Chapter 5

CONCLUSION
The genre of the African American novel has its origin from the nadir – when it was rejected by the white readers and even by publishers – and scaled to greater heights, winning highest honours, awards, and accolades. Now, it has established its roots firmly in literatures and is accepted worldwide for the variety and intensity of its themes. There are several recurrent themes such as combating racism, searching for a black identity, and maintaining a unique quality of life.

Many authors have sprouted up and struggled a lot to find their place among the white writers and to establish their form, express their agonies and wraths. Slave narratives, autobiographies, folklore literature, their roots and experiences in Africa and its culture had worked as influential forces for the development of the African American novel. Both male and female black novelists vent their emotions through the power of the word. While struggle for liberation, loss of African cultural past, servitude, pleas for emancipation were the major themes in the novels of the earlier writers, search for one’s own identity, celebration of that identity, influence of black music, common bond in the form of community and sisterhood, and racial, cultural and sexual atrocities on black women are the prominent leading themes of present novelists. Major movements, wars, great personalities and National Associations have influenced the growth of this tradition.

Black women are all the time projected as both objects and targets in the form of stereotypes in the mainstream American literatures by most of the white men and women writers. To add to this, the black men writers have contributed in their own way to this prejudiced notion of black woman. Unable to project the black women
from their own point of view, they remained apathetic for the plight of black women. So it became the responsibility of the black women writers to make a valiant attempt to put in place the predicament of their race and gender in its historical experience.

The "black woman" has carved a niche for herself in the genre of African American novel. Their sense of rootlessness, loneliness, isolation, inquietude, and loss of identity, need a bond to share. The racial, sexual and gender oppressions they encountered are all brought into focus through their writings and thus gained universal prominence. To survive and grow in those tough times, they need to rediscover their lost selves and identities.

Though the earlier black women writers placed their struggles against the background of racism instead of sexism, the later writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker portray female poignant despairs, justifying their purpose. These writers manage to expose the sexist tragedy of black women and thus rebel against the community degradation. Their main aim has been to expose sexism and the patriarchal power structure and celebrate the all-round capabilities of black women with a revolutionary vision. Their main emphasis in their works has been on how important it is to arrive at an awakening of consciousness that one is being oppressed not because of one's ignorance or laziness or stupidity but just because of one's race and gender that is for just black and female.

Gloria Naylor belongs to the group of African American female novelists who contributed their part to the growth of the genre by exploring the themes of identity and female relationships. With her naturalistic and reformist perceptions, Naylor has
created an atmosphere for her characters to grow under the circumstances of abandoned lives and lost hopes. And this emotional blending of the related suffering attains integrity among these female characters.

The philosophy of Black Feminism is clearly visible in the novels of Gloria Naylor as her female protagonists celebrate the black roots and the ideals of black life by defining a perfect black womanhood. Mattie Michael, Grandma Tilson, and Wilson Nedeed are representatives of Naylor’s philosophy. As these characters strive for a black unity or community, they depend on one another to reclaim their identity. Their foresightedness and afflicted past experiences made them “mammie” figures of her writings. They create awareness among their fellow females regarding their deep anguish and despondence. They provide care and love to retrieve them from their doomed experiences to bring a change in the cramped souls of their female community.

In Gloria Naylor’s first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, Mattie Michael bonds with almost all the women either visibly or invisibly, psychologically or emotionally. Her companionship with Etta, Ceil and Cora is visible and emotional, whereas with Lorraine, Theresa and Kiswana it is invisible and psychological. All these women unite in a world of their own, the Brewster Place, which becomes their own regime that affirms a sense of sisterhood among them. They remind one another of their roots, thus healing the wounds of their unworthy and ignominious past.

The novel thus depicts the story of a community comprised of the wronged women – unwed mothers or deserted ones. In spite of having been oppressed and
deceived very early in their lives, these characters continue to cherish in them a desire to live. The pathetic stories of seven women seem independent. But Mattie acts as a unifying force in the novel. Despite these women's despicable past, all of them emerge as a powerful force in offering a fight against their alienation. At last they succeed in redeeming themselves from this state of miserable oppression through a nourishing sense of solidarity among all the black women.

In *Linden Hills*, Naylor depicts the fate of the Nedeed women – Willa Prescott Nedeed, Luwana Packerwilla Nedeed, Evelyn Creton Nedeed, and Priscilla McGuine Nedeed – all of whom suffer at the hands of their own men who are their own husbands. These men treat their wives as heir producing machines. Once an heir is born or when they fail in giving birth to the right kind of heir their lives are erased.

The last of the Nedeed women, Priscilla, arrives at an awareness of what happened to her predecessors in the past and what is happening to her in the present comes through a “literature of their own,” which comprises the Bible journal of Luwana, the recipe book of Evelyn, and the photo album of Priscilla. These entries awaken her from a state of apathy and prompt her to rebel, but in vain. The awakening itself proves to be some sort of redemption for the last of the Nedeed women for she causes death to the last of the Nedeed men while dying herself.

On the other hand Grandma Tilson's philosophy of life, not to sell one's soul or self in order to live a life of sophistication, signifies the importance of the self. Her mirror symbolism, which reflects the reality, strengthens the female psyche of Linden Hills' locality. Willa Prescott Nedeed, who is determined to assert her identity,
imagines Grandma Tilson's mirror in her own hands. Her companionship with the preceding Nedeed wives through their document assures her of her position in her home, where her true self is hidden. And Laurel Dumont, who strives for a home for herself, commits suicide as she assumes that she can find peace in the deep water of a large swimming pool. Naylor adopts epistolary method in this novel, like Alice Walker in her *The Color Purple*, celebrating female solidarity through unsent letters. Luwana's letters to herself are best examples for this. And the black poets Willie and Lester are her alter egos who delineate the author's craftsmanship in language.

In the next novel, *Bailey's Café*, Naylor focuses on the interesting lives of the proprietors of a diner and its various patrons. Naylor demonstrates her ability to find heroism in the lives of everyday people, while at the same time showing their frustrating at not being able to escape their position in life. By portraying women who are considered by society as "fallen," Naylor takes up a subject which is at once important and timely. In a world that is crumbling down due to lack of morality, ethics and values, Naylor points out to ways by which one can still adhere to what is best in human nature.

In *Bailey's Café*, the women characters resolve the conundrum of African American female perception. The success stories of the women prove that it is possible to transcend the pretty world and create a new world where women call all the shots and are masters of their own destiny. Acute suffering ultimately results in absolute understanding and transcendence. This does not mean that these women run away from situations but rather they objectify the experience in such a way that joy or
sorrow does not affect them adversely. They accept their lot and undergo suffering but they transcend this limitation to think of others and try to help solve their problems too. Instead of falling victim to self-pity, these women learn from their experience to bring meaning and happiness in the lives of those around them and thus give a new dimension to women bonding. The movement from oppression to a celebration of life is empowered by folk tradition, by nature, and by the abiding spiritual forces.

In this way, Naylor calls the attention of the readers of both sexes and both colours to their suffering, helping them to create an experience of their own in their survival. Regarding Naylor’s love for Blackness, Kathleen M. Puhr remarks, “Almost nowhere has black love, manifesting itself in care of others, been better presented than in the novels of Gloria Naylor.”

Gloria Naylor’s incorporation of the theories of Naturalism and Black Feminism as two modes of narration in depicting her female protagonists and the prevailing circumstances helps her present the contemporary black female predicament in the right perspective, attracting many readers and critics towards their plight and poignant emotional and physical pressures, and makes her a complex novelist of contemporary period. Commenting on her dramatic launch as a writer, Naylor herself exclaims:

I wanted to become a writer, because I felt that my pressure as a black woman and my perspectives as a woman in general had been under represented in American Literature. My first novel grew out of a desire to respond to a friend that I had noticed in the black and white critical
establishment. There has been a tendency on the part of both to assume
that a black writer’s work should be ‘definitive’ of black experience.\textsuperscript{2}

As she desired to establish herself as a black writer of black experiences, she
adopted female friendship as a means to emphasize the need of selfhood. Naylor is
adept at portraying the rural and poor African American life conditions. But she failed
to create a perfect urban black community with the same deftness. The isolated
communities she creates in either Brewster Place or Linden Hills or Bailey’s Café
portray the blacks in their onward march towards success, but not completely
urbanized. Though she calls it an urbanized black community, the traces of poor
blacks dominate the black society. Linden Hills is the best example for this imaginary
urbanization as people themselves resolve to be economically and emotionally strong.

The inherent challenges of these black women since their days of servitude
make them change their mindset. Instead of being stereotype story makers, they leave
their foot prints for the next generation of women to follow their paths in assertion of
their identity. Naylor stands successful in creating such characters who are on the
threshold of transition in her novels.

The largely discussed problematic issue of attaining selfhood delineates the
black woman’s need to live a respectable life among the white males and females and
black males. So all the female characters in their struggle achieve an authentic
selfhood. They encounter male domination, self-abuse and bruised past and invite
other females to share their woes. This likeness in suffering brings them together
providing a space for them to alleviate their desolation and distress.
References
