

**African-American conjuring women and slave narration in the novel  
Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day***

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**Abstract**

Present paper focuses on the African-American women situation of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century's Black African tradition and culture. Many African American women are struggled to survive. They used to Black Magic and conjuring as their weapons. The African American women faced slavery about two centuries. Slavery is the cause for without a land, without a home and the cause of prejudices. Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* traces the women slave's sufferings and obstacles in their life. Gloria Naylor introduces Sapphira Wade, and Mama Day (Miranda) who are conjuring women in this novel. Gloria Naylor gives the voice and protects their selves through their conjuring tricks. Gloria Naylor sets a novel in an imaginary island is called Willow Spring. Gloria Naylor focuses on a rich complexity and dimensions of truth. The present paper focuses on the true conjuring, mythical element and self-determination. In this novel two women are use their conjuring tricks to save their family members and the fellow black slaves.

**Key Words:** Conjuring, Black magic and mythical elements.

**1. Introduction**

Gloria Naylor took the modal William Shakespeare's *Tempest* to write her novel *Mama Day*. The title character Miranda Day or her nick name Mama Day is the name recalls of Prospero's daughter in *Tempest*. Even Prospero used magic tricks in the *Tempest*. Like him Miranda (Mama Day), and Sapphira Wade uses some magic tricks in the *Mama Day*. Louise Erdrich *Love Medicine*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Alice Walker *Colour Purple* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* novels are revealing the writings to touch upon many issues of slavery. African-American women discuss the troubles of experienced within slavery, jealous, mistress, sexual exploitation, intelligence as a blessing or curse, community, motherhood and sisterhood. Slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Harriet Jacobs describes "Slavery dwelling on the theme of mothers being divided from their children and any sense of individuality or humanity in a slave being routed out by avaricious slaveholders." (1. qtd. in online). God took to create the whole universe within six days, but Gloria Naylor took too longer to create her imagine island as her wish.

**2. Slave Woman Narration**

Sapphira Wade is a twenty years young black slave woman, who had rich tricks to conjure others. She is "satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay" (*Mama Day* -3). She is capable to heal the wounds; the stars turned into a swaddling cloth and made medicines for illness and she served as a midwife and nurse. In August 3rd (Tuesday) in 1819, she sold to Boscombe Wade who is a Norwegian immigrant; at the age of twenty she brought Willow Spring as a slave. Slave labour is a labour force which is coerced, but it is not marginal. Her master kept her; she has a sexual relation with him because, she is a slave, because she is a woman, because she has no right to against the masters. Slave women in Afro-American are in a horrendous position. Many people talk about them as they have three jobs. That are first one is physical labour they do at often in the fields, sometimes in the house. Second job they do at the care which they must give to themselves, to their own children, when there are children, to whatever the structure of household is in which they live. And the third is often sexual abuse, but the requirement for a sexual relationship with their masters, the

breeding function which is required of many slave women. Gloria Naylor discussed in the novel *Mama Day* about the female slave sexual vulnerability and brutality of racism. The African-American fiction writer Charles W. Chesnutt's work *The Conjure Women* (1899) point out the conjuring is help to overcome difficulties. He emphasized that hoodoo practices are helped to black women slaves from their brutish masters. She had seven sons with Boscombe Wade within a thousand days. In 1823, she married him with her conjuring tricks. Boscombe Wade willingly wrote his property to her sons. She felt that 'this is incorrect politics. She bored with her master and seven sons, so she stabs with dragger through his kidney and poisoned him. After killing her husband, she burst a flame for smashes evidences. Harris and Edward exposed that the archives article to write and Gloria Naylor including these sentences: "Sapphira accepted that she loved this man. The moonlight that coated the wisps of his golden hair. The thin line that ran down the outer edge of the lips that caressed her neck. And she accepted the dagger that lay under her pillow which she could reach back and stiffen his life's blood with. Sapphira had arrived". (3. Qtd. in online Gloria Naylor- unfinished manuscript).

### **3. Willow Spring**

Willow Spring is an isolated island, it located East Atlantic Ocean. The place connects with a bridge between Georgia and South Carolina. "Its inhabitants are the descendants of slaves, their ties to mainstream American culture as fragile as the bridge that connects the island to the mainland." (4. qtd. in *Critical Perspective*- p. 15)

Later Sapphira Wade owned the Willow Spring and she gives the land for all black slaves, who live at an island of Willow Spring. It is not possible for blacks having the own land. Twists and hoodoo tricks are played by the Sapphira Wade, to grab the land from her master. 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" (5. qtd. in Collins 112).

These own land gives the power and freedom to slaves. Willow Spring inhabitants have no rights to sell their land for outsiders. It is an isolated land; there is no permission to allow any American to enter this place. All crops are cultivated by the residents of Willow Springs. Medicines are made by Sapphira Wade. At the woods have rich source for roots, herbs, leaves and stems for medicine or poison. Later *Mama Day* is her granddaughter. Many traditional festivals are celebrated by the people. Especially Candle Walk festival is special attraction for this novel. The island is an autonomous community and it's free from Americans.

The death of great legendary matriarch Sapphira Wade, the Willow Spring is ruled by her granddaughter *Mama Day*. She is the only true heir, who learns the magic hoodoo tricks like her grandmother Sapphira Wade. *Mama Day* is a daughter of Sapphira Wade's seventh son John-Paul.

### **4. Mama Day (Miranda Day)**

*Mama Day* is a 99 years old and witty lady, she knows very well about the history of Sapphira Wade. She gives respect to her grandmother and nature. *Mama Day* understands that nature is best healer to any circumstances. She prepares medicines with use nature herbs and roots. She serves to her community as a midwife and nurse. Miranda makes best medicine for conceiving and delivers babies. Miranda helps Mrs. Bernice Duvall, a married woman who wants children. Bernice is misguided by Dr. Buzzard, who serves as a RMP doctor in Willow Spring. Buzzard suggests her some pills (medicines) for conceive. These pills are more effects on Bernice health and she goes to near death. In this situation *Mama Day* starts treatment with special roots and natural medicines. In this manner Dr. Buzzard always criticise Miranda's treatment because of "What could a tired old woman like me do to a powerful hoodoo doctor?" (*Mama Day*- 51).

### **5. Ruby- mischief conjure woman**

Ruby, a woman is living at Willow Spring, who jealous of Miranda's supernatural powers and waits for revenge on Miranda's family. Ruby uses some hoodoo tricks to manipulate Junior Lee and falls in love with him. Ruby makes to leave his wife Frances with her magical tricks. Meanwhile Cocoa, who

is a granddaughter of Miranda and Abigail, is falls in love with George Andrews and married after five years. Cocoa and George visits to Willow Spring. Ruby felt very envious on Cocoa's happiness. Junior Lee invites Cocoa but Mama Day forbids it. Ruby sends a letter by children to Cocoa, "I'm sorry I married a fool. Come, see me" (Mama Day-244). Cocoa goes into Ruby's house and she meets Ruby. Cocoa and Ruby passed some words each other. Ruby arranges comb, brushes and warm solution. Cocoa sits on the stool and Ruby applies poison oil of Cocoa's hair. Ruby tells her with a soft hypnotic voice and her fingers massaging with warm solution into Cocoa's scalp. Ruby keeps rubbing and she uses some beautiful braids and Ruby says with Cocoa that sure these braids can give good looking for you. Now a day's young girls like use these braids for hair. Ruby uses a white twine for Cocoa hair, white colour is matching any dress. Ruby knots the white thread on each end of her hairs, and all braids knots by white twine. Ruby tells Cocoa it's done; Cocoa asks a mirror. Cocoa looks so prettier with Ruby's experiments. Cocoa bends down and kisses Ruby on the cheek. Ruby is smiling and watches Cocoa's head. In the meanwhile, "Ruby brushes a few strands from her lap and into her hand and puts them in her pocket." (Mama Day-247) Cocoa goes home and sees how pretty it is, and George also appreciates her beautiful hair. With these braids Cocoa looks like a print of African woman.

Shortly Cocoa falls in very serious ill. George thinks that, his wife is attacked by brain fever. In this meantime heavy hurricanes attacked willow spring and badly destroy the bridge, which was connected from mainland to willow spring. Cocoa's illness is increased day by day. After some days Mama Day guess the reason her granddaughter's illness. But there is no way to take her into hospital, because the bridge was fall down and there is no power. George felt very ashamed that he cannot give to her proper treatment. He thinks that "Why hadn't I studied medicine instead of a subject as useless as engineering science? What good was all that math and logic now?" (Mama Day-263). George cannot believe Mama Day's treatment to rescue Cocoa, but he has no way, he just relies on her treatment to save Cocoa. The willow spring is filled with heavy rain water and floods. The rain is continuing. Her health is decreased. Mama Day and George try to save her. Mama Day crying continuously, because she thinks that, "There's more sorrow coming" (Mama Day-262), Miranda knows anybody can't cure Cocoa's brain fever. Mama Day further thinks that this fever was attacked by Ruby's magical elements.

Mama Day says to Abigail to prepare strong cup of chamomile tea, it helps to rest Cocoa. Miranda bends down and smells the scalp of her hair. Miranda observes her scalp smell is doubt. Mama Day thinks that she washes her poisonous hair, she cuts braids and threads. Cocoa feels uneasy in her sleep, because her braids are rashes with pillow. Miranda observes her neck has little red swellings are beginning and it spreading down to her shoulders. Miranda takes cutter and start to cutting off each braid. Miranda uses wood comb and all threads are fall down from her hair. Mama Day cutting all of her hair because she thinks it possible to saves Cocoa from Ruby.

[Ruby] hoped [Mama Day would] spend her time untwisting them threads and washing the poison out of [Cocoa's] hair ... Ruby knows there were so many things [Mama Day] could choose from [to heal Cocoa and seek revenge on Ruby] ... she could reach down in any flower garden ... But all that would take time. (Mama Day- 264)

Miranda turns on warm water until to half of the tub. She applies charcoal paste and some herbal paste of Cocoa's scalp. Miranda starts to fire in back yard, she burns Cocoa's pillow, bed sheet and wooden comb which she used. Cocoa feels better after her bath. But this treatment is not enough for her health, it's necessary to another treatment for her health. George asks Miranda about Cocoa's health condition. She tells him that, her health is improves. He wants to see her she sleeps or not. But Miranda tells him don't shock when you see Cocoa, because Miranda cut her hair. Mama Day discloses with Abigail that jealous Ruby applied something to Cocoa's hair, so Cocoa getting sick on this case. Miranda come Ruby's house, Ruby observes Miranda when she comes on the main road and Ruby goes inside of the house and she bolts suddenly. Miranda knocks the door, but Ruby doesn't open it. Miranda stands at gate and call her loudly, but poor Ruby doesn't answer her call also. Mama

Day conjures on Ruby. Mama Day screams double-loudly on lightning, so Ruby and her house explodes very fast.

Mama Day tries to save Baby Girl, so she needs to George's help, but George does not need her help. Cocoa's head already filled with too much loss and too much sorrow, she didn't able to think anything. In the meantime, Cocoa health condition is seriously, Mama Day considers she will be dies like Peace. George angrily on Mama Day, because he irritated by Cocoa's health. George seriously pays his antidote attention to his wife and quickly wants to do what Miranda tells him to do for Cocoa. Mama Day tells him that there is a remedy for Cocoa's health and can you bring the red hen eggs for Cocoa antidotes. Mama Day sends him to bring the red hen's eggs which are available in the hen house beyond the bridge. Miranda wants to treat her granddaughter by the help of George's negotiation. George doesn't believe this type of healing and he knows the medical treatment is necessary for Cocoa. He tries to do as he is told but George needs a quantifiable outcome. But George necessary to go and bring the red hen's eggs, because he thinks there is small hope to rescue his wife Cocoa. Unfortunately, he fails but his action allows his wife to live even though the result of this task is terrific and awful for him. George, attacks by red hens, all the body bleeding this accident. His weak heart is fails to struggle this attack. George tries to come back home, but he fails; George dies in the middle of the path. George takes risk for Cocoa's health, he sacrifices himself, "Success is a form of surrender: the opposite of the desire to control." (6. qtd. in online.latimes).

Mama Day used magical hoodoo tricks to save her Baby Girl. But George sacrifices his life to his wife Cocoa. Mama Day also uses her magical trick like her great legendary woman Sapphira Wade. Boscombe Wade and George, both are died with these women magical tricks.

## 6. Conclusion:

Gloria Naylor creates a spiritual world, to save their women identity in the African American society. Afro-American wants to live respectably in the society. So, Gloria Naylor creates an imaginary characters Mama Day (Miranda) who always respected and loved by the Willow Spring people of her eternal service as a nurse, mentor, healer, spiritualist and counsellor. Gloria shows a lower woman's strongest will to posses' powers to become a leader through the characters of Sapphira Wade, Miranda and Cocoa. Naylor incorporates their traditional healing practice of magical tricks developing through this novel *Mama Day*. She succeeds to evolving black women oral tradition into literature. Gloria Naylor tries to save their culture through this effort.

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