



PATRIARCHAL EXPLOITATION AND MATRIARCHAL EMBRACE IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE* AND *MAMA DAY*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the themes of patriarchal dominance and matriarchal solidarity in Gloria Naylor's novels "The Women of Brewster Place" and "Mama Day." The paper investigates the complex web of relationships among African American women as they confront and resist oppression from societal and familial structures. In "The Women of Brewster Place," Naylor weaves a narrative of seven women who transcend their struggles through the strength of their communal bonds, showcasing mother-daughter and sister-like relationships as foundational to their resilience. "Mama Day" further explores these themes by integrating magical realism to portray women's empowerment, with characters such as Sapphira Wade embodying the epitome of female strength and autonomy. Naylor's authentic depiction of the emotional landscape and the deep connections among women highlights the pivotal role of matriarchal networks in overcoming patriarchal challenges. This analysis sheds light on the enduring power and significance of female solidarity and support systems as mechanisms of empowerment and resistance. Through her portrayal of these dynamic relationships, Naylor enriches the dialogue on gender and power, celebrating the unwavering spirit of women united against oppression.

Keywords: Gloria Naylor, Patriarchy, Matriarchy, Resilience, and Female Solidarity.

Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) unveils the lifestyle of African American women and is shrouded as a story of seven women who toil under the pressure of domination and cruelty from their family and society. Leaving the domination and cruelty, the women see that they stand for each other in a dire situation. Women should never be hesitant to exhibit a mother–daughter or sister relationship with each other. They define their love for each other through the concern they show. *Mama Day* is Naylor's third novel, where she employs a magical realist narrative technique to show the empowered African American women. Sapphira Wade is ultimately a powerful woman who can “grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand” (*Mama Day* 10).

Naylor's exploration of the African American female experience has been a subject of extensive academic inquiry. Washington (1989) examines how Naylor's “The Women of Brewster Place” foregrounds the complex interplay of race, gender, and community within an urban setting. Washington highlights Naylor's portrayal of communal bonds as a source of resilience against socioeconomic and racial marginalization.

Similarly, Harris (1992), in her analysis of “Mama Day,” delves into the

novel's magical realism as a narrative strategy to reclaim African American heritage and folklore, positing that Naylor redefines African American female identity through the lens of ancestral wisdom and matriarchal strength.

Smith (1995) argues that this narrative technique amplifies the characters' collective experience while highlighting individual stories of struggle and triumph.

In “Mama Day,” Thompson (1998) explores Naylor's use of magical realism not just as an aesthetic choice but as a means to bridge the gap between the spiritual and the material, the past and the present, effectively creating a space where African American traditions and beliefs are validated and celebrated.

Johnson (2000) asserts that Naylor's work provides critical insights into the lives of African American women, challenging monolithic representations and offering a diverse range of experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, Green (2004) situates Naylor's novels within the broader discourse of Black feminism, highlighting how her narratives engage with and expand upon the themes of racial and gender oppression, community solidarity, and empowerment.

Naylor's realistic writing skills explain the characters' moods appropriately. As Paule Marshall says,

The group of women around the table long ago. They taught me my first lessons in narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed onto me in the workshop of the kitchen (11,12).

The female characters' care and compassion for each other are evident in the novels *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day*. A strong friendship among black women is portrayed in both books. No matter the generation to which they belong, an attachment exists between them. Naylor depicts seven courageous women, Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Ceil, Cora Lee, Lorraine, and Theresa, in the novel "*The Women of Brewster Place*." Loyle Hairston says, "... throb with vitality amid the shattering of their hopes and dreams." He also stated about the secondary characters, "Other characters are... equally well-drawn" (282, 285). The portrayal of Ben, Rev. Woods, Eva Turner, Basil, and Eugene are the best examples. Miranda Day, called Mama Day, is the matron, the healer, and the magician

of Willow Springs, a fictitious island between Georgia and South Carolina. Cocoa, her grandniece's relationship with Mama Day, is beautifully depicted in the novel *Mama Day*. Cocoa shuttle between the myth followed in Willow Spring and rational thoughts of Western ideology. George's beliefs and his love for Cocoa are pictured credibly. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the author creates an area for the black women to survive, and in *Mama Day*, a fictional island named Willow Spring is created where the progenies of enslaved people live.

Mattie Michael, the protagonist of *The Women of Brewster Place*, is the source of comfort for other women in the novel. Mattie becomes strong as she encounters several problems in her life. She was brutally beaten up by her father when she disclosed her pregnancy. She leaves her home and gives birth to her son Basil, son of Butch Fuller, a disreputable man. Mattie was the breadwinner and paid her earnings to a babysitter who looked after her son. She leaves that place when she thinks it is unsafe for her child. Eva Turner, a kind-hearted lady, helps Mattie with accommodation. Mattie's love for Basil is incomparable, so she sells her house for him. Basil grows up into a problematic man, and he goes behind bars as he kills a man in a bar fight. She is emotionally bound

to the relationship she is in. Deirdre Donahue in the Washington Post Says,

Naylor is not afraid to grapple with life's big subjects: sex, birth, love, death, grief. Her women feel deeply, and she unflinchingly transcribes their emotions ... Naylor's potency wells up from her language. With prose as rich as poetry, a passage will suddenly take off and sing like the same roots that produced the blues. Like them, her books sing sorrows proudly borne by black women in America (Washington Post).

Natural forces and ancestral power connect cocoa and Mama Day. Brewster Place shows the unity and bonding of women who struggled in a male-dominated society. Willow Springs pictures a woman (Miranda Day), the healer for all female folks. The female characters in both novels take shelter and have compassion for each other. They build an intimate relationship with each other in terrible situations. Willow Springs has traces of maternal ancestor Sapphira Wade, the founder of Willow Springs, whose story evokes African Americans. Africans were cruelly imported from Africa to the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina in the antebellum days. The slave woman

Sapphira Wade, great-grandmother of Mama Day, killed her master and so-called husband, Bascombe Wade, and acquired his whole land. She gave it to the enslaved people and returned to Africa, walking across the ocean. Sapphira Wade had seven children; she gave all her children the last name Day since she believed God took a rest on the seventh day. Hardly Willow Springs is located on the map. It is connected to the mainland by a wooden bridge that the islanders rebuild after every big storm. "... Willow Springs ain't in no state. Georgia and South Carolina done tried, though-been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Springs belong to one or the other of them . . . the only thing connects us to the mainland is a bridge . . . and that even gotta be rebuilt after every big storm" (Mama Day 4,5).

Miranda Day and Abigail Day are granddaughters of Sapphira Wade's seventh son, John Paul. Cocoa is the granddaughter of Abigail Day and grandniece of Miranda Day. Cocoa Day is the last generation of the Day family. Miranda is addressed as Mama Day by the islander, descendant of legendary mother Sapphira Wade, "a true conjure woman," who "could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the

heat of lighting to start the kindling going under her medicine pot . . .”(Mama Day,3). Mama Day is the most powerful woman who conjures in Willow Springs. The novel highlights the African American tradition, a tale of their mysticism; Mama Day is a healer for the island’s people through her supernatural power. It’s a story in which the central characters oscillate between African American tradition and Western Rationalism. The islanders refuse to follow in the footsteps of whites, and they stick to their heritage.

The seven women in *The Women of Brewster Place* end up in Brewster Place, and each plays a part in building up Brewster Place, which is interrelated. Mattie decides to lead a life without losing her individuality and not suffering under male dominance. As a result, she takes the stance to move to Brewster Place. Mattie comforts the other women who feel desperate and oscillate between life and death. After getting jilted by men, Etta Mae Johnson finds comfort when she is with Mattie. Etta wants a lavish life, so she chooses wealthy men. She is completely fed up with the incident that happened with Reverend Woods. She rebuilds her with Mattie’s help. In the same way, Mattie serves as a surrogate mother for Ceil, Eva Turner’s granddaughter. Ceil’s life becomes hopeless as she finds her

husband to be a reckless man. Mattie is the only hope for Ceil after losing a beloved child in an electric shock.

Cora Lee is a weird woman who needs men only to give her children. She loves children but struggles to look after them when they grow up. Besides being born to affluent parents, Kiswana lives in Brewster Place to give hope to the women’s community. Lorraine and Theresa are portrayed as lesbians and incur the abhorrence of the residents. All these women find refurbishment in Mattie, the novel’s central figure. According to Annie Gottlieb, “... all our lives, those relationships had been the backdrop, while the sexy fireworks with men were the show ... the bonds between women are the abiding ones. Most men are calculable hunters who come and go” (“Women Together”).

The compassion and unity between women in the past and the present are shown vividly in the novel *Mama Day*. “For black women, history is a bridge defined along motherliness” (Wills, 138). Natural forces and religious traditions empower the women’s community in Willow Springs. The bond between the women does not exist out of any external force but out of love, emotions, sentiments, and compassion. The history of Sapphira Wade has a significance that makes her generations united. The unity is shown in

the love and bond between Abigail Day, Miranda Day, and Ophelia (Cocoa Day). Mama Day is always another mother for the inhabitants of Willow Spring in the novel. Mama Day's character could be compared with Mattie; it is evident that they both soothe women and help them escape their trauma and sadness. Mama Day helps Bernice, who lost her fetus. The novel *Mama Day* showcases strong female characters and the importance of generational relationships between women. The practices and beliefs of people associated with the history and mystery are also highlighted in the novel. According to Wagner-Martin (1988), *Mama Day* is about "the way one generation of women affects another and the way the strong heritage of gentleness and anger, courage and frailty, can shape individual consciousness through several generations of family" (Quilting in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*). Miranda never fails to insist on Ophelia the reputation of the female bond that comes from generation after generation. She also narrates the story of the empowered woman Sapphira Wade to Ophelia to realize their roots, history, and heritage. The love that exists between Mama Day and Abigail Day is unending.

Gloria Naylor expresses that women's independence is inevitable; it cannot be accepted that women have been controlled

or dominated by men. Women have their attitudes toward life. Women are the supreme power in the world. They govern and unite each other with compassion. Naylor always portrays the female attachment with other females, and they emerge as examples for others. *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day* emphasize the significance of women's relationships, which gives them hope to survive independently in society. The strongest element in both novels is the bond mutually shared within the female community.

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