Chapter-3
Destabilizing the Canon of Racism

Slavery, race prejudice and racial segregation have left a large and lasting imprint on American psyche. They have “scarred American history” and they continue to shape the country’s self-understanding. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, while dissecting the incredible influence of slavery on the making of America, write:

Slavery played a profoundly important role in the making of the United States, as the institution grew from the handful of Africans landed in Virginia in 1619 to the four million African Americans held in bondage at the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. The bound labor of at least twelve generations of black people created great wealth for slaveholders, wealth that was translated into extraordinary political power. (7)

In slavery, Africans were treated as nothing more than a ‘Chattel,’ a ‘thing’ bereft of any individual identity. From the institution of slavery emerges a long journey of African people from the position of being the ‘other’ to becoming African-Americans under highly oppressive and inhuman conditions. From the story of slavery emerges the turbulent history of a race that fought institutionalized racism in America to write “the story of African people becoming African Americans” (Horton and Horton 7).

Historians agree that the concepts of race and racism in America have their roots in the institution of slavery. Expansion of capitalism necessitated the use and abuse of African labour. This could be achieved more effectively, if African labour was treated simply as a commodity. So a complex matrix was woven to facilitate this. From the time when Africans were brought as indentured servants to mainland of English America, religious and scientific theories were probed to find arguments in favour of the perpetuation of the slavery. Justification and rationalization of slavery necessitated the pseudoscientific belief in Negro’s subhumanity and inferiority.

Europeans “…posed Africans as a questionable form of humanity, ranked along the Great Chain of Being between whites and apes, below fully intelligent life
and suspiciously close to animals” (Stein 55). With this belief, early European exploration of the African continent triggered “the most catastrophic binary system perpetuated by the imperialism” in the form of “the invention of the concept of race” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 26). Since color was the most visible and most obvious distinction, it was easy for the white Eurocentric belief to create a binary of white and black. The complex physical and cultural differences were reduced to a binary of white/black via which the whole politics of domination and conquest was played by European settlers over the African slaves. Further extended, the binary system proved to be a powerful tool to establish white over black in a bid to gain capitalistic reward. Binary distinctions between white and black positioned the whites as civilized and cultured race whereas the blacks were perceived as uncivilized and uncultured.

Binary thinking consolidated and deepened the distinction between whites and blacks as it extended the physical difference in color of the skin to intellectual and social capabilities of the two. It anointed whites as beautiful, superior, independent and intelligent subjects whereas blacks were defined as antonyms of these adjectives. The differences in color and culture were assumed by whites as signs of cultural and mental inferiority of a Negro. So a violent hierarchy was created:

- White : black
- Superior : Inferior
- Independent : dependent
- Beautiful : ugly
- Subject : object
- Intelligent : retarded

Whites assumed themselves to be cultured, civilized, intelligent and independent. ‘White male’ crowned himself as the superior being over everything else created by God. White male was the subject and blacks were relegated to the lowest position just above the animals. This concept of hierarchy emanating from the juxtaposition of binaries clearly segregated people into different groups called races and the understanding of the race was not just limited to physical features of the people involved, rather it came to encompass mental ability as well.
Race became subjectively real. Rather than being used in the sense of type as designating species of men distinct in physical constitution, race came to be used in the sense of type as designating species of men distinct both in physical constitution and mental capacities. Racial stereotypes became a norm. It became a social construct required by the imperialistic mind to justify its subjugation of a whole race of people.

To establish their superiority over the blacks, the whites needed God’s mandate to perpetuate their cultural hegemony without a guilt-ridden consciousness: “Southern evangelicals accepted the Bible as God’s literal word, and through selective reading they found abundant evidence to proclaim slavery fully in accord with His moral dictates” (Goldfield et al. 329). The pro-slavery argument depended and banked heavily upon the Bible to such an extent that supporters of slavery established that rather than being a moral curse, “slavery was part of God’s plan to Christianize an inferior race and teach its people how to produce raw materials that benefited the world’s masses” (Goldfield et al. 329). Religious fortification of slavery was important for the psychological peace of slaveholding whites.

The white European settler took to this moral like fish to water and they made sure that a white, patriarchal authority was always there for moral, social and psychological control of a race that was thought unfit for freedom because it was inferior to whites. Under this control, blacks lost their status as an independent entity. They witnessed their souls and bodies being reduced to a status of a thing. They were struggling to keep their sanity and families intact when emancipation came. After this came the difficult periods of reconstruction, Jim Crow America and fight for equality as Afro-Americans.

The fight for equality was difficult because although some southerners now believed that slavery was bad and therefore should be abolished, even the most liberal southerners could never imagine blacks as their equals. So the continued subjugation of black people and black souls remained consistent in their fight to become equal in America. This trend is manifested even today in race relations in America. Even after nearly four hundred years of their presence in America, Afro-Americans are unable to erase “hyphen” in their existence in the process of becoming integrated with the American.
The continuous subjugation of blacks even after the abolition of slavery and reconstruction period is not just the result of slavery and the failure of white world to grant equality in opportunities to blacks. It is the result of internationalization of racism in minds of the whites by a carefully selected canon. Inequality is identifiable and hence an attempt can be made to restrict it, reduce it and remove it. But, it is the canon with an associated battery of tropes and stereotyped images that is difficult to pinpoint, fight and defeat.

Perpetual subjugation of blacks is rooted in deeper ideology. Whites could not have kept a race down by simple attitudes/beliefs in their own superiority and the subsequent denial of equal opportunities to blacks. No doubt, their superiority was established by carefully selected Biblical references, pseudoscientific beliefs and binaries of that era, but it (white superiority) was also cemented by equally pervasive complex matrix of racial images. In the long period of white racial hegemony, many images, metaphors and tropes were widely propagated in literature as well as in society. So much so that these images became a part of common sense, common knowledge and then common belief. Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* writes at length about American brand of Africanism in the minds of white America: “under the pressures of ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation, an American brand of Africanism emerged: strongly urged, thoroughly serviceable, companionably ego-reinforcing, and pervasive” (8).

The obvious polarity of black and white “made the projection of not-me” in the white mind. Morrison further observes that the “construction of the American as a new white man” necessitated the difference between whites and their social ‘other’ (*Playing* 39). So, the new white man was given authority, autonomy, newness and absolute power only at the cost of dark and suppressed presence of black people. Dark and enduring presence of a Negro was a psychological requirement of European settlers in becoming white Americans. Morrison sums up quite pertinently: “Africanism is the vehicle by which American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (52).
No wonder, blacks have often been depicted in theories, media and literary canon as: subhuman, bestial, immature, childlike, lazy, capricious, unreliable, hypersexual, animal-like, diseased, infectious, dirty, smelly, culturally inferior, ugly, uneducable and incapable to produce works of art.

An image speaks louder than words. It leaves an indelible impression and serves its perpetuators. Charles Johnson equated projection of false image with corruption of consciousness which ultimately leads to social corruption. He underscores this point in his assertion: “Correctly, the Harlem Renaissance writers understood the image to be a workshop of meaning and perhaps even understood that the first step in treating social corruption is treating the corruption of consciousness” (17). A projected image perpetuated by dominant culture from all possible positions can lure the senses and consciousness of the subaltern into believing that the image is the real reflection of him. Gloria Wade-Gayles has also explained the working of the images on the minds of the object. She emphasizes, “Images, even when they are false, are the public mirrors in which we first see ourselves as others see us and, are, therefore, the starting places for our definitions of ourselves” (242). As growing number of blacks internalized these images with their understanding of self, the blacks became a perfect soil where the dirty politics of racism played its most humiliating trick of stripping black people of their selfhood. Charles Johnson writes that catastrophe of American slavery is a “bloody history of atrocity, of stripping a people of cultural identity, then grotesquely caricaturing them in the national (white) imagination” (7-8).

Although slavery has ended, ideology continues: “Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was” (Morrison, Playing 63). Images as workshops of meaning keep circulating cultural construct of racial identity. Tropes keep the complexity of race relations alive and race continues in America, as Toni Morrison says, as ‘a metaphor’: “. . .racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely
embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before” (63).

End of slavery gave way to a troubled period of reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, the terror of Ku Klux Klan and institutional racism because white mind kept perpetuating the canon of African inferiority as the absolute truth and chained blacks to shackles of images, no less stronger than the bonds of slavery.

Images of primitiveness, backwardness and stupidity are associated with blacks and Asians and these associations are unquestioningly accepted as part of everyday experience and gumption. These negative images and associations are integrated elements of a wider ideology and “the Ideology’s strength rests on people’s failure to unmask it and examine alternate ways of viewing reality” (Cashmore 114). Alternate view of reality is veiled because the canon of Negro inferiority is deep-rooted, well-documented and thoroughly circulated as a fixed natural reality. Images of savagery, backwardness and foolishness are associated with blacks and perpetuated as facts in dominant discourses.

It is this canon of white racial superiority and the black’s supposed genetic and cultural inferiority that is revisited and destabilized by Naylor with a view to unmask its complex working in strangulating the physical, social and psychological worth of blacks. Naylor has not just exposed the full impact of racism on the lives of Afro-Americans but she also allows us to have a critical look on the dignified struggles of blacks to counter the catastrophe of racism in America.

This appalling status of blacks in white America has given birth to a curious dilemma of black writers. The responsibility on black writers is immense. They have to counteract the ideology of racism and at the same time they have to establish themselves as artists no less capable than those producing white canonical works. It is observed that black writers often seem to ask themselves in what ways and to what extent their art should serve the political and social needs of their race. It is really difficult to find an answer to this dilemma. Judith V. Branzburg makes a very perceptive observation in this connection: “Failure to write with a crusading mentality has often brought on accusations of betrayal of the race, while polemical writing had
been criticized as dull and lacking in artistry or subtlety. For Afro-American women writers the perils of politics and art are more numerous than for the men” (320).

Many a Naylor’s contemporary woman novelist, who include such celebrated writers as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Alice Walker, have managed to be true to art while being honest in their writings about black men and women. They write about situations, issues, characters and move beyond them towards a larger story, with a black sensibility along with black rhythms in black vernacular.

Right from the publication of her first novel, Gloria Naylor seems to have placed herself in the above-mentioned tradition. She has contributed a lot by projecting the diversity and vibrancy of her people in her works of art. The vitality and complexity of her characters challenges the peripheral and one dimensional portrayal of blacks in American literature and media. Her works seriously examine the politics of race and display simultaneously faithful and sincere efforts on the part of the writer to present a realistic view of the lives of Afro-Americans. Judith V. Branzburg analyses in her review “Seven Women and a Wall” that in *The Women of Brewster Place*, “Without being overtly critical of the racism of America, Naylor manages to make the reader understand how the economic and social situation of black lives becomes one with personal lives, with the relationships between men and women, women and women, and parents and children, without diminishing the humanity of the individuals involved” (320).

Charles E. Wilson, Jr. notes while discussing the thematic issues of *The Women of Brewster Place* that “The issue of racism is presented in the novel, but it does not take center stage. Since the informed reader is well aware of its pervasiveness, Naylor resists the temptation to overexpose race. And to some degree, she preserves for her characters some sense of agency” (55). A discussion of the opening and the concluding chapter of *The Women of Brewster Place* here will make us realize that racism and race relations are important and central concerns with Naylor. Absence of white characters and lack of emphasis on situations involving white and black interaction does not mean that Naylor shies away from overexposing racism. Racism, according to Naylor, has come to acquire a pervasiveness and has become a normative part of black experience. She is more intrigued by the struggles of black communities
to survive in a landscape severely limited by racism. So it’s not that she avoids overexposing race to preserve agency for her characters, in fact, her characters achieve agency despite dehumanizing and omnipresent racism in America.

In signifying the creation of Brewster Place and the wall as a symbol of racism in America in the beginning and towards the concluding chapter of this Novel, Naylor puts focus on racism as a central issue that continues to affect the lives of Afro-Americans since they landed as slaves here.

_The Women of Brewster Place_ begins with a description of how Brewster Place is conceptualized on a worthless land in an over-crowded district so that the marginalized races can be kept confined for a long time to come in a dead-end street: “Brewster Place was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company. . . . They came together, propositioned, bargained, and slowly worked out the consummation of their respective desires” (Naylor 1). The white’s desire to dominate and marginalize other people is conspicuously clear in the way the Brewster Place is developed as the consummation of the desires of people who want money and power by trampling over the rights of the voiceless and resourceless people. The dark and dingy hallways and unplastered crumbling walls reveal the resultant effect of white supremacy on the poverty and helplessness of the marginalized people. The street is unpaved. After a heavy rain, there is ankle-deep water in the middle of the street. The abysmal condition of the street is an example of dismissive ‘othering’ of an entire race by the severely lopsided distribution of power in America.

Naylor shows how white America is afraid of accepting people of a different ethnicity and culture in the mainstream. Brewster Place is finally disconnected from the central activities of the city by a brick wall which was erected to control traffic in the major part of the town. This wall serves the purpose of making Brewster Place literally and figuratively a dead-end street. The representatives of other such streets fight the erection of walls that threaten to obstruct their lifeblood. But people living in Brewster Place have no political clout. They are “dark haired and mellow-skinned–Mediterraneans–who spoke to each other in rounded guttural sounds and who brought strange foods to the neighborhood stores” (Naylor, _The Women of 2_). Since they are
not white enough to be called Americans, they are literally cut off from the main city. Brewster Place’s third generation of children are multi-colored ‘Afric’ children who “came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason” (4). Naylor’s focus has not just been the racist and segregated society of the South. By foregrounding racist oppression through Brewster Place, she has been equally vocal about limited possibilities of success for blacks in more receptive North.

Naylor makes it clear that these people fled from starving southern climates and the dead-end street in a worthless land in an overcrowded district is the only option they have to survive. Brewster Place symbolizes the disturbing and diminishing effects of power structures in America that continue to divide urban spaces on the basis of race. Naylor admits in no ambiguous terms in her interview by William Goldstein:

And for me, that wall symbolized, simply, racism in this country. For that is the reductive experience for all blacks, regardless of their status. Now, it is not something you dwell on every day of your life; but it is something you know is part and parcel of your existence. Yet you go on doing the things you do, like these woman did; They raised their children, they had their sorrows, their happiness–but it [wall] is always there. (5)

Literally, the location of Brewster Place is so designed that it remains starved for light: “Three buildings on the east; three on the west; and the wall blocking light from the south. A dead end street. It always feels like dusk on Brewster Place” (Naylor, The Men of 6). On the best of days, it is grey, dark and full of shadows. Metaphorically, it is a place waiting for and desperately in need of a light of egalitarian society where the hopes and dreams of millions will not be deferred and erased on account of their color of skin. The wall in Brewster Place becomes a symbol of underlying racism that permeates American society. The stories of Naylor’s characters living in Brewster Place revolve around her central focus, i.e. racism and on the struggles of her people to re-negotiate a divided and dehumanizing landscape for surviving ‘whole’.
Ben is introduced in *The Women of Brewster Place* and is resurrected in *The Men of Brewster Place*. He narrates not only his story but also the stories of other men who people the world of Naylor’s fifth novel, *The Men of Brewster Place*. Like Mattie Michael of *The Women of Brewster Place*, he is the central figure for providing a unifying platform for different stories of the men in *The Men of Brewster Place*. Through the story of Ben, Naylor exposes the blatant and horrific pattern of the economic and sexual abuse by the white bosses in the southern plantations.

Naylor shows how economic, social and psychological realities of blacks remained unchanged even after a long period of emancipation. One of the strategies of racism is to control the economic realities of the other race in order to fulfil the master plan of the dominant culture to be always in profitable and enviable position of power. During a conversation with Kay Bonetti, entitled “An Interview with Gloria Naylor,” Naylor admits if you are poor along with being black, your problems are bound to be many. In fact, “You’re worth nothing, in a sense” (44). In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Ben’s story begins with the story of his Grandpa Jones. His grandparents were children when freedom came, but they kept working in plantation, for except sharecropping, freedom had not offered anything to them.

What changes his grandfather forever is the rape of his ten year old sister by a white overseer, Dulane, who deliberately sends the girl to pick dewberries in the jungle. Then, he himself goes towards the woods, beats and rapes the ten-year-old girl so badly that when she comes back, it is blood everywhere: “the blood running down her legs. Blood soaking the back of her dress. Blood running from the corner of her mouth on the side of her face where she’d been beaten so bad her eye had swollen shut” (14). bell hooks has commented, “The political aim of this categorical rape of black women by white males was to obtain absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order” (27). She points out, since slavery, rape has been an “institutionalized method of terrorism” (27), so that blacks are left demoralized, dehumanized to such an extent that they don’t question white supremacy. By the story of Grandpa Jones, Naylor highlights the continuous use of rape and economic monopoly of whites as tools to terrorize blacks into submission.
The midwife, Mama Thorn and the mother of the victim try to save the girl, but they are unable to stop bleeding. So, they knock the doors of the mistress of the plantation. Ben’s grandpa, then only twelve years old, is sent for calling the doctor. He is too frightened and in his moment of fear, he rides up to the ‘front’ of the doctor’s house. He is made to wait as a punishment for not knowing his place and daring to come from the ‘front door’. By the time the doctor arrives, the girl is dead.

This incident happened when freedom had come to blacks. The historical condition of segregation continued to be perpetuated as a natural condition. The unexplained cruelty towards the blacks was not the result of simple hatred for blacks. It was a tool to drill the fixed division between blacks and whites in the minds of blacks. A Negro was supposed to know his place. The front doors were for whites, the back doors were for blacks. The brute force was used so that blacks never questioned this absolute segregation.

Jim Crow racial segregation continued the objectification of black women that had originated under the system of chattel slavery. The pattern continued unabated because the white law failed to offer protection to blacks against the gruesome acts of crime. It was unchallenged because whites were still not ready to ascribe human attributes to former slaves. Naylor clearly underlines that the white society operated with a different set of ethics when dealing with the blacks. With the charge of rape and murder of a ten year old girl, “Dulane is called into master’s study” (Naylor, The Men of 15). What conspires between them is not known to anybody but what is important to note here is that the “overseer goes back to work” (15).

Whites’ insensitivity and disregard for the rights of blacks is obvious. Laws and social customs were conceived to sustain white ascendancy. Naylor scrutinizes how the absolute control of whites overpowers the psychology and effervescence of black folks. This relentless control operates by the tight manipulation of whites over black sharecroppers. Although the desire to control is seemingly focused on a work relationship, it finds its way into the relationship between black men, women and children.

Ignored by the politics of law, tied by the poor economic condition, the spirit of black community is silenced by the oppressive racist society to such an extent that
they are afraid to admit the wrongs done to them even in the private moments of their lives. Grandpa, as a twelve-year-old child, confused and torn between the concept of right and wrong, is waiting to hear a nod of protest from his community. He needs desperately to hear from his own community that it was wrong. But the kitchen is silent. The house maids are silent, and people his bleeding sister passed by stood silent. So, when at the funeral, the minister says, “The lord giveth and the lord taketh away,” Grandpa cries, “No, No, he don’t” (15), because he knows that it is not God, but a white man who has taken his sister. His self is rudely jolted into reality by a slap his mother gives him: “Boy, shut your mouth, you hear? Shut your mouth. Be a man” (15).

It’s a silence of the oppressed. It is a silence generated by resignation and acceptance of one’s lot in the face of cruelty of unrelenting white subjugation. Economic suppression serves to control blacks to such an extent that they are left too weak to question the radical exploitation and domination by whites. It functions to negate autonomy of blacks as a community. The social definition of being a man in black subculture is challenged when Ben’s grandfather is asked to be silent. At the age of twelve he learns his first lesson that if silence is required to survive in a racist society, “freedom or no freedom–his people are doomed” (Naylor, The Men of 15).

As a child, Grandpa Jones has witnessed the brutal wrong done to his sister; as a child, he is reminded of forgetting his place as an outcast when he knocks the white man’s door for help; as a child, his inner voice for justice is muzzled by his own community to stay afloat in a racist economy of plantation; no wonder, the psychological reverberations and ironies of these incidents are too much for a child to reconcile. So, this child, who once had the skill to ride like the wind, grows up to be an extremely bitter and silent man who sits in his porch rocker with a closed Bible in his lap. The reader only knows the extent of fire of hatred and deep gulf of pain and disappointment in his soul when he professes: “I’m opening this Bible when someone shows me the place that says white people is going to hell” (12).

Du Bois has commented on the continued state of misery of blacks after emancipation in The Souls of Black Folk, “few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries” (4). For
the Negro heart, “Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites” (4). Finally, when emancipation came, the white America remained far from finding peace from its sins:

Years have passed away since then,—ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the nation’s feast. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem:—

“Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble!” (4-5)

By beginning *The Men of Brewster Place* with the story of Ben and Ben’s grandfather, Naylor seems to extend Du Bois’ theories and state that the swarthy spectre of racism shows no sign of withdrawal even generations after Du Bois’ statement. Grandpa Jones witnesses his sister’s death after her brutal rape in a ‘new’ America free from slavery. But the fact that her tormentor is never punished shows that the ideology of racial subjugation was being deliberately perpetuated. The story of his grandchild replays the same patterns. This means that even decades after the emancipation, freedom from slavery remained a lip-service for millions of black Americans like Ben and his grandfather. Ben is brought up in a place “so poor” that none of them “felt the difference when the Great Depression came. A place that knew back-breaking work—nine months a year—from the planting, weeding, and picking of cotton. So much cotton it touched the horizon each way you looked” (Naylor, *The Men of 11*).

Centuries of slavery left Africans without a land, a home, money or tools to earn a livelihood, and after freedom, they were in competition with “rich, landed, skilled neighbors. To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships” (Du Bois 6). It is ironical that despite contributing their hundred percent in strengthening American capitalistic economy, blacks remained poor and oppressed in a land of plenty. Most of the Negroes had no option but to opt for sharecropping system and it was a self defeating option.
No matter how hard Negroes tried, they always found themselves in debt. Ben and his grandparents remain poor despite voluminous production of cotton by their bone-tiring work. Psychologically, Ben’s grandfather is scarred by seeing his sister’s rapist go free, and economically, he remains at the mercy of white masters who own the land he farms. So Ben wants to see the world and leaves plantation probably in a hope of better future. With the description of the first job he lands, Naylor literally and figuratively shows the kind of degradation Negroes were up against. His first job is to clean the spittoons and he excels at that and keeps them shining. “But hardly a day ever passed that I didn’t get tobacco juice spit on my uniform or in my hair. It made some of ’em feel good …” (Naylor, The Men of ’17).

Ben knows this regular spitting wasn’t accidental. In many cases, it was deliberate. Here Ben comes in contact with a bellboy, Billy. Billy’s promotion from cleaning spittoons as a bellboy is the result of his dedication and overeagerness to do the job assigned to him properly. He “grinned when he didn’t have to, bowed lower than he had to, and was one of those who ran to get coffee or ice water even when the customer said there was no hurry” (18). It was impossible to re-create slavery, but white supremacists tried very hard to keep full freedom away from blacks. By delineating urgency and a sense of desperation in Billy’s mannerism to please his employers and customers, Naylor wants to highlight how hard Afro-Americans tried to keep lowly jobs with them. Economic control of whites ensured that blacks are left with no personal power.

Contradictory ideals of American society are clear when hard working, ordinary black people are denied opportunities by so-called freedom-loving and enterprising whites. Naylor is clear that this economic control succeeds in creating strife and anguish in the black community. It left blacks with no personal power or growth. Billy is hated by other black men for his unnecessary pleasing attitude for a very underrated job of a house Negro. He is laughed at and sidelined by other blacks for his immaculate shoes and well-creased pants. The pressure to be a gentleman or the pressure to hold on to his lowly job is so acute on Billy that he comes close to killing his mate, Rayburn, to death for the latter has accidently stepped on his shoes. Billy’s internal drives and pressures are not explored, but we get a summative view
from Ben: “But coming out of those back fields, I kinda understood. There wasn’t a whole lot of work for black men like us outside of picking cotton; and some would do anything to keep from having to go back to the fields” (18). Ingrained racism ensured that opportunities were severely limited for black people; as a result, it was almost impossible to attain psychological stability. Limited opportunities kept the pressure of cut-throat competition on blacks as they reduced the possibility of any meaningful camaraderie between black workers. Finally, Billy, Ben, Rayburn and rest of other bellhops all are fired for creating the chaos.

Ben’s next job as a shoeshine ‘boy’ is also a statement on the pervasiveness of Jim Crow segregation: “The shoeshine chairs were set up in a row of twelve–ten for the white customers and two spaced a bit apart for the Negro customers” (Naylor, *The Men of 19*). Negro men waited for those two seats with half of the white seats empty. The legal separation and marginalization of a race in schools, public places on account of skin color powered the white desire to dominate and rule. To fulfil this desire, blacks continued to be thought of, projected and treated as an inferior, uneducated, unworthy and dependent race: “Whites addressed a black man as ‘boy’ and a black woman as a ‘girl’ no matter how old they were, and either might be addressed as ‘nigger’” (Horton and Horton 213).

The title of ‘Mr’, of course, was reserved for the white man. The careful use of language to perpetuate their (white’s) racial supremacy did have its desired effect as millions of blacks internalized the image of an unworthy, incapable and unintelligent Negro. Naylor underlines how the master’s language becomes a tool to deny blacks the status of a fully developed person. Ben admits, “We all called ourselves boys even though in my late twenties I was the youngest one there” (Naylor, *The Men of 19*). The strategy is successful as despite having a good physical strength and ability to give his best to a job, Ben’s brightest hope in this racist milieu is reduced “to being a porter one day” or “riding the railroads as a red cap” (19, 20). Ben is excluded from being a part of the dominant culture. But even these modest dreams remain unrealized. He never remembers he was ever in a situation when anybody called him ‘sir’.

Naylor probes the depths of white racism in the middle of the twentieth century further and comments on white man’s desire to see a smiling Negro as if they wanted
an affirmation that whatever was given out to blacks was more than their race deserved: “The man who smiled the most and popped his rag usually got a taker. What was there about white folks that made them feel comfortable when a Negro smiled?” (19). The image of a smiling Negro is linked with the racist picture of foolish, selfless black who is dependent on whites for his very survival. The novelist shows that racism is so ingrained in American culture that even decades after emancipation, whites wanted Negroes to conform to the racist image.

Ben next meets Elvira and they contemplate marriage. Elvira’s health requires country air, so Ben along with Elvira returns to the agricultural life of rural South. Its here that Naylor gives her comprehensive commentary on how “the bonds of debt peonage replaced the chains of slavery, and planters could control their labor force almost as completely as slaveholders had controlled theirs” (Horton and Horton 214). It was not difficult for the white capitalistic mind to equate large profits with cheap labour. Without land, availability of jobs or right to vote, southern blacks stood on a ground too dangerously close to the former slave position of blacks. Ben admits that it was not difficult to set yourself up as sharecropper. Naylor makes the reader aware that to get out of it, for better, was impossible:

You get the old beat-up house that was left by the family before you. The man who owns the place gives you loans of your seed and equipment; and then you’re in business. A business that never lets you break even ’cause by the time you bring in your crops you’re still owing for the stuff you got up front. Not to mention the folks who borrowed on time from the plantation store for their flour, meal, sugar, and other dry goods. Just a little bit in the hole, was the saying each year, we’re just a little bit in the hole. Well, that hole was a mile deep for most; and you ended up farming for the sake of a place to eat and sleep. A little more than slavery but a lot less than doing well. (Naylor, *The Men of 21*)

With the strings of economy and hence of survival still in white man’s hand, what chance the black had to grow in this back-breaking sharecropping system. The social, political and psychological growth is blocked as life becomes a tedious process to earn two square meals a day. The narrow space is suffocated with psychological
sufferings. Naylor shows the fatality of this system by making Ben’s story come a full circle. His grandfather was wounded beyond repair on account of the white’s atrocity in the plantation. Naylor shows that nothing has changed and the system is ripe to make Ben its another victim. Ben and Elvira are not lucky to break the debt trap. They have only one child, a crippled but “a sweet child who’d do anything you asked her, no matter how long it took” (21). The stingy economic control of whites finds its way in their home and in their relationships.

The psychological depravity of Elvira’s mind has not been probed much, but we learn that she has internalized the norms of acceptance projected by the white society: “And she believed that everything white that God put in this world was good. And everything black was to be despised. Elvira didn’t even take her coffee black” (22). She feared that black coffee would turn her darker. She is using white man’s eyes to view her black reality. Elvira evaluates her world in the language defined by the dominant culture. Unable to reconcile the two, she ends up acquiring “a wicked temper and the fury” (21). The results are disastrous for herself, her relationship with her husband and for their daughter. She accuses Ben of being “a no-count man” (22). She challenges his manhood because Ben is unable to provide her better economic circumstances. Ben is as much silenced by her wicked temper as he is with a feeling of inadequacy of being less than a man.

The dirty deal the racist white society has handed them comes to haunt them in their home when Mr. Clyde, the white plantation owner, asks them if their daughter could clean for him. He knows, hard pressed for economic survival, Ben and Elvira will be happy to have a job for their crippled daughter. So, after two months when their daughter complains of molestation and sexual advances of Mr. Clyde, history has repeated itself. Just as his grandfather saw his sister raped, his daughter’s modesty is also outraged and there are no explanations.

By making Ben experience “firsthand an updated version of his grandfather’s story – a young innocent black childwoman can be easily had by an older powerful white man and, as protector and father of his daughter, he is impotent to intervene” (Whitt 207), Naylor shows the same racist forces and the pattern that had emasculated Ben’s grandfather emasculate Ben and he is sucked deep in the hole. Elvira’s white
eyes make her blind to the just complaints of her daughter. Ben is a man completely stripped of his manhood when his daughter shares with him her traumatic experience at Mr. Clyde’s home. She tells her father: “And when I told him… that I was gonna tell my daddy, all he did was laugh. He laughed. And laughed” (Naylor, *The Men of 22-23*). It is a white laughter accumulated through centuries of racial prejudice of viewing blacks as chattels to be exploited for gain and of viewing blacks bereft of any human dignity. This laughter turns the sexual abuse into a racial violation. It reminds Ben of his smallness, blackness and helplessness. This racial encounter disrupts his development into a balanced and happy human being.

Ben turns into a hunk of stone when Mr. Clyde talks to him. Elvira threatens to strike Ben if he refuses to acknowledge Mr. Clyde. The control of white man over their personal relationships through the racist control of their economic situation is clear when Elvira says, “I’ll be damned if I’ll see the little bit we got taken away ’cause you believe that gal’s low-down lies” (26). Elvira’s internalization of white values makes her contemptuous of her own cultural position. Rather than trusting her daughter, she favours the white tormentor of his daughter.

As Ben sees his daughter coming and going for cleaning in Mister Clyde’s truck, he cannot confront the beaten look of her eyes. When he realizes that his fingernails breaking through the skin of his palms are not enough to drown the whistle and laughter of the white man, he settles for killing himself “slowly with booze” (28). Racism maims him. The white laughter over his utter powerlessness makes him hate himself. Assertion is a far cry when you have been taught to observe silence as a sign of manhood. The need for expressing outrage against racist injustice takes an inward dive when it is denied expression outside.

Ben’s daughter finally leaves for prostitution in Memphis; Elvira leaves him for another man in the next plantation and he seeks solace in booze. His grandfather was never able to forget the moment when his mother slapped him for protesting against the rape and murder of his sister. Ben is never able to forgive himself for not acting like a man, for not protecting the honour of his own daughter. He holds himself accountable for abnegation of responsibility for his own daughter. The reader is never allowed to forget the tight control the white supremacists had over black
sharecroppers and how it manipulated and overpowered the social and psychological realities of black lives for more than three generations.

For Naylor, race has always been a reality. It is ‘something that simply exists’. It’s there in society, it’s there on American mind and for all black people of America it is a constant shadow. She explores the possibility of both annihilation and transcendence within this black experience of racism. With characters like Ben and his grandfather, Naylor has laid bare the threads of racism and how it has worked in the American society annihilating people with its oppressive hold, but her primary focus is the process of personal and social growth out of this narrow space of race and waste. Her primary concern seems to be how blacks have kept and still continue to keep their dignities intact in the catastrophe of racism.

Distortion of history by literary canon and media (or partial projection of facts) has been one of the tools with which white supremacist has traditionally and continuously worked to cement the edifice of racism in America. bell hooks notes that the education system in America has been a testimony to the fact that millions of American people were brainwashed “to accept a version of American history that was created to uphold and maintain racial imperialism in the form of white supremacy…” (120). Black and whites were kept equally uninformed. Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes comment on the apparent lack of multicultural courses and programs to educate children on contributions made by Afro-American People: “Across the nation, school desegregation as it has actually been implemented mainly mixes together children and teachers of different racial backgrounds. Much else remains as before. The curriculum is often not desegregated, but continues to reflect the topical interests of the white parents” (82-83).

The statement is important, for it exposes the contradictory foundations of a nation. Racism cannot just be explained in simple terms of racial hatred. Racism is a cultural ideology that requires various physical, social and psychological tools to terrorize and colonize a whole race of black people for the benefits of the whites. Curriculums, education systems and media become likely tools when they cater to predominantly white interests and concerns, thereby harming the vibrant pluralism of America.
Naylor has exposed the mechanism with which the American academic and educational canon worked to perpetuate and cement racism as a tool for politically enslaving generations of blacks in America. First, the history of Afro-Americans was willfully ignored and erased and then white version of history, knowledge and truth was superimposed on people supposedly bereft of history and culture.

History is extremely vital in one’s understanding of self. It gives a vantage point to a person from where one can analyse one’s present and can hope to envision the shape of one’s future. Naylor has highlighted how Negroes were robbed of this vantage point. Facts were distorted. Positive contributions by blacks in various fields were systematically undermined or ignored. With the negation of black heroes and heroism, the young minds were robbed of their reference point and once the reference point is lost, it becomes easy to brainwash generations into believing in their own inferiority.

Through Bailey, in Bailey’s Cafe, Naylor highlights the power of projected images and stories in media to control and conceal positive experiences and contributions of the blacks. Bailey begins the narration of his experience in Pacific war by recounting the hero, Dorie Miller. He tells us a story that exists under the surface, but it is never allowed to find its place in the newspapers:

I was proud to be assigned to the messmen’s branch because the talk at Camp Smalls was all about Dorie Miller, another messman, third class, on the USS Arizona, who had carried his captain and other wounded men to safety before manning a machine gun and shooting down six enemy planes at Pearl Harbor. The navy gave him credit for four planes. The newspapers gave him credit for nothing. No surprise to me. I had already learned from baseball who does and doesn’t exist when it comes to my country needing heroes. (20)

By overlooking and denying the black’s contribution in the making of America, white supremacist not only protected his status as numero uno but also kept the canon of Negro inferiority alive. Bailey understands the conventions of print media. He knows that print media is constructed by white leaders and corporate houses and for white readership. What is stated in print media is accepted as truth by majority of the
masses. Hence, media has been used to selectively hide or highlight facts about black lives.

Naylor calls attention to the role of media in distorting the history of black people forever in American consciousness. Bailey undermines the truth found in print media. By following his favourite game, baseball, he has come to understand that though Negroes were better players, their teams and talents were never recognised by the newspapers. Despite achieving universal standards of merit, the Afro-Americans have witnessed devaluation of their efforts and their experience was no different in baseball than in any other field in America.

Bailey says that playing in Negro Leagues required more sweat and guts than playing in any of the White Leagues. The Negro baseball was being played throughout the year from February to January and in physically and psychologically oppressive conditions. Still, it was being played out better and faster than the white baseball. The Negro players “made it with no rest in body or mind—and still brought in a batting average of .327 while transforming himself into a golden shield between second and third bases” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 10). Despite having the Negro National League, the Negro baseball wasn’t considered organized baseball to be recognized by white dominated organizations, social networks and media. Bailey refuses to accept inclusion of Jackie Robinson as true integration. He puts forward his logic:

I didn’t question why Negroes had separate teams; watching their games and then the white games, it was pretty clear to me. The Negroes were better players. And just like us at school, who wanted to team up with the pee-pants who had snot running out their noses? No, winners stay with winners. But they [Negro players] could have been a little more fair-minded and let the likes of Honus Wager or Ty Cobb on their teams. (9)

By advocating inclusion of white players into black teams, Bailey questions the tokenism of integration. Through Bailey, Naylor voices her concern as to who is being integrated and into what. By narrating the Afro-American experience from Bailey’s point of view, Naylor reverses the story and gives us the perception of whites from the viewpoint of a black. It is whites who are being compared with children who had snot
running out of their noses as they are weaker players. But more importantly, Naylor upsets the dominant perception which blacks acquire of themselves by following mass media. Naylor underlines that it’s important for Negroes to have faith in their own merit and achievement.

Negro baseball was played better and with more passion and energy. The whole teams of Negro Leagues could have been included into Major Leagues. But by including just one black mediocre player, whites managed to grab a stake in the tickets of black spectators. Bailey is unable to understand his own people who have been fooled by a token gesture from White Premier Leagues of including one black player into their team. This relegated black baseball forever to a second-class status. As blacks wait for true integration, Bailey keeps up his morale by knowing the truth from fiction. He knows that whites will never acknowledge black achievement and blacks will be happy to receive whatever they are handed out in the name of the integration. But both whites and blacks have to realize that America cannot live up to its promise of true democracy without giving equal opportunity to millions of blacks. He draws our attention to the fact that true integration cannot come until and unless you have “some colored people owning teams and colored people managing teams and colored people coaching teams. And yeah out on that field—but above all, in the owner’s box—would have been colored and white together—the American way” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 12). Bailey is sure of the potential blacks have in them. He protects the space in himself which addresses this world according to his own perception and knowledge. Hence, he is able to guard himself from bitterness that comes from feeling like a victim.

In Bailey’s Cafe, Naylor introduces us with Miss Maple or Stanley Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver (an unidentified surname). James P. Beckwourth, discoverer of the lowest point for wagon train to cross the Sierras; George Carver, scientist and inventor; Booker T. Washington, leading black political activist—the names of all these black pioneers were chosen by his father to constitute middle names for his son, because he expected the same kind of greatness from him. It is little impractical to carry all the names, yet Stanley always signed his entire name at the end of query letters and on the top of all his marketing proposals. He is astonished at the
miseducation and misinformation across the length and breadth of America when he says with a list of names of black achievers as his middle name, “how could they not realize I was an American Negro?” (202). Its not just whites who were having lopsided version of facts for their convenience. Naylor has shown that many blacks also didn’t recognize their heroes because they only knew the white version of American history. This clearly shows how prejudiced version of American history was used as an established canon to damage the culture, the history and the sense of rootedness of the entire black community. Stanley bemoans:

Someone like Sugar Man, who thinks he has the right to ridicule me for my choice of clothes, doesn’t even know where the Sierras are, or that colored pioneers like Beckwourth existed, or that George Washington Carver did a lot more for the world than refine peanut butter. Whenever he licks a postage stamp this season to send out those misspelled Christmas cards to whoever has the misfortune of his knowing their address, he gives no thanks to Carver for it not falling off the envelope. That’s because he’s only been taught what we call American history.

(165)

People cannot live in the past, but they need to know their history in order to understand who they are in present. When Stanley says that by using Stanley B. B. T. W. C. and then his surname as the abbreviation for his name he got a chance to give a “memorable history lesson to whatever miseducated individual was sitting behind” a reception or interview desk (166), he, like Bailey, is literally and metaphorically signifying a bigger strategy used by Naylor that unrecorded facts can be recalled and recorded. Forgotten stories can be remembered and retold. Marginalised heroes can at least be brought inside the periphery of consciousness.

Naylor challenges the preconceived notions of educational canon when she suggests erasure of history can be undone. She belongs to a group of writers who seem to believe that “To insist on the existence of alternative memories, to refuse to ‘forget,’ is to challenge the foundation of the nation. Exposing the structural supports of history-mis-remembering, forced forgetting–opens up a space of possibility” (Russèll 13). Recognizing multiplicity of experience in historical canon is important to
destabilize singular notions of national identity. Multitudinous narratives have the capability to expand the national story, thereby giving a chance to the marginalized to evoke and experience their own stories in school-books and popular media. Transgression of known boundaries can unearth and illuminate hidden space and stories.

Characters who have a sense of black history of Afro-American people are more comfortable with themselves and have a better understanding of self. This is the reason why Bailey and Stanley are able to survive the onslaught of hardships inflicted on them by a racist, dominant and oppressive system. On the other hand, characters who try to negate or forget their own history, as Luther Ndeed in *Linden Hills* or Uncle Eli in *Bailey’s Cafe* do, end up as hypocrites and become mirror images of white male victimizer.

Naylor shows that another reason why the catastrophe of racism continues to be played out in America is the Western refusal to look beyond the world that for them comprises of opposing binaries. White mind’s attempt to categorize and label things, situations and people often gives them fixed and hence, distorted understanding of reality. Differences are either sidelined or not recognized at all.

Stanley, in *Bailey’s Cafe*, speaks of his aunts from different lineages–Africans, Mexicans and Native Americans: “And I had aunts of all assortments: pure-blooded Yumas; full-blooded Negroes; full-blooded Mexicans; Yuma-Mexicans; Mexican-Irish, Negro-Mexicans; and even one pure-blooded African who still knew some phrases in Ashanti” (Naylor 171). All strong, hale and hearty women who could manage the work of fields as well as pressures of home. But to recognize the personality, the character and actual worth of a person, one first needs to acknowledge the identity of the ‘other’ as it actually is. White’s need to categorize and label things makes it oblivious of the difference; hence, the identity of the subaltern is never established and character is never understood. “The Americans had no problems with our identities, though; they imported one six-letter word to cut through all that Yuma-Irish-Mexican–African tangle in our heritage” (171). And the word is—nigger. By this example, at first, Naylor forces the reader to reconsider the validity of certain labels which may unconsciously be adopted by many as real indicators of truth.
Secondly, she questions fixed parameters of defining national identity. By highlighting amalgamation of Mexican, African, Native American blood in Stanley’s home, she is successful in bringing forth the multiplicity that has gone in the making of American identity. Naylor purposely leads us in Stanley’s home where boundaries are blurred and there is a new possibility of co-existence.

*Bailey’s Cafe* is replete with suggestions to re-examine the fixed definition of our reality. In this regard, critic Philip Page has linked writers like Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor with Jacques Derrida. He says, “a link between Derrida and African American novelists such as Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor is not as surprising as it may appear. Derrida and others urge a shift from a monologic, either/or perspective to an open, both/and stance in which attention is focused not only on fixed entities but on the différance, the endless flux within and between them” (226). If one doesn’t believe in fixed definitions, one remains open to understand and accommodate difference. Fixed and monologic perspective based on watertight compartments of binaries cannot be adequate to understand the space and the landscape our personalities inhabit. Naylor shows that reality is a multilogic, multivalent and multidimensional phenomenon.

Naylor has questioned the dominant society’s attempt to have this world neatly ordered in fixed labels with fixed notions. She shows how pigeonholed perceptions are likely to miss the larger picture and the full understanding of the reality may allude the dominant society completely. She deliberately creates characters, situations and places which are fluid, not fixed.

Bailey’s Place is a fictional space that “sits right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility” (Naylor, *Bailey’s Cafe* 76). By positioning Bailey’s Cafe in the middle of margin and center of the world, Naylor explores possibilities of coexistence, of transcendence and annihilation. The Cafe is a fluid space that symbolizes merging of boundaries, divisions and demarcations. Naylor does not situate Bailey’s Cafe in a particular city or state. Rather than being fixed, it can be found anywhere and at any point of time. Its utility depends on the need of its customers. Bailey admits that the place was conceived to be “real real mobile” (28).
Even the nature of the place is contrary to normal expectations of regular eatery where you have printed menus and people come either for food or ambience.

Bailey’s Cafe, Eve’s garden and Pawn shop are the three spaces that occupy the landscape of Bailey’s Cafe. Although different in nature and utility, they emphasize interconnectedness as is clear by the constant movement of characters to and from these places, rather than contradiction or separate existence.

Characters in Bailey’s Cafe, while being victims of racism, defy fixed definition and categorization. Set against society’s attempt to label anything and everything in reductive binaries, they move to retrieve their own identity and strive to realize their self in the racist milieu. Bailey’s experience in segregated American Army has given him a perspective on perceived version of American History which labels the Negro as an inferior and worthless race. He seems to understand the dichotomy between who he is and what the dominant society is willing to call or project him. He doesn’t attach much importance to the label which may be used by others to refer and define him. To quote Charles E. Wilson: “Bailey is not really Bailey” (128). He simply adopts the name that is painted on the front window of the cafe when he assumed ownership of the cafe. He knows that he is not considered “a national treasure” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 220) in his own country. He doesn’t lament or brood over this fact. He simply imports the name that was imprinted outside the cafe when he started the business and allows it to be used to signify him for the practical purposes of this world. By adopting any name and allowing it to be used for him, Bailey dismisses and discards any importance attached to what others call him and gives more importance to his understanding of his own self.

Nadine, Bailey’s wife, also gives him and readers alike “a whole different way of looking” at women and life (19). Naylor makes it clear through Nadine in Bailey’s Cafe that what happens on the surface may only be a part of reality not the complete truth as is perceived by people: “While most of what happens in life is below the surface, other people do come up for air and translate their feelings for the general population now and then. Nadine doesn’t bother” (19). When Bailey is courting Nadine, he observes that she doesn’t laugh much. The following dialogues suggest Nadine’s sparseness with words and her clarity about her self:
—You don’t laugh much, I finally ventured.

—I laugh all the time, she said. (16)

The extreme difference in perception is worth noting here. Bailey is baffled. Bailey says, “Go to Upper Borneo and smile; they’ll say, He’s happy. Go there and slit your throat; they’ll say, He’s dead. It is basic. It is simple” (17). The conventions of society expect an individual to behave in a particular way. Nadine doesn’t smile to show that she is enjoying herself or she is pleased, for she says, “what does that [smile] have to do with being pleased?” (17). She is not trying to confuse Bailey. She is giving Bailey a different way of looking at things and when Bailey looks deep into her eyes, he sees, “she was laughing. Down at the bottom of those dark orbs, she was bent over double and howling. She laughed and laughed and laughed” (19). By questioning something very basic and very simple, Naylor highlights the fact that most of what happens in life is below the surface. Every label, every category may not represent what it may promise.

Nadine is an affirmation of the lesson Bailey has learnt: “Every one-liner’s got a life underneath it. Every point’s got a counterpoint” (34). Life has multiple layers of meaning which can’t be explained in fixed labels. Like Bailey, Nadine is also not particular about what they call her. She is a woman who knows herself. She knows her mind and functions in this world with this knowledge without being bothered about other’s opinion. Hence, she is more at peace with herself.

Bailey’s disregard for the name to address him, his disregard for white newspapers calling Pop Lloyd black Honus Wagner, and Nadine’s disregard for the accepted gestures to translate her feelings highlight the need to protect and preserve an individual’s personal sense of who-I-am from an outside influence. This need to protect one’s inner self is all the more important in Afro-Americans’ quest for identity which can defy the racist assumption of popular canon only if it recognises its own history and its self worth. Stanley or Miss Maple is another character in Bailey’s Cafe who tries to defy and challenge racial assumptions.

Stanley’s story is the story of white hatred and violence towards blacks. It is a story of systematic exclusion of blacks from the financial success of America. It’s a story of continuous devaluation of black as an inferior race. But from this story,
Naylor weaves another story of Afro-American’s strength and courage in the face of racial discrimination and degradation. From this story emerges the story of valiant efforts of Afro-Americans to protect their inner dignity.

Stanley’s grandfather comes to California in 1849 by crossing the Arizona desert. He isn’t a slave and he marries a Native American woman. Stanley’s grandmother has a dream of “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, flooding the desert. And she saw her sons, dark as night, proud as the eagles, picking white gold from the ground” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 168). She forces her husband to follow her dream and they go to live in the desert to realize her dream. It’s a difficult life. It means surviving midday temperature that hovered above 110 degrees. It means surviving equally harsh chill of the night. It means hauling enough water to irrigate a small garden. His grandmother draws a circle and sits through the night, as if in communication with some spiritual forces, and rises at dawn to announce that they “must claim this land” (168). The version of her dream highlights her spiritual connection and communication with the unknown. Guided by her vision alone, Stanley’s grandparents endure the hardships of a life in a desert. Claiming the land in the 1850s was next to impossible for an African and Native American because none of them was considered an American.

After changes in the law, the couple take a trip to San Diego to register their first 160 acres in the middle of a desert. Rather than getting disoriented by what others think of them, they concentrate on their dream: “Not that the two of them were affected by all the anguish going on in the cedar halls of Sacramento or the marble halls of Washington, D.C., to decide who and what they were. They knew what they were: a man and a woman with four children to feed and another one deciding to be born in the middle of sandstorm” (168). It is a legacy of disregard for outside influence and a legacy of belief in one’s self that is passed by this Negro and Native American couple to their children that becomes instrumental in shaping the character of Stanley’s father.

Naylor shows the literal interpretations of Stanley’s grandmother’s dream by the white miners who move with their dynamites in search of ‘white gold’. Soon,
these miners realize that the land is not worth ten cents. It becomes easier for his grandparents to buy this piece of land and they end up owning a little over 3000 acres of land in the middle of the desert. His grandmother’s vision is realized a year before her death as the water of newly completed Imperial Canal flooded the desert.

With water comes prosperity and the vision of white gold—cotton. Since for Africans at that time, county schools were beyond their reach, Stanley’s grandmother enrolls her sons “in the missionary school set up on the Yuma reservation” (170). Owning more than 3000 acres of land and having a training in Agricultural science, Stanley’s uncles work hard to realize the dream of their mother. Lapping up technology as they learned the language of progress and at the same time working as a unit in a large extended joint family, they defy American conceptualization of a Negro. Even at the time of depression, their sales remain unaffected as they are growing one of the finest staples of pima cotton. At a time when Negroes were associated with slavery, they are landowners, healthy and technically sound. In short, they emerge successful in every sense of the word. Their success is an antithesis to the popular American conception of lazy, irresponsible, shifty, unsmart, uneducable Negro widely propagated by the dominant culture.

Naylor highlights the prevalent conception of the dominant ideology, which is incapable of and unable to fuse ‘Afro’ with ‘American’. The white onlookers of the nearby vicinity are unable to understand the reality of blacks, measuring upto the standards of their ‘American dream’. Their capitalistic desire to monopolize has given them no terminology to reconcile the land

We were pretty much ignored by the Americans until they found out we actually owned all of the land we were farming, and the barns and the reapers and the trucks and the gin mills. They’d stand speechless at the edges of our fields, which stretched farther than they could see over any horizon, progress had given them no vocabulary to reconcile the land
and us. They already knew what we were and any fool could see what the land was worth. But how do you put the two together. (Naylor, *Bailey’s Cafe* 172)

Here, the use of words ‘already knew’ is important. Naylor shows the dangers emanating from approaching a situation with preconceived notion. Since whites in question here are trying to understand the success of Stanley’s family from a conception that they have of black race, they are unsuccessful. For them, Negroes have been inferior, incapable and lazy slaves. To associate them with success, wealth and, above all, with land is beyond their understanding and comprehension.

Naylor shows whites standing on the ‘edges’ of their fields. She subverts the image of whites in the centre with the whites standing on the margins as passive onlookers. Metaphorically, they are standing on the edges of this world as the true meaning of life alludes them because of their monologic conception of reality. They are diminished, spiritually stripped as they try to physically strip the blacks. For harmonious co-existence of different peoples, a broader perspective is required.

Naylor highlights the most glaring conflict in American conscience of whites. Stanley observes that since whites cannot explain or understand the success of Stanley’s family, they believe, “it had no right to exist” (172). Changing laws didn’t alter the realities for blacks in society much because the mentality that shaped racist policies in the first place remains as it has always been. So, whenever his father comes to the Holtville bank in his La Salle convertible, the racist whites of their locality become uncomfortable: “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” (172). A tobacco spit would land just in front of them. His father’s linen loafers always manage to get stepped on in town. It’s a frustrated attempt of a society not to recognize the achievements of a suppressed race and to remind them that whatever they do, they will still be niggers. Despite being taught by American constitution that every man can reach for American dream, the whites of this area have a hard time accepting the success of Stanley’s family. Naylor foregrounds that even if issue of economic marginality is resolved, racism remains a reality for affluent and middle-class blacks because majority of whites continue to consider amalgamation of Negroes in the
mainstream an undesirable necessity. Gunnar Myrdal asserts in his social study, *An American Dilemma*:

The boundary between Negro and white is not simply a class line which can be successfully crossed by education, integration into the national culture, and individual economic advancement. The boundary is fixed. It is not a temporary expediency during an apprenticeship in the national culture. It is a bar erected with the intention of permanency. (58).

Stanley doesn’t like how his father never retaliates the obvious attempts by white racists to insult them. Despite being deliberately bumped and shoved aside, his father never physically fights back. Stanley’s father is different from his brothers. Stanley knows that his uncles would not have tolerated such obvious attacks on their dignity. Miss Maple’s father’s seemingly weak and philosophical approach to life is perceived as antagonistic to conventional concept of manhood Stanley seems to be having. His father is perceived as coward by Stanley. But it is his father who teaches Stanley a very important lesson: “how to be my own man” (Naylor, *Bailey’s Cafe* 173). He teaches his son through his action that a person who knows himself can defy the savage nibbling of racist forces by his own sense of identity, practical wisdom and courage.

Stanley doesn’t get a regular schooling like his cousins. A special tutor is hired for him by his father. Stanley doesn’t like this. His father considers mainstream education as an important ideological unifier that continues to perpetuate Eurocentric assumptions and philosophies as the only sane possibilities for a prosperous existence. As Stanley prepares to leave home to go to Stanford, his father has ordered a complete set of Shakespeare’s plays, including a separate volume of sonnets from England as his graduation gift. They go to pick the three crates, in which the volumes are shipped in, from the head clerk Peters at the freighting office. Peters is a Ku Klux Klan member. He is not at all co-operative when a black comes to his office for regular work. Naylor, here, acknowledges the power of right education and right training in broadening the understanding of people. Peters is impressed by the volume of Shakespeare wrapped in oilcloth envelopes. Peters inspects the crates and wipes his hands before touching the tissue overleaf. For a brief moment Peters and Stanley’s
father stand on a common platform, holding and admiring the beauty of the work of art. They look into each other’s eyes and there is a brief moment of reconciliation. Margret Earley Whitt notes, “Shakespeare has power in this brief moment to bring together a Klansman and a black man; each has a history with the other, yet this moment lets the other become aware of how much they do not know about each other” (197-98).

This brief moment of reconciliation, peace and human-to-human dialogue is broken with the strong winds of protest which were at work in white America at that time in the form of Ku Klux Klan. The hard-core follower of this clan, the Gatlins, are flabbergasted that Peters should be helping these niggers in loading the crates of books in the truck. All four of them enter the room and block the entrance. First comes the verbal insult as a reminder as to how could Negroes forget their place: “how it is that a low-down, scum-bag, filthy piece of shit like you—ya know, something that looks like it swung in from a jungle—how it is that he thinks he can parade all up and down town wearing them clothes?” (Naylor, Bailey’s Café 179). Stanley’s father’s response is a revelation of sorts. Against this barrage of insults, a lesser man would have either resorted to violence or would have surrendered to the dominant perception by apologising for stepping out of his way. But his father looks straight into the eyes of the fat Gatlin and says, “That’s not a difficult question. I wear these clothes because I can” (179).

This response is not violent. It is not aggressive. Hence, it is perceived as a sign of weakness by Stanley. But Stanley misses the subtle but strong point of the response. Here, Naylor simply subverts the conventional picture of racial discrimination with a peaceful response from a black who is confident of his heritage and education. With a Negro uttering the most enabling words ‘I can’ in the face of racial attack, Naylor dismisses the white oppressor as she underlines the self assurance of the targeted victim. Gatlin sees in Stanley’s father’s eyes that he is being dismissed and his wounded ego strikes back.

Stanley and his father are stripped naked of every piece of clothing and are locked inside the store room. Their literal stripping by white members of the Ku Klux Klan is a poignant symbol that reminds the readers how blacks have been stripped of
their dignity and integrity in the full public view on the soil of their own country. Stanley’s vision is blocked by his internalization of dominant culture’s perception of manhood. He is ashamed of his father and his weak response. It is here that Naylor enlightens the son as well as the readers with the importance of discarding the preconceptions and the language of the Eurocentric discourse. The marginalized community must reconstruct their realities with their own words and faith, otherwise, their integrity runs the danger of remaining at the mercy of the dominant discourse that preaches worthlessness of the Negroes.

Barbara Christian notes that Alice Walker’s first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, poses the question: “In the grip of physical and psychological oppression, how do you ‘find a place in you where they [whites] can’t come?’ How do you hold onto self-love?” (185). Stanley’s father seems to be knowing the answer. He knows that a true understanding of self requires a new language uncorrupted by racist images and ideology. In his search for finding a place for his son “where they can’t come?”, he knows his son must learn his own language, set his own standards. He cautions his son as well as the reader alike against accepting the received versions of history and images as reality. His disregard for the established canon of white education goes a long way in making Stanley his own man and in his attempt to create a place in his son where whites can’t come.

Stanley’s father tells his son that resisting the social coercion of Afro-Americans to participate in a discourse that proclaims their unworthiness has not been easy for him, but he held on to his dignity to set an example for his son. Without breaking free from the society’s insistence on cultural whiteness, a black identity cannot achieve meaningful autonomy and independence.

Naylor suggests that struggle for inclusion and legitimacy cannot be won by mastering the language of the colonizer and the oppressor. In *Bailey’s Cafe*, she suggests that for surviving whole, ‘the other’ must transcend racial encoding. Transcending boundaries is important in freeing ‘the other’ from easily identifiable stereotype roles so as to make way for freedom and self knowledge. Stanley’s father sums up his opinion:
From the day you were born I’ve been speaking to you in a language that I wanted you to master, knowing that once you did, there was nothing that could be done to make you feel less than what you are, and I knew that they would stop at nothing to break you—because you are mine. 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 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. (182)

One must guard one’s self from the images thrown by the white world as reality, only then the process of re-discovery and re-shaping one’s self can be facilitated. Naylor acknowledges that Stanley’s father is successful in guarding his self because he does not attach much importance to oppressive dominant ideology. He reduces the white canon of information which has been instrumental in propagating black’s inferiority to a babble—just a babble. Grange in The Third life of Grange Copeland passes almost a similar wisdom to his granddaughter, Ruth. As Grange matures into a loving grandfather, he tries to make sense of his troubled past: “The white folks hated me and I hated myself until I started hating them in return and loving myself. Then I tried just loving me, and then you, and ignoring them much as I could” (252). Grange’s realization, that it was racist ideology that made him hate himself, allows him to understand himself and he begins to transform himself.

Stanley’s father also shows this maturity. He doesn’t hear white babble. He is not afraid of whites. He just does not consider them worthy of any attention. He simply refuses to see this world according to the terms and conditions dictated by the white world: “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” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 182).

By refusing to accept corrosive and reductive definition of the self reserved for blacks, Stanley’s father follows the footsteps of his parents and charts his own course unaffected by the dominant viewpoint. He is successful in his attempts. He now wants to pass the legacy to his son. Believing in himself and secure in his version of self, Stanley’s father inverts the parameters of segregation and shakes the equation of
dominance by questioning white supremacy. His speech begins with the assertion of –but not the erasure of – ‘I am’. It has both textural and historical implications. He is the subject. He is the better man when he puts forward his viewpoint in front of racist forces of America symbolized by the Gatlins: “My friends, I’ll try to be brief. I am a man. And the founding fathers of this democracy passed on to you who call yourselves real Americans a monumental lie. All of us are not created equal” (185). After stating ‘all of us are not created equal,’ Naylor reverses the whole logic of ego-reinforcing white canon of racial superiority, as Stanley’s father says:

Some of us are more intelligent and physically fit than others. Some of us have the iron will to hold on to a dream. My parents were such people. Some of us are more shrewd and ruthless than others. Some of us wealthier by being more determined to step on whoever gets in their way. My brothers are such people. So for better and for worse, you are not my equal. (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 185)

Stanley’s father’s insistence on superiority is not violent. It’s not the result of his blind desire to dominate everything that comes his way. In the face of the gravest of provocations when he is stripped naked, he stays calm. Even in the face of worst of verbal and physical assault, he wants to take a legal path and is willing to have a dialogue with them. He dares to create a space for reconciliation by peaceful methods, for he seems to believe in humanistic world community. He seems to agree with Julius Nyerere’s views against violence: “…violence is a short cut only to the destruction of institutions and power groups of the old society; they are not a short cut to the building of the new…” (qut. in Axelsen 193). He is only interested in respecting and resurrecting connections within his self and within his community

Stanley’s father passes on his legacy of self confidence to his only son who he knows will require it in great measure to survive amongst racist forces of America. Stanley experiences the determined exclusion of blacks by white society from American success story. His life becomes a living testimony of the whites’ dogged attempt to thwart any efforts on the part of blacks to climb over the stupendous wall of racism in America. Their attempt to gain even a little measure of success is scorned at and is discouraged vehemently by white bosses of corporate America. Stanley’s status
as a second class citizen in his own country remains uniform everywhere he goes—in education, in jail and in his search for jobs.

Stanley admits that Stanford wasn’t easy, not because of the difficulty involved in the academic syllabus, but because of mass paranoia of the white intelligentsia and their serious doubts about a Negro’s intellect. In subjects like literature and philosophy, where subjectivity is involved in assessment, his papers always seemed to be lacking in something. As D’s and C’s given to his essays increased, he is “tempted to think the fault lay within me” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 187). Naylor shows this is what the repeated negativism of dominant perception can do to your self image. As Stanley’s work is repeatedly devalued in his academic institution, he begins doubting his self worth. But Stanley is the beneficiary of the wisdom his father passed on to him. When he along with other black students forms Ethiope League, he realizes how none of the black students was getting the desired result: “it was awfully strange how none of them were making the snuff either. Single paranoia? Mass paranoia? Perhaps” (187).

Rather than brooding over the obvious apartheid, Stanley changes his major from more subjective courses to more objective ones like statistics. It’s his own way to handle racism like any other problem one might face. William R. Nash believes that since Stanley has internalized the lesson his father taught him to be his own man, he is “a truly free person, who literally and figuratively beats the forces of oppression into submission with superior strength, intelligence, and sense of identity.” He “finally comes to see how the father’s unconventional world view affords him a measure of freedom and power unlike anything he has seen before” (220). But it takes every bit of his inner strength and inner resources to resist the limited space and degraded role allocated to him by the dominant society.

Stanley’s experience with white America illustrates Naylor’s interests in exploring how authenticity and integrity of blackness is defiled by the white society. When the war started, thousands of Negro volunteers were turned away by Army, for they were declared mentally deficient to handle the pressures of a war. But by 1942, as the war progressed, there was a massive drive to draft Negroes to war. Over three hundred thousand colored men went to armed forces in infantry or as seamen or
stewards and the few white Stanford students who went in the services were commissioned as officers. When brains were required to direct the war, it was the white brain and, bereft of intelligence, Negroes were considered “fit only to die” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 188).

With a draft notice, Stanley goes to donate his blood in a blood donation drive. He finds that they were not taking Negro blood. He is able to see through the hypocrisy of it all. With rights of millions of Negroes relegated to the back seat, Stanley is unable to understand how his country can fight for world democracy when bastions of democracy lay shattered on his own homeland. He has a very valid and unanswerable question: “If my blood wasn’t good enough for the Red Cross, why was it good enough to be spilled on the battlefield?” (189). He refuses to fight for the American Army away from the borders in order to defend equality and democracy inside the borders of his own country. Stanley ends up in a segregated jail as his refusal to join Army is treated as anti-American. By highlighting Stanley’s predicament, Naylor blurs the boundary between what is American and what is anti-American.

In jail, the cell blocks, the showers and the dining room—everything is segregated. Naylor again mocks at the white world’s attempt to categorize the identities and realities of people in two antagonistic groups and binaries: “Mexicans, Yumas, Hopis, and Chinese were all honorary Negroes and in our group, while the various strains of Europeans, designated as white, went in other group” (190). The system of categorizing people finds a literal challenge with the admission of three objectors of Japanese ancestry and third-generation Californians: “Since they were evidently not Chinese, would that make them honorary Negroes or honorary Whites?” (190). Naylor’s inclusion of non-black American citizens of different ethnicities and ancestry underline her heightened concern for empathizing with other white and non-white groups in America who are experiencing otherness and pressures of conformity. Naylor highlights that as long as white world’s attempt to categorize human beings based on phenotype continues, the white world will remain ill-equipped to understand the difference and America will remain far away from it’s goal of realising true democracy.
Stanley is serving a jail term for fighting equality and he is termed as a traitor or a coward. He participates in organizing peaceful hunger strike with members of other races designated as honorary Negroes to end segregation in the dining hall. They are threatened with solitary confinement, but they remain firm in their demand. Stanley shows an acute sense of practical wisdom in understanding the psychology of bureaucrats. He knows that their dissent is non-violent. It is within the rule book of the prison, for nowhere it is mentioned that inmates will have to eat. As men start fainting and there is fear of official enquiry on the fifteenth day of their hunger strike, the warden gives in and “We COs marched into the dining hall victorious. Our country was born in dissent, built on dissent; and here was proof positive that there was hope in the American way” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 192).

The victory, though quite small in magnitude, if we consider the catastrophe of racism in America, is no less important and significant. Naylor suggests that through coalition, the otherness can be reclaimed and faults of a flawed community can be mitigated to an extent. Stanley has to pay a heavy price for it. He is made to share a cell with a hardcore criminal who is serving jail term for three counts of murder. It’s his punishment for organizing hunger strike. Every night, when the lights were turned off, the repeat offender would torment Stanley by repeating “I’m gonna fuck you or kill you” (193). Stanley lost more weight with this torture than in hunger strike.

As Stanley is tortured and tormented psychologically and physically, he survives because he falls back on his culture and roots. His aunt Hazel had taught him the first expression in Cuchan which his mother had taught them all—Ha lúp. Ha lúp stands for, “ancient people of deserts and dry ravines, with heaven for them a land where the Great Spirit would lead you to rest, where the shade was good and the cacti sweet” (195). His mother thought this word to be more important than learning “Mama or Papa or hungry or thirsty” and it is this word that becomes his guiding spirit. “After they called lights-out and the pain soared beyond the reach of my Christian prayers, it became a mantra to replace all of the discarded reasons for my having chosen not to die” (195). Ha lúp, a simple word, but it is indigenous to Stanley’s genealogy and it is this word that connects him to the past and gives him the strength to survive the brutal present. Eurocentric cultural models privilege
Christianity and European culture. They work to erase indigenous customs and folk culture of the oppressed. Naylor highlights the importance of not only knowing one’s culture, roots, history and language, but also the importance of preserving it and relying on it in the times of crisis. Reliance on folk wisdom, which is considered “discredited knowledge” by the West, and one’s ancestors can have “benevolent, instructive, and protective” impact on characters and people (Morrison, “Rootedness” 342-43). Here, it is important to note that Mama Day is also successful in leading a wholesome life because she is able to form this connection of the past with present. Both Mama Day and Stanley, apart from moving ahead, move backwards to strengthen their definitions of self in the present.

Finally, Stanley receives his walking order and he comes home. He feels good to have “the solidness of the house” behind him (Naylor, *Bailey’s Cafe* 194). He has inherited a lot of land and any lesser man would have fallen back on the family land. But he has paid the price for being American and he wants to claim his right of being an educated and employed man in his own country. So, he goes to complete his Ph.D. and begins his search for a job. By making Stanley go back to a path that will take him forward, Naylor emphasizes the importance of both backward as well as forward movements.

The Negroes contributed immensely in the Second World War, but the prevailing attitudes of white America remained the same and these attitudes worked directly to remove any chance of fair trial. Whites continued to make blacks confirm to the Jim Crow image of typical black with a weak mentality and a congenital laziness: “Colored people weren’t born in California–second generation no less. And colored men didn’t have Ph.D.’s. A few grow more comfortable with the fact that I claimed it was southern California, and we did grow cotton on the farm” (Naylor, *Bailey’s Cafe* 166). So even a hard-earned Ph.D. degree has only the scope of being rewarded as the fit qualification for being a “bellboy, mailroom clerk, sleeping-car porter, elevator operator” (166). These are the same positions which were being offered to Ben some twenty years ago.

The systematic exclusion of blacks from deserving jobs is all the more poignant here because Stanley is a Ph.D. in stats and fulfils the eligibility criteria of the post of
marketing analyst he applies for. By indulging in a detailed discussion on lowly jobs offered to Stanley, Naylor highlights a systematic tactical device which was blatantly used to rob deserving black men and women of their independence and agency. Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Kansas city wherever he goes across forty-eight states of America, he goes and applies for the post he deserves and every time his application is rejected because of the color of his skin.

This is the 1940s and the pattern remains in America even after four decades when we find Cocoa also struggling to find a job in the heart of America’s economic capital, New York. In fact, she is dismayed by white America’s cold snub to the black’s merit and she laments that explicit segregation was better than covert racial prejudice, for at least that would have saved her the trouble of physically going and earning rejection.

Naylor’s continued emphasis on economic exclusion of blacks to keep them as the marginalized race is important in understanding the function of race in America as a legacy that still needs to be addressed. She begins with Ben’s grandfather’s economic dependence and exploitation as a sharecropper immediately after emancipation and we find Cocoa also struggling to find a job in the middle of America’s capital city, New York, towards the end of the twentieth century. Devalourization of blacks’ works has been uniform throughout America. Naylor wants to point out that nothing major has changed as far as day-to-day realities of blacks are concerned. Through her characters, Naylor has chronicled the changing forms of racism in America. From slavery to legal segregation to underground racism of today’s America, racism has been a constant feature of America’s social and political progress. In Ben’s times, Stanley’s time, i.e. before the Civil Rights Movement, racism is obvious. It is on display in statements like ‘only whites need apply.’ Even after the Civil Rights Movement, it has not disappeared. It has become more covert than overt. It is more implicit than explicit. Hence, it has become far more difficult to identify and cure. This is what Cocoa laments in *Mama Day*:

Mama Day and Grandma has told me that there was a time when the want ads and housing listing in newspapers—even up north—were clearly
marked colored or white. It must have been wonderfully easy to go job hunting then. You were spared a lot of legwork and headwork. (18-19)

When one of the persons at Selma’s party objects to Cocoa’s comments, she is surprised at his foolishness, for she knows that racism hasn’t gone anywhere, she just wants to bring clarity about it back. By looking back at the times of segregation with a nostalgia, Cocoa is not downplaying the pain of segregation. Rather, she is underlining the shock, trauma and frustration of experiencing racism in desegregated contemporary society.

Stanley doesn’t bow-down to the expectations of the dominant culture. By refusing to accept traditional jobs/works assigned to Negroes in the 1940s, Stanley redefines in his own way the traditional expectations associated with Negroes. His refusal to accept the roles assigned to Negroes by capitalistic America is remarkable. Without malice, he wants to claim what is his legal right. With his never-say-die attitude, he seems to be testing and teasing the limits of white racist society as much as the white society is testing his patience in granting him the job he deserves.

Stanley thoroughly searches the history of the firm he applies, the products they are selling and their prospective customers. Subsequently, he comes up with incredible marketing strategies and sales chart to prove that he is more than qualified to do the job. He keeps refashioning his strategy every time he applies for a job and every time he is rejected. He says that his every extra accomplishment makes him proud of his effort, but the reader can easily notice that it has an opposite effect on the white bosses who were returning his files. Naylor suggests that those who practice racism degrade themselves. Stanley notes, “I was even able to feel pity for them as they avoided my eyes and wilted a little with each page of my impeccable sales charts” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 197). For their profits, they need him. They know that his charts and transcripts are scholarly and professional, but they can’t overcome the racism that they have internalized as part of American education. Stanley keeps applying for the post till they re-advertise with their racist mentality clearly stated: “Only White Need Apply” (198).

Stanley is not destroyed. He keeps holding his dream and is willing to wait and work for a job he deserves. When pitted against his academic brilliance, one of the
white VPs is forced to admit that someday they’ll bring themselves to hire a Negro. Stanley, like his father, shows maturity and belief in himself when he inverts the terms of segregation and the canon of Negro inferiority by saying: “You’ll be doing your company a better favor, I said, when you can bring yourself to hire the most qualified man” (197). This shows that despite rejection, he holds ground. He doesn’t lose belief in himself and his merit.

Stanley keeps counting his attempts to land a job and his rejections keep mounting. Believing that his past failures should have no bearing on the next experience to come, he keeps trying with hope for a fair trail amidst obvious racist policies of corporate America. Ninety eight times he goes with dreams, hopes and an enviable portfolio, ninety eight times he is rejected. As readers, we can realize that it must have taken more than his heart to keep appearing for these interviews across the length and breadth of America with renewed energies and positivity. What keeps him going is his hope in American creed to allow him to succeed on his own terms and when this hope is shattered at the ninety-ninth place at Walco Glass and Tile, he leaves hope and calls it a quit.

At Walco Glass and Tile, everything seems to be going in favour of Stanley and he is offered the best job proposal till date. Head of domestic marketing is awestruck by Stanley’s extraordinary proposal and he wants him to have lunch with the second in command at layout and design, the only black man working in that company. Stanley has bright chances of being the second black man hired by Walco Glass and Tile until he meets the second in command in person. Stanley is disillusioned as he sees his own future. Margret Earley Whitt notes, “In this unnamed man, Stanley sees who he could become: one who is second in command when he is the only person in the department, one whose lobster bib stays spotless during an eating challenge, one who has no definite opinions on anything that matters, one who shreds his bib into tiny pieces” (199).

Stanley has not struggled to buy this deceptive token that is ready to bind his intelligence and put limits and restrictions on his hopes and dreams. The second in command has scarified his own self to succeed in white America. He speaks when he is asked to, he eats the way he is asked to eat by his white corporate master. He is
asked to tie his paper bib tight and he ties it so tight “that the strings dug into his neck” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 209). While the bib of Stanley and head of domestic marketing is getting splattered, the bib of the second in command remains spotless. The behaviour of the second in command is dictated by race. It illuminates the ways in which racism seems to be working as guileful and hidden set of social codes. The second in command seems to have given in to the white cultural assumption as captured by Booker T. Washington: “No white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language, and professes the white man’s religion” (qtd. in Baker 8). White bosses at Walco Glass and Tile take pride in adopting open-door policy for Negroes. But they remain silent in their culpability in bleaching the blackness of the second in command. They accept him but expect him to be culturally white. In order to please his employers, the second in command is eating, moving and behaving the way his masters ask him to. His assimilation in corporate America is like integration of Jackie Robinson in white baseball. Both reveal the token attempts by the white world to compensate serious damages done by them to the black race. Both the examples symbolize modern America’s double standards in extending an opportunity to blacks at the cost of the personal integrity and black identity.

Stanley turns down this picture of his own future. He is not ready to buy success on white terms and conditions. He rejects whiteness that has become a dangerous burden. This is his last attempt to secure the job he deserves. He is worried. He loses hope but what is important here is that he doesn’t lose belief in himself. He has no doubt about his worth and he composes a letter to his father: “Papa, I will say, the language you taught me is wonderful. I have been in small towns and large cities; I have been in clothes of every description. There is no doubt–nor ever will be–that I am a man. And it doesn’t bother me that practically no one in this country understands a single word I say” (Naylor, Bailey’s Cafe 212).

His belief is rooted in sound education—the education that teaches him black history. His text books were carefully chosen by his father from the best literature of the world. His education teaches him personal and social identification. It is the education given to him by his father that trains him that he alone has the right to
decide who he is and what he wants to become. His belief springs from a long tradition of black culture that saw his grandparents holding on to a dream against all odds. His belief springs from the language and religious beliefs of his family that taught him to rely on *Há赔付* when things went out of control.

His lunch with the second in command at Walco Glass and Tiles shatters him because he sees that even good education and posts do not protect Afro-Americans from white racist forces which keep their tight control on the very existence of blacks even if they have good education and posts. No amount of hard work and achievement is enough to protect blacks from stereotyping and discrimination by the whites. As whites continue to protect white privilege, power and mobility by denying the same to blacks, Stanley is out of hope and contemplates suicide. But he knows who he is and when he finds an arrow pointing towards Eve, he is ready to start a new chapter in his life and bounces back with a unique success story in writing jingles. His hunt for the right job in all the leading manufacturing companies of America has given him a good insight into their products and their customers. He combines this knowledge with the working knowledge, he gets at Eve’s by using those products in writing the best jingles for the private companies. Since these jingles are posted they are unable to give any clue about his skin color. Without racial prejudice, these jingles are indeed selected and Stanley goes every month to bank to deposit the prize money. At the end of his story, we find him ready to finally claim the dream of starting his own business with a bank balance close to fifty thousand dollars.

William R. Nash notes, “The beautiful irony of his position is that in his jingles, most of which play upon dominant societal constructions and racial attitudes, he has found a way to exploit the companies that would not hire him and to achieve his original goal of financial independence without having to give in as the second in command before him did” (222). With this strategy, Naylor has underlined how the knowledge of self and a vision of dream can open doors of unconventional and limitless possibilities. At the same time, she has underlined the importance of knowing black history so that it can pass a heritage that can be used to combat oppressive forces of racism in the present world. Stanley and the members of his family
exemplify the commitment to self-empowerment and self-fulfillment embodied in Zora Neal Hurston’s article “How it Feels to be the colored Me”:

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it…. No, I do not weep at the world–I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Naylor’s characters also don’t cry over their blackness. They refute the hegemonic stereotypes, reserved for blacks by embracing their distinctive sense of past and culture. In much of the American canon of literature, Afro-Americans have been projected as mere objects. But Naylor’s fiction is peopled by black characters like Bailey, Nadine, Stanley and Stanley’s father who try to negotiate racism with their own individuality and agency. They have their own subjectivity, complexity and they occupy a unique position, because their blackness is used to deprive them of the basic right of being a human. They simply acknowledge the hardships and obstacles their blackness creates for them because of the misconceived notions of the dominant whites about their race. For them, racism may be an abyss but it’s not the end of the world.

Naylor’s characters are real people who battle with racial prejudice as part of their routine problem. Once they acknowledge the hardship, they try to overcome it. At times, they may lose the battle and get lost in the world; at times, they just keep holding the flickering light of their doors and try hard to just survive. But, yes! there are times when they are able to sharpen their oyster knife to regain their power and strength to overthrow the limitation the racist society has put on them.

Naylor believes that American literary canon in itself has been a white political, male construct. Therefore, she feels that this canon needs to be broadened in order to accommodate a wide range of diversity that comprises America today. In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Naylor says:

What is America? What is America now that we’re moving into twenty-first century? It is said that the majority of Americans in six years will
be non-white. Now can you keep feeding people that anemic soup of Hawthorne and Emerson and Poe? When you’re not eating properly, you feel weak, don’t you? You feel there’s something missing somewhere.

(164)

For America, to move smoothly in a post-racial era, it is all the more necessary that inter-racial and ethnic multiplicity is respected and reflected in literary constructs and mainstream culture. That is why, Naylor is all for broadening the American literary compass by inclusion of the creations from the pens of blacks so that the diversity and multiplicity of American society is well reflected.

When Naylor was asked to comment on the race relations in America by Michelle C. Loris in an interview “The Human Spirit is kick-Ass Thing”, she said that the work and time spent on improving race relations in America “is nothing compared to the time that has gone into creating inequality. To think that thirty years will undo this kind of tangled morass. No, not within our lifetime are we going to see this big thing called race relations ever resolved” (258). For readers and critics, who may find her answer too negative, given the progress in race relations in America and the second term election of Barack Obama as the President of this country, a study of killing of James Anderson, a forty seven-year-old Afro-American, is worth noting here.

In June 2011, James Anderson, a black assembly–line worker at a Nissan plant, was beaten and then crushed under a truck by a churchgoing white teenager, Deryl Dedmon in Brandon, Mississippi without any provocation. As Dedmon crushes Anderson under the tyres of his F-250, he tells his friends amidst laughter, “I just ran over the nigga” (Dokoupil 21). This example may look extreme in its brutality, but its not an isolated case of hate crimes in America today. Analysing such cases is important in our understanding of extremely discomfiting and volatile patterns of racism in America. Tony Dokoupil, recounting the story in the Newsweek, writes about the complexity of this hate crime and race relation in America in the 21st century:

Brandon has a racial history as dark as any county in Mississippi; in the 1960s it was a white-supremacist hotbed, home to an organization that
compared the arrival of the first black student at Ole Miss to the first bombs of Pearl Harbor. Even today, Brandon is home to whites (or the Children of whites) who fled Jackson when it desegregated. (23)

What complicates Anderson’s killing is proclamation by Dedmon’s mother that Dedmon is not a racist. Dedmon’s social circle insists that they may use ‘N’ word but they don’t mean it in a racist way. Tony Dokoupil admits that this case is shocking because it appears to be an “extreme example of white people doing racist things while rejecting the R word itself” (20).

The complexity of existing race relations in America is revealed in a recent survey held by the *Newsweek*. Whites are vehemently denying that racism is being practiced or perpetuated by them, while blacks continue to feel that they are being discriminated against on account of their skin color even in the age of Obama. This difference in perception is staggering to bridge and it is this difference that needs to be negotiated if race relations are to register some progress. This poll glaringly reflects America’s persistent racial divide and basic disagreement between whites and blacks over the intensity of discrimination against Afro-Americans:

Seventy percent of whites, for example, think that blacks have an equal shot at affordable housing; only 35 percent of blacks say the same. Seventy percent of whites believe that the two races receive equal treatment in job market; a mere 25 percent of blacks concur. And while more than 80 percent of white people say the cops and courts usually or always treat blacks the same as whites, that number doesn’t even clear 50 percent among African-Americans. (Romano 25)

In the backdrop of this sociopolitical situation in America, Naylor’s comment that the road to recovering race relations is very long and bumpy seems more pragmatic and prophetic than idealistic tokenism of many politicians and moralists. Naylor has remained consistent with her viewpoint on race relations in America. On being asked by Maxine Lavon Montgomery in an interview “Opening Up the Space Called Home” as to what does she think the likely impact of Obama presidency will be as far as race relations are concerned, Naylor says:
Little, if any. He came out of a Senate in the twenty-first century where he was only the third African American senator since reconstruction.… This country doesn’t have a history of being aggressive in any quest for race, class, or gender equality. Our government dropped the ball for true racial equality during Reconstruction when meaningful reparations could have been made to African Americans…. And as far as class, we need only look at the constitution to see the mindset of the founding fathers. Only land-owning white male citizens had the right to vote, and then only for president through the Electoral College – hardly a representative democracy. (98-99)

Racial logic has shaped American society from the very beginning. Naylor’s apprehensions and anxieties regarding progress in race relations in America are shared by many political commentators. At a time when America is moving in a post racial era, Hua Hsu notes that there is a phenomenon of “growing sense of cultural solidarity among lower- middle-class whites–a solidarity defined by a yearning for American ‘authenticity,’; a folksy realness that rejects the global, the urban, and the effete in favor of nostalgia for ‘the way things used to be’” (54). They reject the global and yearn for an American authenticity that comes by being white and male. With the dawn of the post–racial age, it is possible to imagine “white identity politics growing more potent and more forthright as the soon-to-be white minority’s sense of being besieged and disdained increases” (Hsu 54). Racism in America is far more deeper and complicated than it is made out to be.

In a way, because of the path breaking works of the Civil Rights activists, black women and men writers, definite progress has been made in terms of representation and treatment of black people in American culture. We know that racism is politically incorrect. Instances of racism can be pointed at, and hence condemned. But still ruthless killing of James Anderson is not an isolated example. Blacks continue to feel devalued and discriminated against. Racism continues to function in American society as a metaphor. It has espoused new challenges in front of those who are fighting for equal rights of all races on American soil. As Cocoa feels, racism has become more
subtle. Its more covert than overt these days. It is more implicit than explicit. Hence, it has become far more problematic to cure.

However, Naylor is not pessimistic in her assessment regarding the improvement in race relations in America. She is just giving voice to a sentiment long felt by people fighting for equality in America that more concrete sociopsychological overhauling is required to stop blacks from being treated as the ‘other’. Any change has to come from grassroots, only then it can be successful.

America has a long way to go to fulfil its promise of equality to its millions of Afro-American children. Naylor doesn’t end her answer to Michelle Loris’ question on race relation in America with a finality of hopelessness. According to her, if we start the process of dialogue even on one-to-one basis, then we may have “enough of those one-on-ones of people attempting to understand, then may be we will get a block that lives together, or we’ll get a neighborhood that might live together, or a section of the country that might live together” (Naylor, “Interview: The Human Spirit” 258). This victory of post-racial era will lie in emphasis on individuality and understanding of diversity without privileging an ethnic group at its centre.

Naylor’s triumph lies in visualizing such a multiethnic society at the end of her novel, Bailey’s Cafe, through Mariam’s new born baby, George. Though Mariam bears the brunt of genital mutilation and symbolizes a history of gender abuse and oppression against women of color, she also represents cross culturalism as she is an Ethiopian Jew. Mariam’s pain becomes an agency that empowers the rest of the marginalized people to join hands in the celebration of the birth of her son, George. Most of the characters in Bailey’s Cafe join their hands in anticipation of the birth of Mariam’s child. Eve sets up the stage for the delivery of Mariam’s child. Eve sets up the stage for the delivery of Mariam’s child.

Mariam is a bridge that may allow the troubled history of institutionalized racial and gender oppression to give way to a new future. Gabriel, a Russian Jew, Bailey, an American Negro, and other dispossessed women of color from various parts of America join in the celebration of birth of George and form a community of their own which may be different in origin, but it is now singing in the sparkling shimmering waves of lights. Eve’s set up of eucalyptus trees, the juniper and steep-sloping mountains in the background, gives this scene a touch of magical realism:
Anybody ask you who you are?
Who you are?
Who you are?
Anybody ask you who you are?

Tell him—you’re the child of God. (Naylor, *Bailey’s Cafe* 225)

Amidst the threatening chaos of racism and an environment of distrust of ‘the other’, this scene of happiness and collective efforts, gives voice to several multiethnic groups as they voice their concern for their right to be treated as human beings.

This scene lays emphasis on the need to respect individuality and diversity of each section of the society. The chorus becomes an appeal for equality and tolerance for difference. America positioned as a land of boundless opportunities continues to attract many people belonging to different religion and ethnicities. In the wake of massive demographic changes in America, white America “may cease to exist in 2040, 2050, or 2060, or later still” (Hsu 48). Therefore, rather than galvanizing towards a white centre there is need to remake America for its multiethnic, multicolored heirs politically, economically and sociopsychologically.

Here, Naylor criticizes America’s idealization as a melting pot by critics and theorists alike. For her, America as a melting pot is a nonworkable preposition for the resolution of strained relations in America. Naylor believes that many examples of integration have given us the wisdom that it doesn’t work. She outrightly rejects the idea of America as a melting pot. Naylor’s own words from “An Interview with Gloria Naylor” by Charles H. Rowell are worth quoting: “This country is definitely a patchwork quilt. This country’s not a melting pot. We as a people are still resisting that” (165). Her model of America as a patchwork quilt is more healthy, more humane and more close to reality as it shows that a synthesis is possible out of different patches of different sizes, shapes and colors. The beauty of this synthesis is that each piece is allowed to retain its identity and individuality while being part of a bigger whole and a bigger purpose. Naylor’s ethnocentric vision sees in this patchwork quilt the possibility of co-existence and mutual understanding.
Mama Day and Abigail in *Mama Day* stitch a beautiful quilt for Cocoa and George as their wedding present. Mama Day picks up pieces of clothes from various dresses worn by members of different generations of her family. From broadcloth of her great-uncles to corduroy worn by her uncles, from gingham shirtwaist of Cocoa’s great grandmother, Ophelia, to Cocoa’s baby jumper—every possible bit of clothing worn by the people of her family is stitched together to create an exquisite piece of aesthetic sensibility and everyday utility. Every piece of clothing is stitched into a beautiful circular pattern: “The overlapping circles start out as golds on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds for the middle of the quilt” (Naylor, *Mama Day* 137).

Naylor reflects on the complexity of this world by employing quilt tradition. There are no hard-core demarcations and divisions in her quilting. There is overlapping of circular patterns. Each individual piece is allowed to retain its identity, but at the same time, there is merging and melting so that each individual piece contributes in the making of a magnificent pattern of quilt: “When it’s done right you can’t tell where one ring ends and the other begins. It’s like they ain’t been sewn at all, they grew up out of nowhere” (138).

The patchwork quilt is positioned as the alternative module of viewing American national identities. Rather than melting of individualities into a singular identity, the emphasis is on different shapes, different colors and different sizes. Instead of the dominance of a single color or pattern, Mama Day’s quilt symbolizes merging and melting existence to create something new. The artistic dexterity of quilting lies in the fact that each piece, while maintaining its individuality, coordinates with the rest of the circles to create a unified whole, immensely richer, stronger and more beautiful than the original piece. No piece of clothing is favoured more than the other. The memories of pain and happiness, loss and birth are all reflected with equal grace. The dry, fraying gingham from her mother’s shirt waist is a reminder of the sorrow and madness her mother suffered because of the loss of her child. The gingham is given as much importance as the homespun of her grandmother Sapphire Wade who is the life saviour of her seven sons and is responsible for the freedom of Willow Springs: “The gingham is almost dry rot and don’t cut well, the
threads fraying under her scissors. She tries and tries again just for a silver. Too precious to lose, have to back it with something” (137).

Mama Day’s weaving of past with present is done with a view to connect present with future. It stands for traditional continuum. Cocoa knows that the quilt has not been made by her grandmother just keeping her in mind. She knows that her grandmothers “had sewed for my grand children to be conceived under the quilt” (147).

Naylor, through George, wants us to understand the folly of not understanding American national identity as a patchwork quilt. George is mesmerized by the beautiful work of art and wants to clear a wall to display it. This quilt is not a frill to be used as a decoration item. It is an item of utility. Its not borne out of desire to decorate and beautify. Its borne out of need to protect tenderness: “This quilt was gonna be treated real tender, and it was gonna cover a lot of tenderness up there in New York on them cold winter evenings” (138). It has not been the result of leisure activity of two women. Rather, it’s a toil of two grandmothers who wish to communicate the message of unity and sense of belonging to its coming generation. It’s a gift that is meant to enable George and Cocoa to locate themselves with respect of their family history.

Remembrance of historical facts, good or bad, retaining ones’ own definition of self and maintenance of tolerance for diversity are three important tenets on which the political, social and psychic health of the nation depends. Mama Day’s quilt becomes a metaphor. By piecing together the sad and the happy memories of different hues and of different generations of the Days together, Mama Day signifies a bigger strategy with the help of which the histories of people of different ethnicities can be placed together to build a stronger and aesthetically more beautiful picture of American society in the present.

The emphasis is on one step at a time. The aim is to survive and then to survive as a whole, to survive meaningfully and to survive as black people aware of their history and sure in their identity, so that a future can be planned here in America.

Another factor which is important, according to Naylor, in dismantling the wall of racism is communal action. Community involvement is vital to understand others.
It is important to achieve a sense of purpose. It is essential to nullify the burdens of white political action and to empower the marginalized race. The history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation cannot be undone by any individual action. An individual can aspire to survive in a racist scenario but to uproot and refashion it requires collective support.

The last chapter of *The Women of Brewster Place* underlines the importance of communal action against dehumanizing impact of racial politics. It is presented as a dream in which all the key characters of the novel except Ben and Lorraine, make an appearance. Mattie dreams of a block party which the Brewster Place Block Association is organizing to raise money to hire a lawyer to pressurize the white landlord to take on the work of maintenance of the dilapidated condition of the Brewster Place. In the dream of Mattie, there is festivity, celebration and togetherness. In Mattie’s dream, Ceil returns ready to start a new life. Etta is happy with her partner and Kiswana is playing with one of the children of Cora Lee.

As mentioned earlier, the wall in Brewster Place, according to Naylor, symbolizes racism. In Mattie’s dream, all the key characters try to dismantle this wall. It is a clear indication that Naylor recognizes racism to be an extremely serious threat to the social, psychological and political well-being of the oppressed blacks. In Mattie’s dream, Cora Lee’s Child, Sonya, discovers blood on the bricks of the wall where Lorraine is raped and Ben is murdered. Cora Lee shouts there is blood on the wall: “It ain’t right; it just ain’t right. It shouldn’t still be here” (Naylor, *The Women of 185*). Cora takes the bricks to Mattie and Mattie shouts to “get that thing out of here!” and “it was passed by the women from hand to hand, table to table, until the brick flew out of Brewster Place and went spinning out onto the avenue”(186). Ciel, Etta, a reluctant Kiswana and even Theresa join hands. They chip away the wall to throw away its blood soaked bricks out of Brewster Place: “Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands…” (186).

The wall throughout the novel has been a symbol of white apathy. It’s a symbol of deliberate and calculated move by the majority to trap the dreams of its Afric children into a web of hopelessness and destruction. The blood on this wall is a literal
symbol of deprivation and loss black community has suffered at the altar of American holders of power. All the women working in collaboration in a dream also put forward an alternative wherein black American communal solidarity is required to reject and overthrow white American political and ideological control.

Cora Lee is suspicious of their success initially: “That white man didn’t care about what a bunch of black folks had to say, and these people [blacks] weren’t gonna stick together no way” (Naylor, *The Women of* 116). However, a perfect unison of people’s affirmative action is envisioned in Mattie’s dream and all the women are successful in tearing/breaking down the wall of racism that has kept them away from opportunities. It is not the wall of sexism but it is the wall of racism that these women seem to be breaking through. Although no man joins them in tearing down the wall because they stand “huddled in the doorways” (185), its not just the wall of patriarchy that these women seem to be breaking. They become agents of change not just for themselves but also for their men and children who also remain sidelined in the wake of omnipresent racism in America. They have their men’s approval in doing what they are doing.

The burden of being black in a white society is suffocating and omnipresent. In a way, her strategy of dealing with race issues begins with the recognition of the problem and then she seems to endorse a communal action to de-establish the strong edifice of racism in America. The strength for the communal action in her characters comes from their reliance on their self definition and an insulation from the projected picture of Negro inferiority.

Naylor doesn’t want her answers and her suggestions to be the only solutions to a complicated issue like racism in America. The action happens in Mattie’s dream and in the middle of a deluge that gives the scene a mythical quality. The wall is dismantled in Mattie’s dream. With this strategy, Naylor involves the reader’s participation also. Virginia C. Flower notes, “The dream is one of Naylor’s most successful strategies in the novel, allowing her to provide a vision of what needs to happen while at the same time withholding it (57). When Mattie gets up, Etta tells her, “Woman you still in bed? Don’t you known what day it is? We’re gonna have a party?” (Naylor, *The Women of* 189). The sun is shinning on Brewster Place and
readers are hopeful that the day is ready to embrace a positive outcome of the block party; but the sun is also shining “on the stormy clouds that had formed on the horizon and were silently moving toward Brewster Place” (188). Naylor stitches together the existence of sunshine with the clouds, reality with fantasy, the pain with the happiness to bring out the possibility of co-existence of the two polarities to signify a mutual co-existence of people of different colors, castes and creeds.

Racial gap in contemporary America is a central concern in Naylor’s fiction. The history of disparities between blacks and whites is affecting the political, economic, social and cultural health of this country. Understanding of various forms of inhumanity meted out to blacks is important to sensitize people in their efforts to build a more humanistic world order. Re-examining history from the social and cultural point of view of the marginalized is necessary to confront race and racism in America. Naylor suggests that transcendence of hegemony is necessary to establish a more egalitarian social order in which the black subject will not be restricted from exercising and experiencing agency and self-determination. For this transcendence to happen blacks are only asking “to be allowed to be” (Naylor, The Women of ‘86).
Works Cited


