

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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**A WOMAN'S (AFRICAN AMERICAN'S) JOURNEY FROM PERIPHERY TO THE CENTRE  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY***

**Dr. POKURI VAISHNAVI**

Assistant Professor

Eluru College of Engineering and Technology

[rcetrpl@gmail.com](mailto:rcetrpl@gmail.com)



**ABSTRACT**

Literature is defined as an art form that has artistic and intellectual value. Literature represents the beliefs, customs, values and social behavior of a particular society at a given period of time. On careful examination one finds that the literature of a society has been written by the dominant group of that society. For example, American literature was mainly represented by the whites and they set the standards. The African-Americans were represented (in American literature) as uncivilized, ugly and without values. The African American literature was first written by African American men highlighting their predicament in a racist environment. African American woman started writing about herself much later. Her writing received lukewarm responses as it was considered inferior. African American women authors have used language to bring out their predicament and have provided various solutions to lead a happy life in spite of differences. Gloria Naylor, a renowned African American author, creates female spaces whereby the African American women scarred by racism and sexism are able to lead their lives with dignity. Gloria Naylor in her novel *Mama Day* creates a female space whereby the subaltern (African American woman) who was pushed to the periphery is brought to the center and exhibits extraordinary qualities that not only challenge the phallogocentric world but also re-examines the codes established by a patriarchal society.

Key words: African American, Periphery, Sexism, Ecofeminism, Female Space.

Literature can be defined as an art form (poetry, prose, drama, letters etc) that is of artistic and intellectual value. Literature represents the beliefs, customs, values and social behavior of a particular society at a given period of time. The literature of a society exerts tremendous influence on the behavioral pattern and value system of that society at present and for future generations. On careful examination one finds that the literature of a society has been written by the dominant group of

that society. This group could be dominant in terms of population, caste, color, class, gender or economic status. For example, English literature was mainly represented by the white males. Shakespeare and Dryden were well known while female writers like Mary Ann Evans, Jane Austen and Bronte sisters were recognized much later. In American literature, the African Americans and other ethnic groups were sidelined for several years. They were denied basic rights like education and

free will and were considered incapable of independent thinking.

The African-Americans were represented (in literature) as uncivilized, ugly and without values for several decades. The African American was denied education under the slavery system. Some of the early instances of African American writing were monitored by the whites as the African American was considered inferior and incapable. After the abolition of slavery and the spread of education writers like W.E Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Garvey began to express the African American's point of view. African American literature gained acceptance during the 1920's during the Harlem Renaissance. African American literary movements like Pan Africanism and the Black Arts Movement created an identity for the African Americans. They through their writings proved that African Americans were not inferior and had their own cultural history and traditions.

The African American literature was first written by African American men highlighting their predicament in a racist environment. African American male writers like James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison were widely accepted and they dealt with racist problems. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance and the later period covered the African American male experience ignoring the African American woman's experience. An African American woman could be thus considered a "Subaltern", meaning of inferior rank. The term subaltern was adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to working class people in Soviet Union and it includes peasants, workers and other groups who are pushed to the periphery.

Woman's entry into literature has been rather late. Her position in literary history is conspicuous by her absence and she is at once regarded as "anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider" (Gilbert Sandra. p 48) She was represented by the males from the male point of view. This led to stereotyping, as she was reduced to an angel or a monster type which seriously conflicted with her own self, her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. African American woman's experience was worst as she was the slave of the

slaves. While her male counterpart had to face racism she was exposed to racism and sexism. Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern speak?" states that "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow...between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears..." (Spivak p 287)

African American woman's writing was received with lukewarm responses as her literature was considered inferior. Zora Neale Hurston's works especially *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) did not receive immediate acceptance. Later authors like Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Barbara started writing the African American female experience. Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976) Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), present the internal pressures, the insecurities and the predicaments of an African American woman in her domestic life and in the society.

African American women authors have used language to bring out their predicament and have provided various solutions to lead a happy life in spite of differences. Gloria Naylor, a renowned African American author, creates female spaces whereby the African American women scarred by racism and sexism are able to lead their lives with dignity. Naylor's first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* deals with the lives of seven heterogeneous African American women pushed to the periphery, in a sexist society, lead their lives in a dilapidated tenement. In her next novel *Linden Hills* Naylor rejuvenates the imprisoned Willa Nedeed by creating a bond between her and the six generations of Nedeed women through letters, recipe books, photo albums etc. Naylor's novel *Bailey's Café* deal with the lives of ostracized women labeled as whores by the society attaining completeness at Eve's boarding house. Naylor's *Mama Day* is presented in a different setting in Willow Springs-(a female space) an island that pays obeisance to its

matriarch, Miranda Day, fondly known as Mama Day.

Gloria Naylor in her novel *Mama Day* creates a female space whereby the subaltern (African American woman) who was pushed to the periphery is brought to the center and exhibits extraordinary qualities that not only challenge the phallogocentric world but also re-examines the codes established by a patriarchal society. Naylor transports the African American woman from the periphery to the centre in Willow Springs. The residents of Willow Springs are free from slavery and enjoy complete freedom. It is learnt that the island was created through the mystic powers of Sapphira Wade, once a slave of Bascombe Wade. Thus the denizens of Willow Springs owe allegiance to a black woman. Mama Day is the matriarch of the island and the residents follow her wise words "If Mama Day say no, everybody say no." (MD 6)

"The Greeks conceptualized the universe in terms of various binary oppositions. These included limit/infinity, light /darkness, reason/unreason, mind/body, good/evil, masculine/feminine. In the sequel of binaries the second term is subordinated to the first." (Shodhganga "The Gendered Subaltern" p.9) Naylor uses binaries of New York/Willow Springs, George/Ophelia, Science/Belief, Nature/Man, Cumbersomeness/simplicity, and Youth/Old Age to bring out the superiority of the latter over the former. The novel revolves around the love, fatal illness and recovery of Ophelia Day the only successor to the Day's legacy in Willow Springs. The young, confident, "city boy" George, who believes in "only the present has potential" (MD 23) succumbs to the age old, mystic customs and beliefs of Willow Springs. Thus George a symbol of phallic power is pushed to the periphery and the Days women (Sapphira Wade, Mama and Ophelia) are identified with Mother Nature and occupy the center in Willow Springs.

New York City which is generally considered a destination city is proved insignificant in the novel *Mama Day*. At the beginning of the novel Mama while watching a TV show expresses the artificiality of the city people. The denizens of Willow Springs mock Reema's son, an ethnographer, who visits

Willow Springs as part of his research projects. Their words reiterate the cumbersome/complexity of western education. "And we done learned that anything coming from beyond the bridge gotta be viewed real, real careful." (MD 7) On the other hand the people of Willow Springs live a very simple life. They follow natural healing methods which are safe and are without side effects. The island is presented as having all the basic requirements like a store, a beauty parlor, a church etc. They have simple forms of entertainment like playing cards etc. The island is presented as being close to nature and they celebrated Candle Walk instead of the cumbersome Christmas. It is interesting to note that the denizens of Willow Springs exchanged simple homemade sweetmeats like orange rocks, toddy, and a sack of potatoes during Candle Walk, instead of flashy gifts associated with Christmas.

One of the themes of the novel is the superiority of history over science. The novel has a wonderful love story between the city bred, individualistic, independent and intelligent George-an orphan trained to believe only in the present moment and Ophelia Day-a part of a great history shrouded in mysticism when she states "A person is made up of much more than the now. ..." (MD 127) The confident, lovable city boy George fails in the mystery shrouded Willow Springs. He fails to comprehend Mama Day and accuses her of speaking in metaphors. He fails to understand that Ophelia's fatal illness is more than medical and that he has to confide in the mystical powers of Mama Day in order to save Ophelia. The confident George who boasts of creating a very powerful motor is shocked at the power of the storm that affects Willow Springs in the climax of the novel. "...six-flow generator with blade rotations of eighteen hundred revolutions per minute...That was power. But the winds coming around the corners of that house was God." (MD 251) George describes the storm reinstating the power of Mother Nature which is incomparable to the miniscule constraints of science. The quilt that Mama Day and Abigail make from their ancestors' garments is a symbol of the richness of history. Towards the end of the novel, George, the symbol of phallic power, dies of a broken heart (heart-attack) allowing Ophelia to

recover from her fatal illness and thereby ensuring the continual of the Days legacy in Willow Springs.

Naylor uses eco-feminism in the setting of Willow Springs, as the island that bows down to the matriach and listens to Nature for signs to do their daily activities. "... these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way-learn to move aroun'em." (78) They simple wooden bridge that they construct is bound to collapse in case of a storm and they refuse to listen to George to create a strong one that would last in spite of a storm. In the novel, the denizens do not try to dominate nature. Mama Day is the matriarch and the unofficial doctor of the island. She cures many ailments through natural treatments and common sense. The city doctor Dr. Smithfield respects Mama Day for her impeccable knowledge in natural medicine. Mama Day's treatment of is physical as well as psychological cure. George who represents the scientific cumbersomeness of the city is first awed and later knocked down by the mystic power of nature in Willow Springs.

Old age is generally considered an age of depreciation and ill-health and old people are regarded as not productive and moved to the periphery. Naylor disproves this through the experience laden words of the sagacious Mama Day. The inexperienced Ophelia and George land themselves in trouble as they do not head to the sagacious warnings of Mama Day. Even though Mama Day and Abigail are old they look physically much young because of their physical activity and good conscience. "...the dark brown skin stretched tight over those high cheek bones and fine frame glinted like it was covering steel-I'm Mama Day to some, Miss Miranda to others." (MD 176) Mama Day in particular appreciates the confidence and the positive attitude of George. She correctly estimates him even before she physically meets him through her interaction over the phone and through the letters. The sagacious Mama Day is at home in New York while her young niece Ophelia found it very difficult to understand the city. In the novel the experienced and informed old women (Mama Day and Abigail) try to save Ophelia Day and thereby ensure the continuity of matriarchal power in Willow Springs.

The simple residents of Willow Springs believe in the existence of a power beyond human capacity. They also believe that this power is beyond science as it cannot be explained or proved. They just believe and respect it as Nature. George, an engineer, hesitates to believe in this power as it cannot be proved. He fails to agree with when they try to explain it to him and loses his life as he is not able to play according to the island's rules. "Time, for its own sake, was never a major factor here. The crops, the weather, the seasons-they all controlled behavior much more than your elaborate digital watch." (MD 281) Thus here Naylor tries to explain that there human beings especially man is not superior and has his own limitations. Man (American or an African American) who considers himself superior is helpless before the power of Mother Nature and will be doomed if he does not respect it.

Thus Naylor through the female centric novel *Mama Day* exposes the intellectual power and healing qualities of a woman in general and the African American woman in particular thereby bringing her to the center while at the same time exposing the limitations of phallic power before Nature, thereby moving it to the periphery.

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