

## JOURNEY FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MAGIC REALISM IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*

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### Abstract

The term magic realism, traditionally associated with Latin American men's writing, has been known by different, and often contradictory definitions. It can be a valid term to describe a number of characteristics common to a corpus of work, and can be considered as an aesthetic category different from others such as Surrealism or Fantastic literature, with which it has often been compared. Furthermore, magic realism has viability as a contemporary international mode and is particularly suitable to women writers from minority ethnic groups. Naylor sets the realistic style of magical realism in *Mama Day* (1988). It delivers a novel, fairy narrative, and classical delight. The two central cultural spaces and *Mama Day* male-female characters are cross-cultural exchange matters, and Naylor uses the interdisciplinary technique. A fictional canon strengthened through myth and symbolism is used to allude to the plot's subject and significant events that would gradually emerge and become more visible in the novel.

Keywords: Magic realism, minority, ethnic group, myth, and symbolism

### Introduction:

Gloria Naylor presents the essence of Africanism in her third novel *Mama Day* (1988). Her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* celebrates African women's fortitude against all odds in their lives, and *Linden Hills* highlights the dangers of mimicking the western life without holding to one's roots. *Mama Day* can be called a novel of African spirit, as the work dwells upon an African matriarch in a secluded island, strongly bonded with nature and natural living with extensive use of symbols like the storm symbolizing the power of Nature; the ledger, walking stick symbolizing patriarchal domination, the quilt symbolizing the history and the island symbolizing black matriarchal power. Charles Wilson in his work, *Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion*, has stated that the novel *Mama Day* –

is at once a romantic tale chronicling the emergent relationship of main characters Cocoa and George and also a narrative enigma that delineates every possible influence on this relationship: familial, historical, psychological, social, gendered, spiritual and mystical. (Wilson 87).

Henry Louis Gates asserts that –in the history of the African-American literary tradition, perhaps no other author has been more immersed in the formal history of that tradition than Gloria Naylor.(Gates, ix) In *Mama Day*, Naylor presents Nature in all its glory. It brings out the richness and the incredible power of Nature in a remote island inhabited by African Americans, far away from white influence. She brings out the simple lives of islanders living in close proximity to nature and weaves a tale about their joys and woes, revolving around nature and natural setting. Her concept of nature is opposed to the Eurocentric theory of exploitation and control. She reinstates the African American belief that man has to live in harmony with nature, accept its nurturing capacity, and bear its fury. Alice Walker through Shug in *The Color Purple* reiterates this: –...

one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it came to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed...I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it ( *The Color Purple* 98).

These lines prove the close affinity of African Americans with Nature. Jia, Lisa Lau pointed out that liberation and harmony is the quilt frame work of *Mama Day*–The writing of Naylor and other African-American female authors before the 1970s was in juxtaposition. She discussed themes: women's solidarity, socio-economic inequality of women, the pasteurization of the culture of middle- class African Americans, sexuality for women, broader US society.

Afro-American urban myths are new mechanisms for female Africans. It gave birth to the concept of flight, resurrected the idea of triviality, and empowered southern African folklore. The flight theory empowered African-American women and resulted in female emancipation from southern folklore. Fred Metting emphasized the flight theory among African-American writers as –Three contemporary African-American novelists: Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall and Gloria Naylor, have reclaimed:

The rich, multiple possibilities of the idea of flight. Women writers remind us once again of various dimensions of the concept of flight. These writers trace several meanings of flight in their work, from historical realities of slave resistance and escape to the post-emancipation diaspora of blacks to the sordid powers of creative imagination. These writers have restored flight to its former complexity and value through their clever use of seminal African-American

folktale about flying Africans, a tale of central importance to the novels of *Song of Solomon*, *Praise song for the Widow*, and *Mama Day*" (Metting).

*Mama Day* is a huge step forward in Naylor's career as a writer. She used rotating narrators to vary between thematic and novel authenticity, and she coined the term "magic realism" to describe women's emancipation.

Magic realism is a modern art form of language imposed on reality by certain magic elements or illogical events. Naylor's mystical features include the magic of the enigmatic figure, Willow Creek Island, and Miranda's ultra-capabilities. Naylor interpreted the narrative properties of the multi-angle, underlining the typical black community. Other narrative strategies, including the tendencies of past and current fiction and the stream of awareness, are also becoming increasingly important to the artistic impact of *Mama Day*. Bell Hooks asserted that language leads to triumph and the most profound struggle for a place in the fictional account.

We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. A language is also a site of struggle—the oppressed struggle in language to rewrite, reconcile, and renew themselves. Our words are not without meaning. They are putting up a fight—resistance. A language is also a place of struggle (Hooks).

Through magic realism, *Mama Day* seeks empowerment through magic realism. It focuses on Naylor's supernatural reality in specific fictional mechanisms, such as narrative fabrications, enigmatic male and female figures, magical environments, and other black heritage and folklore themes. Naylor was included in the design of Willow Springs. *Mama Day* reflects the distinct background of the African-American cultural roots. It controls the place with magical and spiritual strength while Cocoa faces it. He is a firm believer in magical realism. Leal, Luis emphasized that magic plays an essential role in human beings "The real magic lies in human potential and in knowing that by searching within ourselves, we can create marvels.

Naylor draws on stories spoken and retold through vocal customs like —Shakespeare, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison to weave tales of her own. She reinterprets those traditions for her purposes. According to Gates, African-American authors usually borrow literary texts from other African American writers, either professionally or without acknowledgement. In his view, "the Afro-American literary legacy is best represented as a long and distinguished history of failed attempts to construct a new narrative space. A common theme in Afro-American literature is referred to as the so-called black experience" (Gates Jr.). Naylor compared her work to Dante's *Inferno* and Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which both deal with the themes of reconciliation, sorcery, and spirituality. According to Peter Erickson,

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, is undeniably a return to Shakespeare's Speare, I would suggest that Naylor's work does not reaffirm Shakespeare's authority and the version of tradition it sustains; rather, Naylor critically revises Shakespeare to such a significant degree as to reorient our sense of how literary tradition operates.

Hence, *Mama Day* is a re-vision of Shakespeare's artistry where all the characters are moved from one place to another. Sanders has examined Shakespeare's influence and borrowed the literary text from the African-American novels; especially in Naylor's *Mama Day*. Sanders claims that the novel brings back forgotten people to life and serves as a political call to arms. Naylor uses her borrowings from Shakespeare to reach her conclusions. In a book where Miranda, the protagonist, controls the barrier that divides the two states, she exerts her white magic to influence the residents and locations around her, as she is a fairy. Miranda's *Mama Day* symbolizes her characters will see themselves in her daughter's strange mystical qualities and extraordinary nurturing powers.

According to Susan Meisenheider, Euro-African elements influence the unrealistic set of magical realism. —And it conjures, which is considered magical or —unreal by —Western standards because blacks having power is unimaginable—that promotes this dislocation, she says (Meisenheider). Through the collision of these two words, slavery and empowerment provide a black woman's subjectivity is provided. They represented these slaves in conventional accounts of black servitude as the female protagonists, at the hands of their peers, are powerless. However, Naylor provides a different interpretation of ebony who refuses to be weak. Their descriptions of black servitude depicted enslaved women as completely weak and in the service of their masters. While Naylor presents a different interpretation of a woman who refuses to be feeble, she is unable to discuss the alternatives. The emancipation of black women through magic realism has been shown both to engage with history, by manipulating narrative conventions as symbolic acts of cultural resistance or black empowerment, and to reject history for a more static vision. Nesrin Yavaş emphasizes the importance and significance of black female empowerment.

The magical, the mythical, and the supernatural in the novel affect a black mythical, matrilineal history, and cultural lore with which black women can constantly write themselves and their experiences into the gaps and silences of history. However, as previously stated, regressing to a more static, mythical past is not the path to black female empowerment and agency on *Mama's Day*."

Naylor's *Mama Day* is a multicultural narrative structure. She created diverse peers from geographical locations and cultural boundaries that enlightened the magic and mysticism legends of white-dominant society. Courtship relationships are important in *Mama Day* because they are linked with other cultural

space protagonists and are beautifully presented in the novel. It is a collection of individual occurrences. The ambiguous story follows with mysterious events and a romantic exaggeration between Cocoa and George's significant leads. Interestingly, the story is well-known for its exploration of spiritual and theological topics. Naylor's ability as a storyteller is consistent with her intellectual and moral goals. The most interesting perspective is the novel's musical reciprocation of sounds and frameworks, which lends the plot a hypnotic quality. Naylor is astute in integrating the enchanted connectivity of individuals with species, with Christ, and with others. She personifies Cocoa and George's black gendered and white-centric romantic relationships. According to Susan Meisenheider, who explained the romance of Gloria Naylor's protagonists writes-

In *Mama Day* Naylor narrates the love story of two black people from strikingly different backgrounds-George, orphaned in the urban North, has grown up in an institution run by whites; and Cocoa, doted on by two black mother figures, has been drenched through the relationship that develops between these two characters, one the product of a white world, the other of an emphatically black one, Naylor deals with the issue of maintaining black cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to order, control, and define black people (Meisenheider).

Their blossoming love exemplifies the unexplained essence of life that Naylor emphasizes: perplexing, strange, chaotic, yet everlasting and irresistible.

the way we saw it, American ain't entered the question at all when it come to our land: Sapphira was African-born, Bascombe Wade was from Norway, and it was the 18 and 23'ing that went down between them two put deeds in our hands. And when we got it, we weren't even Americans; we were slaves. And the laws in Georgia and South Carolina prohibiting slaves from owning anything do not apply because the land was not then--and is not now--in either of these states. (*Mama Day* 5).

The black matriarchy celebrates *Mama Day*, Naylor's black mysticism empowered the black community. Naylor addresses black women's spirituality by emphasizing the relevance of Mama Day's matrilineal heritage. She spends the first pages of the novel visually with a sales bill and a family tree, and through oral storytelling from the residents of Willow Springs. The family matriarch, Sapphira Wade, is significant because she begins the family tree, which is primarily about family history. Women have "supernatural spirituality" that extends beyond the realm of logic to reach out and enter the lives of those they claim to connect the tradition of knowing the history and influence of spirituality runs

through generations of women in the family. Naylor's narrative chronology depicts finding supernatural spirituality through the day's matrilineal thread. To bridge the distance between exploration and use, women must choose to use this mystical spirituality. *Mama Day's* ties to the other place and her experiences with Sapphira Wade who allowed her to access the power she had. Furthermore, Naylor redesigned the matriarchal characters from a feminist perspective and boosted the matriarchal survival view of *Mama Day*. "The unique feature of Willow Springs is that a matriarchal order has re-emerged after a long patriarchal interregnum represented by two generations of seven sons. The main evidence for matriarchal survival is in the character of Mama Day, the conjured woman who gives the story its name, but one can also recognize how time is conceptualized on her island, particularly at the cemetery.

Could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of the lightning to start the kindling going under the medicine pot. She turned the moon into slave, the stars into swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four (*Mama Day* 3).

Sapphire Wade is transformed into a 'conjure woman', as the above lines emphasize a great-grandmother or a mythical mother. Evil spirits haunted Mama Day. The residents of Willow Springs inherited a belief in the metaphysical from their voodoo magic African forebears. Mama Day symbolizes the mysterious and is endowed with her Sapphire Wade, a servant.

In the power of Sapphira Wade one is reminded of the power of conjuring women in African tribal cultures, such as Chinua Achebe presents in *Things Fall Apart*, in which Chielo, priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of Hills and Caves, carries the favorite child of Okonkwo to Agbala, temporarily holding in her hands the happiness of Okonkwo. *Mama Day* thematic concerns deal with a span linking Willow Springs to American folklore. The main idea of the fictional novel is the bridge or correlating unrelated phenomena. *Mama Day* plays a significant role in this event. She emphasizes the importance of accepting the world in all its forms. Whenever she needs inspiration, *Mama Day* communes with the mothers and then returns to her everyday life to hone her skills as an aim-hunter. Although *Mama Day* has a three-dimensional perspective, the plot is simple. It also talks about the romance and wedding of Cocoa and George.

## Conclusion:

Naylor's *Mama Day* creates a 'historical fallacy' and a landscape of geographical fiction based on African characters with Euro-American elements. A novel is set in the future about an ideal imaginary

society known as Utopia. On the contrary, *Mama Day* creates a world where women recover their status as human beings capable of thinking and deciding about their own lives. The novel, however, does not present a reversal of patriarchy in the shape of a Utopian land dominated by women. Instead, it constructs a space where human beings may be whole, embodying traditionally defined female and male features. Thus, Gloria Naylor through her Afro-centric novel *Mama Day* brings the power of nature, highlighting the benefits of living close to Nature while closely linking it with the power of a woman tracing back to African folklore, beliefs, and traditions. Naylor's immense knowledge of human nature is revealed through the sagacious sayings of her characters especially, the indomitable *Mama Day*.

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