CHAPTER - 8

CONCLUSION

This study of Gloria Naylor's narrative space in conjunction with the other narratives representing the community structured by the twentieth century black women novelists accentuate Naylor's achievement as a seminal voice engaged in the politics of community construction in the politics of race. Since the early seventeenth century, the time since when the African American people were fighting the political battle of regaining the lost sense of identity, the community as an entity has been the buffer against any and repeated attempts at disrupting continued existence. The paradox of slavery, reconstruction, and the experience of segregation have been that when the 'other' was comparatively focused and sharply defined in terms of binary oppositions, the construction and sustenance of the sense of the bond of community beyond the individual and the familial was more focused and hence, achievable. The representation of the community in the various categories of oral modes of black expression and the slave narratives establish the urge of the slaves to associate with each other to overcome the sense of loneliness. The slave narratives, among other things, focused on the importance of the warm ties of the extended family and community for survival. This situation continued till the days of the Harlem Renaissance, which may be regarded as a period of diasporic formation when achievement of cultural homogeneity was not sabotaged by disruptive forces within. But this period is not altogether without any problems, as is evident in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance women writers, whose works are marked by a growing sense of class differences. The novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston focus more on issues related to racial and gender discrimination,
but class was slowly becoming one of the most disruptive factors in the formation of a homogenous community. The literature of the period of Depression highlight the hostile environment which was available to black women writers like Ann Petry, Dorothy West, Louise Merriwether, Gwendolyn Brooks, and others. Similar scenarios of the disturbed community on the basis of racial and gender discriminations and the emerging issues of class consciousness are evident in the works of these novelists. The conjunction of the economic forces of the 1920s in America and the ingrained racial prejudices of the larger American cultural space disturbed and gradually turned opaque the vision of the 'other'. Hence, the representation in the fictional space of the setting became more and more problematic. The more or less homogenous sense of the communal that the Harlem Renaissance women writers could work upon was not available to the post 1970 writers when race, gender, and class interpenetrated and dislocated the otherwise stable playing field. Any portrayal of the community demanded grappling with fissures at various levels, and this is evident in the works of Naylor's contemporaries.

The manner in which contemporaries, such as, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and others negotiate the representation of community provides the context in which Naylor's achievement may be postulated. In her first novel, Naylor brings forth a new picture of relation among women, of female friendship, sisterhood, and community. An alternative to the unquestioned patriarchal family structure is offered by the novelist in her representation of the federation among the women in the street, headed by Mattie Michael. Naylor draws her idea of bonding among the different women, who are not even related by blood, from core African notions of 'everyone is family' and 'community othermothers'. At the same time, Naylor emphasizes on the importance of other core African cultures, such as, the naming ceremony of a child as
a means of bonding with the ancestors and members of the community. The first half of the book presents all possible positive strategies for survival, like mothering and mutual supportiveness. It is only in the last part of the book that Naylor presents a complex picture of the slowly disintegrating community that regards the two lesbians as a challenge. The role of the men, throughout the novel, is more towards the destruction of a positive African American family and community. The changing political and economic scenario of Naylor's time may be viewed in the novel through the subtle hints of class differences among the women. All these negative forces act together to break down the communal ties among the women of Brewster Place. Even the breaking down of the wall, which may be regarded as a collective activity, is accomplished only in a dream sequence. What Naylor seems to be highlighting at, in this novel, is the importance of traditional cultural values and communal bonding for the African Americans as a resistance to oppression from different sources.

Naylor's next novel, *Linden Hills*, focuses on a community of soulless people struggling towards a brighter monetary future. In projecting such a community, Naylor frames her novel on Dante's *Inferno*, and this study analyzes Naylor's use of allegory based on the physical and moral topography of Dante's work. Naylor, in this novel, expands the idea of the community as was available to her in the 1980s by focusing more on class differences. The issue of class, which was subtly hinted in *The Women of Brewster Place*, becomes the core idea in *Linden Hills* in highlighting the position of the African American community. Naylor positions much of her critique of the lives of the upwardly mobile African Americans by contrasting with that of the poorer section of the society, who are much more psychologically and culturally healthier. Willie and Lester's journey down Linden Hills offers the readers a chance to view inside the lives of the materialistic African Americans and see the loss of their
identity and humanity. The preoccupation with the idea of owning land, which is a marker of community, is present throughout the novel. This core issue of owning a definite space, which one could call one's own possession, is represented in the works of other African American women novelists, like Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. The community projected in *Linden Hills* is expanded not only across class, but also across time zone as is evident in the parallel narrative of the Nedeeed women. This community, represented in the narrative of the Nedeeed women across generations, includes not only the immediate present but also the ancestors. Willa Nedeeed draws inspiration from the life records of these previous Nedeeed women, already dead, but acting as part of the community of the present, as guiding and comforting factors. Naylor also focuses on the concept of 'eternal mother' as evident in the community of the Nedeeed women. This concept has been dealt with by Naylor in *The Women of Brewster Place* in the figure of Mattie Michael who acts as guardian to the women of Brewster Place. Naylor in creating a community in *Linden Hills*, which is expanded across time, anticipates what she was going to do in her next novel *Mama Day*.

Naylor's *Mama Day* goes back to the sense of the Afro-centric in the representation of folk traditions, conjure, and other core African beliefs. Willow Springs may be regarded as a projection of the survival of traditional cultural values in a more or less homogenous community, which is situated as an island outside the border of the American mainland space. Willow Springs may also be regarded as the representation of a larger imaginary community existing across time and space. The concept of 'eternal mother' and 'community othermother' which Naylor had already dealt with in her earlier novels, are projected in Miranda (Mama) Day who possesses conjuring abilities which she uses to heal her entire community. The community portrayed in
Willow Springs is not an exclusively female one, like the women of Brewster Place or the Nedeed women, but includes the involvement of all the members—females and males—to associate with each other for survival. Naylor also emphasizes generational or historical bonding in Mama Day's relationship with her ancestors. Naylor, once again in this novel, explores the core African belief that "the dead are not remote from the living because everyone is supported by an ancestor's spirit." Mama Day, with her conjuring abilities, acts as a mediating figure of the community—a bridge between the everyday world and the sacred world of her African ancestors. The power of community bonding is also brought forth through different symbols, like the 'Candle Walk', quilting, braiding hair, and so on. But just because Willow Springs is an imaginary community projected as an almost homogenous entity, it does not mean that it does not face any challenges from within it. Mama Day and Ruby's clashes bring to mind the realistic scenario of the 1980s, but ultimately what Naylor seems to have in mind is the importance of traditional beliefs and values to hold together the community from drifting apart.

The next novel, Bailey's Café, explores the themes of loneliness, suffering, and lack of love as evident in the stories of all the characters. Unlike the other three novels of Naylor, the characters in this book seem to have no connections with each other and their stories are also structured as loosely connected ones. But the two main locations in the novel, one being the café; and the other, Eve's boardinghouse, bring the characters together. The café, which is open twenty-four hours a day, acts as a refuge where all the outcasts end their journey to seek the ultimate place of solace—Eve's boardinghouse. Even though a café may be regarded as a temporary meeting place, but Naylor in this novel has projected Bailey's Café as the ultimate place for associations and has also added certain symbolic qualities to the café as is evident
from its situation "between the edge of the world and infinite possibility..." or that of the fact that "you can find Bailey's Café in any town." (112) As in Naylor's previous works, the issue of class differences acting as a major hindrance towards the establishment of a homogenous community is reflected in this book as well. Common in the stories of all the characters in Bailey's Café is the lack of familial and communal ties. The only glimpse of community portrayed towards the end of the novel also seem to be a temporary one, existing more in the minds of the members, rather than in reality. What Naylor seems to be highlighting finally is the fact that escape and solitude will never solve problems for those who live on the fringes of the society.

Naylor's fifth novel, *The Men of Brewster Place*, relates the other side of the stories in Naylor's first book by narrating the tragic, sad, and heroic stories of the men. In this book, the women are still present, but the primary focus is on the men—their problems and complexities, and their relationships to their families and community. The wider society that these men have to fight against does not give them due access to the tokens of manhood—money, power, and respect. What proves a challenge for these men is their coming together and reclaiming what is theirs. Interesting to note in the stories of most of the men is the absence of a positive familial bond in their early years. The urge to establish close connections to each other as a strategy for survival is projected in Abshu's involvement with the community. What is important to note, however, is the absence of any linking figure, like Mattie Michael or Mama Day, to bind the community of men together. The only place for community associations is the setting of Max's barbershop where the men come together from time to time. Billingsley regards the barbershop as one of the important subsystems of the African American community, but this setting also proves to be the place of one of the most
tragic scenes in *The Men of Brewster Place*, which is limited in its role in bringing group solidarity. Ultimately, Naylor seems to suggest that the men need the women as well as mutual supportiveness to create a full-fledged community.

If race and gender had constituted the line of divide in the early decade of the twentieth century, Naylor was confronted with class as arguably the most decisive factor now dislocating any attempt at constructing the African American identity. Incidentally it is not possible for any African American creative imagination to ignore the primacy of community bonding in the construction of any idea of the cultural self. Naylor in her five novels engages the creative imagination and the structural development of her plots in critiquing the impact of the divisions in the community now engaged in negotiating the impact of class. Hence, in almost all her novels, we find the interaction between a variety of individuals who ideologically represent varied strata of division. This division in Naylor's narrative space is also marked by the presence of barriers in many forms and attempts at breaking or bridging the barriers. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, it is the wall, as it is also in *The Men of Brewster Place*; in *Linden Hills* it is the spacing of the houses at different levels with the linking figures of Willie and Lester travelling to and fro across the many levels; in *Mama Day*, the island is naturally separated from the mainland space by the stretch of water which again has a bridge over it across which the main characters move to and fro; and in *Bailey's Café*, the narratives are not bound just within the four walls of the locale—the action and the characters flow in and out establishing linkages across any form of barriers. One would like to repeat that Gloria Naylor probably represents the notion that racial differences or gender divisions are no longer the primary determinants in the social dynamics of the African American community. They have yielded considerable space to the class divisions in the larger capitalist society where
the African Americans have made considerable inroads. Hence, maybe the one projection of the survival of traditional cultural values constituting a more or less homogenous community in the island called Willow Springs, the situating of which as an island outside the border of the American mainland space. Similarly, the setting of The Women of Brewster Place, the dead-end street, where the wall could be pulled down in a dream sequence, becomes also the setting of the dissolution of the street in real time action in the last novel The Men of Brewster Place, as if to indicate that a sense of community in the first novel was tentative and incomplete with the men absent. The preoccupation with the idea of owning property, of wealth, of a definitive space which one could call one's own possession, as evident in the emphasis on location in her novels, represent Gloria Naylor's engagement with the manipulation of metaphors of space in her portrayal of African American community as it negotiated with the dynamics of the larger American capitalist structure. This negotiation determines the structure of representation of the community as is evident from a close reading of her novels.
NOTES

   <www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1264/is_8_30/ai_58361074_32k>
   *[ All quotations from Bailey’s Café in this chapter have the same publication details.]