CHAPTER—6

BAILEY’S CAFÉ

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.¹

Naylor’s fourth novel, Bailey’s Café, (1992) is a collection of deeply moving personal stories from (mainly) women deeply scarred by life. In this novel, Naylor relates the stories of people who are nearly destroyed by their pasts, yet getting some glimmer of hope in Eve’s boarding house, arrived at via Bailey’s Café. Montgomery identifies that —

(i)n what is part of her ongoing search for an authorial voice with which to tell—or, rather, retell – the experiences of women of color, Naylor chooses to locate her fourth novel within a specifically cultured and gendered context where voice and all of its associations are directed toward subverting the myriad forms of authority patriarchy legitimizes and constructing a new world order among partially dispossessed women world-wide.²

The novel is comprised of a series of loosely connected stories — each one from a different woman’s (and a man’s) point of view.
Naylor in this novel features two sites: the café, still known by the name of its long-gone former owner; and Eve’s boarding house, refuge for the afflicted of both genders but primarily for women who have been sexually abused or are drug-dependent or victims of their own beauty. The unusual location of the café, which is situated “between the edge of the world and infinite possibility...”^3 (76), points to its symbolic significance. Although greasy and unattractive, it is open twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. A refuge for the wretched of the earth, the café, like the street on which it is located, is a “way station” (221) where all outcasts end up. For those seeking solace, Bailey’s Café and/or Eve’s place, is their goal. One of the seekers learns that “you can find Bailey’s Café in any town” (112), and the proprietor himself observes,

Even though this planet is round, there are just too many spots where you can find yourself hanging on to the edge...and unless there’s some space, some place, to take a breather for a while, the edge of the world – frightening as it is – could be the end of the world.... (28)

This café becomes the arena where individuals act out their lives by telling their personal stories, by singing their miseries and transient joys.

The proprietor of the café, unlike his fictional predecessors residing at the decaying Brewster, is no mere shadow of a man. He is endowed with a certain psychological depth and complexity of character, despite the ambiguities associated with his assumed name. ‘Bailey’ is not his real name, but when he and his wife, Nadine took over the run-down café called ‘Bailey’s’, he was stuck with this name by his customers. It was 1948 and Bailey, a Negro World War II veteran and avid fan of baseball, especially the Negro pro league, records the history of the 1940s, focusing on the oppressed ‘minorities’ at that time and before. The concern about skin color prevails in almost all the stories of the book. When Bailey tells us about his parents,
lower-class blacks, working with poor whites for upper-class blacks, he hints at the intricate relation between race and class. His parents used to work for the rich Van Morrisons who were, as Bailey states, “as colored as we were” (4), but had the same kind of attitude towards the poor blacks as wealthy white people had. Bailey sums it up in his narration when he states – “So I think I had it figured out pretty good for a five-year-old: there were rich white people, poor white people, rich colored people – and us.” (5) Naylor was confronted with issues of class, more than race and gender, as the most important factor dislocating any attempt at constructing the African American identity and this is well projected in Bailey’s narrative. Bailey also scoffs at the hypocrisy of integration, in sports for example: in a long passage about baseball, he engages in a criticism of the blacks as well as the whites. Ironically, he shows the politics behind the competition of black teams against white teams, makes fun of the way people call a black player ‘The Black Honus Wagner’ (after the name of a white champion) whereas nobody would ever think of calling a white player ‘the White Pop Llyod’. Apart from his own story, Bailey is the one who narrates the stories and sets the stage for the other characters to reveal their lives.

Once Bailey sets the tune of the novel by narrating his past life, one by one we hear from the café regulars: there is Sadie, whose addiction to alcohol is second only to her mania for cleanliness; the oddly maternal Eve, whose bordello accepts only fresh flowers as legal tender; Sweet Esther, who hides from light to obscure what used to happen to her in the dark cellar; Mary (Peaches), so beautiful that her life had only one public meaning until she scarred her face; Jesse Bell, who moves from the slums to the hill top with disastrous results; ‘Miss Maple’ (Stanley), rich well-educated son of a wealthy Negro family – an American super achiever, rejected and humiliated because he is black – who becomes the bouncer for Eve’s home; and finally Mariam,
the Ethiopian child, suffering genital mutilation and virgin pregnancy. Battered, molested, shunned, and exploited, these women wend their way to Bailey’s Café and ultimately to Eve’s.

Though the main narrator (Bailey) states that the characters “all boil down to one type…” (32), the writer takes pain to give each of them a different personality and background. Esther indulged in luxury, whereas Sadie was born in the gutters; Eve’s ‘Godfather’ was a stern preacher, whereas Jesse Bell was from a family of longshoremen. They come from all regions, Chicago, New York, Kansas City, and even Ethiopia; they have often roamed all over the country. The narrative string is pulled by Bailey, who is also a participant in the action. Chavanelle says that “(t)he characters come and go, as if in an aimless procession, as if the unwanted of American society, of humanity, were condemned to be wanderers, just like the first blues singers.” Their stories are fragments of loneliness. What connects them is their physical and psychological meanderings which end or may be start, in Bailey’s Café or in Eve’s ‘boarding house’. Naylor’s narration draws on the ordinary language of folks, establishing intimacy with the reader-listener. Her stories gush from the mouths of common people, those whose voices have sometimes been muffled. The main narrator’s speech is standard; he uses popular sayings like “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” (100), or “One man’s weed is another man’s flower” (115), while Jesse Bell has the pithy language of a working-class New Yorker, spiced with coarse phrases or bold comments. On the other hand, Miss Maple’s discourse reveals the sharpness of the well-read, acquainted with prison slang and business jargon; the historical explanation of his bizarre name Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver testifies to his erudition and wit. In this loosely structured novel – unlike a collection of short stories linked by themes, setting and narrator, like The Women Of Brewster
Place – each story follows the same movement, except for “Mary (Take Two)” which alternates scenes in Ethiopia and in the café. In the movement Naylor employs throughout, the narrator introduces the characters in a conversational tone. From the prelude, the stories are told almost chronologically, either by the observer or by the protagonist himself or herself in the first person. But it is Bailey whose veiled comments offer insight into the narration: “Anything really worth hearing in this greasy spoon happens under the surface. You need to know that if you plan to stick around here and listen while we play it all out.” (35) Unfortunately, the other men who people the novel’s fictional landscape do not fare as well as Bailey does. They are largely responsible for perpetuating the oppression that the women face. What the narrative moves toward is the creation of a reality deeply rooted in the black history that more closely reflects the particular experiences of marginalized women across the globe. The stories of the different women are presented in the form of oral narratives which in a way imply, in the larger structure, the combination of the oral and the written narratives or the point of transition from the former to the later as one notices in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*.

The themes of loneliness, suffering, and the lack of love and bonding abound in the stories of all the alienated individuals in the novel. Naylor projects an urban society which negates the power of love and bonding as a force that heals the trauma of alienation. The narrator sets the background and starts off with the story of one such individual called Sadie, a regular at the café. She has all throughout her life tried to earn love by being the perfect fulfiller of anyone’s needs by her order, cleanliness, and elegance. She is the unwanted child of a prostitute and has never got any love from her mother as much as she has tried. The readers’ eye and ear cannot fail to notice the similar patterns in language used by Naylor which insist on Sadie’s life of
drudgery and bondage: “Her four-year-old, five-year-old, six-year-old world was really very simple…” followed by the next sentence, “Her seven-year-old, eight-year-old, nine-year-old world was when it started to get confusing” (42), and further down, “A ten-year-old, eleven-year-old, twelve-year-old of pressing threadbare petticoats….of darning….of not polishing….A ten-year-old, eleven-year-old, twelve-year-old world of slicing….of spooning corn gruel….” (43) These repetitions counterpoise the emphasis on Sadie’s dreams: “Dreams of love. Dreams that spoke louder than the whispering….” (44), “Dreams that drowned….” (46)

A counterpoint to the theme of loneliness and suffering in Saddie’s case is provided by the metaphor of flowers, as compensations for love. Sadie’s dream of a garden and geraniums brings her solace in a dismal environment, after her most overpowering wish, that of her mother pinning an orchid on her collar, has fallen through. Ultimately when she got married to a man thirty years her senior, her life did not improve much, apart from the fact that she had a permanent place to stay in, which meant the most to her. Her urge to own her husband’s shack after his death takes her again to a life of prostitution and as much as she tries, she is not able to keep her ‘home’. The times of the trains that punctuate Sadie’s life are sufficient to convey the humdrum of her life; the numerous abortions of Sadie are briefly summed up: “A couple of folded towels and a little peroxide on a coat hanger.” (41) Human degradation is portrayed in little dabs like the shaking of her hands, the coughing, the silence about a burnt hand, the way Sadie adds up every dime she finds in the gutter; hunger is mentioned soberly, too: “…under the shelves of the cupboard, a soda cracker softening in her mouth before she dared chew it….” (43) The stark realism comes out in the description of Sadie’s daily struggle for a few cents and fight against the soot of the trains and her trying to seek ultimate refuge in alcohol. The fall from
hope to vice is expressed through the metaphor of the stars, which initially were the symbols of Sadie’s dreams, but which eventually become connected with the five stars on the bottles of wine which sustain her when nobody or nothing is left. After all she had gone through, being homeless; she sticks to alcohol, sells her body in order to get her wine, because her wine brought her the dream of a house that she had already lost. Most of the time she remains silent, confirming that self-expression has always been alien to her. Even in the twenty-five years Sadie spent with her husband, she uttered no more than a few sentences. This failure of communication may be traced back to the enforced silence during the Middle Passage and the days of plantation slavery. Naylor carries forward the idea of this difficulty in communication faced by most of the women in this book, such as, Bailey’s wife Nadine, who is described by her husband as a “stone-faced girl” (17) who “…wasn’t much of a talker.” (16) Sadie, also an alienated individual, unlike most of the other characters, finds it difficult to voice forth her own story and thus, we find Bailey narrating it for her. The narrator also views her as a loner, always sitting at the single table at the far wall of the café. But for such a woman also, a ray of hope glimmers in the form of Iceman Jones, who knowing very well that she is “a twenty-five-cent whore” (40) urges to marry her. It is in his company, that the narrator as well as the café-goers hears her laughing for the first time. But surprisingly she rejects the offer of Iceman Jones and we are left to wonder whether Sadie refuses the prospect of a stable life for fear of losing her independence, or if she is unable to trust the man. She might feel unable to give him anything other than despair; or might long to give him dreams, dreams that a married life would not smash. The absence of a closure in Sadie’s story, however, does not lead to any ambiguity when we analyze Naylor’s women who even when are partly defeated, are never totally crushed. Sadie – an industrious girl who significantly lives
beyond the railroad tracks, relentlessly removes the dust off the windows and the flowers, avoids switching on the radio and turning the pages of a book in order to not disturb her husband, refuses public welfare, the food offered by an employer and, like a “perfect little lady” (43), insists on returning the change to her customers even when she charges below the price – is not ready to take the “charity” (75) from Iceman. Commenting on the ending of Sadie’s story, Naylor in an interview to Charles H. Rowell, says that the genealogy of Bailey’s Café

... started with the image which turned out to be Sadie and the Iceman who were in a situation that was hopeless. In a sense, he loved her, but she had grown to believe in a dream. She could no longer believe in reality...I would have loved for her to look into the Iceman’s eyes and see salvation. That she could get off the streets. That she had someone who wasn’t going to beat her, who understood her history, who would cherish her. I would give anything for an ending like that. But my books are character driven, and that was not going to be the ending. You know, so that’s one example of my respecting what happens with my character.5

So, in keeping with a realistic situation, Sadie, refuses to marry Iceman Jones. Sadie, born by accident, is hated by her mother; her craving for affection is never satisfied and when she ultimately rejects Iceman, we realize that it might be because her unrepaid boundless love for her mother and devotion to her husband has finally drained her heart.

Women like Sadie, who could not find refuge anywhere, wend their way to Bailey’s Café and ultimately to Eve’s. Whereas Bailey’s can provide an end to their sufferings through its back porch offering painless exits and painful possibilities, Eve’s can provide a reason to go on living, a sanctuary, and a place for physical and psychological healing. Bailey’s is the first stop: a place for orientation, for getting one’s bearings; Eve’s is for many the destination itself. As the proprietor of Bailey’s states: “A woman is either ready for Eve’s or she’s not. And if she’s ready, she’ll ask where to find it on her own.” (80) In the proprietor’s view, Eve herself is picky about
her sojourners, “I do know that charity has nothing to do with it. Eve is not a charitable person.” (80) Out of sheer persistence, she has risen to full humanity and now she judges people on what they have been through. The mythic element of the text is most apparent in the character of Eve. She is described as a well-dressed woman with dirt under her nails: “delta dust” (82) – the dirt of thousand years. Sexual escapades with the childish prankster Billy Boy, result in her ostracism from her small Louisiana delta home. It is in her highly symbolic trek from Pilottown to Arabi to Bailey’s Café that Eve, who emerges as a strong yet sensitive woman with an acute business sense and a love for well-kept gardens, manages somehow to escape the tragic fate toward which she seems destined. Godfather, the stern, dictatorial preacher who rears her up, is a figure of male authority and is ubiquitous in his influence within the delta community. Perhaps the most definite change in Eve’s evolving consciousness occurs when she comes to recognize his church as a social construct reflecting the hierarchies of a society which relegates women to the undesirable position of subservient ‘other’: “To be thrown out his church was to be thrown out of the world.” (85) Eve’s leave-taking occurs as Godfather strips her of her clothes and purges her of the food he has provided. Naked and hungry, she is forced to provide for herself amidst dire economic circumstances. Eve successfully recreates herself, however, in preparation for her role among a community of outcast women. That she has no clear cut parental ties suggests that she is at once natural and supernatural – more than a mere woman – and her narrative is replete with references to organic matter, especially the rich delta soil. Godfather claims to have found her “in a patch of ragweed, so new I was still tied to the birth sac....” (83) As she grows into womanhood, her burgeoning sexuality, given fullest expression during her earth-
stomping with Billy Boy, rekindles her awareness of a vital oneness with the rich earth.

Eve, whose name means ‘mother of all living’ is essentially self-generated. Her narrative reveals a freedom from imposed gender-specific labels: “I had no choice but to walk into New Orleans neither male nor female – mud”, she informs the reader. “But I could right then and there choose what I was going to be when I walked back out.” (91) With her obviously symbolic name, Eve creates a world where she not only shapes and assists the growth of other female identities, but also like Miranda (in Mama Day), she presides in an almost goddess-like fashion. Eve’s boarding house is the new order of dominant female sensibility. Headed by Eve, it represents almost an alternative to the unquestioned acceptance of an ideal patriarchal family. A similar idea was highlighted by Naylor when she presented the federation among the women of Brewster Place headed by Mattie Michael. Like Mattie, Naylor uses Eve’s relationship with the other women in the boarding house to substantiate her argument of strength through sharing. Despite the many ambiguities surrounding Eve’s character, her role in the narrative action is to be considered in terms of her effect on her female wards and it is through this character in the novel that Naylor highlights the thematic importance of communal harmony among all women regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or even sexual preference.

Echoed throughout the stories the women relate is female subjection to male desire. Such is the case with Sweet Esther, whose pervasive hatred for men stems from the commodification of black women within the context of slavery. Esther suffers exploitation as her elder brother barters her to an older, propertied farmer in exchange for higher sharecropping wages. Passively, Esther surrenders to the farmer’s whims while he chooses to be intimate with her only in the cellar of his home. The
pink and lace-trimmed bed where she sleeps alone reveals her confinement to a socially prescribed gender role. Esther, amidst such a situation, dreams of true love and “another kind of touch” (98), and listens to radio songs which “speak of kisses” (98) Her monologues point to a profound self-hatred in a world that evolves no terms for her existence:

I like the white roses because they show up in the dark.
I don’t.
Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable. (95)

The chapter on Sweet Esther, poetical in its lay out, with a chorus and stanzas, illustrates how difficult it is for certain characters to speak. Esther has been walled in muteness for twelve years; a line in italics, compulsive and soothing at the same time, recurs like a whisper from Eve, like a lament, too: “*We won’t speak about this, Esther.*” (95) After sometime, Esther realized that she was a mere object sold by her brother to his rich boss so that he could derive material benefits. The tone of the chapter “Sweet Esther” is sober, almost barren, yet lyrical, with short independent clauses or elliptical sentences, and repetitions which sound like cries of despair or powerless anger: “My brother knew. My brother knew.” (99) Even after arriving at Eve’s, she cannot be happy without love and flowers – she accepts only the men who bring her white Christmas roses and call her “little sister”. (99) By demanding white roses from her male callers at Eve’s, who are allowed to visit her only in a dark, secluded basement, Esther, relieves her painful past. It is Eve, “a survivor *extraordinaire*” who helps Esther to regain herself. So, Esther is able to add her solitary voice to those of the other women whose stories are included in “The Jam”, and therefore, breaks the troubling discursive silence surrounding her tragic life.
*Bailey's Cafe* explores female sexuality and female (as well as male) sexual identity to a great extent. One such woman who is tormented to the core for identifying her sexuality is Mary (Peaches) who comes and takes refuge at Eve's. Being extraordinarily beautiful right from her childhood, she was protected by her father who had built a wall around the house to avoid any men looking at his daughter. But Mary's bodily drives created as a result of the perverse attitude of men, even her father's friends, are hard to control. She cannot stand the gaze of men who regard her as a sexual object, nor can she stand the eyes of jealous women. Her self-hate has grown out of mirrors which send her back an image of herself that she cannot acknowledge. Mary's psychological problems are mainly the consequences of her father's and later her lover's possessiveness, which drove the former to build a wall around the house, to welcome the boys with a gun or to beat her up, and the latter to lock her in. She feels disgusted by the attitude of men who see in her only a whore, an image that she ends up interiorizing. Thus, Mary disfigures her beautiful face in an effort to circumvent the attraction men hold for her and her inability to resist them. Rather than continue to be just another pretty, and therefore exploited, face, Mary uses a can opener to rip open her cheek and ultimately, lands up at Eve's. There, she wants “(m)ore perfect and more perfect daffodils” (114) from her male visitors and as time passes, she comes closer to healing and to love. Ultimately, when Mary's father arrives at Eve's to take back his daughter; Eve does not even let them meet, because she knows that his daughter has changed beyond his recognition. What instead Eve does is to assure the man of her power to heal: “Leave your daughter here...and I'll return her to you whole.” (113) The love of Mary's father for his daughter is too exclusive and the “wetness of men's eyes” (105) repels her; Mary's self-mutilation proves that a woman needs to be loved for what she is inwardly.
Eve turns out to be a redemptive figure for the women who live at her place. Another recovered person in the long list is Jesse Bell, who loses everything including her husband, son, and self-respect and turns to heroin for solace. She is taken from the Women’s Detention Center by Eve, subjected to Eve’s own treatment, and restored to health. Jesse Bell had turned to heroin and female lovers when her marriage into the wealthy Sugar Hill King Family ends in a bitter divorce. It is a distant uncle of her husband, Uncle Eli, who does not like her due to her low family and financial status, and causes the divorce. Class difference play a major role in Jesse’s story which highlights the reason of her not being accepted as an equal in her married life. Uncle Eli not only negates her identity as ‘Mrs. King’, but also insults her family because of their being lower in class and status. This uncle had also gradually distanced her husband and son from her, and Jesse’s disappointment with her son may be well understood from her words: “It might as well have been a dead woman ranting at him. I looked into that boy’s eyes and saw my words were lost, lost.” (128) The same words reappear, after the death of her mother, as Jesse realizes that her husband has moved far off away from her: “I looked into that man’s eye and saw….And yes, it might as well have been a dead woman ranting at him. My words were lost, lost.” (130) Jesse’s words bring to mind the fading personality of the Nedeed women in their family. The newspaper misrepresents Jesse in its sensationalized account of her divorce. Her lament that she “didn’t have no friends putting out the Herald Tribune” (118) suggests the exclusion of the experiences of black women from the written word and the printed text. Yet in the retelling of her story, Jesse narrates her own life story in such a manner as to subvert the voice of Bailey, who sets up her narrative. According to Jesse, Eve’s role in Jesse’s recovery is a unique one. Eve relies upon magic or the power of conjure in curing Jesse’s addiction to heroin by engineering a
series of well-crafted illusions which allow Jesse to have unlimited access to the
enslaving drug. Eve’s effect on her female wards is highlighted when the omniscient
narrator points out that Jesse is cured in less than a month. Even though different in
approach, Eve’s treatment of Jesse reminds the readers of Mattie’s caring for Ciel and
Mama Day’s healing Cocoa and saving her life. Eve also protects Jesse from Sister
Carrie’s (another customer of the Café) narrow and legalistic perspective in
condemning her by stressing the essential oneness between the Jews and Gentiles and
encouraging a non-judgmental stance toward issues of morality set forth in divine
law. Naylor thus, stresses on the importance of global communal harmony among all
women regardless of divisions in class and social status.

Among all the stories narrated in this novel, the one which sparkles with wit and
scathing irony the most is the chapter on ‘Miss Maple’ (Stanley). Miss Maple’s story
tackles the subject of racial segregation most directly and mocks at everybody, black,
white or Indian. He is a brilliant young man, rejected and humiliated everywhere
because he is a black even though he belongs to a very rich family – rich, financially
as well as culturally and as he states “…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…” (171) He also dwells,
more seriously, on the mixed identities of American people and the absurdity of
making distinctions. His description of his grandfather’s encounter and life with his
Yuma wife is exhilarating even if it shows the harsh reality of the time for Indians and
blacks, who did not enjoy the same basic rights as whites – Indians could get
education but no land, blacks could get land but no education. Miss Maple assaults
American history pungently: “…it would take him another war, another thirteen
years, and two more children to become a paper American.” (169) Moreover, he
mocks at the uneducated prejudiced whites who know nothing about blacks, about Indians, about history; he ridicules them for their narrow-mindedness – “progress had given them no vocabulary to reconcile the land and us.” (172) With extreme reality, he demonstrates how little chance he has of being hired, and his search for a job is an occasion for wisecracks and sarcasm. Cathartically, laughter helps him to bear his professional setbacks and ultimately, he finds refuge at Eve’s place who hires him as a bouncer and gives him a new name.

Finally, in Naylor’s gallery of alienated individuals appears Mariam, a pregnant fourteen-year-old Jew from Ethiopia, a castrated female who claims, “No man has ever touched me.” (143) Naylor’s story takes us back to the cultural roots of male domination, Ethiopia, where the Torah and the Bible have been distorted to suit men. The practice of female genital mutilation exists in many societies where unequal gender relations dictate the conditions under which women have to live:

Commonly cited reasons for the preservation of the practice include: cleanliness, aesthetics, prevention of stillbirths, promotion of social and political cohesion, prevention of promiscuity, improvement of male sexual pleasure, increased matrimonial opportunities, good health, fertility and for preservation of virginity.7

Mutilated, pregnant, and rejected by her people, Mariam “miraculously wandered into the neighborhood of Bailey’s Café to be salvaged and nurtured by an African woman (i.e. Eve).”8 Naylor uses Bailey’s voice in establishing the time, place, mood, and character for each woman’s story, except that of Mariam whose touching account recreates a vital sisterhood among women of colour across the globe who often find themselves at odds with notions of female sexuality prescribed by patriarchy. Thus, in retelling Mariam’s tale, Eve and Bailey’s otherwise reticent wife Nadine, form a duet, for the male voice is severely limited in its ability to decode the very private experiences the women relate. Karla Holloway, in her discussion on the responsive
strategy of black women's narratives, refers to the technique as "a collective
'speaking out' by all the voices gathered within the text, authorial, narrative, and even
the implicated reader". In this climatic episode, a sort of female unity is achieved in
narration because Bailey can offer empathy but not immediacy between Mariam, the
speaking subject, and the reader.

Prefigured in *The Women of Brewster Place* by Mattie Michael's dream of the
women's communal efforts to dismantle the restrictive brick wall, the utopian world
that emerges in *Bailey's Cafe* is one constructed around Mariam, who gives birth to
the future, figured by young George. Mariam, the outcast mother, is a bridge between
the past and future in terms similar to what Daryl Dance sets forth: "She is
unquestionably a Madonna", Dance writes regarding the African American mother,
"both in the context of being a savior and in terms of giving birth and sustenance to
positive growth and advancement among her people." With the birth of the child,
there is harmony between opposing rituals and traditions drawn from a multi-cultural
community. Gabriel, a Russian Jew, presides at the naming ceremony of Mariam's
son, whose role in the text is that of a guide or foreteller, for it is he who offers
Mariam directions to Bailey's Café. George's birth brings forth a communal
celebration in Bailey's Café, where everyone who lived on that street had gathered in.

Bailey's narration of the scene at the café immediately after the child's birth is very
suggestive:

Nadine hugged me so tight she almost lifted me onto my toes. Then Gabe
grabbed me, whirled me around, and we started to dance....People were up on
tables and cheering. Someone was banging on the counter with my spatula.
Someone tore open a sack of rice and was throwing it into the air. I didn't give
a damn. Jesse had her skirt raised in the throes of a mean flamenco. And,
with wonder of wonders, Esther smiled. (225)
It is Mary (Peaches) who, at first, intones the gospel song inscribing the identities of Mariam and George:

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. (225)

As the other members of the group join in with the singing of this popular Christmas carol, a cultural code among an international community of outcasts is established. Their voices unite together to express the hope for a global community:

Peace on earth, Mary rocked the cradle.  
Mary rocked the cradle and Mary rocked the cradle.  
Peace on earth, Mary rocked the cradle.  
Tell him – was with the child of God. (226)

The chant becomes collective which unites the people, and a gleam of hope is brought about by the birth of the baby. For the first time, with this communal celebration of the birth of Mariam’s son, not only is there oneness among a culturally diverse group whose traditions and customs span the globe, but the voices of women also unify in the ritualization of George’s arrival. George’s long-awaited birth could signal, hopefully, new beginnings for the pluralistic group present.

In this climatic scene, after creating an image of global harmony, Naylor denies the reader the privilege of knowing the fate of the young mother and son. Bailey is unable to offer a satisfactory ending to the moving stories that unfold. Instead, he merely invites the reader to empathize with the women whose tragic tales comprise the written text: “If this was like that sappy violin music on Make-Believe Ballroom, we could wrap it all up with a lot of happy endings to leave you feeling real good that you took the time to listen”, Bailey informs us in “The Wrap”. “But I don’t believe that life is supposed to make you feel good, or to make you feel miserable either. Life is
just supposed to make you feel.” (219) The stories which comprise the novel echo and re-echo each other, but resist closure.

The image given in Bailey’s Café is that of a humanity whose dreams crumble to pieces under the blows of fate. We realize that most aspirations are thwarted because of social and economic circumstances; and escape and solitude will solve nothing for those who live on the fringes of the society. However, there is a slight hope for survival which empowers the marginal beings at the end of the novel as they connect in a network of universal community. Commenting on Naylor’s novels, Philip Page says that the progress toward the establishment of community “occurs only in nonworldly, magical settings, never in realistic ones.” Given the social and economic conditions of the time in which Naylor had started writing, focusing on a unified community was no longer possible. Instead, she has created a space in which her characters can reconnect personal and interpersonal threads through the imagination, and thus enables the projection of alternative realities in which community is possible. The community portrayed in Naylor’s novels exists more in each member’s mind, as the totality of possible voices, thoughts, and dreams of all the community members.
NOTES

   *[All the quotations from *Bailey’s Café* in this chapter have the same publication details.]*
The Boy died in my alley
without my Having Known.
Policeman said, next morning,
‘Apparently died Alone.’

‘You heard a shot?’ Policeman said.
Shots I hear and Shots I hear.
I never see the Dead.

I have known this Boy before, who
ornaments my alley.
I never saw his face at all.
I never saw his futurefall.
But I have known this Boy.

(Gwendolyn Brooks)