

Decoding (Coded Language) in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

G.SARAVANA PRABU

ABSTRACT

Coding is an African traditional practice of transferring a message through a set of signals. Instead of using everyone's language to transfer a message, coders use certain codes to signify a message to a particular person. Reflecting Naylor's use of coding in her novel *Mama Day*, this article explores how the mother character uses coded language to save her family. Depicting as one of the most powerful conjure women, Mama Day knows that Cocoa can't be saved anywhere in the world unless George believes in African traditional practices and gives his hand to save her. Having brought up in the western culture and considering African traditional practices as superstitious, George could neither understand nor accept African traditional practices. Understanding his mind set, Mama Day uses coded language, which George could decipher only at the time his sacrifice to save his wife Cocoa.

Keywords: Coded language, traditional practices, western culture, conjure, signals.

Coding is an African traditional practice of transferring a message through a set of signals. Instead of using everyone's language to transfer a message, coders use certain codes to signify a message to a particular person. Joan N. Radner opines, "Coding occurs in the context of complex audience, in situations in which some of the audience may be competent to decode the message, but others – including those who might be dangerous – are not competent (or not willing) to do so" (Brunvand 147).

George and Cocoa plan to stay in Willow Springs for two weeks on their vacation. Mama Day has a sense of inconvenience regarding their visit. She feels, "It ain't gonna be an easy two weeks no way you look at it, so don't start getting used to cutting corners now" (MD 173). Nature indicates signs of evil. The air in the woods is heavy, the birds are motionless and there are no butterflies. Sensing danger, she prays, "I ain't up to all this, Lord. I'm an old woman. And I'm tired, tired of knowing things I can't do nothing about. Whatever is waiting in here today, I just ain't ready to face" (MD 174).

Mama Day goes to Ruby's place and tells her that since Cocoa and George are coming to stay for two whole weeks, she needs some ripe peaches. Ruby says that she has plenty but Mama Day leaves empty handed. The real reason for Mama Day's visit is to inform Ruby about their visit. Through her visit she warns her not to create any mess because she expects that George should not see any unpleasant thing. She believes that Ruby understands her warning as "There was a year's worth of anger here" (MD 173).

Ruby comes to meet George and Cocoa with Junior Lee. She talks with them as if she belongs to their family. While leaving she hands the peaches to Mama Day for the party that they are going to celebrate. She informs her that she has brought the peaches because Mama Day need not strain to come to her place to get it. Everyone in that room knows the surface meaning but Mama Day does understand that Ruby indirectly means that she will not trouble Cocoa and George and that there will not be any reason for Mama Day to worry. Codes express deeper meaning than words and so Mama Day had warned Ruby through a code and the latter understood it.

Mama Day understands the ill-omen and in order to train George for the task that awaits him, she takes him for fishing. Unaware of the forthcoming events he is surprised to see her without the walking cane and asks whether she can manage

without it because they have to walk on their own to The Sound. She says that as she is feeling better there is no need for the walking cane. She directs him to The Sound through the east woods. There are other ways but she chooses this way because it is wilder and he has to learn more lessons:

They were a bit wilder, stray creepers to tangle up his foot and let him stumble, a sight more hilly so he'd get a little winded, patches of waist-high bulrush for him to wade through. She'd keep him from the real danger: stinging nettles, poison sumac, or the suck mud that could break an ankle. This here was just to be a little spanking. (MD 205)

At the beginning he finds it comfortable to walk but "He's so tired his knees are wobbling by the time they get home" (MD 207). He requests Cocoa to wake him for breakfast and goes to bed without even removing his suede sneakers. Cocoa becomes angry on seeing his muddy, sweaty and scratched condition. She fights with Mama Day for taking him to the east woods. She asks why she has given him such a task since his heart is weak. But Mama Day simply ignores her by saying, "Yeah, and mine's been beating more than half a century before he was born. A hike that don't kill me, won't kill him" (MD 208). The superiority of the African woman is in contrast with the New Yorker. Harris shows Naylor's success in giving a picture of the powerful woman conjuror:

Naylor's mama Day (1988) depicts one of the most powerful conjure women in African American literature. Reputed to be able to heal anything that walks on two feet or four, Mama Day can also induce pregnancy in infertile woman, blow up houses by striking her cane against their door, and call forth hurricanes. (Flora and Mackethan 183)

She feels death around her. She knows that a hurricane is going to hit Willow Springs but she feels something different. She cannot exactly point out what is going to happen. Naylor describes her mindset: "This here was real death. But whose? It didn't have to be a who – it could be a what" (MD 226). Felton and Loris point out Mama Day's intuition:

Indeed, Miranda's 'reading' ability brings us to the important concept of divination – the ability to read signs – which is not only an important component of African belief systems but is also crucial to the construction of the novel. Naylor suggests that what is often denoted as second sight or precognition is actually an acute awareness of the behaviour of plant and animal life. For example, Miranda knows of the coming hurricane, not because of supernatural ability, but because she reads actual signs: the more rapid movement of the waves, the hills the crayfish have made, the nests built further up from the water, the deeper burrows of rabbits, the chickens with their backs to the wind. (151)

George and Cocoa give a marriage feast to the neighbours. During the feast Junior Lee's attraction towards Cocoa creates jealousy in Ruby (Junior Lee's wife). After the party Ruby sends a note to Cocoa stating that she has married a fool and invites her to her home. When Cocoa visits her home, Ruby apologises for what her husband has done. This makes Cocoa believe her completely and accepts hair dressing as a token of friendship: "Disguising her jealousy, Ruby pretends to support Cocoa by apologising for Junior Lee's actions, and to compensate for his behaviour she offers to braid Cocoa's hair" (Monica A. Coleman). Ruby performs hoodoo while decorating her hair. She applies a warm solution into her scalp and massages it. She takes different colour braids and asks her to select one but the latter allows her to choose one for her. She chooses white twine and specifies that white goes with any colour dress. She moves her hand on Cocoa's "temples to get the shape of the head before making the first part. A straight part down the middle, north to south." She puts the comb so hard and it scratches her scalp. She takes the warm solution from the round jar and massages it on her scalp. "The second big part crosses the first, going east to west, and this time she dips her fingers into the square jar, massaging hard. North to south, east to west, round to square" (MD 246). Finally Ruby forms braids. As it is a practice to burn the loose hair, she cleans the comb and gives it to Cocoa. The traditional practice followed with hair is revealed through

Cocoa's words: "A ball of hair in my hands to be burned when we were through. A bird will take it and make a nest – you'll have headache all your life. All unspoken and by rote" (MD 246). This understanding of hair is seen in numerous West African cultures:

Among the Ewe, Jukun, Mpogwe, Bantu (Bakongo is a Bantu culture), Benga, Fang, Banita, and Ibibio, it is typical for pieces of hair to be carefully buried or burned so that they would not 'fall into the hands of [conjurers]' who use the hair of enemies to kill them. Stealing someone's hair usually indicates that the thief is trying to steal the other person's soul. (Monica A. Coleman)

Ruby does not hand over all her hair. She collects some and keeps it in her pocket in order to perform hoodoo. Felton and Loris comment:

When faced with the task of defining conjure, scholars often create divisions which, while useful, tend to oversimplify the subject and almost always reflect an ethnocentric bias. To associate conjure with sorcery, witchcraft, or necromancy is to further align it with occult practices which in Western traditions have been perceived to be opposed to Christianity and are, therefore, the work of the devil. One critic prefers to view conjure as being comprised of practices which are natural – using plants to cure – and unnatural – using spells and charms. (147)

The hurricane that hits Willow Springs blows off the bridge connecting the place to the city. Ruby's hoodoo makes Cocoa fall ill. Cocoa thinks it is a kind of virus but she cannot open her eyes easily. When she forces herself to sit up, she sees everything floating as she exclaims: "everything kept swimming in front of me through this crazy gray light. What time was it? How long had I slept? My throat was sand paper and I needed to get to the toilet, but the floor boards were wavering up and down" (MD 259).

Abigail (her grandmother) asserts it is a viral fever. But George cannot see her suffering: "I didn't like your paleness, those splotches of red around your temples, and the constant

sleeping" (MD 260). He needs a doctor to cure her or at least wants to call a doctor to inform the symptoms and get the medicine but he is helpless to do any. He "considers belief in hoodoo, magic, the supernatural, or any manifestation of the nonrational to be not simply misguided but 'pathetic'" (Felton and Loris 184). Mama Day understands the condition and goes to the other place to get help from her ancestors. She thinks of Bernice's son's death. She even knows "*more sorrow coming*" (MD 262). Abigail comes to the other place to meet Mama Day and informs her about Cocoa's illness. As Mama Day knows this earlier, she does not turn her eyes. She tries to forecast the future of Cocoa and then turns to Abigail and informs her that "It's gonna take a man to bring her peace" (MD 263). Mama Day knows that Cocoa can be saved only when George believes in African cultural practices and gives his hand in support. Wilson's opinion of the ancestor's guidance is noteworthy:

As a means of trying to help in the recovery of her great-niece, Mama Day retires to the ancestral home of the Days, referred to as 'the other place' and located in a remote section of the island beyond the family cemetery. The family home is a mystical place where known reality is less discernible. In addition to coming here periodically to gather medicinal herbs, Mama Day often seeks sanctuary in the other place to commune with her ancestors and to seek guidance as she tackles yet another modern dilemma. There is none more baffling than Cocoa's ailment. (90-91)

Mama Day examines Cocoa and understands what Ruby has done to her. She takes a pair of shears and snips down each braid. Then she cuts the braid close to her head. She takes her to the tub of warm water. She collects all the shredded hair and braids and burns them in the back yard. She applies charcoal paste on her head and massages her scalp with a grayish paste. She witnesses the welt on her scalp but does not pay much attention to it. After rinsing the paste from her head, she applies charcoal grains to remove the poison from her head. But she knows "That's out of her hands and she's doing the only thing she can" (MD 265).

Mama Day is ready to give up her life to save Cocoa but she cannot do so because “Baby Girl done tied up her mind and her flesh with George” (MD 265). When George comes home, she tries to inform him what has happened to Cocoa but George with his western mind-set is not ready to listen to her. He does not want to listen and so leaves the place. He wants to take his wife away from the god – for shaken island as soon as possible. Patterson comments:

Black people accepted what some would call superstition and magic, which for them were practical ways of knowing things. Because their way of looking at the world was not accepted by whites or even by some elite blacks, these beliefs were viewed at best as backward and superstitious, at worst as ignorant and evil. (94)

Wilson thinks that “Appreciating the skepticism of a very practical-minded engineer and not wanting to shatter his reality by schooling him on Willow Springs reality, both Abigail and Mama Day are reluctant to tell him the truth (the Willow Springs truth)” (90).

Mama Day knows that he cannot save Cocoa anywhere in the world. Unless he believes and supports her she cannot be saved. He works very hard in constructing the bridge. She knows very well that once the bridge is constructed he will take Cocoa to the city but no western medicine can cure her. So to stop his speed she puts the silver powder on the bridge to electrify the earth. As she expects lightening “hits the bridge, though, taking out the new tarred boards and a day’s worth of work” (MD 272-273). Amy K. Levin states the condition of George as he “acknowledges a conflict between his rationalistic view of the world and Mama Day’s intuitive, mystical knowledge. Mama Day has a broader perspective, which includes George’s assessment of the conflict as well as the problem of finding a worthy successor. She knows that the real battle is over possession of Cocoa” (Kelley 81).

George tries all the possible and impossible ways to take Cocoa out of the island but none of them works. But "he never sees the real kind of bridge between Cocoa and her history, and between her and himself, which they both need to survive" (Felton and Loris 117). Finally he comes to Mama Day to ask for her way of saving Cocoa. Commenting on Naylor's idea on man Fowler points out: "Naylor's novel celebrates those same traditions as restorative and healing. In Naylor's vision, it is the black male who has been corrupted by the value system of the white world, not the black female" (103). Mama Day informs him that she can do many things with her hands "but this time they ain't no good alone" (MD 294) and adds "Now, I got all that in this hand but it ain't gonna be complete unless I can reach out with the other hand and take yours. You see, she done bound more than her flesh up with you" (MD 294). She hands him the walking cane and a ledger and directs him to bring whatever he finds under the red hen in the coop. As Felton and Loris put it

To help him become such a man, Mama Day fashions a ritual for George that is, in every detail, outside the European tradition of heroic quest legends. Sent with Bascombe Wade's receipt for the purchase of Sapphira and John Paul's walking stick carved with water lilies, both emblems of male failure to be everything for women. (121)

The conflict between man and woman is inevitable. Naylor symbolically represents it through the snake carved cane and the hen. According to Levin, "Just as the bird and snake together on the sowo mask suggest the inevitability of conflict, the story that links the chicken and the snake-carved walking stick is repeated over and over in a man's struggle to control one of the strong Day women. The Succession of the Days assured for the time being" (Kelley 82).

George has promised Mama Day earlier in the novel that he will give everything he has to Cocoa: "Mama Day connects the rational world with the mystical world when she asks George to honour the promise he made to Cocoa in the rational world, but to do so by obeying the rules of Willow Springs" (Wilson 95). He

struggles hard to find what is under the red hen. But he finds nothing. He starts to bleed when the hen hits him with its claws and beak. Levin identifies the conjuring of Mama Day when she sends George to the chicken coop: "In addition, both Ruby (because of her name) and the rust-coloured hen are associated with the colour red. The chicken also shares Ruby's massive proportions, her thick neck, and her jealousy; in fact, the two are metaphorically related. Clarissa, like Ruby, ultimately functions as an agent or extension of Mama Day" (Kelley 82).

He starts to laugh when he finds nothing other than his hands. In surprise he thinks, "Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?" (MD 300) He returns with the bleeding hands "Unable to abandon his intense masculine individualism, however, George perverts this ritual by acting another white male role. Refusing to believe his hands are all he is to bring back, frustrated at what he (like the white world) sees as only 'mumbo-jumbo'" as Felton and Loris put it (121). Mama Day understands that Cocoa is going to live. She arranges various things to bring back her health. With the connection that George and Cocoa share, she saves the life of Cocoa by sacrificing George's. After everything has been arranged for Cocoa she visits the coop and cries for George.

George makes Cocoa feel at home in multicultural New York and with Shakespeare, even though at first she complains that 'Shakespeare didn't have a bit of soul.' In return, Cocoa introduces George to the culture of Willow Springs, 'a place...you can't find...on the map,' a place where belief in magic gives it power. Significantly, George's ignorance of his cultural roots combined with his inability to merge his 'Western' rationalism and Mama Day's 'magic' kill him in the end. Nevertheless, his irrevocable connection to Cocoa enables them, even after George's death, to share their respective stories in an on-going effort to find out what really happened.

WORKS CITED

- Coleman, Monica A. "'The Work of Your Own Hands': Doing Black Women's Hair as Religious Language in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." *Soundings* 85.1-2 (2002): 121-139. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 261. Detroit: Gale, 2009. *Literature Resource Centre*. Web. 15 Mar. 2012. <<http://go.galegroup.com/vlib/interchange.at/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100085764&v=2.1&u=wash89460&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>.
- Felton, Sharon, and Michelle C. Loris, eds. *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*. London: Greenwood Press, 1997. Print.
- Flora, Joseph M. "Bible." *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. Machethan. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002. Print.
- Fowler, Virginia C. "A Conversation with Gloria Naylor." *Conversations with Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Maxine Lavon Montgomery. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. 65-69. Print.
- Joan N. Radner. "Coding in American Folk Culture." *American Folklore: An Encyclopaedia*. Ed. Jan Harold Brunvand. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. Print.
- Kelley, Margot Anne, ed. *Gloria Naylor's Early Novels*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999. Print.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Mama Day*. New York: Random, 1988.
- Patterson, Tiffany Ruby. *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005. Print.
- Wilson, Charles E. *Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion*. London: Greenwood Press, 2001. Print.