

# Exploring the Spirituality – Texts and contexts in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*

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**Abstract** -- Miranda Day receives the name “Mama Day” not because she has many children of her personal, she has none---but because as midwife, she has formed or birthed, most of residents of Willow Springs. She has served as mother not only to her own blood relations but to various people of the island, she is recognized as the most powerful conjurist on the island. *Mama Day* is a modern love story, a timeless generational history, an amazing tale of the supernatural power of African-American traditions. It is a novel that passes through the worlds of the black and white. The first one is the southern barrier in the island of Willow Springs, a place which is not exempted from the racial laws of men. As God has created the earth in six days so has Naylor took longer to create her personal universe in *Mama Day*. The other world, New York City is multi-racial, multi linguist governed by stern and apparently heartless codes of love. Naylor gives each of world its personal storyline and storyteller and then brings them together. She also explores and examines several reconciliations between the blacks rustic past and their urban present, between allegory and the past, between individuals and communities, sense and trust and at last the living and the dead. On the other side, Miranda recalls the history of her father and great grandfather, Boscombe, who was a Norwegian and got married to Sapphira, an African-born and then forthcoming generation which has also witnessed the claws of slavery. Willow Springs is an imaginary place, where the blacks' monarch rules in their own way and refuse to follow the rule and regulations of whites.

**Index Terms**— simultaneously, miracles, resembles, tempestuous, chronicles, women bonding, paratextual.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Mama Day* is the third novel of Gloria Naylor, the American Book Award-winning author of *The Women of Brewster Place*. This novel follows the lives of Miranda Day and her family. *Mama Day* is narrated in third person (Mama Day’s story) and in the first person, in a dialogue between Mama Day’s niece Ophelia (Cocoa) Day, and her husband, George Andrews. She has used narrators who simultaneously narrate and are the soul of the novel which reflects and reinforces the novel’s thematic concerns with reality and truth. The novel is concerned with the examination, reconstruction and redefinition the past events. The strongest elements are the bond which is mutually shared within the female community and between the generations of women.

The novel portrays the story of a conjuring woman called Sapphira Wade and her descendent Miranda (Mama) Day. Abigail, Miranda’s sister and Ophelia or Cocoa alias Baby Girl, her grand-

niece and the way all of them come to terms with the spirit of Sapphira Wade forms the narrative factor, “The problem for the present generation of women is to continue with the heritage of Sapphira Wade.” The novel starts in Willow Springs, where everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. Sapphira Wade as a sorceress had been doing miracles with her magic. She turns the moon into a slave, the stars into a swaddling cloth and heals the wounds of all living thing within two or four days. In 1823, she gets married to Boscombe Wade and gives birth to seven sons in thousand days. She persuades Wade to deed the Willow Springs Island to those seven sons and after this processing; she slays her husband very harshly. She smothers Bascombe, poisons him and even puts a dagger through his kidney. After killing him, she vanishes in a burst of flame. As per the lineage chart of Sapphira’s family, she gives birth to seven sons in six deliveries. The first page of the novel consists of a family-tree beginning with Sapphira. The next generation consists of her seven sons- Elijah, Elisha, Joel, Daniel, Joshua, Amons and Jonah, the third son possesses his seven sons - Mathew, Mark, Luke, Timothy, James, John and John-Paul. The seventh John-Paul gives birth to three daughters, the eldest being Mama Day who is none other than Miranda, the second one is Abigail and

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the last is Peace. Abigail then gives birth to three daughters, out of whom the last two daughters each too have a daughter. The second one has an Ophelia (Cocoa) and next one has a Willa Prescott Nedeed. Though its beginnings are cloaked in mystery, Mama Day, the matriarch of the island, helps to keep the island's unique inheritance alive. Her sister Abigail is her only living relative on the island, as Abigail's granddaughter Cocoa has gone "mainside" and is living in New York City.

## 2 RESEMBLES OF TEMPEST IN MAMA DAY

Mama Day remarkably resembles William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Analyzed Bibliography on Gloria Naylor shows, "The two stories fit in community alcoholics, a twisted subplot to seize the leadership, and a ravishing storm, or tempest." The inversion of plot and characters in *The Tempest* and *Mama Day* functions to highlight the power and capabilities of black women. Indeed, it can safely be accomplished that Gloria Naylor has taken a sign from the Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for creating her novel more inspiring and by this effort her novel becomes one of her best novels. Naylor's reconsideration of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in *Mama Day* not only includes more women, but also empowers them. Naylor creates a female, African-American version of Prospero and departs from *The Tempest's* accent on male political structures to stress the importance of female bonds. Like Shakespeare's romance, *Mama Day* takes place on a charmed, isolated island. Naylor renounces the original crime in *The Tempest*.

Mama Day's character further departs from Prospero's caring and believing by her importance on female bonds. *The Tempest* revolves in the region of jealousies and revengeful natures of Shakespeare's male characters, *Mama Day* is driven by the interconnections of the women. In *The Tempest*, Prospero desires to take revenge towards his dishonest brother Antonio. In *Mama Day*, the novel chronicles the characters' retracing of their female birthright. *Mama Day* tries to understand the importance of three women in her life: Sapphira Wade, the slave who started the Day family line; Ophelia, *Mama Day's* mother; and Cocoa, *Mama Day's* grandniece (Erickson 244). In contrast to Shakespeare's Prospero, Naylor makes *Mama Day* not only more commanding and moral, but also alters the prominence of the novel to the importance of maintaining motherly bonds in African-American life.

## 3 SUPERNATURAL IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S

## MAMA DAY

*Mama Day* is a woman of supernatural power and magic. Through which she helps and controls the Willow Springs. Ruby, a witch creates an artificial tempestuous atmosphere, targeting *Mama Day's* dearest one Cocoa, Gloria Naylor through creating magic continues her fiction. Through her characters the author brings out the fact that everything is possible. *Miranda* does not practice magic regularly but in the time of crisis she uses her sorcery and strength, "Some of *Miranda's* 'magic' therefore, consists of psychological approach aided by the useful symbol." Though possessed with the powers to raise the standard of the living of her Willow Spring, She along with her people preferred only recognition and authoritative power in the society but not financial upliftment.

The novel has two subplots, which are introduced in part I. The first plot concerns a young woman, Bernice Duvall, who is hopeless to have a child and elicits to help *Mama Day*. She takes matters into her own hands with unsuccessful attempt. *Mama Day* steps in and offers to help if only Bernice will follow her guidance. Finally, with *Mama Day's* help, Bernice becomes pregnant. The second plot concerns with another neighbour Ruby, who is suspected of using mystical means to whip another woman's lover. She is possessive and prone to jealousy, mistrust, and revenge and has been a threat of hurt. Eventually people begins to avoid both her and her new husband.

In Part II, George and Cocoa visits Willow Springs after four years. He is welcomed into the family and society. The Day women inform George and Cocoa they plan to have a party for the couple to celebrate their visit. George gets to know the tales and customs of the island, though he is not aware of them. Bernice and her husband have had a son. Bernice is affectionate towards him, but cannot avoid misfortune from unusual when being killed during a storm. Ruby's possessiveness has become bitter and brutal. Thus allowing none to come closer towards her. When she suspects Junior Lee has his eyes on Cocoa, she turns her rage on the younger woman with fierce consequences. However, Ruby underestimates the cost of messing with someone *Mama Day* loves. George and Cocoa fight because of the supernatural powers of Ruby and the storm hits. They both fear that the party will separate them and the hope of Ruby would be achieved.

The storm hits, bringing George and Cocoa together again. When Cocoa awakes, she finds she

has come down with a strange illness. Mama Day understood quickly that Ruby has done something to her Baby Girl, and goes on to deal with her. When Ruby refuses to come out to meet her, Mama Day takes up revenge. The storm has caused vast damage, including the death of Little Caesar Duvall and the demolition of the bridge to the mainland. George is passionate with repairing the bridge, and threatens to swim across in order to get help for his wife. Mama Day instructs Dr. Buzzard to tell George about the bad luck that has been performed on Cocoa. George did not believe, even when Mama Day tells him the same thing and thus adding the truth that Cocoa is dying. When he finds a worm from Cocoa's body, he decides to return to Mama Day, who sends him to execute an unusual task. In his attempt to do as her orders, he falls victim to a heart attack, during which he goes to Cocoa and holds her as he dies. She despairs over the loss of her husband. Mama Day returns with her to New York to clean out their residence, Cocoa moves to Charleston and She finally remarries and has children. She being 104 years old, Mama Day knows well that she is dying, and savors the moments left in her life. She knows well that Cocoa is only at the beginning of her journey, and now being calmed down found their peace.

#### 4 MOTHER-DAUGHTER NARRATIVE

Cocoa Day's personal description contributes to the transparent nature of Sapphira Wade's story. In other words, Cocoa's experience of migration shapes her ancestor's story of dependence and fight. Jo Malin's work, "The Voice of the Mother"-Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies, focuses on how a daughter's autobiography is inextricably related to her mother's story.

To expose the story of Mama Day, Naylor makes use of three alternating voices. The first voice is omniscient, folksy narrator provides the description, relating the behavior of the islanders, including Mama Day and her sister Abigail. A second voice belongs to Abigail's granddaughter (Ophelia) who comes back of her light skin. She lives in New York City, and comes back to Willow Springs on the time of Candle Walk. There she meets George Andrews, an engineer without any family. He narrates the story in third voice.

#### 5 WOMANHOOD IN MAMA DAY

Naylor's characters are associated with each other and through this connectivity they portray

the picture of female unity. Mama Day as a fosterer fosters every islander and mostly looks after the females. Strong community reaction is evident in the behavior of Miranda and Abigail, and it spreads through the whole island. Ruby, the witch snatched the husband of another woman to satisfy her sexual desire. Cocoa, on the other hand, also exhibits a character of brave black woman, who uses her husband, George at her will and wish. While loving a person and calling him 'son of a bitch' at the same time is quite noteworthy. So, the novel is a mirror of black community and clearly reflects the **women superiority and women bonding** through their co-operation and lively participation in the society.

Definition of womanhood takes place in the Day family graveyard in Willow Springs. Cocoa Day is basically talking to George's burial ground, and George speaks back. First is participatory, call and response ritual of African, thus African-American, orality. Second is participation for the true mediation of cultural memory. Thompson points to Naylor's use of call-and-response as a pointer of the novel's placement within the black allegorical belief. Naylor tries to represent the voice of the black women through her writings-the collective voice of the women who try to empower and take care for each other, who give a little strength to each other as and when needed. In the Women of Brewster Place she projects black women who are totally fascinated by the immoral system. But, later they gain control of themselves such as Nedeed women in Linden Hills do. These women come into view from far away city life but manage their own fortune, in the glow of their own experiences.

#### 6 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In Mama Day the way of introducing the relationship between Sapphira Wade and Cocoa Day, Naylor uses paratextual documents at the beginning of the story narration. These documents help frame her novel within the history of black dependence. They include a family tree showing Sapphira Wade's descendants.

#### 7 WRITING STYLE IN MAMA DAY

The novel is written in both the first person and third person omniscient points of view. It is told in first person in the form of a conversation between Ophelia and George, and then switches to third person omniscient narration when looking over the shoulder of Mama Day. The dialogue portion of

the novel is written to allow George and Ophelia to tell the story of their relationship. The third person point of view allows us to share Mama Day's opinion and explanations as well as her actions through the voice of the narrator. This allows a much larger scope for the story.

The novel offers a very close point of view, not only into the individual relationship of a married couple, but also into the mind of a woman whose age and maturity has made her both influential and wise.

## 8 MAMA DAY THEMES

The theme of people and identity is vital in the novel. The Day family is at the middle of Willow Springs with its strong ancestry; however the origins are lost to history. The exact identity of Sapphira Wade is lost, as is the nature of her relationship with Bascombe Wade. Still, it is likely his blood that runs through her descendants veins, children like, have glow skin and eyes. It is this paleness causing Cocoa's crisis of identity, even though she has a strong and loving family. George has no family, yet he has a strong identity, as he was trained to live in the present and rely only on himself. Still, he longs for relationship, which is why he is tempted to stay on Willow Springs where he feels accepted, and why he longs for several children of his own.

## 9 CONCLUSION

Mama Day shows a nonstop progression in her artistic imagination. Gloria Naylor creates the perfect conjure woman in Mama Day. She is much closer to her roots than the rest of Willow Springs, as is demonstrated with her conversations with her dead father and her experience while making the wedding quilt. She inherits her mantle of power from her great grandmother who the reader knows is versed in midwifery and witchcraft from the prefatory documents of the novel. Mama Day follows in her footsteps as a midwife and herbal doctor to her people. Obviously,

being called Mama Day or Little Mama by her entire community, even by her sister, she carries the honorary name of Mother. We can conclude that though the society is ruled the so called Gods of the society they are nothing but hypocrites who cannot check control or curb their desires. They want to dominate the weaker sex on petty subjects like color sex expression behavior language and attitude. They psychologically torture of the woman and a woman has no other option but to suffer the injustice. In the end its pathetic when Miranda begs George to give her a single moment, even a finger-tip to touch her. She needs George but he does not need her. He does not trust her, still she is willing to help and guide him safely through the extra mile where the others had stumbled. The chains of relations do not make any barriers or control over the male dominancy. Be it is a son or a father or a husband.

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