Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
The literary history of African American literature has emphasized the experience and acute suffering of the black community in America. African American literature has firmly established its roots in the literatures of the world and has been accepted worldwide for its authenticity and popularity.

The genre has its roots in the year 1492, when Africans were brought as slaves to the white world. The Negro woman was brought to America, not only of curiosity but as a slave and to serve as a breeding animal, to procreate more slaves. Black women, like other blacks, were believed to be animals, living beings who, according to most whites, were without souls, a strange exotic new kind of creatures. Blacks were labelled as wild and savage creatures without souls.

No doubt living in such a situation, black woman’s value as a human being and also as a human female was always at the mercy of others – the white men and black men. As a result she was forced to undergo continuous devaluation of her womanhood. This was in vogue from the beginning of their arrival in the USA up to the days of abolition of slavery.

In fact, to be a woman is a curse in this society. Simone de Beauvoir rightly says, “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other.”

In due course, black women have tried to define themselves. However, given the physical limitations on their mobility, the conceptualization of self that is part of
black women's self definition is distinctive. Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the contest of family and community, as Paule Marshall describes it, "the ability to recognize one's continuity with the larger community."²

By being accountable to others, African American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves. Sonia Sanchez points this version of self by stating, "We must move past always focusing on the 'personal self' because there is a larger self. There is a 'self' of black people."³ Rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides black women a deeper, more meaningful definition of the self.

Black women have tried to gain their lost humanity and collective an individual self through their art and literature. Not only this, they have also succeeded in establishing themselves as writers and creative artists of reputation. They have also succeeded in establishing black literature as separate branch of American literature in general. However, though black women were a major party in making and developing black literature, their contribution to black literature was always denied and ignored till a few decades ago. It is only recently that the literature of black women has come into vogue and is recognized as a literature of distinct sensibility.

However, the literature written by black women was not so easily received and recognized by the establishment. Barbara Smith in her Feminist Criticism (1977), Deborah Mc Dowell through New directions of Black Feminist Criticism, Mary Helen
Washington in her introduction to *Black Eyed Susans: Classic Stories By and About Black Women*, and Barbara Christian in her *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition*, 1872-1976, highlight the issue as to how black women writers were ignored and neglected. Deborah E. McDowell adds that not only have black women writers been “disenfranchised” from critical work by white women scholars on the “female tradition,” but they also have been frequently exorcised from those on the African American literary tradition by black scholars, most of whom are males. Robert Stepto says, “When black women writers are neither ignored altogether nor merely given honorable mention, they are critically misunderstood and summarily dismissed.” To prove her stand she cites the examples of books such as *The Negro Novel in America* of Robert Bone and of *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes* by David Littlejohn.

Black women have identified themselves with the problems of the African Americans in general. They believe that their problems are slightly different from those of black men and also of white women. Though the uniqueness of their problem was long understood by them, this kind of awareness of the uniqueness and separateness could be located in 1892 in Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South*.

In fact, it was Cooper who first analyzed the fallacy of referring to the “black man” when one is speaking of black people. It is she who first argued that just as white men speak through the consciousness of black men neither can black men “fully and adequately reproduce the exact voice of the black women.” She argues gender
and race cannot be conflated, except in the instance of a black woman’s voice, and it is the voice which must be uttered and to which one must listen.

As stated earlier, black women’s writing is a part and parcel of African American literature in general although it has its own distinct identity. Phillis Wheatley raised her voice and published her *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, Religion and Moral* in 1773. She is the first black female poet who raised a new voice, a voice that came from a black feminist sensibility, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig; or Sketches From the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House, North* (1859) being the first novel by an African American woman.

Mary Helen Washington, Claudia Tate, Deborah E. Mc Dowell, Valarie Smith, and Barbara Smith placed black women squarely in the centre of their historical experience, which makes them the dynamic interpreters of their own lives. Black women’s literature began the task that critic Hortense Spiller demanded: “Women must seek to become their own historical subject in pursuit of its proper object, its proper and specific expression in time.”

Harriet Jacob’s novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* were concerned about the abominable practice of slavery, the only one woman novelist who dared to reject the unending suffering they were encountering was Harriet Beecher Stowe. She attempted the first Anti-Slave narrative *Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Life among the Lowly* (1852), which influenced even male writers and traced its roots in the protest novel by Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.
If there is any other woman novelist who influenced the literary emotions of generations of writers, it is none other than Zora Neale Hurston. She produced her first novel, *Jonah's Guard Vine* (1933) when the Negro Renaissance and its centre Harlem were both affected by the Great Depression. Her first novel centres on the prevailing themes of racial disintegration and oppression, African American folklore and language. Her next novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), was well received because of its focus on the struggle between men and women. It made the black woman aware of her identity and question her personal freedom.

Black women have led a different life from the other categories of the Americans; their consciousness differs a lot from the consciousness the other groups. As a result, literature of black women forms a kind of separate literature as it is rooted in the special black feminist consciousness. Barbara Smith writes:

That Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker incorporate the traditional black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjuring, and midwifery into the fabric of their stories is not mere coincidence, nor is their use of specific Black female language to express their own and their characters’ thoughts accidental. The use of Black Women’s language and cultural experience in books by black women about black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white male literary structures. The black feminist
critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by black women.\textsuperscript{7}

A transition can be found in the handling of themes from earlier novelists to the period of Zora Neale Hurston. The earlier writers depended upon the slave narratives and autobiographies relating their themes to personal liberation, cultural and racial equality whereas the next generation of writers exposed the influence of folklore, African cultural heredity and impact of blues and jazz music, and woman as separate entity in her personal freedom. This difference in themes is clear through their craft and characterization.

Carving out the two decades between 1940 and 1960 from the historical trajectory of African American letters is, of course, the arbitrary and largely artificial work of literary historians. Of course, these decades constitute an extraordinary moment in the development of African American writing, a period during which a galaxy of exceptional literary talents emerged. The conventional narrative of the period, which tended to focus on literary luminaries who published legendary books – both critically acclaimed and commercially successful – eclipsed much in its path. The writers who emerged during these decades were James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Ellison, Robert Hayden, Ann Petry, Melvin Tolson, Margaret Walker, Dorothy West, and Richard Wright. Close on the heels of Richard Wright’s successful novel \textit{Native Son}, other African American writers garnered recognition and prestige from a predominantly white literary world, which had long stinted on its awards and favours to black writers. Margaret Walker won the Yale Younger Poets Award for \textit{For My
People in 1942; Gwendolyn Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* in 1950; Ralph Ellison, the National Book Award for *Invisible Man* in 1952; and Lorraine Hansberry, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959.

In summarizing African American literary production of the 1950s, critic Mary Helen Washington asserts, "The real 'invisible man' ... was the black woman." Gwendolyn Brooks' novel *Maud Martha* (1953) and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) were the two exceptions in decade during which men published the lion's share of novels. Though their novels earned favourable notices, Brooks and Marshall had to await the "renaissance" in African American women's fiction of the 1970s and 1980s to fully receive their critical due. The fact that Brooks had earlier won the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* identified her more readily as a poet – a poet whose work was rigorously technical, rhythmically complex, spontaneous, and fresh. Along with Brooks, other female poets who became well known during the 1950s and 1960s are Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. It is also worth noting that a number of important essays and books about human rights were written by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. One of the leading examples of these is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

Paule Marshall wrote the novel that most black feminist critics consider the beginning of contemporary African American women's writing. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was published in 1959 to fine critical reviews but without much fanfare since most African American literature of the time focused mainly on black manhood. Since then *Brown Girl, Brownstones* has been claimed by well-known African
American writers such as Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange as important to their own literary development, because it portrayed black woman’s centrality within the context of a specifically black culture.

The period 1960s witnessed more number of black female writers. Alice Childress’ *The Wedding Band* (1960) and Rosaline Fleming’s *God Bless the Child* (1964) fall under the tradition of rediscovering one’s blackness. In 1965, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was reprinted, as it gained more popularity after 30 years. Margaret Walker, a novelist, poet and a Civil War writer, attracted the audience with her novel *Jubilee* (1966), the first neo-slave narrative. It challenges the changes that occurred in the lives of black women and questions black people’s racial cultural and economic equality. By the end of this decade, novels of these writers influenced both black and white audiences resulting in the formation of Black Arts Movement and Black Power Movement. And this is the period when the feminist perspectives of the black women novelists started to influence them with their works. These novelists rejoiced at their historical past and determined to reclaim black woman’s “selfhood” and cultural heredity. However the proud, optimistic sense of global leadership and domestic tranquility that characterized post-World War II American was shattered during the decade by black civil rights and white youth movements that polarized various populations of the United States. Youth squared off against age; southern whites dug in their heels against blacks seeking civil rights; zealous Northerners challenged the Deep South’s cherished system of racial segregation.
The Black Arts Movement is a continuous, collective effort to bring about fundamental social reform. It is a collaborative rather than an individualistic enterprise. African American writers and artists, as a vital sector of the movement, sought to transform the manner in which black Americans were represented or portrayed in literature and the arts.

In accord with their definition of themselves as participants in a movement, African American writers and artists turned to the African American masses for their inspiration and defined their goals in broadly collective social and political terms. Their objective was to create works that would be — in the words of Maulana Karenga — "functional, collective and committing." Hence, the Black Arts 1960s proposed to create a politically engaged expression as a corollary to the new black spirit of the decade. The writer Larry Neal explained that the Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Arts is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of black American. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the African American desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic.

Several senior black American authors during the 1960s such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Dudley Randoll joined their efforts to those of the Black Arts Movement. Brooks and Randall welcomed the new energies of the young black creators and provided publishing venues for their work and offered sound guidelines
for their enterprise. Though Hayden made known his disagreement with the more prescriptive, racialist demands of the Black Arts Movement, his work was nevertheless shaped and energized during the 1960s by the renewed sense of black history. The distance is immense during poems found in Hayden’s *Heart Shape in the Dust* (1940) and the mighty resonances of “Middle Passage.” During his term at the Library of congress as poet in residence, Hayden graciously welcomed the new spokesperson of the Black Arts. Other senior black writers and critics were not so adaptable. Some of them roundly condemned the new creative moment as a demagogic black departure from the universal standards of art and culture. Novelist Ralph Ellison and man of letters J. Saunders Redding were in the very forefront of such detractors.

The community of black women writing has emerged. Hortense Spillers calls “the community of Black women writing” a hallmark of the contemporary period. Events in 1970 signaled its arrival. *The Black Woman*, an anthology edited by Toni Cade Bambara, heralded an effort by black women to define themselves. Another impetus was the recuperation of literary precursors Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, whose classic volume of folklore *Mules and Men* was reprinted in 1970. At that time Hurston remained, in her biographer Robert Hemenway’s words, “one of the most significant unread authors in America.” Her work would soon reach hundreds of thousands of readers; it would provide a touchstone for the writing of a new generation as well.
The year 1970 saw the publication of extraordinary first novels: Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Powerfully written and deeply unsettling in their exploration of family violence, sexual oppression and abuse, and the corrosive effects of racism and poverty, these novels ran counter to the then prevailing mood of righteous anger and triumphant struggle. Angelou’s *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* partook more in that mood, but at its dramatic center – as in Morrison’s novel – was the rape of a girl. In a society ordered by hierarchies of power based on race, class and gender, no one is more powerless, hence is more vulnerable, than a poor black girl. In these texts such characters anchor the critique of social ideology. The years 1970s and 80s witnessed the emergence of some women writers with feminist perspectives. This period began with the publication by four renowned women novelists: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Maya Angelou. Their works created a literary Renaissance in women’s writings and distinguished them with their varied themes and unique characters.

Walker’s classic essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden” offers a theory of black female creativity and defines a tradition of black women’s art. The portrait Walker draws of her mother gardening is the portrait of an artist “ordering the universe in her personal conception of Beauty.” Many writers share Walker’s impulse to recuperate the artistic legacy of their foremothers. Paule Marshall pays homage to the “poets in the kitchen” whose linguistic creativity inspires her own, while Naylor endows her protagonist Mama Days, a midwife and conjure woman, with the ability to quilt, bake and garden superlatively. In *Sula* Morrison creates Eva
Peace, a character whose will to order the universe according to her own personal conception is both beautiful and sinister.

The period of 1980s and 1990s witnessed movements like Black Power Movement and Black Feminist Movement, bringing onto the stage many writers of both genders in African American literature. Black feminism was a widely accepted and adopted concept by the contemporary writers. Walker’s “womanism” as the black feminism pervaded through almost all female novelists of 80s and 90s. Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, Alice Walker’s The Colour Purple, and Gloria Naylor’s debut novel The Women of Brewster Place, all appeared in the same year, 1982, and stressed the importance of female kinship in their search for identity and portrayed a black female character who was subjected to the atrocities of “the triple jeopardy” – sex, class, and race. Many critics came to the fore during this period, as there was increase in the number of publications, providing rich insights into the writers’ critical literary influence. Barbara Christian’s Black Women Novelists (1980) and Black Feminist Criticism (1985), Bernard Bell’s The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition (1987), and Hazel Carby’s Reconstructing Black Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Women Novelists (1987) were only a few critical works to mention. Many writers and critics focused their attention on the black female writers for their treatment of authentic themes and their emphasis on strong black womanhood. Both the female writers and their female characters reflected the psychological image of black womanhood which became an object in the hands of both white and black males.
In the 1990s African American writers told new stories of growing up black. First time authors Rosemary Bray, Nathan McCall, and Debra Dickerson as well as veteran writers, including June Jordan and Thylias Moss, and scholars Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Deborah McDowell, penned haunting memories. Their works reflect the recent and widespread popularity of the memoir as a genre.

Unlike the predecessors of African American literature, the younger writers of the contemporary period studied in the classroom. For example, Naylor asserts that reading Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* as a college student gave her the authority to begin writing fiction herself. Her novels, especially *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*, acknowledge her debt to Morrison, Hurston, and Walker as well as to Dante’s *Inferno* and Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. Walker, who first found Hurston’s name in a footnote as she was doing research for short story, claimed her as a literary foremother, wrote essays about her, and described her own novel *The Color Purple* as a “love letter to Zora.” Scholars, notably Henry Louis Gates Jr., subsequently identified the pattern of shared themes and tropes in the two authors’ texts. As Gates demonstrates in his critical study *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), black texts “talk” to other black texts and the art of signifying is simultaneously oral and literary. He asserts, moreover, that the African American literary tradition is “double-voiced” – that is, it reflects writers’ reading of western texts. But it “repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use.” Theories of intertextuality have become central to African American literary study.
All these black novelists later no longer concentrated on the mundane issues; instead they constructed their novels on the basis of spirituality, respect for ancestry and pride for history, oneness with nature and importance of community and female affinity, retrospection of their past and history. Commenting on this, Gloria Joseph writes, "Black women play integral roles in the family, and frequently it is immaterial whether they are biological mothers, sisters, or members of the extended family."\textsuperscript{16}

In this way, it has taken a long time to establish the genre of African American novel in a respectable position in the hands of both male and female novelists, especially female novelists, who shattered the shackles around them differentiating themselves from their counterparts in dealing with contemporary authentic and captivating themes. Affected and influenced by the works of Hurston, Morrison and Walker, Gloria Naylor has adopted her own style to present the lives of black women. In Naylor's novel, one can find a connection between her preceding novelists as she tends to adopt the idea of developing it further through her characters and situations. Discovering a better way of life is what Gloria Naylor suggests through her characters. Knowing what is there around them, they try to live beyond the problems by transcending the quarrels and miseries of everyday life. Therefore a keen eye for moral and emotional dilemmas, a keen sympathy for the trials and triumphs of her characters, a vibrant response to the challenge of her own self-authorization, and a compelling prose style that is gritty and sensuous, incantatory and apocalyptic – these have been the hallmarks of Gloria Naylor's career.
Naylor's work clearly celebrates the unique experience of African American women; she connects each of her five novels in the transcendence of boundaries. Forever challenging the arbitrary limitations that society imposes on the individual, whether racially motivated, gender-driven, or caste-generated, Naylor demands that her characters question their circumstances in order to change them. Believing that attempts to circumscribe human movement and human interaction result in ultimate dehumanization, Naylor argues for vigilance in dismantling any imprisoning forces. Likewise, Naylor's life, from the very beginning, is a testament to the act of defiance.

Gloria Naylor was born on 25 January 1950 in New York City, the first of three daughters of Roosevelt and Alberta McAlphin Naylor, who had recently migrated northward from their native Robersonville, Mississippi. Her mother had decided months before her first child's arrival that the baby would be born in the small town Mississippi and they worked as a subway motorman and a telephone operator. Therefore Naylor's mother departed Mississippi for New York for fear of limited opportunities for educational growth and advancement. For many blacks, moving North offered more immediate remedies to social ills. With Roosevelt as a motorman with the New York Transit Authority and Alberta as a telephone operator, the Naylors worked tirelessly to ensure their children a life far better than the one they had known. Naylor's dreams were simple: provide a stable home life for their family, which would ultimately include three daughters. They had a steady job and place to live. Conceived in one region and one decade, yet born in others, Naylor entered life in transcendence. Naylor confirms the significance of her dual heritage in her outlook on the world
about which she writes. Therefore her conception in the South has played the more important role in shaping her life as a writer. Her family’s immediate southern roots and her own northern perspective to some degree placed her as the oldest child. Naylor has always viewed life broadly and critically. Her precocious nature as a child is easily attributed to all of these factors.

Naylor’s interest in literature was generated at an early age when her mother encouraged young Gloria to read broadly. Her penchant for writing was revealed as early as at seven years when she wrote poems to express feelings she found difficult to utter. She had been told that she had potential, while she only knew she felt most complete when expressing herself through the written work.

By age twelve Gloria Naylor described herself as a brooder, a gifted child, and a voracious reader, who used writing as a means for venting various feelings and frustrations. As she matured, reading and writing continued to soothe her creative urges and provide with a forum for considering her own opinions about the world around her. Sequestering herself in the attic of her parents’ house, the preteen Gloria used to pull a sheet across part of the space and call it Gloria’s Gallery. There she wrote poems and bits of prose to satisfy this predilection for creativity. She even began drafting a novel at sixteen, though no complete work materialized.

Naylor describes her early reading as being indiscriminate. When she was thirteen, however, her seventh-grade teacher gave her a copy of Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, insisting that every young woman should read this classic before her
fourteenth birthday. From this point, Naylor was eager to read more classic literature. In November 1979, two months before her thirteenth birthday, Naylor was notified that *Essence*, a magazine, would publish her short story “A Life on Beekman Place” in the spring. Editor Marcia Gillespie encouraged her to continue writing, if she did nothing else in life. Naylor was both pleased and frightened. To be told that she truly had talent, yet to think about a life that would require her to produce, terrified the budding writer. Later in March 1980 her short story “A life on Beekman Place” became the “Lucielia Louise Turner” chapter in *The Woman of Brewster Place*. As an excellent student, Naylor was placed into advanced classes. Her teacher had begun to sharpen her reading tastes and her exposure to English classics helped to shape the foundation to writing.

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Naylor said, “The passion of the Bronte’s, the irony of Jane Austen, and the social indignation of Dickens fed my imagination as I read voraciously.” However, her evolution as a writer was stalled during her senior year in high school as a result of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. King’s death had a major impact on Naylor, leaving her bewildered about the black meaning and her own future. Her search for meaning led her to serve as a missionary for the Jehovah’s Witnesses in New York, North Carolina, and Florida for the next seven years (1968-1975).

The migration of her parents from South to North provided Gloria with good education and a respectable life, and helped her live a life of her own. She chose creative writing as a potential instrument to portray the real life conditions of her own
black people, especially women in Naturalistic tradition. Naylor herself once explained, "I felt most complete when expressing myself through written word.... I wrote because I had no choice, but that was a long road from gathering the authority within myself to believe that I could actually be a writer."\textsuperscript{17}

What followed for Naylor were years of transformation. Having become disenchanted with the organization, Naylor returned to New York, where she briefly studied nursing at Medgar Evers College before enrolling in Brooklyn College, from which she received her BA in English in 1981. In 1983 she received a master’s degree in Afro-American studies from Yale University. Submitting her thesis, she began her second novel, \textit{Linden Hills}, and published it in 1985.

It was during her sophomore year at Brooklyn College, at age twenty seven, that Naylor read Toni Morrison’s \textit{The Bluest Eye} (1970), a crucial event in her emergence as an author. Whereas "the writers [she] had been taught to love were either white or male," Morrison’s example gave Naylor “the \textit{authority}... to enter this forbidden terrain”:

\begin{quote}
It said to a young poet, struggling to break into prose, that the barriers were flexible.... And it said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth... not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Ironically, Naylor was on the National Book Award panel that passed over Morrison’s \textit{Beloved} (1988), a top contender for that prestigious award and later a Pulitzer Prize-
winning novel; while it is not known how Naylor voted, the episode caused considerable stir in the literary community.

Naylor has positioned herself among other black feminist writers and their theories in the perspective of Naturalism. She admires women – such as Zora Neal Hurston – who have “turned their backs on the world… been selfish to some degree… gone against the grain.”19 Naylor recognized the dangers of a creative life in which “you are rewarded for staying inside, for becoming a recluse.”20 Accordingly, she has sought to complement her writing with activities that require engagement with the world – above all, teaching.

In the same way Naylor’s women protagonists experience the hardship of life on the white land, like other black female companions. But, instead of brooding over their suffering, they try to reform their lives, by forming a community for themselves. Naylor herself asserted with Morrison, “My emotional energy was spent in creating a woman’s world, telling her side of it, because I knew it had not been done enough in literature.”21 This firm determination in her makes her represent her female characters as human beings in search of identity, and developing a kinship among themselves and caring for one another, and providing strength to each other.

As a novelist, Naylor was influenced by the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Her encounter with Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in her BA course helped her expand and establish her oeuvre as the African American women novelist of 1980s. Her works include *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama*

In fact Naylor expressed her humiliation when she was called a "nigger" by a classmate in her third-grade. In her essay "The Meaning of the Word" published in the New York Times in 1986, she expresses her hope for a racially equal society, wherein every day is given a chance to live with self-respect and human dignity. She remarks, "If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one was naïve enough to believe it would disappear from white mind."22 This idea pervades in her novels, where innocent women strive to define themselves in a racially and sexually polarized society.

While defining, describing and identifying their place and in their quest to create a space for them in the white/male-dominated society, they extend their support to other women. They create a female community where their problems and sufferings are identified, shared and alleviated to some extent through mutual support. Understanding the southern life in many ways, Naylor feels obligated to capture this essence in all of her works, which defines the African American experience. Barbara Christian, insisting on these female-female relationships, ascertains:

Partly because of matricentric orientation of African peoples from which they were descended, partly because of the nature of American slavery, Afro-American women had had to bond with each other in order to
survive. Afro-American as a race could not have survived without the “female values” of community sharing and nurturing.\textsuperscript{23}

Naylor features themes of ancestry, generational conflict, economic exploitation, and lost dreams. In particular, Naylor celebrates the power of love as a force which heals heart and soul as well as body, bringing peace and wholeness. Her characters share their wealth: some through doctoring, others through psychic healing, still others through inspirational documents that they have left behind, and finally some through providing a haven for the needy. Naylor uses holistic methods, archetypal practices, and even voodoo, linking themselves to atavistic practices of Africa. The best way into her fictional world, of course, is through attentive perusal of the works.

Gloria Naylor's elaborately detailed, precisely drawn fictional worlds represent the complex social worlds of late twentieth-century African American. Always conscious of class and gender distinctions, as well as racial difference and sexual preference, Naylor crafts nuanced and varied representations of black life. All reflect a particular concern with black female character and with the problem of preserving a distinctive cultural heritage during a period of social and cultural assimilation. Larded with literary allusions to both classical Western texts and African American fiction, Naylor’s novels deliberately call attention to themselves as literary artifacts. They have enjoyed critical and commercial success.

Naylor maps a fictional geography that encompasses Brewster Place, an inner-city neighbourhood that is home to those with nowhere else to go; Linden Hills, a
suburb to which successful blacks aspire; and Willow Springs, a mythical island off
the coast of South Carolina and Georgia that constitutes an ancestral home.
Geographically disparate, these sites are connected through the genealogies of the
characters that inhabit them. With each novel, the dimension of Naylor's project
becomes clearer.

In her remarkable first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor tells her
story through the eventually interlocking lives of seven women, old and young, who
have come there in refuge, despair or defiance. Their lives reflect in depth the
experience of many black women alive in America today, from the old woman tossed
out as a teenager by her self-righteous Southern father when she bore an illegitimate
child, to the young woman from a rich family fascinated by her African roots and
trying to persuade her sisters to fight a slum landlord. It is when two lesbians move in
that all the fears and prejudices of Brewster Place rise to a terrible climax, one that
leaves the reader shattered.

Ostensibly set in a northern urban centre that tests the fortitude and resilience
of the title characters, it is apparent that for several of the women, southern roots and
southern experience inform their powers of survival. Naylor is concerned with the
distance between their dreams and realities, problems and solution; these women are
of different ages, come from different backgrounds, react differently to their blackness
and to men, and have different notions of personal accomplishment, but all are
burdened by black and female.
However, the major characters Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Lucielia Louise, and Ben all hail from Tennessee; and Theresa is from Georgia. Like Naylor’s parents, these characters have come north in search of a more fulfilling life; unlike the Naylors, however, many of these characters find their desire, if not thwarted, then indeed deferred. Hence these characters are not puppets but exist and function as well-rounded personalities.

*Linden Hills* is set in the same northern city as in *The Women of Brewster Place*, but there is still the slight southern “intrusion” on the narrative space. Naylor abandons the gritty realism of her first novel for an allegorical commentary on the fallacies of upward mobility and material success. Linden Hills’ existence defines the founding residents’ response to southern memories of segregation and subjugation: the upscale black neighborhood was established in utter defiance to racism and white authority. On the other hand, the southern home is presented as the grounding identity for the black psyche, that place which speaks truth and disdains superficiality.

When Laurel Dumont, corporate executive, returns to Georgia after an elapsed period of time to visit Roberta Johnson, the grandmother who practically raised her, and behaves like stranger in the old woman’s house, Roberta snidely remarks, “Miss, my cups and glasses are where they been for the last thirty yearn. If anything’s changed, it ain’t them” (230).

In their assertion for a “home,” a place where they could be themselves, black women experience humiliation and sexual exploitation by their own men and in some
cases, lose their own lives. The black bourgeoisie of *Linden Hills* community imitates white patriarchs in their treatment of poor blacks which results in their destruction in the hands of desperate women. The black southern sensibility figures significantly, then, in the general atmosphere of Linden Hills.

The third novel, *Mama Day*, is set primarily in the south. It strives not only to re-establish the primacy of Southern place in African American identity, but also to position African cosmology as a legitimate means of viewing the world. The very title of the novel establishes the centrality of African conjuring ritual. Miranda (Mama) Day, as resident practitioner of the occult, reminds other characters of the importance of fidelity to one’s cultural, both regional and ethnic, foundation. Though Cocoa, Mama Day’s great niece, has moved to New York, her new life must never eclipse what is considered her more authentic identity.

*Bailey Café* is the most unique of Naylor’s novels, because it depends most heavily on the reader’s imaginative powers. Instead of the setting being fixed, it is virtual moving from city to city as the narrative dictates. This flexibility accommodates Naylor’s signature transcendence. And there is still the southern or northern paradigm at work. The novel explores female sexuality, female sexual identity, and male sexual identity: “The core of the work is indeed the way in which the word ‘whore’ has been used against women or to manipulate female sexual identity,” says Naylor. She also intends to employ the blues and jazz into the novel’s structure. The characters tell their own stories and sing their own songs which empower them to generate the hope for necessary living.
Naylor’s fifth novel, *The Men of Brewster Place*, also applies this southern foundation. In a work that focuses on black manhood, it is important for Naylor to address the origins of black male oppression, and she does so by resurrecting the voice of Ben (a southern black male who died in *The Women of Brewster Place*) to narrate. Ben reminds the reader not only of his own personal oppression in Tennessee by white male authority, but also of the history of black male oppression, when he relates the childhood plight of his grandfather and the man’s ensuing bitterness throughout life. This southern history, then, impacts the lives, of course only indirectly, of the other men in the novel. The black man’s blues is the pulse of *The Men on Brewster Place*, and the novel’s last line offers a possible prediction of Naylor’s future direction: “the music plays on ... and on ...” (173).

Naylor’s fictional memoir *1996* (2005) narrates the story of a secret vigilance posed against her by an official of the US Government and her disturbed peace and serenity by his spying. She challenges the government for its use of secret observation. With the exception of her memoir, in all these novels, Naylor separates her characters from the main society into an isolated place where they could live a life of their own, untouched by the white shadows. And this enables her to concentrate more on the problem of black people, their needs and agonies, by creating a sense of space for them on the white land.

Brewster Place, Linden Hills, Willow Springs, Bailey Café are imaginary places created by her in her novels which cannot be found on the geographical map.
Naylor herself explained her way of isolating the black community in an interview with Angels Carabi:

... family and class community is my communal history as a black American. Our survival today has depended on our nurturing each other, finding resources within ourselves... so people grew up within a community that birthed you and laid you away when you died. Community is what I know and what I feel most comfortable with... I learned to look inward, to explore the problem “we” have and discover what the realities are ... I think this is going to be my modus operandi until I die!24

The deep-rooted awareness of generations of suppression gives rise to an attempt on the part of the African American women to find a way out of the tough situation. The excruciating pain and suffering undergone by these women is touchingly portrayed by Gloria Naylor who felt that the world ought to know about what was happening. Even if everyone knew about it, she wanted them to do something about it – to find a solution to the problem, to discover a better way of life. A better way of life is to withstand pain and suffering above everyday existence by helping each other. Thus a close bonding elevates the women to greater heights of glory. They struggle hard to rise up beyond everything to the most painful experiences in the world; there arises the fact that human nature, especially of these women, can be shaken by the tornados of life but cannot be completely destroyed. Hope prevails at every end.
Thus, Naylor’s works reinforce the importance of connections to an African model of female leadership, both directly and indirectly. Naylor makes this point in a unique fashion, but it is nevertheless an iteration of a theme Carolyn Cooper finds increasingly common in works by black women globally:

In all of these feminist fictions of the African Diaspora the central characters are challenged, however unwillingly, to re-appropriate the ‘discredited knowledge’ of their collective history. The need of these women to remember their ‘ancient properties’ forces them, with varying degrees of success, to confront the contradiction of acculturation in societies where ‘the press toward upward social mobility’ represses Afro-centric cultural norms.25

Naylor in particular values independence for women rather than their being controlled by men. She privileges women’s connections to other women and establishes a model of family continuity in distinct opposition to the broken African American families found in many other novels. In this position of maternity, two sides of womanhood – the wise, beneficent matriarch and the angry, jealous sexual female – are shown to be inextricably connected. One side acts for the other.

Many critics have compared Naylor’s work to that of other African American female writers, including Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Critics have viewed Naylor’s work as a part of a female African American writing movement of the 1980s. Gloria Naylor has achieved a secure and comfortable place as a writer by demonstrating the ability to bring to life a segment of the population which has often been ignored in literature. Her study focuses on the importance of female friendship in
discovering one's own identity in the male dominated, sexist and racist society, and appeals to the readers to pay attention to these poor and helpless black women.

The dissertation focuses on the following three novels:


References


