CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

How the writings of women of colour differ from white feminism has been explored in this thesis through the analyses of Toni Morrison’s and Gloria Naylor’s novels. In their works, Morrison and Naylor have shown the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. The writers have struggled to redefine black womanhood. Their novels focus mainly on the struggles of black women in their own communities as well as white communities. The subjects of their novels are: love and hate, friendship, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, death, magic, supernatural, marriage, poverty, violence, hope and personal redemption.

In their novels, Morrison and Naylor focus on the experience of Afro-Americans, especially emphasizing on black women’s search for cultural identity in an unjust society. They value independence for women, rather than they being controlled by men. They privilege women’s connections to other women and establish a model of family continuity in distinct opposition to the broken Afro-American families found in many other novels. The black women search for voice; they want an equal status with men in society. Their experiences help them to focus on the issues of racism, gender discrimination and class conflict. Naylor has said that irrespective of where black women are on the social spectrum, “as black women we all share two things in this country—that is racism and sexism” (qtd. in Bonetti).

The black women are the victims of violence and oppression. Sometimes, they are treated as property or as sources of pleasure for men. They experienced not just racism, but sexism and other forms of oppression. Black women’s beauty and femininity often led to sexual abuse by
slave owners and male slaves. Even children of enslaved mothers were also enslaved and were treated as the property of their mother’s owner. Thus, an enslaved woman preferred to end the life of her newborn rather than raise her child under slavery and as it is shown in *Beloved* infanticide often carried heavy spiritual and psychological costs for enslaved mothers.

Morrison and Naylor have told the stories of their mothers and grandmothers. They have developed their personal and national identities and shared ancestral memories they acquired from Afro-American culture. Carolyn Cooper states:

> In all of these feminist fictions of the African Diaspora the central characters are challenged; however unwillingly, to reappropriate 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 Afrocentric cultural norms. (84)

The authors believe that the presence of the ancestors is one of the characteristics of black writing; they are a connection with the past. The lack of roots and the disconnections from the community cause individuals’ alienation.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek has noted that in the novels of black women writers, the protagonist is often on a quest—be it a physical or an inner journey—that leads to “the development of identity, particularly in relationship to community” (Kubitschek 9). These quests are often inspired by either an ancestral figure with supernatural gifts or by a supernatural event. The spiritual journey toward identity and community inevitably leads back to Africa and African
traditions and values. The protagonist is guided in this journey into the past by an ancestral, usually female figure. The ancestral figure is clearly a symbol of Africa and blackness.

The thesis consists of five chapters. It employs the comparative methods to analyze the selected novels of Morrison and Naylor. A specific theme or concept has been investigated in each chapter. The first chapter is an “Introduction” to literary and biographical notes on Morrison and Naylor. Issues of feminism in general and particularly black feminism from Afro-American writers’ points of view are also discussed in this chapter.

The second chapter, “Women’s Solidarity: Female Friendship,” explores the issue of female friendship in Morrison’s *Sula* and women bonding in Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and examines the impact of race, class and gender on women’s relationship. Discovering the meaning of friendship, wifehood, sisterhood, prostitution, rape, parental love, spirituality, and healing and hurting mothers are the main themes focused on in this chapter. The novels emphasize how women face the challenges of patriarchal institutions. This study foregrounds the healing powers of female bonding, which allows women to overcome prejudice and survive, to enjoy empowerment and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that participates in nation building.

Morrison and Naylor present patriarchal institutions in these novels as threats to women’s relationships. Both the novels describe the plight of women who suffer different forms of oppression and portray female bonding as a strategy for fighting back against prejudice. Although *Sula* portrays failed female friendship in order to foreground the power of patriarchy, *The Women of Brewster Place* demonstrates that women can fight the attempts to subjugate them and succeed into overcoming and surviving. The protagonists in *The Women of Brewster Place*
make a stronger commitment to female bonding and try to liberate themselves from the burden of oppression. Each helps the other in difficult times; because they go through similar experiences, they understand each other. In *Sula*, the relationship of Nel Wright and Sula Peace is integral to the novel; they make a deep friendship that allows them to develop their identities. Black women in *The Women of Brewster Place* also support each other by sharing their stories and experiences. These black women realize that they have to work in unity, peace and harmony in order to achieve their dreams. The dreams of Brewster’s inhabitants are what keep them alive. The dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection. At the end of *The Women of Brewster Place*, the black women join in the block party in order to protest against the power of men over women and against the barriers of racist and class oppression.

According to Morrison and Naylor, sisterhood is essential to the survival of the black woman. The black woman must turn to her gender, not necessarily in a sexual manner, but in a loving manner to help, guide and care for one another. Those who live together in harmony learn more about themselves and their identities in the world around them; if women cannot support one another, they will destroy one or all the women involved in the relationship. Black women must come together in a common bond of sisterhood for strength and support. Naylor’s novel foregrounds the healing powers of female friendship that soothes pain and makes it possible for women to survive prejudice. It also highlights how female bonding extends to female solidarity and in effect reaches more women. The concept does not exist in Morrison’s *Sula* and even the weak attempts at solidarity in the community initiated to fight Sula’s unconventionality fades away as soon as she dies.

Later in life, Nell realized that she had really missed Sula. She also realized that their
youthful friendship had been the most important relationship in her life. Good friends bring out something from each that the other doesn’t have. Sula and Nell were almost two halves of the same person. Each one lacked something the other didn’t have (Century 49). Nell’s ultimate realization of the importance of her relationship with Sula hints at the possibility of change, and she gets a glimpse of what it may be like to see herself as a whole being on its own.

Although the pain each novel describes may be different, it reveals women’s suffering which indicates different forms of women’s oppression. These different forms of oppression urge women to form bonds in order to fight back. Morrison acknowledges the potentiality of female friendship and encourages women to make connections in order to fight patriarchy. The successful girlhood relationships she portrays reflect her stand on female bonding even though they fail afterward. Naylor’s novel demonstrates the strength of female friendship that liberates women from the burden of oppression and a chance to empower each other. This survival over patriarchy is indeed vital and highlights the nurturing and caring qualities of female bonding that makes this liberation possible and allows women to heal the wounds contracted through the process.

Morrison chooses to portray failed female friendships as a warning in order to show the chaos that a lack of female bonding is likely to cause in women’s lives and to encourage them to cultivate successful sisterhood. In Patricia Hill Collins’ explanation of black women’s journey to “self, change and empowerment,” she says that “other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuation lies within the individual woman” (112). The oppression Morrison describes in Sula is not different from the suffering of the Brewster women that Naylor depicts in The Women of
Brewster Place. This commonness in women’s experiences of oppression reveals the universality of female subjugation, a plight that women have to fight everywhere.

Morrison’s novel portrays estranged mother-daughter relationships. The novel reveals how Nel’s and Sula’s bond allows them to care and nurture each other thereby filling in the gap of their mothers’ neglect. So, Morrison’s novel says about how an estranged mother-daughter relationship helps the characters compensate the lack of mother-love and heal each other’s wounds. Julie Tharp asserts the importance of “black mothering . . . to gender and ethnic identity which undermines the destructive fragmentation of capitalism, racism and patriarchy” (123).

This study deals with a specific theory of female friendship that does neither concern sibling nor homoerotic relationships between women. It mainly focuses on the nurturing, caring, exchanges, giving and receiving counsel and sharing experiences. The friendship and union between the black women in The Women of Brewster Place impacts their lives as a whole and helps them resolve all sorts of problems. The sisterhood reaches out various aspects of the characters’ lives and allows them to benefit from all their interactions and endeavours.

The study also highlights the support and comfort between women, which give them the opportunity to extend their friendship to female solidarity that involves more women who may also benefit from this sisterhood. Indeed, this female solidarity may not only involve more women which may impact the community but also participate in nation building. However, the research reveals the existence of two forms of empowerment—women who empower each other through female friendship and those who empower themselves at the expense of other women and work for their destruction.
In the third chapter, “Feminist Rendition of Identity,” the themes of the standards of beauty, sexuality, prostitution and gender in the two novels: *The Bluest Eye* and *Bailey’s Café* have been focused. This study illuminates that Morrison and Naylor mark each character’s black girlhood as a pivotal point wherein each woman’s inherent value is either denied or affirmed. The implications of a theory that eliminates the agency of the victim in favour of discourse on the internal conflicts of culprits are dire for blacks and for women whose psychological and emotional copings with subjugation, as members of an oppressed group, have been historically dismissed or denied.

Morrison’s and Naylor’s novels focus on black females in constructing their identities in a racist society. In this chapter, the novelists discuss the threat of gendered violence in the society. Black women are doubly oppressed; the question of race is the issue, which distinguishes black feminism from white feminism.

The authors create an atmosphere that exposes the contingency of black women’s position. Many black girls are not protected from the harsh realities of black womanhood, but are left to experience the politics of race, gender, sexuality and class with no viable coping strategies. They use language to suggest patterns of silence, self-negation as well as agency to express how black women internalize cultural assumptions about black female sexuality. Margaret Anne Kelley in her critical essay entitled “Framing Possibilities: Collective Agency and the Novels of Gloria Naylor,” argues that Naylor attempts to “formulate ways to escape debilitating interpolation into a capitalist identity while living in the contemporary United States” (xxiii).
Pecola Breedlove, the central character of Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, desires the bluest eyes because she needs to escape not only from her ugliness, but also the ugliness of the world in which she is raped by her father, abandoned by her mother and despised by almost everyone in her community. She believes that if she had beautiful blue eyes, everything would be all right. The rape destroyed Pecola and her hopes for self-reconciliation. She attempts to disappear to ease her own pain as well as that of her parents.

Despite her depiction of nearly universal scorn and contempt towards Pecola, Morrison ultimately presses us to find within ourselves compassion and sympathy for the raped girl. Prompted by Claudia’s and Frieda’s dismay over the adult reaction, we are asked to evaluate our own beliefs about sexual assault and whether they are biased against the victim, who could be an eleven-year-old girl standing in her kitchen, washing dishes. Kimberly Drake writes, “Claudia insists that ‘we’ are complicit in the ‘assassination’ of Pecola’s mind and spirit: ‘we felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her . . . .’ This ‘we’ includes the reader, forcing him/her to consider whether a similar oppression is occurring ‘among the garbage and sunflowers’ of his/her town” (70). *The Bluest Eye* succeeds in its multiple imperatives of delineating the devastating effects of racism upon one black community, identifying the cankerous phenomenon of incest, and demanding concern for the violated female. In making significant the destruction of a little black girl, Morrison affirms that the trauma of incest, and thus any kind of rape, is worthy of our deepest consideration.

In *Bailey’s Café*, Naylor’s focus is primarily on the social relationships between genders rather than the complex interpersonal relations between women. These people are in a battle with the dominant culture to discover their inherent value and to take hold of their right to thrive; they
attempt to create their own identity. The novel places black women at the centre of analysis of race and racism to demonstrate how gender and race form a lethal combination in the lives of these women. Kelley demonstrates that Naylor in this novel is making “the marginal become centre” by using different frames for the representation of different women “that had previously been unrepresentable” (Kelley 135). She puts her characters in a natural environment and empowers them without uprooting them from there, making true to what Jonathan Culler says, “the marginal becomes central by virtue of its own marginality” (196).

Black women have surrounded themselves particularly with sisterly support as they attempted to negotiate their way through the problems of race, class, and gender prejudices. Isolated and vulnerable, they must act without the benefit of collaboration or council. In Bailey’s Café, Naylor radically refuges the women as subjects in order to deconstruct voiceless erotic representations of black women and envisages embodied “emancipatory transformation” (Chopp 40). The lives of these women have been marred by their horrific encounters with racial and gender discrimination. They are products of the worst marriages and male-female relationships, either their parents’ or their own. These women, the powerless and abandoned victims of oppression and domination in the society, are too often silent. According to Lynn Alexander, “in the case of Bailey’s Café [Naylor] further argued that what was lost was language, the way people talk about and identify themselves—in particular, the way one subgroup of women is identified” (91).

Naylor’s protagonists resist the very real consequences of patriarchy in their lives, alienation, sexual violence, child abuse and hetero-sexism. Black women, as a result of racism and sexism, have come to represent the embodiment of female evil, sexual, or nonsexual, in the
sex/gender configuration. “Black ‘whores,’” as Collins writes, “make white virgins possible” (176). Naylor focuses on the effects of “telegraphic coding” (Spillers 65) on the interior lives of her characters, with particular reference to the mutilating effects of the “unreconciled strivings” of “double-consciousness” (Du Bois 45).

Evelynn Hammonds explains that the “politics of sexuality” converges on the themes which emerge, and the one that Naylor seems to focus on is that while historically black women chose to remain silent about their sexuality in order to “protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” as well as to ward off negative stereotyping regarding the construction of “the black female as the embodiment of sex” during slavery, this self-imposed silence creates a vacuum, thus leaving no “ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality” (Hammonds 487-88). Black women have remained silent about their sexuality; therefore, they have not passed down a language that their daughters can use to reflect the truth of their lives (Hammonds 488).

Morrison’s and Naylor’s stories resonate with the lived experiences of black women and their families. They attest to the real presence of evil in the world in the forms of sexism, racism, child abuse, domestic violence, alienation, heterosexism and homophobia. The women’s silence allows the abuses to continue. Conversely, Naylor challenges racist heteropatriarchal, biblical representations that produce and sustain black women’s erotic shame and distort even our most intimate relationships. Rebecca S. Chopp writes, “It is possible to imagine a new relation to the body and to God, to creation and redemption, to law and to grace” (122). The endings of the stories of real life stolen women and victims and survivors of abuse are unwritten and depend largely upon us.
The fourth chapter, “Feminist Genealogy: History and Hauntology,” is a comparative analysis of Morrison’s *Beloved* and Naylor’s *Mama Day*. With the assistance of the supernatural and help from ancestors, with incantations, herbs, voodoo, baby ghosts, cleansing ceremonies, and African rituals, the characters in the novels find the strength and knowledge to survive and nurture themselves and their communities. In this chapter, it has been argued that the presence of the ghosts in these novels is as connectors between the past and the present. The issues of hauntology and women’s belief in ghosts are considered a contrast between white and black feminisms.

*Beloved* shows what slavery did to black people’s bodies and minds. In fact, most enslaved Afro-Americans were treated worse than animals; this dehumanization causes them to lose their sense of self-worth and leaves them questioning their existence as humans. *Beloved* revives the past in the modes of haunting, memory and storytelling. It expresses history as a construction of the dominant culture. *Beloved*, as it rewrites history, becomes a narrative of agency in literature as well—a way to reclaim the absent voices and lost truths.

The novel was influenced by a published story about a slave, Margaret Garner, who tried to kill her children rather than return them to a life of slavery. Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, murdered her unnamed infant, “Beloved.” Her house was then haunted by the dead baby daughter. Paul D, whom she knew in slavery, came to visit her and managed to drive the ghost out for a while. Time passed, Beloved became more violent; Denver, Sethe’s other daughter, left the house in order to save their life. At the end of the novel, women of the community rescued Sethe; Beloved disappeared. Paul D. returned to take care of Sethe. Sethe and Paul D looked back to embrace their individual and communal history and moved into a future where love is a
real possibility. *Beloved* concludes with emphasis on the importance of communal participation in the processes of emotional and spiritual healing and stability.

The character of Beloved simultaneously embodies and confronts Sethe with both of the central traumas of her past, the distance slavery imposed between her and her mother, and the murder of her baby girl, the main misery of the novel. Sethe believes that Beloved’s “distance from the events . . . or her thirst for hearing it” compels her to speak and find “unexpected pleasure” in it (*Beloved* 58). Morrison explains that Beloved is “spirit . . . [Sethe’s] child returned to her from the dead [and] a survivor from the true, factual, slave ship,” the cadence in Beloved’s voice may have been that of an African rather than an African-American (Darling 247).

Most of the novel’s narrative is in the form of memories—not simply the memories of one character, but the memories of all, even the most minor characters. In this way, *Beloved* is the story not just of Sethe and her family, but of an entire community. At several points in the novel, characters are encouraged to lay their painful memories and stories down. In times of particular struggle, Sethe yearns for the now dead Baby Suggs to massage her neck and tell her “lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down” (*Beloved* 86). Sethe, like the rest of the former enslaved Afro-American characters in the novel, tries to not to remember anything.

The second part of fourth chapter provides a histography and an in-depth analysis of conjure women, one that is intended to aid in the critical and cultural understanding of Afro-American women and spirit work within the Afro-American literary tradition. In *Mama Day*, 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. In this novel, Naylor asks the
readers to hear as their own voice (Mama Day 10) the mystical knowledge of that “other place” where the rationalistic laws of the mainland “don’t apply” (Mama Day 5).

*Mama Day* privileges supernatural and ancestral powers in the representation of individual women as part of a community of women. Miranda Day spiritually and physically leads her people as a descendent of Sapphira Wade, the “Great Mother,” and to give them the love and support that only a mother can. The “other place,” the previous place of residence of the Days, is a location on the island, even though its name suggests something otherworldly. The “other place” is filled with painful memories and trauma that Abigail and Miranda would rather keep away from, but it continues to be a part of their lives and of the world they inhabit. Mama Day’s actions are not limited simply to delivering children, but also to enhancing opportunities for women to conceive and bring life to the world, which is what she does with Bernice.

Mama Day is a conjure woman who can work beyond the range of the properties of herbs or scientific knowledge. She can hear whispers from her ancestors and Willow Springs itself. As a healer, her biggest challenge is saving Ophelia who became the victim of Ruby’s Jealousy. Thus, Miranda has to dream Sapphira’s name and place herself at the ancestral home before she can help Cocoa. She needs George to search in the northwest corner of the chicken coop for the nest of an old red hen, and bring back to her “whatever he finds” (Mama Day 295). George realizes what Mama Day wants is his hands. Finally, he sacrifices himself on the altar of love, and his wife, Cocoa—the next guardian of the community of Willow Springs is returned to the life.

The interesting matter for Naylor’s novels is that each novel has thematic and geographical connections to the others; the characters refer to other places in other novels. For
instance, Kiswana Browne in *The Women of Brewster Place* grew up in Linden Hills; Willa Prescott Nedeed from *Linden Hills* is Miranda Day’s niece and George in *Mama Day* is possibly the child named George who was born in *Bailey’s Café*. This connection helps the reader establish a history, a community and a functional sense of stability in a place where a story can be told and believed.

The fifth chapter, “Conclusion” of this thesis, sums up the findings of the preceding chapters while focusing on the thematic concerns of the novels of Morrison and Naylor. It points out the general similarities and differences between the two novelists.
Works Cited


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