
UNIVERSALITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S 'MAMA DAY'

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Abstract: Gloria Naylor's third novel 'Mama Day' celebrates Africanism and African womanhood. 'Mama Day' could be called a novel of African spirit as the novel dwells about an African matriarch in a secluded island strongly bonded with nature and natural living. The island has peculiar features as it is self-sufficient and self-reliant and the setting helps to bring out the universal truths that hold well in any society. The novel's central character, a conjurer, matriarch, mid-wife brings out several truths that will help every human being to lead a harmonious life.

Keywords: Africanism, natural, harmonious life, universal truths.

Introduction: 'Mama Day' is a novel that speaks of the happenings in the island of Willow Springs. The island is Naylor's creation in celebration of Africanism and African womanhood. The island of Willow Springs is situated along the borders of Georgia and North Carolina and enjoys complete autonomy. As Willow Springs is not claimed by either of the states it cannot be traced in a map. This self-sufficient and rustic island came into existence through the daring feat of an African conjurer woman, Sapphira Wade. Sapphira Wade was the slave of Bascombe Wade, a Norwegian. The legend goes that she bore him seven sons in a thousand days and convinced him to manumit her and her sons. Thus Willow Springs came to be owned by free African Americans. Miranda Day and Abigail are the two elders from the Days family living in Willow Springs. Ophelia is the grand daughter of Abigail and she lives in New York but visits Willow Springs once a year. It is believed that Miranda Day is gifted with the supernatural powers of Sapphira Wade. She is the island's matriarch, mid-wife and conjurer with excellent knowledge of men and matters. It is through the experienced observances and sayings of this sagacious lady that Naylor brings out some Universal truths.

George a New Yorker marries Ophelia, a native from Willow Springs. The novel is about a series of events that happen when George along with his wife visits Willow Springs to spend a holiday with Ophelia's grandmother and great aunt. The island of Willow Springs celebrates the beauty, knowledge, fortitude and uniqueness of African woman in particular and African culture in general. 'Mama Day' could be described as Naylor's message to the African Americans to take pride in their origin. The

importance of home, the roots "You can move away from it, but you never leave it". This is true to any race as in today's world that has shrunk its boundaries. It is a common phenomenon that people from different countries, races, religions and faiths move away from their homeland for greener pastures but it is essential and desirable that they do not abandon the uniqueness of the culture to which they belong. Moreover, lack of 'roots' and history makes a person vulnerable as in the case of George in 'Mama Day'.

The island of Willow Springs is wrought with nature and natural setting. It boasts of luscious forests, deep seas, The Sound, beautiful gardens, natural herbs and rich life. Nature and natural phenomena in part and parcel of their life and the residents of Willow Springs have learnt to live in harmony with Nature. They face storms, great depressions and any natural calamity by simply accepting it and never complaining. This is echoed by Miranda when she recollects her father's words thus: "Little Mama, these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way-learn to move aroun'em." (78) These words reinstate the supremacy of nature and the effervescence of human beings. 'Mama Day' states the need to live in harmony with nature, for the survival of humankind. The wise saying of John Paul holds true as the modern man is obsessed with exploiting nature for his selfish benefits without a thought about the future. Mama Day reiterates the needs to learn from the past especially to respect nature. If humankind learns to respect nature and live in harmony with it then it would be a panacea for all ills.

The residents of Willow Springs for example, Ambush Duvall strives hard in his farm. Ambush Duvall a

successful farmer is praised for his hard work. Miranda Day and Abigail are found busy in spite of their age. George, the New Yorker finds Miranda and Abigail healthy and young. Their health has resulted from the manual work they are used to. Miranda in a lighter note remarks that people simply complained about struggling “Lord, don’t I remember. These young people talk about tired. They don’t know tired.” (96) “... when talking about making cream and bread. The need to be cool.” (102) Now, I’m gonna tell you about cool. It comes with the cultural territory: the beating of the bush drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again... You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it-but even when your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever, LOSE it.” Through the words of Mama Day one can learn the need to have patience and strive hard without complaining. The capacity to be work irrespective of age is necessary for a healthy body which leads to a healthy psyche.

Naylor gives a wonderful depiction of a husband and wife relationship through the characters of George and Ophelia. Gender discrimination and female abuse is rampantly prevalent in most of the societies especially in African American society. Naylor makes a point when she describes the need for a husband to support his wife than ill treat her when she states:” A woman shouldn’t fight her man to be what she was; he should be fighting that battle for her. It weren’t so in her time, though, and from what these young women tell her, it’s rare to find it now.” (202) These words throw light on the difficult lives of African women in particular and womanhood in general. African women have witnessed most indifferent treatment in their homes which is almost shared in most of the communities. Naylor finds no improvement of the status of women in spite of many changes in society. Gloria Naylor sets the standard for an ideal relationship of a husband and wife.

Naylor does have strong messages for women. While supporting woman she calls for positive attitude among woman. Naylor requires all women to develop positive attitude and determination in order to live a respectable life. Speaking about the dangers of a being negative she states “There is nothing worst than a colored woman with a bad attitude.”(103) In the novel we find Ophelia almost dies as she succumbs to the nightshade poison and magic of Ruby, the jealous neighbor of the Days. Naylor brings

out the price paid when there is hate “How bad is hat Abigail? How strong is hate? It can destroy more people quicker than anything else” The wise words bring out the worldly wisdom that Naylor has gained. From Naylor’s childhood her parents inculcated the spirit of thirst for knowledge and the importance of self-esteem among their children. Naylor states the dangers to being ignorant when Miranda states: “Ignorance is a might ugly thing to watch in action. It’s worse than spite and envy.” 179 These wise sayings hold universal appeal as we find many a youth, the backbone of any society being misled by ignorance and other negative feelings that engulf it.

Miranda gives excellent advice to the nervous Bernice who desperately wanted to conceive. Bernice pleads Miranda many a time to help her conceive through Miranda’s magical powers. Miranda warns Bernice to be cool and wait patiently for nature to take its course. Miranda states “The only miracle is life itself. And when it comes, it comes.” Pg43 However Miranda is taken aback when she sees Bernice seriously ill after consuming fertility pills. She helps Bernice to conceive. Bernice adores her son Charles to such an extent that the people of Willow Springs smell trouble “ But older heads feel that trouble is coming. When you raise a God instead of a child, you’re bound to be serving him for the rest of your days. (162) Bernice was too possessive of Charles but finally she looses him in the storm. This truth holds well in the modern world where children are excessively pampered by their parents. This excessive pampering of children leads to many complications which might prove dangerous for the child itself.

Naylor is known to have been a voracious reader and a wise sage who has deeply understood the ways of world. She gives a wonderful message of humankind of being open in their thoughts and stick to their limited notions. She is most sagacious when she states these words through Miranda “...everybody wants to be right in a world where there ain’t no right or wrong to be found. My side. He don’t listen to my side. She don’t listen to my side. Just as the chicken coup, everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside, and an inside.”(230) If one could give a little thought to this wise saying before shutting oneself within one’s own perceptions the world would be a better place to live in. A little thought about many other sides of a thing would prevent heated arguments and would help many marriages to survive.

Naylor gives two contradictory truths which are universal in their appeal and hold good. They are told through the lives of George and Ophelia. George and Ophelia come from completely different backgrounds. George is an orphan and has nothing to remember about his past. He invests only in the present as taught by his teacher Mrs. Jackson that "Only the present has potential." Pg 126 It is this belief that helps him to survive his loneliness and to become successful in his career. Though George feels bad of not having a mother or a background he puts all his beliefs in his present and comes up in life. On the other hand, Ophelia had a history for generations. The whole of Willow Springs looked upon Mama Day, and the Day family having lost other heirs looks upto Ophelia as the surviving heir. This made Ophelia to visit her grand mother and great aunt once every year. Ophelia had the responsibility of continuing the Day family. She continued to live and married another man after George's death. She represents the truth "A person is made up of much more than the now. ..." This truth holds good as George was not able to realize this and did follow the instructions of Miranda whose words he dismissed as 'mumbo jumbo'. He eventually lost his life as he was

not able to comprehend the advice of Miranda Day. Ophelia realizes the truth and lives on to carry the legacy of the Days. "Mama Day' suggests something far more valuable: in light of knowledge gleaned from the past, individual lives and perhaps the future can be re-scripted."

Naylor gives wonderful advice when she speaks of the troubles that every person encounters in his or her life but continues to live on and experience life than lose faith in it. While describing about the greatness of morning and sunset Miranda states that there is something positive in the day and during sunset. Miranda might be referring to both happy and sad moments in life. Life has some valuable things to teach and one should be ready to experience and learn from each experience. Naylor words "They say every blessing hides a curse and every curse a blessing" (78), holds good and provides the motivation required for a balanced life.

Thus Gloria Naylor's "Mama Day' the third novel of Naylor's quartet could be described as a mellifluous song that sings the praise of Africanism, African womanism and sends striking notes for a harmonious life.

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