

MAMA DAY (1988): FEMININE ACQUIESCENCE OR DEFIANCE

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Abstract

Ethnicity, identity and multiculturalism in a country like the United States have since become very important entities in the global context of class, race and gender. American Black women writers in their fictional works have envisioned conducting a systematic analysis of all those issues with which Black women and Black men have grappled since the emergence of the so-called women's liberation movement of the early 1970s. In the novels of prominent African-American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor, it is mostly Black men against Black women, the former being the tormentors and oppressors treating their female counterparts as doormats, objects of mere pleasure and sexual gratification

Keywords: - sociological, consciousness, Picaresque..

Higher Education &
Research Society

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Gloria Naylor, born on 25th January, 1950, has been labeled as a writer whose fictions get narrated as difficult, utterly original psychic, sociological journeys to the interior of human consciousness. What the reader witnesses in her novels are terrifying situations, born out of gendered disequilibrium as a consequence of male-induced oppression and discrimination. The Black women personages, as the central novelistic protagonists reconstruct their lives and realize their dreams, by undertaking a picaresque type movement of freedom. This journey of freedom also involves the transition of identity, enslavement to emancipation, from ironic suppression to alazonic dignity. The resurgence of identity, rootedness and belongingness, constitutes the final vindication of the colored feminine sensibility as applying to Naylor's women characters.

Many critics have compared Naylor's work to other African-American women writers including Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Critically, Naylor's works have been identified as reflecting the ability to portray the lives of African American women without reducing them to stereotypes or claiming to have represented "the" African-American experience. In this connection, Roz Kaveney says:

"In her first three novels, Gloria Naylor described urban African-American life with a graceful vigor that transcended, but did not discard polemic; she found ways of portraying the lives of individuals, and in particular of women, who were damaged and scarred, but not overwhelmed by racial and sexual oppression." (1).

Gloria Naylor's third novel *Mama Day* (1988) symbolizes in its narrative the preoccupation of Black writers in general and Black women in particular about the blessings and curses, the benefits and the losses, that accrued with the migration from rural to urban areas, in other words from intuitive to rational life. Like other novels of Naylor, the territorial location of the plot and the action is at Willow Springs at sea-island. Subsequently the chief characters in the novel have been labelled as sea-islanders and two basic characteristics of the African-American culture get testified: the persistence of the past in the present followed by myth and archetype become the participating motives in the fictional present of the novel. Considering the plot, the very opening statement in the text mentions a legend called as the legend of "Sapphira Wade". Sapphira is portrayed as a

conjuring woman, in a peculiar dress and displaying an exceptional strength of character and demeanor. The opening of the plot- narrative talks about a family tree beginning with Sapphira, with the next generation consisting of her seven sons: Elijah, Elisha, Joel, Daniel, Joshua, Amos and Jonah Day. Jonah Day himself begets seven sons: Mathew, Mark , Luke , Timothy, James, John and John Paul. These fourteen men, as the sons of two generations , symbolize a clear movement in the biblical format, the transition from the Old to the New Testament nomenclatures. Thus, the Biblical touch invokes an archetypal significance for the characters , besides the movement from one order to another.

The mention of Willow Springs and Sapphira Wade not only opens the text for the reader but also gives evidence of Naylor's typical arresting style, a style energized with eagerness and passion:

"Willow Springs. Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A True conjure woman : satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her." (2).

Sapphira is neither black, cream or red, with the power to heal using the moon as slave and the stars as swaging cloth.

Naylor explores the themes of self- identity and the contrast between the mainstream society and an isolated black community of Willow Springs especially, "black women in particular with the gains and losses that have come with the move from rural to urban, from intuitive to general life".(3). Naylor talks about , in a racially separate African-American community of Willow Springs, a mythical sea-island where the Day family has lived since the time of slavery. Willow Springs takes us into the luminous world, where understanding comes through the mysterious, the ethereal, that permeates the whole self. The plot deals with the story of Cocoa and George's courtship, besides talking about George's and Cocoa's fateful summer visit to Willow Springs.

Gloria Naylor creates an outspoken character named Ophelia alias Cocoa or Baby Girl. The first time Cocoa is introduced , she is on her way to an interview at Andrews and Stein, an engineering firm. When George Andrews asks her name, she replies:

"I'm used to answering to Cocoa, i guess we might as well start now because if I get the position and anyone here calls me Ophelia, I'll be so busy concentrating on my work , it won't register. I truly doubt I could have moved up as fast as I did at my last job." (4).

Cocoa's reply makes her self- confident. She does not just reply, "Cocoa", but also goes on to discuss her tenacity as a worker. George, fascinated by the nickname, wants to know more about it's origin, and not about Cocoa's qualifications, for which she feels quite agitated and answers, "I've had it from a child- in the south it's called a pet name. My

grandmother and great aunt gave it to me..." (5). Cocoa is aggressive and shows her self-confidence to George and leaves Willow Springs for New York.

George and Cocoa have little in common, but they gradually fall in love and finally get married. 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, raised by two black mother figures, has been drenched in the traditions of the rural South. Through the relationship that develops between these two characters, Naylor deals with the issue of maintaining a black cultural identity in the world of whites simply to order, to control, and define black people. In the concluding twenty pages of the novel, however, our gradual building suspicions as to the fate of George are finally confirmed: in reality he has been dead throughout the entire book; Cocoa has been talking to him in her family Graveyard in Willow Springs-and , ofcourse, he has been talking back. Although Cocoa has since remarried and had children, she has continually returned to the graveyard since George's death in 1985 to keep his memory alive and to continue to tell their unfinished stories.

The world of Willow Springs sustains Cocoa and George's power to continue their talking and listening even after physical death. African religions which have shaped Christianity in the Black South tend to stress the belief that one's life does not end with physical death; rather, death is "door between two worlds", a rite which allows to contact with the dead. Such a belief stresses the cycle of human life, as typified by the Bakongo cosmology of the "four moments of the sun"- its rising (birth), ascending (maturity), setting (death), and , midnight (life in another world). This cosmology authorizes the "everlasting continuity of all righteous men and women".

Mama Day is a matriarch, nearly 100 years of age , and the island is as deeply rooted in her as she is in it. George knows everything about Mama Day and about her ways of herbal medicine. Mama Day is trusted and respected by nearly everyone on the island. She can read, every nuance in the land as well as people's personalities and is also reputed for having a second sight. Mama Day spends time with her dead ancestors as spirits. These spirits tell everything through premonitions.

Mama Day simply functions as the existential catalyst, exerting a special guiding and shaping force. Infact, the very character and personality of Mama Day attains mythic proportions as the alazonic diva around whom the other personages in this novel, male and female, are put into orbit. The imagistic pattern that does emerge is one of the constellations of humans, the Black men and women who undertake the task of reconstructing and redefining their lives, relationships and destinies. Of course, as in the other novels, Naylor's African- American feminist sexual politics comes into play, in which

women have an edge over their male counterparts, maybe with the exception of George who arouses hope and affirmation in Cocoa's life.

The climax of *Mama Day* is scary and sad, George ends his life for his wife. Cocoa's life is threatened but saved through the combined efforts of those who love her the best. Cocoa is saved by the altruistic hell, rendered by her grandmothers, Abigail and Mama Day besides the sacrificial devotion of George, who in spite of his physical ailment resurrects the life of Cocoa till his very last breath. Mama Day, attains an almost biblical status of a redeemer for the community of Blacks who have settled down at Willow Springs since generations, something reminiscent of what happens in Linden Hills.

George turns out to be a Christ figure who dies to save Cocoa. As a pragmatic person with a positive bent of mind, George possesses the passion of Redemption which governs his very self. In reality, "It is the quality of passion of his awareness that can be called as radical innocence. Radical first because it is inherent in his character, and goes to the root or foundation of it". George as well attains an almost mythical status as a character simply because in the novel, he comes, "somewhere between the divine and the all too human." (6). George's exemplary devotion to his wife Cocoa becomes an instance of the "sacred" mist the tribulations of a demonic society that only breeds suffering, agony and existential tribulations.

When the narrative ends in *Mama Day* George is already dead. An altruistic alazon who gave his life simply to grant Cocoa renewed life. Thus, for Cocoa, George not only becomes an instrument of renewal or rejuvenation but also a Black African male, who unlike his societal counterparts, does not laud over his spouse, discriminate against her patriarchal pride and prejudice, not does he exhibit any kind of male aggression and domination against a helpless female.

Mama Day's voice serves "a spiritual tone in the narrative, a guide to the elemental truths". There is "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (7), which is served in *Mama Day*. *Mama Day* is richly southern in its setting and treatment of the past. The past evolves as a familial, cultural and racial force in the closed, isolated community of Willow Springs. There is a great bonding of "identity, purpose and strength for survival" (8) of realm of "matriarchal mythmaking" (9).

It is this triumph of the human spirit and celebration of the female experience that unite such radically and culturally the works like *Mama Day*. The novel is about "the way one generation of woman affects another, and the way the strong heritage of gentleness and anger, courage and frailty, can shape individual consciousness through several generations of family." (10). What makes *Mama Day* an exceptional work among African-American culture expositions is the fact, that the existence of human superiority, as invariably anti-woman, gets totally demolished. The alazon-eiron existential algebra works

in the novel in the feminist- oriented spectrum. *Mama day* , thus, reflects "contempt for femaleness or things associated with femaleness- body , sex, desire, need..."(11).

As already mentioned the clearly visible transition in the plot of *Mama day* from the Biblical Old to New Testament, not only reflects the archetypal importance as applying to the characters, but another explicit factor invokes a Shakespearean ambience. Two central female characters, Miranda (*Mama Day*) and Ophelia (*Cocoa*) clearly echo Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. George, Ophelia's husband gives up his reading of *King Lear* only to meet his lady love for their first date and later of n a discussion about the same play provides an excuse for the lovers to meet. George and Ophelia implicitly to be lovers but as a matter of discretion, cannot admit the same openly.

To conclude my paper, I would like to say that in the history of *Bascombe and Sapphira*, Naylor presents a story which is a story of liberation and metamorphosis of the human self, though, "the inversion of gender radically alters this story: in a fireball bound for Africa". (12). The triumph of the Black woman in her alazonic incarnation gets symbolized, when *Sapphira* departs from the man , who bought but did not master her. From the thematic and gendered point of view, it can be safely assumed that in *Mama Day*, Naylor allows Afro- American female to come forth as a character in fiction ,"engaged in the business not of abstract reconciliation but of concrete and dramatic living. "(13) . *Mama day* enables the reader to probe still deeper into the organic life of Afro- American culture, especially the irreducible instincts related to the resurgent and reawakened Afro- American female, who no longer desires , nor can tolerate, to confine herself and her identity within the cloistered confines of a male- induced eironic status.

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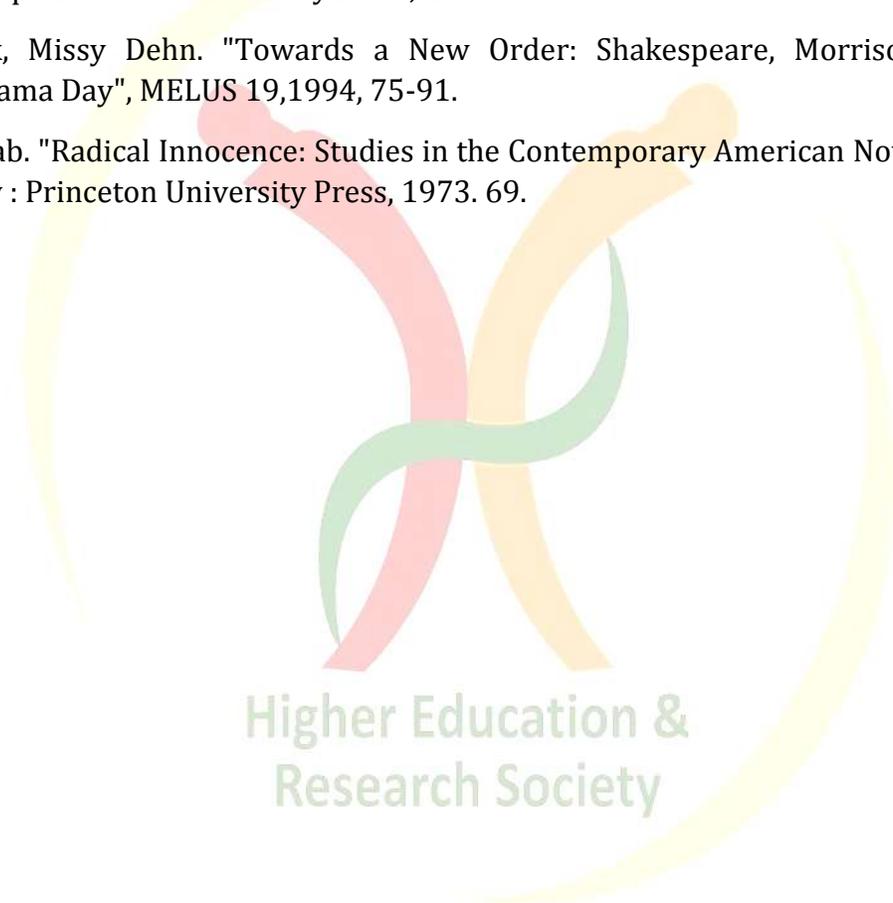
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