Chapter-6
Conclusion

The master narrative of American history is deeply rooted in white man’s triumph over wilderness of the New World. European settler embraced the Biblical sanction to proclaim himself as the supreme being—superior to nature and other forms of life associated with nature, namely Native Americans, Afro-Americans and women. The conquest motif of white capitalistic mind justified genocide of Native Americans and subjugation of millions of Afro-Americans for years to come. His ‘errand into wilderness’ has resolutely rebuffed any impulse to label blacks as human beings. Naylor recognizes that for ensuring meaningful sustainability of people on earth, there is need to question and rein in the perpetuation of the conquest motif that sanctions power politics of whites over nature and people of different ethnicities and cultures. Beneath the politics of hegemonic power structures of European male centre lies an alternative version and vision of life that enables the marginalized and the oppressed to survive. This study shows that Naylor’s works are an attempt to recognize this alternative vision of life that has long been suppressed and devalued by the dominant culture as the uncivilized way of life. The discussion evidences that the range of Naylor’s vision is very wide and her perspective is realistic, optimistic and humanistic.

Naylor explores the existence of the slippery spaces, characters, situations and contexts that often lie between the dichotomous and violent political and cultural divides. Her spaces challenge the boundaries that position a Eurocentric white male’s canon at its centre. She pushes these boundaries to include the stories, experiences and traditions of the subjects who have not been considered worthy of recognition and respect by the mainstream politics. She writes against Western distortion of the humanity of Afro-American people to reclaim and reposition the history, traditions, the language and ethnocentric core of Afro-Americans. In this process, she is not just broadening the boundaries of consciousness of whites and blacks alike, she blurs the
very existence and relevance of boundaries and labels as they have been used by the white colonizers to sideline and dehumanize Afro-Americans.

Naylor questions the canons that arrange this world around the binary opposition of man/nature, white/black, man/woman, rich/poor, emotion/intellect, urban/rural, fact/fiction, past/present, this world and the other world. Life is much deeper, inclusive and complex to be explained in one dimensional juxtaposition of either/or. Boundaries and binaries only define an inside and an outside. Eurocentric canon privileges white version of stories, whereas for Naylor “there are just too many sides to the whole story” (*Mama Day* 311).

Even the conceptualization of the geography of Naylor’s places rebels against the reductive attempt to define and limit spaces and experiences. Willow Springs challenges the political and cultural significance of boundaries as it is not there on any of the maps for South Carolina or Georgia. Willow Springs is actually an alternative place where a woman slave, Sapphira, is able to win freedom for herself and her children from her white master. It is successful because it lies outside the control of white male power. The black community of this island rejects the values and oppressive binaries of the mainland. *Linden Hills* is doomed because it is modelled after the same hierarchical white power structures which people of Willow Springs reject. By positioning Bailey’s Cafe on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility, Naylor insists on overlapping and interpenetrating spaces and realities. Despite being in New York, Bailey’s Cafe is able to sustain itself because it defies the constrictive category of space. It is real, real mobile and can be found anywhere and any time so as to cater to the needs of men and women who are always in transition because of being locked out of the fixed boundaries.

Naylor’s blurring of boundaries is not just restricted to geographical lines and spaces. She erases the borderline separating the human world from the world of nature in *Mama Day*. Her characters openly borrow from nature. Mama Day recognizes nature as the incarnation of God himself. Like religion, it gives spiritual sustenance, saves people and is a part of their rituals. Through Mama Day, the whole community of Willow Springs derives its sustenance and medical cures from nature. For people of Willow Springs, nature is a fellow communicator with whom they can speak and
share. Understanding nature’s existence as a living and friendly entity questions the Eurocentric theory of conquest of vast tracts of natural land and can go a long way in protecting nature from exploitation.

Naylor also recognizes the dangerous and incomprehensible disorder of nature. For people of Willow Springs, nature is not an escape from one’s problems. Natural terrain is fraught with dangers and people of Willow Springs recognize nature’s power to stir hurricanes also. Naylor doesn’t dismiss the possibility of nature striking back if people start taking nature as a predictable and controllable entity. By revealing the unpredictable and the powerful rhythms of the natural world, Naylor derides the Western conceptualization of nature as a passive object that requires pruning and taming. She positions nature as an independent, living and breathing agency that requires understanding and care rather than exploitation and disregard.

People of Willow Springs approach nature as a companion, as a fellow being. That is why, they are able to communicate with nature. This approach saves them from being blind exploiters of nature. For them, nature never becomes the ‘other’. People, who remain removed from the core values of earth, ultimately suffer when natural order of things takes its own course. Luther Nedeed, historian Braithwaite and Maxwell in Linden Hills are examples of people who are unable to become whole because of their attempt to dominate nature.

Naylor rewrites nature’s imagery in Bailey’s Cafe. Here, it is Eve, rather than Adam, who recreates a garden after her fall from grace in the home of her Christian Godfather. Eve makes flowers bloom and her flowers, in turn, give meaning and nurturance to the existence of Eve and her boarders. In Eve’s garden, Naylor achieves a balance rarely conceptualized in the world of Afro-American letters. Here, nature is not more powerful than human beings; rather, it is a presence that can be understood and assimilated into the routine humdrum of life. Likewise, Eve’s garden is also a place where human beings do not dominate nature for commercial gains. By accepting nature as an active and alive companion, Naylor breaks the binary of either man or nature to pave the way for a more participatory involvement of both the agents for a new universe.
By positioning the involvement of nature as God, saviour, redeemer and a companion in people’s lives, Naylor blurs the boundary between the natural and the human world. She makes both man and nature stakeholders in each other’s sustenance. Her blurring of boundaries is not just restricted to the plurality of the perceptible world. She fuses the past with the present and the physical with the metaphysical to create a connectedness that stretches from the past to the present of the individual and the community. Against the Western conceptualization of linear progression of time, Naylor identifies with circular movement of seasons in nature to acknowledge the spiritual unity of the cosmos. She destabilizes the rigid demarcation between the physical world and the world that lies beyond the known world. Abigail, in *Mama Day*, answers her sister, and George continues to communicate with Cocoa even after they (Abigail and George) are no longer part of this living world. Behind Mama Day’s exchange of good mornings with her dead sister and Cocoa’s communication with George, who is no longer living, there is a serious quest on the part of Naylor to unearth connections of the present with the past. By making Abigail and George answer from the past, Naylor opens up a place which is considered closed, mystical and separate by the Western ideology.

Naylor’s insistence on reality as a living, dynamic and ever-changing organism questions the treatment of nature, woman and people of color as fixed and mechanized resources. According to her, different identities, different perspectives and different realities cannot be treated as antagonistic by virtue of being different. She underlines that Western world’s reductive attempt to label reality and human identity emanates from their fear of diversity, fear of the unknown and fear of disorder. Anything different is labelled as the ‘other’. Throughout her critique of Eurocentric approach, she questions the racist projection of white identity as superior and cardinal axis of this world.

Naylor recognizes that the history of black identity in white America has been the struggle between the reality imposed by white hegemonic society and the actual realities of blacks. A white hegemonic society has always been active in superimposing images and myths on the realities of millions of Afro-Americans. Naylor is precise in her assessment that the myth of Negro inferiority is a very
convenient tool that has been used by whites in making Negroes believe in their own inferiority. Despite good physique and understanding, Ben only hopes to become a porter one day. While some fall apart, Naylor hails the resilience and ingenuity of the majority of the people with which they are able to see racism face to face rather than being cowed down by it.

What is remarkable about Naylor is her depiction of characters who go on with their lives despite obvious degradation and confinement. They take racism in their stride. The women of Brewster Place go on with their pain and laughter despite the presence of wall of racism in their lives. Hence, Naylor’s focus includes, besides social and economic oppression of white colonizer, the survival of her characters, groups and communities. Her works focus on the recognition of the trap that is laid out to chain the identity of Afro-Americans in a predefined category that is always put at the bottom of hierarchical scheme of things. Once these categories, myths and pseudo images are identified, Naylor exhorts the Afro-American individuals to rely on their own understanding of self. For her characters, the total disregard for what the world perceives them to be may be a conscious decision or an unconscious reflex to protect one’s identity from being reduced to caricatures and stereotypes.

Bailey does not mind being called Bailey even if it is not his real name. For he knows that the white world has never given credit to blacks for their real worth. A black has been viewed as a nigger only. So, for Bailey it is important to know who he is and he is not bothered about what others call him or how they perceive him. Nadine totally disregards society’s convention of the accepted behaviour. Miss Maple’s father inverts the terms of segregation by politely proclaiming in front of white representatives of Ku Klux Klan that he and his brothers are intellectually and physically more worthy inheritors of the legacy of Shakespeare. By making her characters disregard the names, the social and behavioural expectations of a manipulative society, Naylor strongly presents racial identity as a contested terrain rather than a fixed category. These characters acknowledge that by ignoring and suppressing the black’s contribution in the making of America, white supremacist not only protects his status as numero uno but also keeps the canon of Negro inferiority alive. That’s why, these characters recognize the necessity of being their own agents
of change. They destabilize and dismiss the categories and labels which are used to constrict their hopes, dreams and opportunities.

The strength of some of her characters comes from their determined disregard for shared information of academic canon. When segregation in schools and colleges ended, education was seen as a central tool in the model that was implemented as a viable option for self-reliance and self-sufficiency for the black masses. The school and college curriculums, media and social reports became the absolute apparatuses to teach blacks lessons in American history and culture. They became mouth-piece organisations to propagate a singular white American national identity that could rule by colonizing the ethnicity of the ‘other’. By academic indoctrination, white hegemonic society sought to superimpose images and myths on the realities of millions of Afro-Americans. For a holistic development of an Afro-American, Naylor questions the existence of the cultural fences that are created by the white intelligentsia through college education separated from the oral and folk traditions of black masses. But Blacks like Bailey, Willie and Miss Maple succeed because they refuse to separate their folk wisdom from their knowledge.

The quest for self in Naylor’s characters is quite different from the image of independent white American pioneering the exploration and exploitation of American land and resources. The strength in Naylor’s characters does not come from isolated individualism and autonomy, rather it comes from their ability to form connections with their past and their community. Apart from underlining the significance of discarding white definitions and doctored education, Naylor highlights the importance of building from the past not over their past. Unlike people of Linden Hills, who build over their past, the characters who transcend racism reclaim their past, as do Mama Day, Mattie, Stanley and his father.

America is a multiethnic society. Naylor, therefore, questions the ethics of having rigid parameters for defining an American identity. Stanley's home is a mix of people having Mexican, African and Native American roots. While completing his term in jail, Stanley observes that Mexicans, Yumas, third generation Japanese and Chinese—all were honorary Negroes for white America. With this example, Naylor extends her periphery of concerns to include white and non-white groups who are
experiencing otherness and pressures of assimilation in white America. Her works speak for creating a culture that doesn’t degrade and devalue diversity, difference, disorder and the unknown as the ‘other’. Her works speak for multiple definitions or at times for the total disregard for reductive definitions for complex identities and realities of life. She is all for extending boundaries so that extremes can be looked as co-existing entities. Naylor is firm in her suggestion that a reductive attempt to view humanity of an individual based on his phenotypes is bound to result in immense cultural loss. As long as America continues to deny its respect for and recognition of physical and cultural differences among people, the goal of true democracy and liberty will continue to be elusive.

Close on the heels of the tendency of whites to portray black intellectual and cultural identity as inferior and debased is the myth of viewing black communities as a mass of degraded homogeneous people. But Naylor’s fiction strongly contests such monolithic depiction of black communities in America. Naylor’s characters come from all walks of life, from different regions and different time frames of America. From a recipient of welfare cheques to a top notch executive of IBM, from a sharecropper to a successful real estate founder of a posh colony—her characters are part of various economic and professional organizations of the American state. They defy easy classifications into seemingly antagonistic terminologies reserved for black characters. By delineating the lives of upper-middle-class members of Linden Hills along with the underprivileged, economically and politically marginalized people of Brewster Place, Naylor debunks the dominant myth of black society as a monolithic class of people.

However, in her description of upper-middle-class blacks, Naylor critiques the blind pursuit of American dream by Afro-Americans. She re-examines the validity of power, money, luxury, consumerism and capitalistic acquisition as core indicators of one’s dream and happiness. In doing this, she shifts the thrust from materialistic prosperity to one’s ethnocentric self as an essential condition for happiness. White power, white money and white American dreams have been influential in establishing whites as socially and culturally a superior class. The American dream of white race ensures that minorities aspire for the status, mannerism and cultural mores of white
society so that cultural differences can be erased in the construction of America as the great melting pot. Naylor questions the metaphor of America as a great melting pot. Her works embody a defiant and deliberate refusal to consider various identities as a homogeneous mass under a singular mark of American identity. Naylor upsets the dominant myth of associating success with cultural whiteness in America.

Naylor shows that adoption of white terms of success and status symbol have more damaging effects on the people who have been deliberately kept away from the American dream for so long. Naylor does not denounce the rewards of material gains, but she cautions the readers to weigh the spiritual cost of excessive materialism. Through her minor character, Grandma Tilson, in *Linden Hills*, Naylor underlines the importance of preserving the silver mirror of soul for Afro-Americans. She is aware of the fact that if broader view of life is not given importance by blacks themselves, Afro-American communities may be in danger of replicating the marginalizing and dehumanizing power structures of white culture. In Naylor’s fiction, the characters, who in order to prove their class superiority begin to suppress their African roots, their culture and traditions, end up alienating themselves from their own self and their communities.

Naylor highlights the dangers in discarding one’s roots and donning an alien mask of white identity. For upward social mobility, if an Afro-American severs his ties with his home, his family, his community and with his ethnocentric self, then the consequences can be quite damaging, as is the case with Luther Nedeed, Uncle Eli, Laurel Dumont and Reverend Moreland. Luther, in order to create a black wad of spit in the white eye of America, and Uncle Eli to become rich and powerful like whites, distance themselves from their African origins, their African past and model themselves like white male pioneers of entrepreneurship in America. In this process, they repeat the mistakes of their white male models of power and end up alienating themselves from nature and from their own people.

Secondly, Naylor delineates the psychological pressures that assimilation of blacks into white upper middle class can exert on their spiritual well-being. A capitalistic society reserves its accolades for only those blacks who come quite close in their choice of food, clothes and mannerisms to those of upper white class. At
Walco Glass Steel, the Second-in-command’s tightening of his bib around his neck represents choking of the African eros in order to walk the tight rope of accepted sophisticated mannerism of white upper class. Maxwell Smyth, Xavier Donnell, Winston Alcott become fake and mechanical replicas of their self as they continue to weigh their real emotions against a pseudo image of a new, cultured and polished Negro in the minds of white dominant society.

According to Naylor, it is the ties of Afro-Americans with their families, with their communities, nature and with their ethnocentric self that have helped them survive the brutal oppression of slavery and inequality in America. Naylor implies that for the survival of Afro-Americans as a whole, their success has to be built and achieved with these ties and not at the expense of these ties.

Naylor explores the tensions and anxieties of middle class blacks and at the same time, she restores the dignity of the proletariat by finding laughter and strength in their community life. For her, economically marginalized and underprivileged ghettos are as much a site of human survival as they are projected to be the sites of budding crime in America. Naylor upsets the myth of American dream of associating happiness with accumulation of materialistic things. The house which can truly be called a home in Linden Hills belongs to a couple Norman and Ruth Anderson who do not have more than three pieces of furniture in their apartment. But her triumph lies in rewriting white upper-middle-class male canon as she also gives us examples of characters who are able to fuse their prosperity with their unique ethnocentric self as represented in their choice of food, clothing and culture of sharing. Moving beyond the mindset of class contrast and class conflict, she fuses folk and proletarian aesthetics with prosperity. The two economically secure characters of her fiction, namely Abshu and Miss Eva, give a clear message that the ties and values that have helped Afro-Americans survive economic oppression of slavery need not be discarded at the altar of selfish consumerism and power for writing economic success in America. Naylor puts forward an alternative possibility to transcend limiting stratification of the capitalistic society by fusing prosperity with one’s cultural roots.

Naylor’s attempts to dislocate existing power structures to work out new possibilities are apparent in her treatment of gender also. Being black and being
women, black women have been doubly erased and doubly marginalized by the racist and sexist forces of America. Twice invisible, the pain, the agony, the struggles and triumphs of black women have gone by and large unnoticed, unrecorded and unattended to in white patriarchal society even after emancipation and the end of Civil Rights Movement. Black women have remained economically oppressed, socially neglected and politically dispossessed. Naylor purposely writes from the vantage point of black women whose selves were deliberately erased and are still being erased by the dominant patriarchal society to establish a male order on this planet. Naylor acknowledges the identity of her black women characters. Through her wide spectrum of female characters, she repeatedly reinforces this message that the circumstances, the struggles and experiences of black women in America are too different and unique to be labelled in a single category of being a mammy, slut or a domineering matriarch. Naylor exposes the veiled humanity of black women behind their distorted images and subservient roles allotted to them.

Domesticity takes the centre stage in her fiction. Cooking, cleaning, washing, midwifery—all important, but unrecognized works of women—take the centre stage in her fictional cosmology. The language and the concerns Naylor portrays are specifically and pointedly female. Naylor uses her quite ordinary and marginalized black women to break into the guarded bastions of white male literary canon. A majority of her women are plain women. Although their pain is very personal, more often than not it emanates from forces over which these black women seem to have no control. They get fractured jaws for burnt pots of rice. Men leave them with unwanted pregnancies and welfare cheques. Even if husbands happen to be rich and educated, the demand for submission and silence remains the same as in the case of Willa and Laurel.

Naylor’s treatment of the oppression of women in patriarchal society goes beyond the physical manifestation of oppression in terms of lower socio-economic status and physical abuse of black women. Naylor questions the social and psychological indoctrination designed to make woman accept definition of femininity and masculinity as the core values to model themselves and their sons. She shows how acceptance of their existence as dependent non-entities chains black women and
makes the task of finding their selves all the more difficult. She brings out the conflict and sufferings in her characters as they try to perfectly fit into gender roles allotted to them. Women who limit their originality and potential by restricting themselves only to gender specific roles struggle to achieve their selfhood and at times they become unconscious accomplices in their own erasure/effacement. Mattie willingly pools all her energies and attention on her son, only to be betrayed by him in her old age. Etta, though a spirited woman, is unable to imagine a new horizon for herself, for she too internalizes the patriarchal myth that the place for a successful woman is behind the shadow of a successful man. Society, upbringings, myths and education play an important role in internalizing the gender roles in women.

Despite enormous odds pitted against black women, Naylor feels that black woman has depended on instinctive and intuitional means to resist her erasure and oppression. Her sisterhood, her spirituality rooted in nature and her wisdom derived from oral tradition of her tribe have enabled her to survive whole. Naylor feels black woman must come out of the rigid definition and labels that are used to limit her humanity. She extends her feminism and aligns with Alice Walker in contending that the traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity have been used by racist forces of America to limit the humanity and horizon for both the genders.

Naylor’s feminism is not just about women and their empowerment alone. She refuses to see the world as divided into two extremes of femininity and masculinity. She shows a deep understanding of how society’s definition of masculinity forces many men to aspire towards aggressive and domineering personality. Any failure to adhere to the accepted norms of femininity and masculinity leaves the guilt of inadequacy and inefficiency in the individual. Luther goes out of his way to subjugate his wife and natural order of things in order to be a man. Willie hides his neat packing and his love of poetry as these traits are considered too feminine to belong to a man. George is unable to join hands with Mama Day because of his inflated belief in his all powerful masculine self.

Naylor brings out obvious limitations of branding certain traits as feminine and others as masculine. Masculinity or femininity cannot be over the humanity and individuality of a person. Miss Maple crosses the gender boundary by adopting the
woman’s way of dressing and woman’s work of cleaning with his Ph.D degree in statistics and commercial success in writing jingles. Eve feels neither a male nor a female, she is just ‘mud’. Abshu defines his identity by a purpose and doesn’t feel the need to assert his manhood by running after fat pay cheques or unwarranted aggression. Hence, he retains his compassion and humanity. Recognising and respecting the strengths and weaknesses of seemingly antagonistic constructions of femininity and masculinity is necessary to preserve and nurture the best of the both worlds.

Naylor’s characters, situations and spaces are always in a flux. Oppressed by dehumanizing definition of what it means to be a black male or female in a consumerist society, there is continuous search for meaning and freedom in her characters. Characters who are able to see through the reductive definitions and roles allotted to them and their culture are able to save themselves and their unique Afro-American sense of self. She, in her fiction, underlines the purpose of survival as to survive whole. The economic, social, cultural, moral and psychological codes imposed by a white hegemonic society are quite inconsistent with the multifaceted realities and individualities of the human beings who are sidelined as the ‘other’ because of their race, ethnicity, class, gender and culture.

Naylor believes that American literary canon has been a white male construct. It is high time that this canon is broadened to include different voices from different ethnicities and cultures. Naylor feels that it will take another lifetime before race relations are resolved forever. But she hopes that the process of dialogue on one-to-one basis can go a long way in blurring racial boundaries. She depicts the possibilities of transcending these color lines in Bailey’s Cafe when the entire community of the street welcome a newborn as the son of God. She deconstructs the politics of power over blacks by suggesting the possibility of interconnection and coexistence through overlapping circles of Mama Day’s patchwork quilt. The emphasis on individuality, understanding and tolerance for diversity are important to position America as a patchwork quilt of humanism.

Naylor underlines the importance of remaining true to one’s self for people of different colors, genders and classes and once that realization dawns, she weaves an
intricate pattern to represent American identity as a patchwork quilt, where each patch retains its color and uniqueness while still remaining the part of a larger pattern. Life is vibrant. So why just restrict it to a single color white or with just few labels and definitions. That’s why, her characters, who challenge the confining boundaries of race, class and gender, are able to live more meaningful lives. Any attempt to define truth in fixed terms is reductive. Mama Day sums up Naylor’s perspective in the best way that life “ain’t about a right way or wrong way–just two ways” (Naylor, *Mama Day* 295).

In order to protect the humanity of the millions of ‘others’ who are being ignored and oppressed by the mainstream, the hostile configuration of this world into absolute power structures needs to be questioned and rearranged. For the conceptualization of such an egalitarian world, Naylor suggests the participatory involvement of all the stakeholders, i.e. black and white, man and nature, man and man, female and female, male and female.

Naylor underlines the struggle for dominance in the political, social and cultural fabric of America to highlight the necessity of a cooperative and interpenetrating involvement of various binaries in making the growth of this life more meaningful and all encompassing. It is high time that Americans opened up their curriculums as well as minds to accept and recognize the visible multiracial and multifaceted reality of America. As such, Naylor may be a representative of largely Afro-American experience, but her works mirror the voice of dispossessed Jews, Ethiopians and second-third generation Japanese and Asians as well. In this regard, her literature becomes truly humane and crosses national borders to claim international citizenship of a humanistic world.