CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Among the recent group of African American women novelists, Gloria Naylor holds a prominent position in contemporary African American literature. Naylor was born on January 25, 1950 in New York City. Though she grew up in the largest urban centre in America, her roots were in the south as her parents had been sharecroppers in Robinsonville, Mississippi. In 1963, Naylor and her family had moved to Queens, a more middle-class area, which increased her awareness of racism. In the same year, her mother had joined the Jehovah's Witnesses and Naylor also joined the same in 1968. The Jehovah's Witnesses gave Naylor a cause, community to belong, and opportunity for travel. Her already active imagination was further boosted and she started strongly believing in the power of the written word. From 1968 to 1975, Naylor served as a missionary in New York, South Carolina, and Florida. After leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses in 1975, Naylor moved to New York, where she briefly studied nursing and then enrolled in Brooklyn College to study English. In 1977, Naylor read her first novel by an African American woman, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which made her feel that "she had been given 'the authority...to enter this forbidden terrain' of prose."¹ Inspired by Morrison's work, Naylor began writing fiction in 1979, and she also received encouragement from Marcia Gillespie of 'Essence' magazine to pursue her writing. In 1981, Naylor received her B.A. in English and subsequently published her first book *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982. Naylor received the American Book Award for Best First Novel in 1983 and also her M.A. in Afro-American Studies from Yale University in the same year. In 1985, she published her second novel *Linden Hills* which was also
her master's thesis at Yale. The publication of her second book was followed by three more novels - *Mama Day* in 1988, *Bailey's Café* in 1992, and *The Men of Brewster Place* in 1998. Naylor had been a writer-in-residence at Cummington Community of the Arts and a visiting lecturer at George Washington University. She has also taught at Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, New York University, Boston University, Brandeis, and Cornell. She has received both National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and Guggenheim fellowship. In 1990, Naylor established her own multimedia production company called 'One Way Production' which is intended to present positive images of the black community to as many people in America and around the world as possible. Naylor has so far written and published five novels and is currently working on her next one which is supposed to be a sequel to her third book *Mama Day*.

In a literary career spanning over two decades, Naylor has mainly concentrated on the representation of African American life and culture and if one looks for a common thread which can be regarded as binding her novels, it is her interest in the representation of the African American community. Naylor considers how black cultures are formed by diverse groups of individuals, how they are maintained through the nurturing of their members, how they can be destroyed through the abandonment of their shared past and heritage, and finally the question of the survival of that culture in a political context which emphasizes multiculturalism. In order to study the representation of the African American community in the novels of Naylor, it becomes imperative to understand the very concept of 'community' and the ideas related to it, mainly as a sociological and cultural entity.

The term 'community' relates to a wide range of phenomena and has been used as an omnibus word loaded with diverse associations. A human community essentially
means a group of people, living in a particular locality, sharing a common culture, and exhibiting an awareness of their separate identity as a group. While some writers have given the area based conception of the community, emphasizing its ecological aspect, others have adopted psychological emphasis in their thinking about the community. The main confusion, as a result, arises between community as a type of collectivity or social unit, and community as a type of social relationship or sentiment. These differences have led to the 'territorial' and 'non-territorial' approaches of community.

From one perspective, the most important basis of communality is a shared physical territory. Even though it does not neglect the importance of common ties, but these ties are not sufficient in themselves to constitute a community. The non-territorial approach, on the other hand, stresses the importance of common ties at the expense of territory. This approach stresses on community as a form of human bond and a sense of belonging, which may derive from beliefs in a common past or a common fate, common values, interests, kinship relations and so on, none of which presuppose living together in a common territory. The non-territorial approach has gained grounds in today's world "...as a result of modern advances in communication which have reduced the importance of territorial proximity as a basis for human association...."2

Community, either in relational terms or territorial terms, suggests the co-existence of certain important elements. According to the traditional concept of community, the requirements of communal existence can be met only in the context of a certain quality of human association occurring within the confines of a shared physical territory. The modern concept, however, views the importance of four essential elements - membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections. Community, thus, in totality of both the concepts include -
(a) a group of people sharing the basic conditions of common life; (b) within a geographic area, which need not be fixed forever; (c) community sentiment - 'we' feeling or the feeling of belonging; (d) whose members are conscious of their unity and who can act collectively in an organized manner; (e) permanency - not transitory like a crowd; (f) likeness among the members, with a common culture and social system; (g) wider ends, where people associate not for the fulfillment of a particular end; and (h) a particular name, signifying identity and individuality.

Another element of confusion arises regarding the size of the community. The lack of clear-cut boundaries is indeed one of the major properties of communities. A measure of the maximal size of a community may be stretched to include an entire nation or even the world at large. However, some scholars prefer to limit community to a size that enables the inhabitants to have familiarity with the everyday life of the area. This familiarity with one's own community includes ordinary events that would not draw attention in the global, national or metropolitan contexts. The smaller the community, the greater its members' familiarity with routine life, but the minimal size of a community cannot be a single house in its own right, though not necessarily the pre-modern extended family network. This brings us to the idea of some basic functions that should be undertaken by each community, such as, the provision of basic economic needs, socialization, social control, social participation, and mutual support. The community, thus, is a social system in itself, including such subsystems as government, economy, education, religion, and family found in a larger society, and so, maybe aptly called "a microcosm of the society."³

The major questions that concern the sociology of community include, among others, the distinguishing characteristics and definition of community; the bases of communal experience and integration; the causes and processes of community
transformation and adaptation in the face of social change. Community studies undertaken over the past sixty years have to a large extent sought to address some, if not all, of these issues. The more recent well-known studies have focused on the problem of social class conflicts. The 'Stratification' theory has set forth several statements on class conflicts by considering accurate descriptions of American community politics -

(i) the upper class rules; (ii) political and civic leaders are subordinate to this class; (iii) there is a single power elite dealing with a wide variety of community issues; (iv) this upper class power elite rules for its own interests; and (v) social conflict takes place chiefly between the upper and lower classes.

A common thread running through these propositions is the dependency of political power on the class and status structure of the community and hence, these propositions are generally referred to as 'stratification theory of community power.'

The social conflict created as a result of widening gap between the upper and lower classes in a community lead to the disorganization of community structure. Community disorganization may be defined as "...a state in which any one or more of the several subsystems, for whatever reason, fail to function at some specified expected level of effectiveness, or it may be defined as the processes that lead to such a state, or it may refer both to the processes and to the state." The main reasons for these disorganizing processes are -

(1) **competition and conflict between or among groups or subsystems** - sometimes mass hysteria become hostile and lead to widespread violence, resulting in destruction of property and loss of life; (2) **maximizing performance of function** - if any one subsystem under-performs its function, and all the other subsystems over-performs, it leads to disorganization; (3) **over conformity** – over conformity or rigorous
enforcement to community norms within any subsystem constitutes a disorganizing process.

Keeping the disorganizing concepts in mind, we may refer to the ideal type of a community that is not disorganized as one in which -

(a) all the subsystems are in proper functioning order, capable of serving the needs of the people; (b) the people are in good physical and mental health and are able to perform at least at minimal levels of efficiency; (c) there is at least a tolerable fit between community needs and functional subsystems to save them; (d) there is consensus with respect to norms, so that everyone knows what to expect of everyone else, and hence there is no confusion; and (e) these expectations are fulfilled.

The disorganization theory leads to the concept of the fate of community in mass society. Barry Wellman and Barry Leighton suggest that there are three essential arguments concerning this concept - community 'lost', community 'saved', and community 'liberated'. The community 'lost' argument emerged during the Industrial Revolution. According to this hypothesis, the intimate and mutually interdependent human associations based on shared fate and shared consciousness observed in traditional communal society are relentlessly giving way to the casual, impersonal, transitory, and instrumental relationships based on self-interest that are characteristic of social existence in modern industrial society. In direct contrast to the community 'lost' perspective, the community 'saved' argument suggests that communities and communal relationships continue to exist within industrialized bureaucratic urban societies, as people are increasingly motivated to seek a safe communal space. The community 'liberated' argument concedes and to some extent qualifies key aspects of both the community 'lost' and community 'saved' perspectives. While it acknowledges that neighbourhood-level communal ties have been weakened in the face of
urbanization, it argues that communal ties and folkways still flourish. This argument suggests that the spatial dependence of communal ties have been replaced by ease of mobility and communicating across boundaries of both geographical and social distance.

Since the days of plantation slavery, the experience of the African American people has been one of displacement and migration for many reasons. For them it has been a historical experience of disorganization and repeated reorganization of any sense of community. The concept of the African American community, its nature and structure, can be understood in relationship with the black family on one hand, and the wider society on the other. For the African Americans, it is an expanding, concentric system of circles - the self, the family, and the community. The wider society, as Billingsley states, consists of major institutions - like the subsystem of values, political, economic, education, health, welfare, and communications subsystems - which help set the conditions for the African American family and community. The black family, on the other hand, may be primarily structured into three categories - nuclear families, extended families, and augmented families. The last two categories are important to understand the concept of the larger community because these include members not immediately related to each other. As Sobonfu Some states, "Our ancestors believed family went beyond bloodlines, and community was the core, the very substance, of human existence." In the extended African American family structure, other relatives are introduced into the nuclear household. Billingsley has categorized the African American extended family into three types -
(a) the incipient extended family, consisting of a married couple with no children of their own, who take in other relatives; (b) the simple extended family, consisting of a married couple with their children, who take in other relatives; and (c) the attenuated
extended family, consisting of a single, abandoned, legally separated, divorced, or widowed mother or father living with his or her own children, who takes into the household other relatives. The African American augmented families are those which have roomers, boarders, lodgers, or other relatively long-term guests. These unrelated persons often exert major influence in the organization of the African American family and community. The African American community may be identified as a network of mutually interdependent relationships with the black family and the society at large. The sense of the African American community extends beyond the immediate geographical space to include the past, the ancestors and also the space denoted by that which they were made to leave behind. This enlargement of the scope of the community across time and space provides a unique sociological canvas from which the African American artist draws sustaining materials which determine the representation of the community with interaction operating not in one but in many levels of existence, which also includes the presence of the spiritual as living and operating in the present. This is the wider extended canvas from which Gloria Naylor draws her materials and constitutes a process of cultural mapping in the form of literary representations and narrative structures cutting across borders of time and space and existing more often than not at the borders, negotiating the question of identity, as Bhabha states, at the borders, at the interstices, in liminal existence.¹

But in recent times, the African American community can no longer be identified as a homogenous entity. Social class has become the most powerful dimension to define the conditions of life for the African American family and community. It needs to be noted that Naylor's novels are written at a time when assertion of multiculturalism had become the cornerstone of the political agenda of the larger American culture. The changing scenario of American life and society made Naylor
face certain serious difficulties in her representation of black culture in the United States of the 1980s. This was a decade of considerable devastation within the African American community. As a result of changing government policies which provided more economic opportunities to those already established and programmes designed to lift families out of poverty, class differences became more pronounced. Those blacks, who entered this decade in poverty, were for the most part condemned to remain poor. The percentage of African Americans below the poverty level remained relatively constant in the 1970s and the 1980s at about 32%. But during the same period, some segments of the African American community prospered as never before. Between 1970 and 1980, the growth of blacks in high-paying positions increased at a rate higher than for white Americans. The divisions based on race and class grew increasingly more visible during the 1980s. The various elements of black society now existed wide apart. The decade also brought new economic possibilities to those in a position to enjoy them, while those families who needed greater assistance because of socio-economic or educational disadvantages were left to struggle under the weight of poverty and racism. Thus, there remained a wide segment of the black people who were poor, uneducated, and struggling to be seen at all. Increasingly, it was being questioned as to what these two different African American cultures had to do with each other, if there was any connection between these people other than the colour of their skin.

Naylor's representation of a community in a constant state of constructing and deconstructing its very notion of existence is a challenge for any critiquing of her narrative space. It is not that this feature has gone unnoticed but it does require greater critical attention and further opportunities for expansion of critical reading of her novels. Among the book length works of criticism of Naylor's novels, important
insights have been provided by Margaret Earley Whitt in *Understanding Gloria Naylor* (1999) and Philip Page in *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction* (1999). Whitt offers a thorough introduction to Naylor's novels and points to the novelist's detailed portrayal of her characters' lives and her meticulous depiction of the places where those characters dwell.10 Whitt also underscores Naylor's efforts to record the multivocality and hues of the black community. Tracing Naylor's development of the theme of the black community, Whitt shows how Naylor's characters move from poverty and isolation and transcend the racism and sexism that constrict their lives. Philip Page also analyzes the themes of creating and depicting community as evident in the novels of Naylor, and a few other novelists.11 He investigates the ways in which the African Americans' search for the past and a stable identity has created the desire for the maintenance of a cohesive community. He relates the issue to Naylor's projection of imagined community as an alternative reality in her novels.

Several other critics have highlighted important aspects of Naylor's novels. One such critic is Kathleen M. Puhr who states that Naylor celebrates the power of love as a force that heals, bringing peace and wholeness. Puhr points out that Naylor's "characters share their wealth: some through literal 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."12 Naylor's first four novels, according to Puhr, reinforce the theme that one can overcome with the guidance of others, usually a female other. Critics like Joan S. Korenman and Maxine L. Montgomery have given important insights to Naylor's first novel. Korenman looks closely at the section "Kiswana Browne" in *The Women of Brewster Place* and compares it with Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Toni Cade Bambara's "My Man
Bovanne” to highlight the conflicts between well-educated Black Nationalist daughters and their "politically incorrect" mothers. Korenman points out that these writers’ celebration of the 'mother' and their reservations about Black Nationalism grew out of their high regard for the matrilineal heritage. Korenman also suggests that these writers may have created their stories as cautionary tales for daughters - a warning against smugness and selfishness and a reminder of the matrilineal heritage that Black Nationalism might cause them to ignore. Whereas, Korenman discusses issues regarding Black Nationalism, Montgomery focuses on the theme of the descent motif in the establishment of the fictive world of Brewster Place. He points out that each quest for linear progress in Brewster Place ultimately fails on the community's rather foreboding dead-end street. Amidst all hardships, Montgomery highlights the community's stabilizing force, Mattie Michael, who offers warmth and support to the other women. By bonding together in relationships among themselves, the women form not only a separate and distinct community, but also as Montgomery states, an alternative world far removed from both white and male spheres. But at the same time, the critic also takes note of the dichotomy between Mattie as central mother figure and Lorraine, the "black-woman-as-victim" which exemplifies the unresolved conflict that the black women experience in the search for selfhood.

Charles P. Toombs focuses on the food which the characters consume in *Linden Hills* and also the rituals and codes of conduct that surround its consumption. Toombs feels that Naylor suggests that food consumption is a viable way of understanding some of the problematic issues of African American identity.

Critics like Erin Weik and Lindsey Tucker speak about Naylor’s use of conjure in her third novel. Weik states that Willow Springs is close to Africa in spirit and thus, we find conjure, voodoo, and herbal medicine a part and parcel of the life of the
inhabitants of the island. Weik also highlights the conjuring abilities of Mama Day and how she uses her powers to heal the entire community. While researching this novel, Weik says, "I found over 200 references to things of a non-Christian religious or spiritual nature, thus lending support to the claim that conjure is a natural part of life in Willow Springs."\(^6\) Weik also stresses on the use of different symbols like Candle Walk, quilting, etc. in the novel to focus on Naylor's emphasis on the need for people to join hands and share their strength with each other for survival. Lindsey Tucker also stresses on Naylor's use of conjure and states that *Mama Day* is full of conjurers and feels that "readers may be at a loss how to treat the subject, since the conjurer, and especially the conjure woman, has existed mostly on the margins of folklore and ethnography and is therefore barely credible."\(^7\) Tucker highlights Naylor's depiction of conjures in the novel and compares and contrasts the conjuring abilities of the different conjurers in the island. Tucker also stresses on different beliefs and rituals of the islanders that have their origins in African religions.

Critics like Sylvie Chavanelle and others have focused on important aspects of *Bailey's Café* and have pointed out that the novel is closer to blues than to jazz.\(^8\) Chavanelle establishes the point by stating that the main theme in this novel, as in traditional blues, is loneliness and suffering. The critic brings forth different elements of the blues in the novel, like the themes, the use of humour to relieve the narrative from an excess of sentimentality, and the poetical structure of many sections - with chorus and stanzas. Naylor's blues symphony, according to the critic, with the double nature of the music - melancholy and resilience - ultimately exposes the chaos of life, its beauty and ugliness. Another critic, Montgomery, stresses on Naylor's thematic concern in *Bailey's Café* which stresses on the importance of global harmony among all women regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or even sexual preference.\(^9\) He
points out that Naylor is bent on recreating a new social order with a family of choice replacing the traditional nuclear family. The critic takes note of the prevailing harmony between opposing rituals and traditions drawn from a multicultural community.

Naylor’s fifth novel has received much attention as it was a much-awaited sequel to her first book, and critics like Roy Hoffman feel that Naylor in her latest book has offered her male characters a chance to confess and atone for their past guilt. However, he points out that Naylor’s men in their revelations of their problems lack the complexity of the women. Hoffman also states that the men of Brewster Place ultimately need the women to make sense of their lives.

The critical response to the novels of Gloria Naylor as analyzed above suggests that Naylor’s fictional world is constructed keeping in mind the shifts in the structure of the African American community as it developed since the days of slavery. She looks back at these transformations from the perspectives of a middle class writer writing in a most crucial period, the 1980s onwards, and this prompts the analysis of her representation of the African American community in its state of construction.

This study aims at finding out how Naylor responds to the challenge posed by the changing notions of the community divided along class lines as she founded in the 1980s and 90s. The next chapter of this study traces the development of the African American women's fiction from the time of slavery till the 1980s, the period Naylor wrote her first novel. The main focus of this chapter is on the shifting notions of the community in the works of the African American women novelists. The urge to associate with family and friends can be viewed in the different oral modes, such as, folk tales, folk songs, etc. The slave narratives also represented the familial and communal ties of the African Americans. The importance of communal ties is further
strengthened during the Harlem Renaissance period, but novels of this period onwards also highlighted the presence of class differences in the community. This chapter traces these constant changes in the status of the African American community as represented in the literature of the period of slavery till the recent time.

The next five chapters study the portrayal of the African American community in Gloria Naylor's novels. Chapter 3 is a critical analysis of the representation of the community in Naylor's first novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. The study identifies mutual supportiveness among the different women living in an imaginary, deteriorating street symbolic of racist and sexist society. Amidst the frustrations of poverty, worth noticing, is the determination of these black women to survive despite the oppressive marginalization in terms of race, class, and gender. But the changing political and economic scenario of Naylor's time made it impossible for any writer of the period to realistically represent the African American community as a homogenous entity. The slow disintegration of the Brewster Place community, towards the end of the novel, is viewed from different angles to understand the shifting dynamics of the African American community, the existence of class differences, the role of the men in the formation and destruction of the community, and other related issues.

Chapter 4, a critical representation of Naylor's next novel *Linden Hills*, presents a critical examination of the struggle for African American identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The study identifies the madness that lurks underneath the vision of a community of black material progress, and compares this community with the poorer section of the society who are psychologically and culturally healthier than their richer counterparts. The analysis of this chapter draws attention to the fact that community bonding is of utmost importance for the African Americans.
Chapter 5 identifies Naylor's engagement with the idea of a larger community in a utopian space as reflected in the narrative structure of *Mama Day*. The analysis of this novel highlights Naylor's use of different symbols of community bonding - like 'Candle Walk', quilting, braiding hair, and so on. Emphasis is also given to core African beliefs - beliefs regarding the spirit world, ancestors, and conjuring. Amidst the close communal ties, the study also projects the challenges posed to the community as a realistic portrayal of the time-period.

Chapter 6 explores the themes of loneliness, suffering, and lack of love, as presented by Naylor in *Bailey's Café*. This chapter offers interesting insights into the characters of the loosely connected stories of the novel, and identifies the lack of familial and communal ties in their lives. The community, as portrayed in this book, is somewhat achieved towards the end of the novel, but only as a temporary stability.

Chapter 7 relates Naylor's fifth novel *The Men of Brewster Place* to her first one. The men narrate their sad and tragic stories and bring forth their relationships to their families and community. Absent, however, in their stories is a close connection among the community of men as was noticed among their counterparts.

Chapter 8, the concluding section of the study, focuses on how Gloria Naylor negotiates the problem of representing the African American culture as she encountered it in the 1980s onwards, when visualizing the cultural entity as a homogenous one was becoming more and more difficult. The African Americans in their interaction with the American multicultural scenario by then had imbibed some of the nuances of the American capitalist society, thus giving rise to smaller circles of culture existing within and contributing to the configuration of a larger entity, the African American culture. This chapter highlights how Gloria Naylor falls back upon certain metaphorical structures, such as, the quilt and utopian space along with other
cultural tropes to give expression and representation to the African American community's existence and experience.
NOTES


3. ibid.


