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Matriarchal and Mythical Healing in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

A. Vijayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

R. Padmavathi, Ph.D.

Southern Flavor in Gloria Naylor's Fiction

There is something peculiarly Southern about Gloria Naylor's fiction--and this despite her birth in New York City. Careful consideration of place--whether it is a dilapidated, rat-infested housing project situated on a dead-end street or a magical island paradise off the Georgia coast--and the uniquely individual folk inhabiting such locales are hallmarks of Naylor's carefully crafted novels. Her deft rendering of people, places, and customs invites comparison with that of the best American local colorists who have brought national and, in some instances, international attention to little-known regions of the country.

A Biographical Sketch

Gloria (born in 1950) is a novelist, essayist, screenplay writer, columnist, and educator. Gloria Naylor was born in New York City to Roosevelt and Alberta McAlpin Naylor, who had migrated northward from their native Robinsonville, Mississippi. Having worked as cotton sharecroppers in Mississippi, her father became a transit worker for the New York City subway system and her mother a telephone operator. Naylor, who was a very shy child, grew up in New

York City, where she lived until she graduated from high school in 1968.

After her graduation until 1975, Naylor worked as a missionary for the Jehovah's Witnesses in New York, North Carolina, and Florida. Eventually deciding that missionary life and the Jehovah's Witnesses were not for her, Naylor returned to New York City and attended college while working as a telephone operator in several different hotels. Although she studied nursing for a short time at Medgar Evers College, she soon decided to pursue a BA in English at Brooklyn College, from which she graduated in 1981.

Naylor entered Yale University on a fellowship and received an MA in Afro-American studies there in 1983. Having published her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, in 1982, she wrote for her master's thesis at Yale what would become her second novel, *Linden Hills* (published 1985). *Mama Day* (1988) *Bailey's Cafe* (1992), and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). In addition to these primary works, she has also published essays—including a column in the New York Times in 1986 and a scholarly piece, *Love and Sex in the Afro-American Novel*, which was published in the Yale Review in 1988—and has written several unproduced screenplays. Another important publication is 'A Conversation between Naylor and Toni Morrison,' which appeared in the *Southern Review* in 1985. She edited *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers 1967 to the present* in 1995.

Mama Day

Her third novel, *Mama Day* (1988), Naylor has received the most praise. As the story of the title character and her great-niece, Ophelia (Cocoa) Day, this work fully develops Naylor's themes of magic, myth and family. Naylor superimposes the two settings of Willow Springs—an island off the coast between (but not in) South Carolina and Georgia—and New York City, thereby contrasting the philosophical differences between Cocoa and her husband, George Andrews. In a 1989 interview with Nicholas Shakespeare, Naylor said that her purpose in *Mama Day* was to analyze the makeup of individual belief, as well as what constitutes an individual definition of reality. During the course of the novel, she compares her depictions of magic and personal faith with the willing suspension of disbelief that all readers of fiction undergo.

Following a prologue that explains the history of Willow Springs, and which is narrated by the collective consciousness of the island itself, part 1 of the novel primarily consists of exchanges between Cocoa and George. Although George is already dead during the time of these narrated memories, he and Cocoa continue to commune from beyond the grave. Focusing on New York City, where Cocoa and George meet and eventually marry, part 1 also introduces Miranda (Mama) Day, the matriarch of Willow Springs, and her sister, Abigail, Cocoa's grandmother. *Mama Day* is a midwife, healer and root doctor, herbalist, and, if the reader chooses to interpret Naylor's ambiguous signals this way, a conjure woman.

Part 2 of *Mama Day*

Part two of *Mama Day* depicts the events that occur after George and Cocoa travel to Willow Springs. Following a tremendous storm, the bridge connecting the island to the mainland

washes away. Cocoa then becomes dangerously ill, apparently as a result of poisoning and conjuring by Ruby, an intensely jealous woman. In order to save his wife, George must suspend rational thought and fully accept the mystical ways of the island. Although his love for Cocoa almost makes him capable of this leap of faith, ultimately he cannot believe what the island and Mama Day demand of him. George's already weakened heart fails and he dies. Yet, partly because of George's sacrifice, Cocoa recovers. The novel's close in 1999, also the time of its beginning, shows Cocoa poised to succeed the 105-year-old Mama Day as the island's spiritual leader.

According to Lindsey Tucker (1994: 14), there are three kinds of illnesses treated by conjuring:

- Illness for which knowledge of roots, herbs, barks and teas is applied.
- Occult or spiritually corrected illness that requires spell casting and charms.
- Illness that includes both personal and collective calamities that are not the result of malevolent attitudes.

Similar to the portrait of a perverted Eden (Ward 5) in her second novel *Linden Hills*, Naylor creates a hermetic black community in *Mama Day* with a pastoral setting named Willow Springs off the coast of South Carolina in Georgia. Sapphira Wade, the legendary mother is depicted by Naylor as Sapphira Wade. The legendary mother is a slave woman, who brought a whole new era to the island of Willow Springs. Being bought as a slave by a Norwegian named Bascombe Wade, who later married her, she bore him seven sons to persons known or unknown to her but forced by him. Later Sapphira compelled him to deed the island of Willow Springs to a thousand days and murdered him in the year 1823. This act of murder for her islanders has elevated her to a Mother goddess. In the island of Willow Springs patriarchy gets displaced with matriarchy.

Three Voices

With this legendary tale as its background the novel finds its description through three voices: the voice of George (from the grave), Cocoa's voice and in the voice of an omniscient narrator.

The novel explores the tragic past of Mama Day. This surrogate Grandmother - Sapphira functions as a physical and spiritual healer, a preserver and as the wise woman of the small community of Willow Springs. It is these female protagonists who have served as conjurers and spiritual healers in Mama Day. They have bridged the gap of ancestral conjuring with African roots and the spiritual milieu of their forefathers thereby creating a healing narrative which Pryse terms them as "metaphorical conjure women" (Pryse, 5).

Of the three daughters born to the seventh son of the legendary matriarch Sapphira Wade, Abigail and Mama Day are the two to survive. Abigail had three daughters - Grace, Hope and Peace. Peace died and Abigail's Hope, the mother of Willa Prescott of Linden Hills died shortly

after Willa got married to Luther. As Willa had burnt herself to death, the only heir left to was Cocoa, the sole legendary heir to Sapphira Wade.

It is Mama Day and Abigail, who nurture Cocoa alias 'Baby Girl', who later leaves Willow Springs for urban life in New York. In New York, she falls in love with an engineer George, and later marries him. It is during their visit to Willow Springs they encounter the supernatural forces of nature. George sacrifices his life while attempting to save his wife Cocoa, who is later saved by the matriarchal powers of Mama Day.

Naylor's depiction of George Andrews, one of the three voices, is an engineer from Columbia University. He is an orphan, who has received the impersonal guidance of Mrs. Jackson of the Wallace T. Andrews shelter for Boys. He is on the notion that "Only the present is potential" (23). His association with Cocoa gradually turns his pragmatic approach to life.

When George crosses the mainland and enters the island, he attains a consciousness as of entering another world. As George is unable to acknowledge the powers of matriarchy, the central conflict arises. David Cowart asserts, "the single great source of disharmony, which Naylor intimates, lies in an overturning, enduring ego of matriarchal authority and its divine counterpart. The world still reels for the displacement of the Goddess - the Great Mother" (Cowart, 444). Though he observes the gifted hands of Mama Day in helping the infertile couple Bernice and Ambush and her magical powers of delivering most of the babies of Willow Springs, he dismisses her powers and remarks casually, natural remedies are really in now. We have centers opening up all over the place in New York (195). These comments of George reveal his "ignorance of the effectiveness of holistic healings" (Cowart, 447). He calls Mama Day's healing strategy as mumbo jumbo.

The Faith in the Ancestral Past

When Cocoa becomes the victim of the spell magician Ruby, it is George who makes an attempt to the chicken coop. He returns with empty hands after smashing the chicken coop and later dies of heart attack. The faith in the ancestral past helps Cocoa to relive her life but it takes away the life of the George, as his consciousness was not bound on faith. The healing powers of Mama Day continue to heal not only Cocoa but also the islanders. As a whole Mama Day carries the healing powers from her ancestors as gifts. She has a second sight through which she sees magic in the woods on the island. Everyday this "Mother" makes her visit to the trees and flowers and hears their whispers.

Naylor picturizes the healing powers prevalent in nature and the wisdom of Mama Day as: This great mother did not possess just the powers of healing and conjuring. She could read the signs of animal behavior too and tell the advent of hurricane even before the weather forecasters: "You better listen to the crows, Miranda says, when it gets so they start screaming, the winds gone come in screaming too" (236).

Healer and Conjurer

Mama Day serves not only as a healer, predictor and a conjurer. She is a counselor too. She is the guardian angel to the islands of Willow Spring. When people get dejected to their personal problems, they seek their shelter in her house. When Frances, the old wife of Jounior Lee fall as a prey to the conjurer Ruby, she seeks the advice of Mama Day for which this mother utters: "A man doesn't leave you less he wants to go Frances. And if he's made up his mind to go, these ain't nothing you, me, or anybody else can do about that" (Naylor, 93). These unusual matriarchal powers of Mama Day owe their heritage to the legacy of her ancestors. She shares the ancestral gifts and wisdom with her descendants to keep the past alive. The Candle Walk ritual on December 22 marking the winter solstice and the Standing forth ceremony honoring the dead - all these reveal the matriarchal myth in which the islanders linked their ancestral reverence.

Collective Process of Empowerment of Women Is Needed

The wisdom and power in one woman from Sapphira Wade to Mama Day have assisted the other in the healing process. For the liberation of women, a collective process of empowerment is essential. To achieve this, the abuse and the trauma have to be acknowledged and brought to a collective consciousness.

Naylor has established the feminine power and dignity for the new millennium amidst an institutionalized patriarchy with a legacy of millions of abusive imprints. With all the matriarchal and mythical powers, these abused women have introduced and embraced a sacred and wise feminine world in *Mama Day*. According to Lindsey Tucker (1994: 186), "healing includes the ongoing process of seeing, healing and making". This voice of the ancestral past ought to be listened to. Naylor has converted an oral myth to a written one, thereby has allowed the reader to listen, see, hear and ultimately get healed.

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A. Vijayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

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Vijayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Padmavathi, Ph.D.

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Department of English
Karpagam College of Engineering
Myleripalayam
Coimbatore 641 032
Tamilnadu, India
aviji79@gmail.com

R. Padmavathi, Ph.D.
Department of English
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Peelamedu
Coimbatore 641 004
Tamilnadu, India
padmaraju@yahoo.com