Then he goes on to say about his mother who was “the youngest child of a fugitive Texan slave and Mexican ranchero” and also about 'his 'assorted aunts’: “pure-blooded Yumas; full-blooded Negros; full-blooded Mexicans; Yuma-Mexicans; Mexican-Irish; Negro Mexicans and even one pure-blooded African who still knew some phrases in Ashanti, all hearty and strong” (BC 171).

In spite of the various origins of his ancestors his identity could be very easily narrowed down as a Negro by the 'one drop rule. “The Americans had no
problems with our identities, though; they imported one six-letter word to cut through all that Yuma-Irish-Mexican-African tangled in our heritage” (BC 171). He adds “The real Americans didn’t know that this is what they actually believed every man—whatever race of man—had a right to anything he was willing to work and sacrifice for”, and about his father who was successful in life and how the whites looked at him. “He'd come back out of the bank to find all of his whitewalls flat and that six-letter word scrawled in mud over his windshield”(BC 172). Stanley’s father never reacted or got angry with whites for their racial hatred and so Stanley was ashamed of his father not being a man. But in a bitter incident when the Gatlins driven by racial prejudice strip the son and father naked, and beat them black and blue Stanley's father explains why he was silent and patient. His father tells him:

And I wanted their words to be babble, whatever they printed, whatever they sent over the radio. Babble---as you learned your own language, set your own standards, began to identify yourself as a man. You see, to accept even a single image in their language as your truth is to be led into accepting them all. Do you think I'm afraid of the Gatlins? Do you think that what they say means anything to me? I don't hear them Stanley. Most of the time, I don't even see them. (BC 21)

He tells that he expected his son to understand this and become a man too early in life.

Naylor traces the attitude of blacks not giving back to whites’ anger or violence or plead but deal with their enemies in a matured way proving the self-assertion of the blacks. Stanley is just taken aback “This man is amazing; he was standing there talking as if weren't as naked as jay birds” and father says “They're pathetic, but they aren't animals” (BC 183). Stanley agrees “They don't speak your language, papa”. “I'm aware of that” his father said. Then
Stanley's father finds his favourite leather bound artistic volume of Shakespeare's plays being destroyed and tattered, becomes wild and attacks them. Naylor reads his mind:

I am a man. And the founding fathers of this democracy passed on to you who call yourselves real Americans a monumental lie. ..I am a man of peace. I am a sensitive man. I can spend hours with Proust and have been known to weep at sunset. Those are qualities I wanted to pass on to my son. I believe he has the capacity to be a great leader. I've tried to teach him that a man rules best when he rules with compassion. (BC 185)

Naylor states her philosophy of life through the mouth of Stanley’s father: “There is no greater strength than what is found within. There is no greater love than reaching beyond boundaries to other men. There is no greater wealth than possessing true peace of mind” (BC 186). Naylor’s simile is highly suggestive and signifying. When Stanley and his father come out, the crowd that gathered “parted before us like the Red sea” (BC 186) is suggestive of similarity between African Americans and Israelites.

Stanley’s identity is not confined by any boundaries, even in clothes. He feels suffocated in the formal clothes he wore for interviews. As he was watching dresses worn by kids, bohemians and women for comfort, he says:

I started thinking of other cultures where proper business attire was geared to Tropical weather: the flowing Arabian djellaba, the light gauze Bombay dhoti. Or just to be an African with silk and gold worked into loose folds of a ceremonial robe. He decides to wear the dress designed for American female, the sleeves were short, the skirts loose and
airy. I wasn't an Arab, and I wasn't a Ghanian, and I wasn't a native of Calcutta. (BC 201)

According to Trey Ellis an advocate of New Black Aesthetics, today’s black is someone who has a range of mixed cultural experiences and this is not a process of moving away from blackness but an experience unique to a middle class black man of recognizing and embracing the complex cultural milieu(23).

Alain Locke argues that, cultural goods “are no longer the exclusive property of the race or people that originated them. They belong to all who can use them” (Posnock 11, quoting Locke 206). New Black Aesthetics acknowledges the multiple and culturally divided nature of an African American as natural, and induces him to transcend 'blackness'. Its writers believe that it is difficult to establish a unified African American experience in the present scenario that can be discerned in African American literature. There is always a shifting sense of “blackness” as it is a concept that has a changing nature. The dominant characteristics of Black Aesthetic, its celebration of blackness, black essentialism, its celebration of black heritage also exposed its own limitations. The more it tried to create a cultural space defined in terms of the concept of Blackness the more it alienated some of its own blacks, who could not be pure blooded blacks.

Naylor creates Stanley as one who transcends his ancestral origins and blackness to embrace a multi - cultural and even rises above gender identity that he feels “blessedly free” (BC 203) in woman’s clothes with a woman's name. Bailey, owner of the café, comments on Miss Maple and his dress. He says “he likes the swirl of it, and it keeps him just warm. No doubt about it, that man has flair and courage. And looking at the way he can wear any piece of cloth on his own terms gets you to thinking that may be…..just may be”(BC
Ending up as a house keeper in Eve's boarding house, Stanley is christened by her as Miss Maple is ‘allowed to be one of the freest man' by Eve says Bailey. The novelist closes his story with these words’, “He holds his glass upturns to me as a single flake catches on the rim before melting down the side into an amber world where bubbles burst and are born, burst and are born” (BC 216). The fluidity of identity, markers of race and culture seem to be suggested by the bubbles being burst and born again and again.

If Naylor creates microcosm of a multiracial community in Bailey’s Cafe, she comes out with an island of pure black culture as if going back to the origin of its creation in Mama Day. In Mama Day Naylor places the descendant of the matrilineal Days family, inheritor of the rich black culture in Willow Springs in New York. The world of black culture of Willow Springs is balanced with the multiethnic or multicultural society of New York in Mama Day. It also explains how in reality one has to face and co-exist with identity problems in a multi-cultural society today. The stratification of the multi-ethnic society is cleverly brought out by Naylor in this description of various eating places:

Now gettingpicked up in one of those booths at a Greek restaurant meant dinner at a mid-drawer ethnic: Mexican, Chinese, Southern Italian, with real table cloths but under glass shield, and probably off-Broadway tickets. And if you hooked into someone at one of those restaurants, then it was out to top drawer ethnic: northern Italian, French, Russian, or continental with waiters, not waitresses and balcony seats on Broadway. (MD 22)

Cocoa lives in New York with the hope of finding a job like Stanley in Bailey's Café, running from pillar to post to get a decent job. Naylor vividly exposes the difficulties she underwent and obstacles she faced as a black, in the city dominated by whites. Cocoa was in a business school for two years and
seven years in an insurance company which she had to leave because of its “greedy president who didn't have the sense to avoid insuring half of the buildings in the South Bronx—even at triple premiums for fire and water damage” (MD 30). She is not left alone in job hunting. She keenly observes those who are like her, carrying briefcases which "had only pounds of resumes" and “classifieds neatly clipped out” (MD 20). Some of them pretended to read headlines and editorial in newspaper and then “finally creasing the paper and shifting it an inch or two closer to their faces” (MD 20), to go through classifieds not revealing their anxiety in looking for jobs.

Ophelia delineates the lifestyle of the unemployed, struggling with a bare minimum to pull on. “It's begging your friends for a new lead every other day, a newspaper folded straight to the classifieds, and a cup of tea and the house salad anywhere the bill will come in under two bucks with a table near the air conditioner” (MD 21).

She is skillful in locating the jobless and their plight as expressed below:

Six months of looking for a job had made me an expert at picking out the people, like me, were hurrying up to wait-in somebody’s outer anything for a chance to make it through their inner doors to prove that you could type two words a minute, or not drool on your blouse while answering difficult questions about your middle initial and date of birth. (MD 56)

Cocoa recognizes the underlying racism in the city and recalls that Mama Day told her of the days when the ads in newspapers were marked colored or white. She says:
‘It must have been wonderfully easy to go job hunting then. You were spared a lot of legwork and headwork’ when this is pronounced by Cocoa the reaction is, ‘you mean, you want to bring back segregation? I looked at him like he was a fool. Where had it gone?’ I just wanted to bring the clarity about it back—it would save me a whole lot of subway tokens. But it took me a while to figure out that in New York racism moved underground like most of the people did. (MD 26)

Cocoa feels that the ads labeled ‘Equal opportunity Employer or nothing’ should have been “color apply or take your chances”. Not only the whites even Jews she has heard are clannish, and would want their own for employment, looking at Andrews and Stein Engineering Company. When she enters the office for an interview she finds three women ahead of her. One was Oriental, very rare in her circles, she observes, and the cherry Vanilla receptionist “wasn’t pouting out the oily politeness that’s normally used to slide you quietly out of any chance of getting the job” (MD 28). The employers and their team are conscious of the race based color of the job seekers and look down upon them. Cocoa realizes that racism and its consequences were explicit in her grandmother’s days but in her days it was subtle and silent but strong enough to damage the marginalized.

The identity of African Americans which was erased by their color was re-established by their reclaiming their right to name themselves and in naming they have been profusely indigenous and innovative. Both Naylor and Bambara excelled in incorporating their culture and folk tradition in names. Names and naming have always been powerful aspects in establishing the identity of the Blacks. The whites opinion of blacks and their power over them are revealed in both the names they call them and in naming them. Black people have claimed their power as a people by claiming the power to name themselves. They were called savage, heathen, slave, spear-chucker, jig-a-boo, spade,
boy, sambo, darky, contraband, property, freedmen, nigger, kaffir, Negro, coon Nigger, then in their turn they named themselves as Colored, Negro, Black, Afro-American, and now African American. This evolution in naming is not only an attempt to name them but also their strife to grasp the power from the whites and name themselves.

The debates within the Black Women’s Movement over the usage of names such as Womanist, Black feminist, and Africa Womanist to encompass their unique identity and articulate the differences in their identity, reinforces the significance of name as an identity in the case of African American women. The issue of naming is dominant in the works of Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor. Their naming practices reflect their African tradition, sense of community, respect of elders, and even the confusions as to go back to African or American origin. Miltona Mirkin Cade got her name Bambara from her ancestor, Le Roi Jones became Amiri Baraka, their characters also rename themselves. Naylor's Melanie named after her grand- mother goes for an African name Kiswana, Stanley becomes Miss Maples in Bailey's Café- which indicate the never ending exertion in substantiating their identity.

Many of Toni Cade Bambara and Naylor's main characters have nicknames, which is a common practice in Black communities. Gorilla, My Love has two protagonists named Sugar, The Sea Birds are Still Alive has main characters named Honey and Candy. Sweet names notwithstanding these characters are strong willed and self-defining. These nicknames instead emphasize the women’s relationship with the community. The names give power to the community ties that coheres the women among themselves and with other members of their kinship networks.

Naylor's Mama Day too accentuates the same as we find Cocoa supplying everyone with nicknames using the names of food items. And Miranda’s name is not known to all, but only to a close circle and to all the
islanders she is Mama. Mama Day is not only a mother, but also a healer, root worker a descendant of the founder of their island who stands for their rich culture, history, tradition and a goddess of creation herself. Her sensitivity and close ties with nature and people had made her omniscient and powerful MAMA. Mattie Michael of *Women of Brewster place* establishes black sisterhood and plays the role of nurturer and protector with a name which means in Aramaic “lady”, in French “strength in battle”, in German “strength for battle” and one finds her having mettle to fight against the battle of her life and source of strength for the divested women. In the same novel, Kiswana chooses this African name to renew her identity and also to retrieve the African past. It enables her to recover her individuality. In Black history, Morrison acknowledges, names have been often conferred as meaningless entities. In a world in which men and women are possessed of “names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes and weaknesses”, names, Morrison asserts, bear witness. (qtd in Dearborn 94)

Mary Dearborn discusses the various stages of ethnic women’s writing in her *Pocahontas’s Daughters* and says that the American identity acquired through learning English language has “implied both an awareness of the ethnic women’s past and her ancestors and membership in the American community or family”(ibid 71). She points out that the ethnic women write about or reproduce their acquisition of an American identity and fathers of the old world are replaced by the fathers of the new: George Washington Ben Franklin and Abraham Lincoln. In *Bailey’s Café* Stanley is named after famous black men who contributed for the betterment of the American society: Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver and Mariam’s son is named George without Washington.

In *Bailey’s Café*, Naylor names two chapters as Mary. Mary(take one) and Mary (take two) – Peaches is renamed as Mary plagued by her beauty. She as she was torn between her two selves, one pure, wholesome, good and the
other wicked, promiscuous and aggressive. She disfigures herself to escape from the torment and renamed as Mary. Naylor calls her Mary with symbolic significance. The other Mary (take two) Mariam’s story has a strong resemblance to that of Mother Mary. The Ethiopian jewess’ sacrifice and purity challenges the reader’s sense of reality and truth. By naming the chapter on Mariam as Mary, Naylor associates all the conventional virtues and qualities with the name and seems to question and revise the same in calling Peaches, Mary. She has juxtaposed the two characters named Mary and one is the alter ego of the other.

Not only the birth of George in *Bailey’s Café* brings all the characters together in joy, love and creates a society of cultural mulattoes but also his name is significant. While discussing Gertrude Stein’s “The Making of Americans as an Ethnic Text” in *Pocahontas’s Daughters*, Mary V Dearborn delineates the implication of the name George Washington.

It is as if a boy named George, in Stein’s mind, inevitably ‘does credit to his christening’ always washing, and calling to the American mind the linguistic association of George Washington. Excellence in sport and washing, qualities imparted by public schooling in civic values, in turn to do credit to the values imparted by the image of the nation’s greatest civic hero.(98)

George a new born baby in this novel is the husband of Cocoa in *Mama Day*. Naylor projects him as a representative of Western mind, a product of the Western school of thought and ideals from New York. All his convictions crumble before the rich black culture of conjuring women which will be discussed in the chapter on Of Women By Women.
Kiswana’s mother is unable to reconcile to the fact that her daughter has changed her name and tells the significance of her name in *The Women of Brewster Place*:

> It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother's name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for ‘not knowing his place.’ Yet you needed to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud (WBP 86).

In an interview with William Goldstein, Naylor has explained her aim in writing *The Women of Brewster Place*: “I wanted to immortalize the spirit I saw in my grandmother, my great aunt and my mom” (21). For Kiswana’s mother, naming is a way to honor her maternal ancestors and to perpetuate their legacy. The change of name that the daughter regards as a gesture of personal and racial affirmation is presented by Naylor as an effacing of African-American women’s history.

Bambara’s treatment of African renaming practices during the Black Nationalist Movement is two-fold. First of all, she highlights the way in which renaming serves to accentuate these characters’ commitment to empowerment of their community. Secondly, Bambara uses re-naming to satirize a superficial investment or understanding of Black Nationalism. As an act of sincere and self-reflective renaming, Bambara took an African last name after seeing the word Bambara etched on an old family journal. This renaming underscores restoration of an identity connected to the African past.

Naturally in her novels naming communicates respect for elders and tradition especially for women. Elder women are most often referred to with a title that includes some form of the word “mother”. There are several Ma Dears
and M’Dears in her stories. Mama Drew runs the house in “The Johnson Girls” and Mama Dear is Candy’s grandmother in “Christmas Even at Johnson’s Drugs N Goods.” The use of the title “mother” nullifies all the negative implications of ‘mammy’. It also emphasizes the sisterhood established between community members in the story, especially the power of women who hold these networks together as in the novels of Naylor. Many of the middle aged women’s names are prefaced with Miss as a way of showing respect such as Miss Moore in “The Lesson” and Miss Ruby in “Playing with Punjab.” The protagonist in “The Basement” refers to the women characters by their relationship to her and her friend Patsy, they are “mama,” “Patsy [’s] mother”, and “Patsy [’s] aunt”. The loss of dignity and identity the names provided by whites is given back in double measure with a name and a title along with it.

In the short story collection of GML, characters such as Dada Bibi and Dada Lacey are important mentors in the community. They are staunch advocates for children and educators for liberation. The term Dada is a Kiswahili word for sister and term of respect for a woman and Bibi is a Kiswahili word meaning ‘lady’ or grandmother’. This terminology reflects a nationalist turn toward African naming practices as a way of regaining African ancestry as a source of cultural pride and resistance. Characters such as Obie in The Salt Eaters and Aicha in “A Tender Man” also have chosen African names. Obie, an Igbo word meaning Love, was originally James Henry. His choice in name is important because it highlights his commitment to the Black community represented in his dedication to the Community Center. Like Stanley of Bailey’s Cafe James Henry has three more names Obie, Obea and Oba. This is suggestive of the fluidity of his identity as well as his quest for identity. Aicha is a Swahili or Arabic name which means ‘woman’ or ‘life’. Aicha’s choice of an African name underlines her dedication and seriousness as she requests custody of Cliff’s daughter. Clifford professes to be a nationalist as a liberal sociology professor. His abbreviated European name Cliff, reverberates his childish nature and inability to fulfil his duties as a father.
In “Christmas at Johnson’s Drug N Goods” Candy is drawn towards Obatale's political commentary but she is unable to pronounce his name, so calls him Alibaba. He invites her to Kwanza celebration and she obliges but is unable to comprehend it. But attending the event is a turning point in her personal and political life. She becomes a nationalist and liberates herself by taking decisions. This is signified by stopping to make fun of his names.

Candy’s decision to attend the event marks a turning point for her in the novel both personally and politically. Personally she decides to take her fate into her own hands and pursue her dreams despite her parents’ neglect and politically she turns toward nationalism, which is marked by her decision to go to the Kwanza celebration and to stop making fun of Obatale’s name - Obatale possibly is a variation of obatale the Yoruba deity of knowledge. She confronts him, asking him to say it slowly and writes it down so that she can understand it (SB 208).

The power to choose a name knowing its meaning and significance is a step towards establishing a relationship. It enables them to construct an identity and mobilizes towards a social identity.

In Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place Kiswana establishes her identity with the ghetto and with the black sisters with her new name. But in Bambara’s fiction African renaming practices satirize or serve as commentary on misdeeds of Black Nationalists. Ms. Hazel’s daughter Nisi in “My Man Bovanne” renamed herself Tamu. It is her job to introduce her mother to a crowd of Nationalists whom she expects to organize a council of elders. Tamu and her siblings, however, did not ask their mother if she wanted the job and furthermore did not inform her mother of her name change. When Tamu informs her mother that she expects her to go on stage and announce the new project, Miss Hazel resists both the imposition of the role and her daughter’s name change. “Me? Didn nobody ask me nuthin. Tamu? You mean Nisi? She
change her name?” (GML 21) Tamu’s name change criticizes an aspect of nationalism that is concerned with the superficial but misses the values of their community such as valuing and respecting elders which is the theme of the story.

The question and complications of identity is revealed by Naylor in *Mama Day* as the islanders name their children after the President (Woodrow Wilson) - Ruby’s brother is Woody. The folks name the children after their appearance which is another proof of their originality and creativity. Berince gives birth to a son after a very long painful wait.

She loaded that baby down with every name in the book: Charles Somebody Harrison Somebody else Duvall. We called him chick. That’s what he looked like toddling around: little pecan head sitting on a scrawny neck, two bright buttons for eyes, and a feathery mess of hair she couldn’t keep slicked down for nothing (MD 252).

Later they call him Little Ceasar as he was treated like a king. Carmen Rae’s son is called Blackbird. Even the chickens have been given names by Mama Day, Clarrissa and Cicero. There is renaming for gaining respect. Rainbow Simpson has now turned into Dr Buzzard, a hoodoo doctor. It is interesting to note that all the islanders call Mama Day’s grandniece Baby girl though she was christened as Ophelia, and her family members give her a pet name Cocoa.

The process of Naming demonstrates the African Americans’ miserable plight to conceive an identity of their own and establish it in their voiceless, faceless, nameless existence in the country.
Black Aesthetics taught the writers to be entertainers and activists as well. It is color which weakened and nullified the African Americans’ identity in the White America. If naming was the first step towards creating an individual identity, acquisition of power strengthened their redefining it as an ethnic group. Black women’s attraction to political activism stems from its ability to grant them power over others. With the power of an activist their own fears melt away, granting them a sense of self. It originates in the solidarity they have with their activist sisters which took them off their Self and identity from exclusivity to inclusivity in the society and led them towards power to define and redefine them.

Race in the case of African Americans is determined by their color. Sartre says that the situations faced by individuals play a major role in the dynamics of race. He assets that man is defined first of all as a being in a situation. Richard Wright too said, there is no Negro problem in the United States, there is only a White problem.

Political consciousness is an important front in the battle against establishing an identity and preserving their ethnicity because, for many blacks, a revolutionary consciousness has been a shelter from white domination and a practical form of resistance to oppression. The white image of the Black people has led them to believe that they have no viable history and culture and it has disabled the personal and political autonomy of the people of color. When this misinformation is internalized by the people of color it can transform them into associates in their own oppression. A political consciousness is therefore the first battle site in revolution because without a politicized consciousness it is impossible to fight for self-determination. Revolution gives people the chance to change and also raises a consciousness which was dead for ages. The importance of awakening political awareness can be found in two levels: individuals and community because when individuals are conscientized naturally the community’s consciousness is aroused.
As Grassroots Movements and National organizations participated in identity building and community making, identity takes a political dimension and individuals are mobilized to act for everyone’s welfare. Stuart Hall advocates use of identification over identity, to signify that “self-definition is constantly in flux, that one identifies in multiple ways simultaneously, and that identifications are prioritized differently at a given moment” (Smith 2).

Naylor and Bambara trace out the impact of women becoming political activists in an attempt to ascertain their identity as they are conscious of instituting and retaining their communal ties. Women writers need not be feminists writing about women and their double jeopardy. They are an integral part of the nation and they have played a vital role in building up the nation. Both Naylor and Bambara have projected women as political activists and its positive and negative influence on the individual and community. It became implicit that women are capacitated for fulfilling higher roles than defined by the white and patriarchal society. But in defining their roles and identity women had to face conflicts within and without the community of women.

Patricia Hill-Collins in *Fighting Words*, notes that “In the Unites States, the term Black feminism also disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-White-only ideology and political movement” (67). In “On the Issue of Roles,” Bambara argues that an exclusive look at Black womanhood is worthwhile to end ideologies that speak for Black women, but do not include Black women as researchers. She asks,

How relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to Black women? Are women after all simply women? I don’t know that our priorities are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford or depend on this new field of experts (white, female). (qtd in Evans 14)
Bambara raises the point that not only Black women, but women of color, domestically and internationally, are fully capable of representing themselves and should work to adopt a Black feminist aesthetic as a vehicle for transporting and relaying the possibilities of truth that lie in the myriad of experiences that Black women possess.

Butler–Evans notes that “The critique of the past that reads male-dominance and duplicity as aspects of traditional nationalist politics becomes an ideologeme of the broader feminist discourse of the novel” (180). It is clear that Bambara shows ways in which Black men were able to project their voices and be heard, but too often at the expense of Black women who were ever-present in the struggle. In addition to using a Black feminist approach, Bambara embraces what Alice Walker later called a Womanist aesthetic. Womanism speaks to a person who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walter xi), and the environment in which they live. The Womanist approach is one that “supplies a way for Black women to address gender oppression without attacking Black men” (Collins 63), and it draws on Bambara’s notion of environment as a pivotal portion of life for all people.

Bambara’s fiction conveys the internal fissures among activists, spiritualists, and artists, as well as the external rift between writer and reader. Every work contributes a different piece of a whole picture. For Bambara this whole is multi-generational, political, spiritual, artistic, and involving community activism and accountability. She explores the theme of emerging consciousness on an individual and a community in her fiction. A close study of her short stories “The Long Night,” and “The Organizer’s Wife,” from *The Sea Birds are Still Alive* and *The Salt Eaters* demonstrates it.

In “The Long Night,” a story in Bambara’s *The Sea birds are Still Alive* violence of the police comes as a blow which awakens the people. The police
enter into a revolutionary’s home and she hides in the bathtub thinking that they have come to arrest her. She is a member of the political group which has assaulted a pesticide plant, a police zone, and has made a slipshod attempt to free student political prisoners. The woman is so much terrified that she imagines her torture and plots her escape, mentally taking stock of the guns she has hidden throughout her home. But, the actual motive of the police break in is to get a mop and bucket to clean up the blood from a murder they have committed. The police bang on several doors which scare the community members. The people are scared of the police as if they were burglars. They are frozen with fear unwilling to even look at them. One woman pleads as they bang on her door, “Please [go don’t hurt us] we have kids in here” (TSB 100).

After the police leave the scene of their crime, the people descend to look at the pool of blood on the sidewalk that the organizer’s mop could not sop up. Witnessing this crime against their community the people begin to emerge into clarity.

The people would be emerging from the dark of their places. Surfacing for the first time in eons into clarity… And their brains, true to their tropism…would stretch the whole body up to the light, generating new food. And they would look at each other for the first time and wonder, who is this one and that one. And she would join the circle gathered round the ancient stains in the street. And someone would whisper, and who are you. And who are you. And who are we. And they would tell each other in a language that had evolved, not by magic, in the caves (TSB 102).

People are first frozen by the violence and then they come out of the shock and begin to empathize and sympathize with each other. This incident brings them together and the new found relationship creates a commitment and
responsibility in everyone. The unknown citizens can no longer remain in the nameless state of darkness, so they move towards light as the ties with others become strong very much against the individualism of the Western thought. Bambara marks this emerging consciousness with light. Immaculée Ilibargiza’s “Left-to tell” (New York Times best seller) chronicles her experiences as a survivor of the Rwandan genocide like “That Long Night”. Ilibargiza was in a bathroom for three months in silence with very little food supplied. Physically withered but spiritually sound and strong she narrates her transformation from anger and hatred to love, peace and forgiveness.

In “The Organizer’s Wife,” from The Sea Birds are Still Alive Virginia, referred and identified as organizer’s wife by everyone, emerges from her self-centered perspective toward one of greater personal power and community accountability. She is transformed as a result of her participation in a community organization. Her demeaning nickname ‘gin’ signifies her position and role in the society and also provides scope for her empowerment in the story. Gin is married to the local organizer Graham who leads the rural community in a land rights campaign. Virginia hopes that he will soon leave the community, as she is longing to leave the home town at the earliest with him. The local farmers have been exploited and forced to sell their land to developers for very low rates. Graham is devoted and committed to the campaign and runs a community school on land leased to the organization by the local church. The church sells the land occupied by the community organization with the hope of buying it along with the pastor. For, they had trumped up the charges that leads to Graham’s imprisonment. Virginia takes a literacy class at the Freedom School and soon begins to teach there. The local farmers, who had so far been dependent on Graham to organize them, use their local connections to arrange to have the paperwork held up, to sell the land.

Virginia, hearing of the preacher’s treachery, confronts him in the church, beats him with a ruler and chases him away. There is a fundamental
shifting of roles. Virginia who doesn’t accept the traditional role of a pastor as the community leader takes the role of the teacher and is metamorphosed into a community organizer. Her eyes are opened to the community’s problems like the people in “The Long Night”. A naïve country girl emerges as a community organizer and creates an identity for herself. Her identity based on her relationship with her husband ‘organizer’s wife’ is elevated into a leader with her self-actualization which elevates her identity in the community.

The importance of evolving emerging personal and communal consciousness is also one of the central themes of *The Salt Eaters* published at the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and at the beginning of the Black Women’s Movement. The Black community’s internal splits, intense despair, exhaustion, and unequal division of labor between men and women, the loss of its major leaders and the termination of the major movements are reflected in the suicide attempts made by Velma Henry a dedicated activist. Her state is very similar to that of her community which affects her physique and psyche. A journey back and forth in time, through several dimensions, and characters rehabilitate the multiple rifts that both Velma and the Black community face in the novel. The only solution to regain wholeness is to turn towards the spiritual resources of the Black culture and community. As the individual is healed the community too regains its wholeness from the fragmented self-created by blackness.

In 1977 interviewer Beverly Guy-Sheftall asked Bambara, “Do you consider it a dilemma for the black woman today who considers herself both a feminist and a warrior in the race struggle?” Bambara replied that she did not regard it as a dilemma for herself: “I don't find any basic contradiction or any tension between being a feminist, being a pan-Africanist, being a Black Nationalist ... and being a woman in North America” (27).
In her works, Bambara depicts the young women as aspiring activists, but too much of leaning towards Nationalistic ideals sometimes leads them away from their ancient communal values. They also realize the drawbacks of the drawbacks of the Black Nationalism. In *The Salt Eaters* she depicts the disorientation and fragmentation it can create in the individuals and the wholeness can be revived by the ancestors and their ancestral methods of healing. The writers seem to be skeptical about the fruits of such movements where they could see male domination.

Bambara writes that in *The Salt Eaters* she was trying to figure out how to bridge the gap between the spiritual, psychic, and political forces in the community. *The Salt Eaters* grew out of an attempt to fuse this “wasteful and dangerous split”, and to envision the incredible power and possibility if a bridge was made (SE 17). The title *The Salt Eaters* has multiple references in the novel and refers to the main themes; the key to Black people’s survival lies in community, struggle and unification.

Naylor and Bambara depict the transition in women’s attitude towards racism in assuming a new name or a new role with familial and communal ties which hold them together. Woman’s silent ways of communicating and language not as the means of communication but language as communication and non-verbal communication becoming effective when words fail-for a race which remained voiceless-are abound in Bambara’s stories. In the story “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive” an old woman spits “beetle juice” on the government newspaper which is the principal means of spreading propaganda. The lady’s attempt to minimize the revolution or express her disgust is the spitting-a form of silent resistance. As the voice and language are signifiers in African American literature, silence also signifies the futility of verbiage and revolution in Bambara’s story. Countering propaganda through consciousness building is an important issue, as it forms the foundation for a revolutionary writer. Literature as a part of revolution operates as a tool to raise consciousness. In
the story, ‘The Sea Birds are still Alive’ because of the potential in everyone to transform they become an agent for change.

Color culminated in the negation of identity, which then consequently erased the familial and communal ties in the lives of African Americans. Conflict between parents and children is almost as common in literature as it is in life. The specific form that conflict takes, however, will vary with the historical and cultural climate in which it arises. The crisis of generation gap becomes acute and poignant as the mode of pronouncing one’s identity keeps changing among the oppressed. There are strained relationships in a community always trying to surmount the negative image created by the ‘othering’ community. Both “My Man Bovanne” in Gorilla My Love and The Women of Brewster Place celebrate the mothers and portray unsympathetically the daughters whose adherence to Black Nationalism prevents them from appreciating their matrilineal heritage.

Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor are themselves daughters whose works valorize the mother and affirm, in Mary Helen Washington's words, “the black woman writer's sense of herself as part of a link in generations of women”( qtd in Pryse 21). Marjorie Pryse posits that the “heritage of separation” of children from their mothers under slavery has made black daughters value the matrilineal heritage with particular intensity (22). But the fear that the self- affirmation and self-assertion that their role as activists had conferred on them would separate them again from mothers of black history is reflected in the works chosen here. In an interview with Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker observed:

I think one reason I never stay away from the Southern Movement is because I realize how deeply political changes affect the choices and life-styles of people. The Movement of the Sixties, Black Power, the Muslims, the Panthers...have
changed the options of Black people generally and of Black women in particular. (qtd in Pryse 26)

Naylor and Bambara bring out the tug between Mothers holding on to ancestors and history and daughters moving towards African identity or Black Nationalism in fortifying their self-image. The novelists prove to be both entertainers and activists according to the call of propagators of Black Aesthetics. Critic Mary Helen Washington has discussed the presence of generational conflict, especially between mothers and daughters, in fiction by African-American women writers. Washington describes the conflict as "basically between the idealists (the daughters) and the pragmatists (the mothers and/or grandmothers)"(23).

Naylor and Bambara project how blackness give their characters meaning and negotiate different aspects of their identity, existence, and survival in family and society. There are many African American women writers who have dealt with mother–daughter relationship. Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones, Audre Lorde’s Zami are novels portraying the girls attaining a self-image through their troublesome relationship with their mothers. In its focus on the mother-daughter relationship Zami evokes Paule Marshall’s coming of age novel Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959. Brown Girl as an autobiographical novel narrates the experiences of Selina, a first-generation American girl trying to reconcile her West Indian heritage with the U.S. culture in which she lives. Selina’s development, like that of Audre in Zami, mainly revolves around her problematic relationship with her strong and domineering mother, whom she seeks to understand. Zami indeed presents the girl-protagonist Audre, who partially constructs her identity around her mother. In defining their identity daughters look up to them or learn to face life drawing the indomitable courage from them.
Bambara privileges the mother by making her the narrator of the story *My Man Bovanne*, Naylor uses a third-person point of view focused primarily through the eyes of the political activist daughter, Kiswana in her *Women of Brewster Place*. The mother appears to be an overbearing, unattractively conservative woman. Naylor deals with the conflict between mother and daughter in Mrs. Browne’s first visit to her daughter's run-down apartment building, as she “plowed through the remains” of Kiswana's ideal world established in Brewster Place. Kiswana is anxious as her mother “carefully inspected the condition of the street and the adjoining property” and made a “meticulous inventory” of her findings. She is relieved to know that the “harmless old wino” usually perched on a near-by garbage can is not there: “[H]er mother only needed one wino or one teenager with a refer within a twenty-block radius to decide that her daughter was living in a building seething with dope factories and hang-outs for derelicts” (WBP 76-77).

Kiswana looks at her mother as a middle class black woman whose material prosperity has cut her off spiritually as well as geographically from the blacks of ghetto. The mother calls her “Melanie” denying the Africanized “Kiswana”, and she is cynical about her daughter’s poor black neighborhood and afraid that “anything could happen--especially living among these people” (WBP 83). Her mother’s words enrage Kiswana, who has dropped out of college, moved from her parents’ comfortable Linden Hills home into low-income housing, and adopted an African name, hairstyle, and decor in order to put her Black Nationalist beliefs into practice. She responds to her mother’s remark with indignation: “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” (WBP 83).

A similar case is found in Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The tensions between Lena (Mama) Younger and her college-educated, activist daughter Beneatha are no less than above discussed cases.
Hansberry’s mother character Mama Younger has enormous wisdom, dignity, and love. Beneatha embraces black cultural nationalism and even thinks of marrying her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, and returning with him to Africa. Asagai calls Beneatha by an African nickname, “Alaiyo,” meaning “One for Whom Brea- Fool -Is Not Enough,” Beneatha is proud that it illustrates her identity.

Naylor's portrayal of the activist daughter differs markedly from that seen in “My Man Bovanne”. In Bambara’s story, the Black Nationalist younger generation comes across simply as the heavy, selfish, self-righteous, and blind to the authentic African American heritage it claims to value. Although Kiswana has her share of these qualities, Naylor makes her a more rounded character endowed with a sensitivity and genuine commitment not evident in the others. However, it is the mother's outlook, not the daughter’s that prevails. When Kiswana heatedly proclaims, “I'd rather be dead than be like you—a white man's nigger who's ashamed of being black” (WBP 85), Mrs. Browne grabs her daughter by the shoulders and pulls her so close that Kiswana sees “her [own] reflection, distorted and wavering, in the tears that stood in the older woman's eyes” (WBP 86). This image foreshadows the daughter's identification with her mother, an identification precipitated in part by Mrs. Browne's proud and dramatic account of their family's heritage.

Other aspects of Black Nationalism are also called into question in Naylor's story. While Mrs. Browne's impassioned account of her history makes clear her racial pride, she rejects chauvinistic assertions of racial superiority as well as narrow concepts of blackness. She tells Kiswana: “And I learned through the blood of these people [her ancestors] that black isn't beautiful and it isn't ugly—black is! It's not kinky hair and it's not straight hair—it just is” (WBP 86). She recalls that when her children were born, she was determined that both her "ebony son" and her "golden daughter" would be "prepared to meet this world on its own terms, so that no one could sell them short and make them
ashamed of what they were or how they looked--whatever they were or however they looked." She stresses to her daughter: “And Melanie, that's not being white or red or black--that's being a mother” (WBP 88). Whereas Bambara prioritizes Black Nationalism and activism Naylor underscores motherhood over race. Significantly, her mother’s words move Kiswana deeply and she looks at her mother very closely.

Kiswana followed her reflection in the two single tears that moved down her mother's cheeks until it blended with them into the woman's copper skin. There was nothing and then so much that she wanted to say, but her throat kept closing up every time she tried to speak. She kept her head down and her eyes closed, and thought, Oh, God, just let me die. How can I face her now? (WBP 87)

As Stanley understands the significance of his father and his calm nature in Bailey’s Café, it dawns on Kiswana too how much her mother would have suffered in this society. Kiswana sees herself reflected in her mother's tears; now, her reflection blends into her mother's skin, and she identifies herself with her mother. Naylor makes her identity more significant as it is strongly tied to her mother’s and closes the story with:

And she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had trod the same universe that she herself was now traveling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just two feet away on that couch. She stared at the woman she had been and was to become. (WBP 87)

In “My Man Bovanne,” from Gorilla My Love, Ms. Hazel is found dancing close to Mr. Bovanne, an old blind man. Her children take offense, and
accuse her of “acting like a bitch in heat” (GML 5) They look at their mother from the perspective of the youth. They fail to see their mother as a whole person and fall from the responsibility to truly honor the elders and their community. Much to her children’s humiliation the mother drinks, laughs too loud and wears a wig with cornrows underneath (the children agree that the wig must go but the cornrows are authentically Black). The novelist also hints that their embarrassment is on account of upward mobility which has led them to ridicule their mother’s “low class ways” which they no longer identify themselves with. It is ironical that her children who are Black Nationalists, a movement built on understanding the past, dismiss and disregard the elders, those who made history. The rhetoric which glorifies the past is adored but is not used in respecting the lives and opinions of older people.

Bambara critiques on some Nationalists whose words do not match their actions and the negative impact of the movement too. Hazel is bewildered and shocked to know that her children especially her daughter doesn’t understand her. She expects a natural inclination of a better understanding from the daughter who is close to her but she joins others in mocking her mother. One of Ms. Hazel’s sons beseeches her to act her age but then does not know her age. This special child that “she carried strapped to her chest until she was nearly two” treats her like a stranger and is more conscious of the commitment to Black Nationalism than her mother.

In “My Man Bovanne” Bambara critiques a shallow understanding of Black Nationalism by over enthusiastic youngsters. The children were very keen on making the older people conform to nationalist ideals. Fed up with her children being inquisitive, the mother leaves the community get together with Mr.Bovanne. They go to her house where she proceeds to bathe and tuck him in. Their relationship is not sexual, she says that “you have to take care of the older folks, [it is] the folks who support the people who do the organizing.” She
quotes the nationalist rhetoric of one of her children who touts that “old folks is the nation” (GML 12).

Narrated in Miss Hazel’s voice, the story humorously reveals the hypocrisy of a nationalist ideology that embraces the folk as a political abstraction but has little tolerance for actual members of the folk. Aware that she and Bovanne have been invited to the benefit because “we grass roots,” Miss Hazel satirizes the notion of grass roots subscribed to by the younger and politically militant generation:

And I ain’t never been southerner than Brooklyn Battery and no more country than the window box on my fire escape. And just yesterday my kids tellin me to take them to the countrified rags off my head and be cool. And now can’t get Black enough to suit em’. (GML 8)

Whereas her children dismiss Bovanne as Tom, Miss Hazel not only treats him with affection but also insists on his centrality to any variable conception of black political community must be capacious and founded on respect for the variegated humanity of the folk.

Despite conflicts, misunderstandings and accusations the reunion builds stronger and healthier relationship between mothers and daughters. Gloria Joseph’s research has revealed that black daughters hold overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward their mothers:

The daughters showed tremendous respect, concern, and love for their mothers. The positive feelings that were expressed did not imply that all was sweet, kind, and loving between them. Rather, what was expressed was an undeniable respect and admiration for their mother's accomplishments and
struggles against overwhelming odds. The mothers were role models for their daughters. (20)

According to historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "African women were traditionally the key to cultural survival, because they were the bearers of tradition." Moreover, “older women” played a particularly vital role “in resistance movements in Africa and throughout the diaspora” (28).

The artists have explored the constructedness and fluidity of identity and toy with how it is represented. The pieces chosen have the potential to intervene the ideologies that justified the separateness and challenge the socio-economic, civic and legal inequities assigned to minority populations. They valorize being self without agonizing, and become an embodiment of new identities- new names, new roles in Movements etc. In this process the friction within the family and society is eradicated, there is personal and communal empowerment, the private and public spheres get expanded.

In the long struggle of blacks to eradicate the negative impact of their blackness they have reconstituted their self-esteem, relationship within families and society. In the novels chosen for study, the colored victims define and institute a collective identity, through celebrating blackness, their ethnicity which liberates them. The blackness which isolated them becomes a marker of their communal identity.