

Nature, Culture, and Afro-American Identity: Representation of Mother-Figure in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

- Mahboobeh Khaleghi

Abstract: On the island of Willow Springs, off the Georgia coast, the powers of healer Mama Day are tested by her great niece, Cocoa, a stubbornly emancipated woman endangered by the island's darker forces. A powerful generational saga at once tenders overflowing with magic and common sense. Mama Day, who embodies the supernatural, possesses a "gift" that she inherited from her great-grandmother, Sapphira Wade. There is a connection between recovering black women's history of the woman as healer and source of supernatural power and the survival of a people with their ethnic identity intact.

Keywords: Superstitions, Healers, Nature, Community, Maternity, Identity.

The use of natural elements in voodoo and conjuring ties black people, and especially black women, even more closely to the natural side of the nature/culture dichotomy, it represents a supernatural aspect of nature that culture fears because it cannot comprehend it. Conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjurers inherit their aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines. Though not every person of African descent believed in the authenticity of their power, conjurers still proved to be a vital to the survival of life in the New World. Often Conjurers are spoken of as being "two-headed." "The religious specialist," as John W. Roberts calls the conjure figure, "was seen as a kind of generator of life-force and his or her presence in the community as essential to the maintenance of the quality of life that allowed individuals to attain the fullest ontological being" (80). Gloria Naylor makes it clear what her beliefs are, "I happen to believe that there are some people who can take you, or even take their own minds, to other planes. I believe in psychics. There are dimensions we are not privy to" (Carroll 161). Indeed, "to Gloria Naylor, the real world is not the world we experience with our five senses" (Reckley 87). In her novel, *Mama Day*, Naylor fuses the realistic urban world of New York City and the world of the supernatural, the rural south of Willow Springs, which offers a setting for a healing community with roots in female folk tradition and nature. In *Mama Day*, Miranda (Mama Day) is a permanent fixture in domestic space, baking cakes from scratch, quilting, and tending to the

garden at “the Other Place.” Her domesticity quietly extends into her healing work; she depends on the products from the garden and in the woods for the remedies she procures for the community. Her role as midwife and nurse are not separated from her domesticity. Miranda is the central character in this pastoral community as she is living embodiment of great-grandmother Sapphira Wade. The title “Mother” reveals Mama Day's position as a conjure woman. She is rooted in her people and her land and gains wisdom from this connection. She presides over her community as a force of good—spiritual healer, midwife and wise woman. Mama Day is in touch with her identity, she knows her past, and she is even able to communicate with that past. She is able to use her spiritual connection with the past and with others to help people in this life through life-enhancing acts. When someone needs help with a personal problem, Mama is there to help. Through a life spent helping, guiding, and being offered help by the people of the island, Mama Day has come to receive joy from life, and to see life as so valuable that preserving and nurturing it becomes her own life's purpose. Miranda is wise, loving, and stable. She is a good role model of surrogate mother for the contemporary women. She is the undisputed matriarch of her community,

That she is indeed a kind of archetypal mother figure is underscored by her improbable age as well as by her creative powers. She defines the values of Willow Springs and guides its inhabitants just as surely as she exercises the powers of nature [. . .] She also embodies and articulates the philosophy and moral vision that Naylor seems to recommend as an antidote to the gender and racial oppression [. . .] as well as to the spiritual emptiness and corruption she sees at the core of contemporary urban life. (Fowler 118)

Miranda Day receives the name “Mama” not because she has many children of her own, in fact, she has none, but because as midwife, she has “created,” or birthed, most of the inhabitants of Willow Springs. She is also the nurturer and spiritual healer for her community. Miranda's “gifted hands” are indeed a gift passed down through the generations of the Day family. As a descendant of the “greatest conjure woman on earth,” Sapphira Wade, Mama Day's magical power is irrefutable. She is able to harness the power of the island and of her incredible ancestor, and she is able to do miraculous things because of this spiritual connection. As Marjorie Pryse points out, such passing on of the oral tradition with its elements of genealogy, magic and naming, is a particularly female tradition that empowers the women who inherit it (20). Miranda is revered by the people of Willow Springs who listen to her and follow her advice, “Nobody was gonna trifle with Mama Day's, 'cause she know how to use it-her being a direct descendent of Sapphira Wade... Mama Day say no, everybody say no” (*Mama Day* 6). Miranda holds in her hands a mystery and influence that the people of Willow Springs respect and fear because she has skills and knowledge that no one fully understands. Sapphira is a living force in the townspeople's lives, as they

evoke her life and her spirit despite never speaking her name: "Sapphira Wade don't live in the part of our memory we can use to form words" (*Mama Day* 4). She has the power to create, she is the one who gives birth to seven sons and becomes "the Mother who began the Days" (*Mama Day* 262). Everyone's power in Willow Springs was born with Sapphira Wade in 1799,

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. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hands; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medical pot; depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. (*Mama Day* 3)

Sapphira was an American-born slave sold to Bascombe Wade in 1819; and "She married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman's noose, laughing in a burst of flames 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble" (*Mama Day* 3). Sapphira creates "Candle Walk," a celebratory ritual which commemorates the community's foremother. The islanders march throughout the town carrying candles, singing and chanting "Lead on with light, Great Mother" (*Mama Day* 111). They hold the annual Candle Walk to honour the slave who secured her freedom and theirs. The end of slavery on the island simultaneously marks the beginning of the Day family history, which resolves the trauma of slavery and the sexual exploitation of black women. Because of Sapphira's refusal to accept the role of slave and because of her knowledge of nature and female sexuality, she was given the title "witch." Candle Walk, as representative of her essence, signifies vitality and community. It also stand for "the light that burned in a man's heart"—the spirit of Bascombe Wade who loved Sapphira and who surrendered all his land to her and her offspring. Mama Day regards the land as freedom, for it conveys knowledge from her ancestors in the spirit world. The land as representative of history, culture and family becomes the vehicles with which Mama Day's powers are realized. She certainly demonstrates a great deal of power, both spiritual and cultural, and it is clear that her opinion carries a great deal of influence among the people of Willow Springs. Miranda's extraordinary ability to see and hear is not always shrouded in mystery. Her lifelong acquaintance with the woods is responsible for her impressive knowledge since, when "younger, the whole island was her playground; she'd walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the shadow of a summer cottonwood;" so comfortable is she in the woods that "folks started believing John-Paul's little girl became a spirit in the woods" (*Mama Day* 79). After their mother's death, Mama Day, accepting the role of housekeeper to her father, and mother to her sister, Abigail, let her own opportunity for a family slip past her. Instead, she becomes midwife and

“mother” to all of Willow Springs. Roger D. Abrahams notes that the “little mama” role is a common one in African-American society; it is often granted to a young girl who has a “precocious ability to demonstrate her household abilities” (23). The affirmation of life that Mama Day demonstrates in her actions is a result of a spiritual connection to the island and its people. Miranda's communication with ancestral voices seems genuine and usually occurs during her solitary walks in the woods or during her clearing of the graves in the family cemetery, activities that reflect with some accuracy African beliefs about the dead. When the jealous Ruby poisons Cocoa (Ophelia) with a mixture of nightshade, voodoo, and hate, Mama Day kneels and prays “to the Father and Son as she'd been taught. But she falls asleep, murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira” (*Mama Day* 280). As the Mother has instructed, she intuitively knows what she and George must do to save Cocoa. Miranda sees Ophelia as probably the last woman of the family line but a worthy descendant of the “great mother” Sapphira,

And now she strides so proud...The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs-pure black. Me and Abigail, we take after the sons, Miranda thinks. The earth men who formed the line of Days, hard and dark brown. But the Baby Girl brings back the great, grandmother. We ain't seen 18 & 23 black form that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun. (*Mama Day* 47-48).

Ophelia has inherited the power and now, through Miranda, the knowledge of her foremothers. Sapphira is the conflation of the need for a new woman-centred spirituality and ancient African ancestor worship. Dona Marimba Richards explains that in the African worldview, the African family includes the dead, the living, and the “yet unborn,” and the ritual of ancestor communion is emblematic of the interdependence of its parts (7). To make the dead more powerful, the living offer sacrifices; in return, the ancestors strengthen the force vital of the living, thereby promoting their general health (7). George is a culturally isolated northern male; he has no knowledge of family or bloodlines which directly connect him to his history. As an orphan, George was indoctrinated with “only the present has potential.” Missy Dehn Kubitschek states that “his orphanage upbringing forced him into a constant focus on the present rather than the future; he envies Ophelia's knowledge of her family's past and her wider tribal history, his own being, of course, drowned with his mother” (12). When Abigail touches his face and calls him “child,” George finds himself “envious” of Cocoa's past, but also “grateful” that he may at last be part of a family (*Mama Day* 176). While George resists the notion that Cocoa is deathly ill because of something supernatural, he eventually succumbs to Mama Day's logic. At this point, he undertakes to perform a healing ritual. George's and Mama Day's encounter in the “Other Place” illustrates the dichotomy between the African-American folk culture and the Euro-American culture, as George cannot even understand Mama Day's language.

George decides to do whatever to save his wife: a pair of oars in his hands to row across The Sound for help. He says,

I'm going to put the oars into the oarlocks and begin to row across The Sound. That much I can do for her. And at that point in time when I can feel those oars between my hands, whether I make it or not won't be the issue. And if the boat begins to sink-I look at my hands lit up by the moonlight-I'll place them in the water and start to swim. (*Mama Day* 282-83)

Miranda, however, realizes that she needs George's hands in a different way, "She needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to hand it over to her. She needs his hand in hers-his very hand-so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before... So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over" (*Mama Day* 285). George understands that Willow Springs is framed by beliefs he cannot comprehend. He seeks out Mama Day for help, but when she directs him to the nest of the old red hen, telling him, "Bring me straight back whatever you find," George dismisses her as "a crazy old woman" with nothing to offer him but "mumbo-jumbo" (*Mama Day* 295). Mama Day knows that however his cultural and cognitive attitudes may limit him, his moral heart acknowledges no limits to his moral responsibility to do whatever it takes to save his wife. When Mama Day sends George to the chicken coop carrying her father's cane and her great-grandfather's ledger, asking him to bring back whatever he finds, all she needs is for him to bring back his empty hands; however, because he does not believe, he cannot do as she asks. Inside the henhouse, George begins searching the nests and finds nothing tangible. Just as George begins to consider "could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands," the old red hen attacks him (*Mama Day* 301). Wounded by the chickens, his physically flawed heart succumbs, but in death, it is his strong and loving heart that brings him "total peace" (*Mama Day* 302). Destiny is under no one's control; and here, destiny is controlled by nonrational forces. Susan Meisenholder defines the conflict between rationality and nonrationality, as conflict between white and black (127). George is the novel's tragic victim. His love and his death break Cocoa's self-absorption and allow her to grow into a mature woman. George is reborn as a member of the African-American folk culture and is no longer an orphan although this rebirth signals his literal death too. He saves Cocoa's life; she is healed by the strength and love of a cooperative male and female community. The promise of Ophelia's future wisdom and power is only fully imaged in the final paragraph, when Miranda sees Ophelia on the hillside,

It is a face that's been given the meaning of peace. A face ready to go in search of answers, so at last there ain't no need for words as they lock over the distance. Under a sky so blue it's stopped being sky; one is closer to the circle of oaks than the other. But both can hear clearly that on the east side of the island and on the west side, the waters were still. (*Mama Day* 312)

Using the devices of mythology, ancestor-worship, native spirituality, magic, voodoo and the supernatural, *Mama Day* not only rewrites history in the words of the oppressed but also puts forth suggestions as to how the black community and specifically black women, can transcend racism and sexism, how they can survive, love and be whole in a country that conspires to keep them fragmented and voiceless.

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