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ASSERTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*



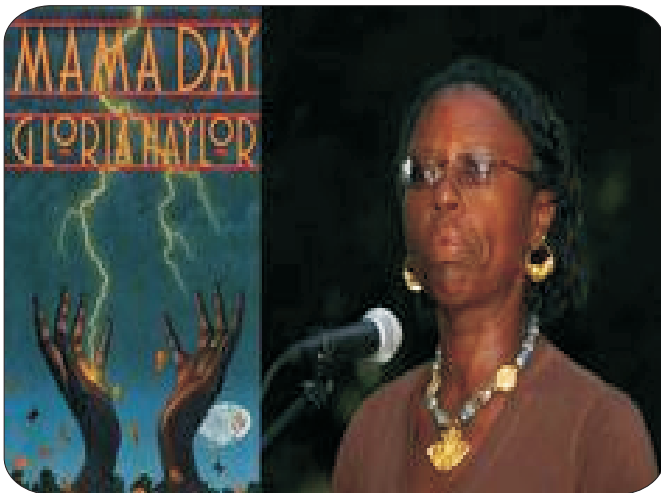
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ABSTRACT

The problem of identity has always been a complicated issue for Afro-American women due to geographical displacement and racial and gender oppression. The racial ideology has constructed sufficient controlling images for Black women to prevent them from forming an independent and self-reliant identity. From the age of slavery till the present times of modern slavery, Black women have suffered a lot due to the negative images attached to them by the White society. The Afro-American women have been in a state of constant struggle to assert their identities in the affluent American society.

'Identity' for these women is to create such a reality that allows them to reach their full potential, destabilizing the established models of dominance, influence and control. Many Black writers both male and female have raised the issue of Black female identity in their writings connecting it with the collective Afro-American identity. De Veaux says that "you have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups" (qtd. in Collins 112).

Gloria Naylor (1950---) is a formidable Afro-American voice of the contemporary period. Her novels bear the literary influence of the women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. Like Hurston, Naylor's fictional world is singularly a world of black community. Her women characters enjoy special attention in almost all of her novels. In her novels, she selects female heroes from different classes, places and generations. Her fictional world looks more convincing as she is an inseparable part of what she writes. This paper brings into light the resilience and indomitable spirit shown by Black

women in her third novel *Mama Day*, that help them survive and assert their own individuality despite all odds in their life including racial and gender discrimination.

KEYWORDS :Identity, geographical displacement, resilience, affluent, assertion.

INTRODUCTION:

Mama Day (1988) is the most thrilling and powerful novel that circles around the title character Mama Day, who is a strong matriarch of Willow Springs---a small island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. The island belongs only to the black people who live on it and have their own rules and laws which are not to be written down. The islanders follow their own traditions apart from the one practised by Whites in the mainland. Naylor brings into existence the fictional island to bridge Afro-American community to her past and cultural heritage which is significant to rescue the African roots of female tradition in confronting oppression.

The novel begins with the life history of Sapphira, a slave woman who was bought by a Norwegian named Bascombe Wade in 1819. She is the founding mother of the island of Willow Springs. She bore seven sons to Wade, persuaded him to deed all his property to his slaves and killed him by putting a dagger through his kidney. It is only due to the daring efforts of Sapphira that there has been no slavery in Willow Springs since 1823. Sapphira had supernatural powers and “she could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot.... she turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four (Naylor 3). Montgomery asserts that “Naylor conflates antecedent sources in rewriting the story of Sapphira, lending a new twist to an old saga involving master-slave liaisons, even as she genders the subject female, intricate and self-determining in the face of hegemonic authority” (Montgomery 47).

Sapphira’s action lends credence to the assertions that black women were not passive in the face of slave holding aristocracy rather they cleverly and confidently made themselves assertive in their behaviour. The choice of the surname Day for her family of seven sons, instead of Wade, can be perceived as an act of resistance and assertion of female identity. Thus, the black women have always marked their presence in the domestic as well as the social sphere challenging the prevailing oppressive system of the larger society.

Although this imaginary island suffers from the dominant patriarchy, the resistance that the female community of Willow Springs shows toward the authority and control of the Western imperialism compensates for the shortage and allows a space for the female Black consciousness to define itself. In an interview given to Kay Bonetti in 1988, Naylor herself divulges the truth about Sapphira’s strength of mind as she refused to be a slave: “Boscomb Wade bought her knowing that she was half-prime — that, in short, she refused to be a slave, you know. Basically, it boils down a lot of times to your refusal to be an animal, that, of course, you were damaged goods” (Naylor 60).

Mama Day, the title Character inherits all the powers of Sapphira. She is barely five feet and can be snapped in the middle with one good sized hand. She is a midwife, nurse, counselor, healer and conjurer and is respected as community mother on the island. She is an indomitable woman who can tame lightning and heal wounds through magic or the ingredients of her medicine pot. Mama had to face various ups and downs in her early age. When her youngest sister, Peace accidentally drowned in a well, her mother closed herself from the outside world and died, leaving behind all the responsibility of family on little Mama. These bitter experiences of life made Mama Day very hard and rigorous towards

her family and the community. Being a wise old woman of the community of Willow Springs, she dispenses her knowledge of magic, herbs and folklore for the welfare of the islanders. With the help of her unparalleled wisdom and power, she creates such an atmosphere that is good for her well-wishers and against her opponents. Inhabitants of the island have complete faith in Mama Day as Gary Storhoff points out: "Mama Day say no, everybody say no' to the encroachment of corporate real estate developers (the contemporary colonialists) who would steal Willow Springs from its indigenous people" (Storhoff 168).

Besides, being a community leader, Mama Day asserts her individuality in the domestic domain too. Though she is not a biological mother, she fulfils all her duties as a mother to her grandniece, Cocoa. Mama Day, as a strong and confident woman, has the ability to deal with the world on her own terms. She reacts furiously when her grandniece Coca's school Principal, Mr. Samson Wilbright, tries to take advantage of her: "Told him we weren't raising no public toilet for him to be doing his business into — told him loud. What we ain't touched since she was in diapers, he don't touch" (Naylor 68). As an assertive matriarch, she does not allow anybody to tease Cocoa. It is the result of good upbringing provided by Mama Day and Abigail that Cocoa grows up to be a strong and assertive individual aware of her own female identity. Cocoa admits that "together they were the perfect mother" (Naylor 58). Mama Day is a strict disciplinarian whereas Abigail is soft. They taught her the manners and methods of social behaviour as well as the survival techniques that helped her face the world confidently despite all racial and gender discrimination in New York. Mama Day is a lady of strong will power and can do anything for her granddaughter. It is only because of Mama Day's unflinching faith in the power of love and magic, and strength of will power that Cocoa is restored to life. In an interview given to Angels Carabi in 1992, Naylor asserts:

I believe in the power of love and the power of magic – sometimes I think that they were one and the same. Mama is about the fact that the real magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles. (Naylor 121)

Mama Day is the living example of true womanhood as she believes that in an ideal relationship a woman should get enough space and liberty to be what she is and what she wants to be. She also reminds Cocoa of a woman's potential and worth in saving and sustaining her marital relationship, "Cause we got more going for us than them. A good woman is worth two good men any day she puts her mind to it. So the little bit we gotta give up, we don't miss half a much" (Naylor 240). Mama Day, as a creator, saves the lives of islanders with her knowledge as a midwife. She has a vast knowledge of herbs due to her constant companionship with nature. Even Dr. Brian Smithfield has a great respect for Mama Day and accepts her abilities as a root doctor. As a midwife, she has helped a number of women deliver their babies safely, even in critical conditions by doing surgery with her 'gifted hands'. As Mehboobeh Khaleghi observes:

Her powers lie not just in herbal remedies or conjure spells; they emanate from deep recesses of the mind and perhaps from more ancient source of power. To Miranda, the realization that 'the mind is everything' lies at the heart of what she does and whom she touches. Miranda's knowledge as a midwife and healer has a medically correct basis. She blends the elements of traditional medical practices with non-traditional folk and herbal remedies that exist as part of the memory of her culture. (Khaleghi 136)

Thus, through a strong female matriarch, Naylor has created a female atmosphere that protects the female islanders from the patriarchal oppressive forces. Instead of confining woman to a purely biological function, Naylor assigns her a greater role to play by making her instrumental in the transmission of cultural values. By presenting Mama Day, a lady of short stature, as a successful

community leader having a vast knowledge in medical, social and political fields, the author demystifies and dismantles the degrading images attached to Afro-American conjure women. As a benevolent mother, Mama Day uses her magic and supernatural powers in a selfless manner to heal and benefit the lives of others.

Though Willow Springs is an independent island of all black folk, it does suffer from the after effects of slavery. Naylor presents the complexity of black woman's life as she suffers at the hands of White as well as Black community under the influence of racism and sexism. Some of them feel so suppressed that they try to take revenge upon the whole male community. Consumed by the hatred of her husband who abandoned her, Grace Samantha Day – mother of Ophelia, died young soon after the birth of her daughter. She named her daughter after her grandmother, Ophelia, who broke her husband's heart by losing sanity after the death of her youngest daughter, Peace. The motive behind choosing this name for her daughter is told by Grace herself from her grave:

I gave the first and only baby my grandmother's name. Ophelia. I did it out of vengeance. Let this be another one, I told God, who could break a man's heart. Didn't women suffer enough? Eight months heavy with his child and he went off to chase horizons. I hoped he'd find them in hell. If I had known then what I was knowing all along, I woulda named her something else. Sapphira. my grandmother only softly broke a heart. My great-great grandmother tore one wide open. (Naylor 151)

This contempt for patriarchal system is the result of the age long sufferings borne by Afro-American women due to the racial and gender discrimination prevalent in the affluent society. This oppressive system plays havoc with the lives of Afro-Americans who in their desire to fulfil the American Dream, desert their families forgetting all their duties towards their wives and children. Under these threatening conditions, some black women nurture a strong sense of hatred towards the whole male community and try to seek their children as weapons of their vengeance.

Cocoa, the daughter of Grace Samantha Day, is a girl who is self-reliant, assertive and forcefully strong. She has developed into an independent woman who has been successful in making a life for herself in New York. She passes her life with certain rules and ethics which are prescribed by her grandaunt and grandmother. When George calls Cocoa by her pet name Ophelia, she compels him to call her only 'Cocoa'. She does not respond to George's query about the mystery behind her pet name and her native place and makes him understand that "... not to be rude, Mr. Andrews, but I really would like to talk about my credentials for working here. Where I was born and what name I was given were beyond my control. But what I could do about my life, I've done well" (Naylor 29). Cocoa's objection on calling her by her pet name is symbolic of the increased awareness of Afro-American woman of the tactics of hegemonic culture used against her to rob her of her identity as a black female.

After her marriage with George, Cocoa uses her husband at her will and wish. She compels him to make adjustments on issues of their individual likes and dislikes. When he tries to dominate in their relationship and does not allow her to make slightest change in their house according to her taste, she reacts forcefully and asserts her identity as a strong woman saying, "But it was a fraction of an inch, George. That's what I was crying over. There were six rooms in that house, and if I was to be afraid for every small change made, what was I to think about the biggest change of all – me?" (Naylor 146) As an aware and assertive woman she strongly objects George's behaviour that is symbolic of male hegemony. Despite all odds, she never lets die her own dream of getting a degree in History and pursues it as soon as she gets an opportunity.

Cocoa dominates fully in her marital relationship with George, who is a native New Yorker brought up in an orphanage run by Whites. One of the reasons behind Cocoa's overpowering force is her connection to her past and Black folk tradition that makes her feel proud and even elevates her level

of self importance in their relationship. In contrast, George has no knowing of his past as a Black man, not even his surname, hence feels totally powerless before Cocoa. The real power for African Americans lies in their close proximity to their ancestry, folk traditions and cultural heritage. Failing which they find themselves uprooted and alone in the face of hegemonic culture as well as in their own Black community.

Cocoa exhibits the character of bold woman who makes her husband realize that she is the only force behind the success of their relationship. She takes the whole credit of sustaining their marriage saying, "My patience has been the salvation of this marriage" (Naylor165) to which George admits, "I think you're right"(Naylor 165).During her visit to Willow Springs, she does not let anybody, even her own grandaunt Mama Day, to interfere with her. She asserts her individuality by making her own choices and reacts strongly when anybody tries to advise her considering a child. When Mama Day prevents her from going out with drunkards like Dr. Buzzard and Junior Lee on Saturday night, she resists to her interference in her personal life saying: "You have always been an overbearing and domineering old woman but I am not a child anymore — do you hear me? I am not a child" (Naylor 156). Cocoa is considered a worth descendent of the great mother Sapphira for her strong will power and sense of proud as a black woman as Mama Day says:

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, grand Mother. (Naylor 47-48)

Abigail, the grandmother of Cocoa, is not as powerful as Mama Day is; her strength of character is revealed during Cocoa's illness. Her refusal to shed tears underscores her determination to be a stabilizing force during this tragedy. As an embodiment of true womanhood, she believes that women must have the strength and courage to face every odd in life if they want to assert their own individuality. As a loving and strong mother, she tries to inculcate good qualities in Cocoa so that she may be able to assert her female identity in the face of racial and gender discrimination prevalent everywhere in the mainland. She herself possesses a great mental and emotional strength that helps her bear the loss of her eldest daughter, Peace. Abigail does not even respect those women of her own family who behaved in a cowardly manner and did not show much courage and strength of mind to embrace life as it came to them. For her the dignity of Afro-American woman lies in her indomitable spirit that does not allow her to surrender to an oppressive system and provides her resistance to fight back and assert her own individuality emerging as stronger human being.

Naylor, by presenting these strong black women from different generations, seeks to create an alternative realm where women have full liberty to realize their multifaceted potential in various fields. Through the character of Mama Day, a non-Christian but highly spiritual lady, Naylor succeeds in providing an alternative of Christianity. Contrary to the Christian belief in male power i.e. the Father, the author shifts all the power to the Day women, who exert this power only for the welfare of black community. Defying the Eurocentric approach to Christianity, the islanders celebrate Candle Walk on the 22nd December every year to commemorate their founding mother Sapphira, who made it possible for them to enjoy a life full of self-respect and freedom beyond the control of white hegemony.

Conclusion

Thus, Naylor in Mama Day tries to deconstruct the negative image of African American woman as a conjurer through the character of Mama Day, who is loved and respected by the people of her community for her selfless service as a healer, mentor, counselor and spiritualist. Through her strong women characters, Naylor questions and even rejects the social construct that places African American

woman at the lowest pedestal in the social hierarchy, considering her sub-human. By highlighting the characters like Sapphira, Mama Day, and Cocoa, Naylor succeeds in presenting the fact that African American women possess leadership qualities and powers to overcome all odds in their life. They mark their strong presence not only in the domestic field as mother and wife but in social and political field also. They have a great resilience that gives them courage to face and overcome all the oppression in the hegemonic system. Their strong bond to their ancestry, lineage and cultural heritage helps them in realizing their potential to revert the prevailing system full of racial and gender discrimination. This hidden potential is the real source that plays miraculous role in the lives of Afro-American women in asserting and maintaining their female identity in a totally impersonal and ever threatening world.

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