Chapter Four

TOWARDS THE ATTAINMENT OF PURE LOVE:

MAMA DAY
Gloria Naylor’s third novel *Mama Day* (1988) marks a signal change in her career as a fiction writer. It also illustrates her art of storytelling. Storytelling indeed becomes an ‘act of love’ with Naylor as Dorothy Allison says. Establishing Naylor as a novelist, Rita Mae Brown says:

A writer’s first work of fiction is usually a surprise to the reader and the writer too. A writer’s second book is almost always a disappointment. A writer’s third novel determines whether the writer has a real career. *Mama Day* being the third novel by Gloria Naylor shows her art of storytelling and determines her as a novelist.¹

In *Mama Day* Naylor fictionalizes Willow Springs, an island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. Its inhabitants are slave descendents and they detach themselves from the mainstream American culture. Yet, there is a fragile bridge to connect the island to the mainland. Before writing *Mama Day* Naylor visited the secluded Sea Islands which are off the coast of Georgia for details. During these visits Naylor was lured by the islands’ serenity and beauty and as a result of it, she bought a house in St. Helena Island with the money she made out of her third novel *Mama Day*. In the year 1996 she had left for St. Helena to write and read books, and to tend her garden. It was in the same year she claimed that she was spied on and the government put surveillance on her. Naylor brings out her bitter
experience of ‘mind control’, a device used on her as part of surveillance in her fictionalized memoir titled ‘1996’ published in 2004.

In Naylor’s imagination Willow Springs becomes even more isolated than the Sea Islands. It is more resolutely “black”. It exists still as it must have been hundreds of years ago with a homogeneous black culture nurtured by folklore and tradition. Further, Willow Springs defiantly refuses to move into the modern times. Its woods contain herbs, roots, stems, and leaves that can be used for ‘good or evil’ i.e. as medicine or poison. Naylor depicts a ‘secret part’ of Willow Springs which she fictionalizes with magic and supernatural power. So, the novel has the theme of magic that has been shown with rich and unique cultural heritage of African American experience in America.

Naylor analyses the theme of *Mama Day* as the power of magic:

> When I got to *Mama Day*, I wanted to... write about what I believed. And I believed in the power of love and the power of magic. Sometimes I think that they are one and the same. *Mama Day* is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potentials and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles.²
Charles E. Wilson, Jr. while introducing the main concept of *Mama Day*, says:

"Naylor charts a different terrain. While her first two novels were grounded in known reality, this third novel allows Naylor to explore, and to question the concept of reality. Set on a mystical island of the southeast coast, *Mama Day* forces the readers to suspend disbelief and to shed those faculties normally used to navigate the established world. *Mama Day* is at once a romantic tale chronicling the emergent relationship of main characters Cocoa and George and also a narrative enigma that delineates every possible influence on this relationship; feminial, historical, psychological, social, gendered, spiritual and mystical. With this broad analysis Naylor encourages the reader to consider the various factors that shape our lives."

When *Mama Day* was published in 1988, the novel received mixed reviews. Many reviewers show great respect for Naylor's ambitious book and its accomplishments, while others remark the novel as 'confusing'. Those who like the novel like it for its power to absorb the reader in its magical world. *The Publisher's Weekly* admires *Mama Day* for dealing with the complexity of not only joy, satisfaction but pain and misery of human life. *Vintage contemporary series* in its publishers' review sees it as not just a black story but a human story. Paradoxically,
the novel contains all encompassing human experience of life. The review notices the plot consisting mystical events in the second part, with a respective glow across the first part which tells the love story of the main characters, Cocoa and George. Interestingly the novel is known for revealing spiritual and religious themes throughout. Naylor’s skill as a teller of tales is in tune with her philosophical and moral aims. The fascinating part of the novel is the rhythmic alternation of voices and locales that give a narcotic effect to the story. Naylor is clear sighted and intelligent in combining the magical interconnectedness of people with nature, with God, and with each other.

Bharathi Mukherjee admires Naylor for her characterization and depiction of the magical world of Willow Springs for being ‘proficient in making the familiar wondrous than making the wondrous familiar’:

Gloria Naylor has written a big, strong, dense, admirable novel spacious, sometimes a little drafty like all public monuments, designed to last and intended for many levels of use.  

Many critics of Naylor agree to find the thematic similarities of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in *Mama Day*. Bharathi Mukherjee makes it clear while analyzing the theme and the story line of *Mama Day*:
Mama Day has its roots in The Tempest. The theme is reconciliation. The title character is Miranda (also the name of Prospero’s daughter), and Willow Springs is an isolated island where, as on Prospero’s isle, magical and mysterious events come to pass. As in The Tempest, one story line concerns the magician Miranda Day, nicked named Mama Day, and her acquisition, exercise, and relinquishment of magical powers. The other story line concerns a pair of “star-crossed” (Ms. Naylor’s phrase, too) lovers: Ophelia Day, nicknamed Cocoa, and George Andrews.\(^5\)

Many scholars have seen many direct connections between Mama Day and the works of Shakespeare. Bharathi Mukherjee, and Missy Dehn Kubitschek points out how Naylor specially engages The Tempest by making Willow Springs an island community that appears on no map. Naylor naming her protagonist as Miranda and having a hurricane descend upon the island at the novel’s climax also signals her use of The Tempest. Some critics compare Mama Day with Hamlet and King Lear. Peter Erickson states that Naylor revisits Shakespeare in all her novels. Naylor, he argues, giving importance to the white literary tradition, elevates the black folk tradition represented by the community of the Willow Springs as well. He feels that Mama Day picks up where Linden Hills leaves off by greatly intensifying both
the North-South cultural contrast and the Shakespearean motif. Naylor's reassessment of Shakespeare in *Mama Day* is carried out on two levels. On the first, George's attachment to *King Lear* is probed; on the second, more pervasive level, association between Willow Springs and *The Tempest* are tested. This twofold approach is correlated with the novel's overall geographical movement from North to South since George's Lear is situated in the former while *The Tempest's* connections are with the latter.

George's adaption of Shakespeare serves as a badge of his upward mobility. His successive editions of *King Lear* both mark the increasing value of the play as a material object and cultural status symbol and measure the progress of his relationship with Cocoa. He begins with a "worn copy" that he prefers to Cocoa's and ends with "the calfskin and gold-leafed copy" that Cocoa gives him as a birthday present. *King Lear* specifically provides the medium for negotiating George's seduction of Cocoa.

It is true that in its own way *Mama Day* is as determined as any Shakespearean comedy in its marital and reproductive drive. Like Prospero, Mama Day orchestrates generational continuity and promising to keep on living till she can rock one of Cocoa's child son on her knee. This parallel does not mean, however, that Mama Day derives after all from a Shakespearean analogue. *Mama Day* is shaped rather by the figure of the black mother as an artist described by writers such
as Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and some such writers, and it is within this distinct tradition that the Mama Day-Cocoa relationship has to be considered.

Peter Erickson finally limits Shakespearean influence on Naylor's novels, since Shakespeare does not write from African American experience:

We have in the end to see Naylor's work in relation to two different contexts, both of which are important for a full view. Naylor's departures from Shakespeare especially her rejection of the absence and restrictions imposed by Shakespearean images of women are substantial. By countering Shakespeare, Naylor demonstrates the degree to which Shakespeare does not author us, the extent to which that role has irreversibly passed to others. New problems indeed arise, but they are not Shakespeare's problems nor does his work contain the materials needed for exploring all the possible options.6

Naylor's work provides a valuable test, case for how we are going to formulate a multicultural approach to literary studies. Naylor's interest in Shakespeare neither translates into a kinship nor supports a model of continuity; the main note is rather one of conflict and difference. As Gloria T. Hull remarks: "Black women poets are not 'Shakespeare's sisters.' In fact, they seem to be siblings of no one but themselves."7 Mama Day owes less to Shakespeare than to a separate
tradition of black women writers. Shakespeare does not assimilate Naylor; Naylor assimilates Shakespeare.

The most notable interpretive approaches to *Mama Day* are black sisterhood, motherhood, magic, generational heritage of hoodoo tradition, history, community and relationship between men and women. Elizabeth T. Hayes, notices the use of magic as the defining aspect of the novel. She finds the novel as a prime example of magical realism. Others like Lindsey Tucker, Helen Fiddyment Levy see Naylor’s use of magic and myth as powerful themes linking her characters to the African American community though Susan Meisenhelder is critical of Naylor’s interpretation of black cultural identity in the standards set by the white world. She states:

In *Mama Day* Naylor narrates the love story of two black people from strikingly different background – George, orphaned in the urban North, has grown up in an institution run by whites; and Cocoa, doted on by two black mother figures, has been drenched in the traditions of the rural South. Through the relationship that develops between these two characters, one the product of a white world, the other of an emphatically black one. Naylor deals with the issue of maintaining black cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to order, control and define black people.8
About the theme of *Mama Day*, Anne Kelley says:

Near the middle of *Mama Day*, George is white washing a chicken coop for Miranda Day, while Miranda watches him and hopes that nasty fight they [George and Cocoa] had the night before. She worries a little that they might, “go the way of so many of these young people now a days. Just letting things crumble a part because everybody wants to be right in a world where there ain't no right or wrong to be found.” (*MD*, 299-30) Moreover, she sees the impulse of behind this desire to be right as the desire to have one’s “side” validated to be not only listened to but also agreed with. The latter strikes *Mama Day* as problematic because “just like [a] chicken coop, everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside, and an inside. All of it is the truth.” (230). One of the distinctions that Gloria Naylor draws here, while “all of it” is “the truth”, on the other hand, is crucial to her fictitious [work]. . .

*Mama Day* is told from three perspectives but the story is simple. It presents the courtship and marriage of Cocoa (nee Ophelia) and George, and Georges’ death in Cocoa’s ancestral home, the Willow Springs, and Cocoa’s affinity to her dead husband, George. For the first time they meet in a job interview which does not go well because Cocoa must spend August in Willow Springs.
Subsequently they become friends and fall in love in spite of several conflicts. George, after marrying Cocoa, does not come to visit Willow Springs until their fourth year of marriage.

The second part of the novel foreshadows George’s death, George and Cocoa dream about his drowning and Miranda (nee Mama Day) sees a hurricane coming. Meanwhile, George and Cocoa have a terrible fight when George sees that she is wearing makeup foundation that is too dark for her. At the party arranged in their honour George rebuffs Cocoa’s attempts to speak to him. Junior Lee makes a pass at Cocoa, and Ruby, his wife witnesses it. When Cocoa comes to see Ruby, Ruby out of jealous, braids nightshades into Cocoa’s hair. As a result Cocoa is seriously ill, and at the same time a hurricane destroys the bridge that connects Willow Springs to the mainland. George is frustrated by his inability to leave the Willow Springs to get medical help for her. Mama Day realizes that Ruby has poisoned Cocoa and cuts off Cocoa’s braids. Mama Day uses magic to make a lightening strike Ruby’s house, burning it to the ground. Cocoa becomes ill, and begins to hallucinate. Mama Day remembering the broken hearted man of her past, realizes that she needs George’s help to rescue Cocoa.

In the final part, Mama Day tells George to go to the chicken house and bring back whatever he finds there to save Cocoa from her sickness. George does not believe in her magic but obeys her for the sake of Cocoa. George does not realize
that Mama Day means his own two hands. He tears apart the chicken house, and
finds nothing, but his own ‘bleeding hands’. He must learn that with those very
hands he can hold on tight to Ophelia, and metaphorically speaking, never have to let
go. In the process his weak heart gives out and he dies. Cocoa feels that her life is
over without him. Mama Day and Abigail, the two grandma figures help her recover
completely. She spends three months in Willow Springs and eventually, remarries
and moves to Charleston. She has two sons by her second husband and names her
second son after George. Towards end of the novel it is learnt that George had been
dead for 14-years but Cocoa speaks to him regularly. Abigail, Cocoa’s grandmother
dies at the end, while Mama Day’s death is foreshadowed.

*Mama Day* is imbued with supernatural elements. People in the Willow
Springs had inherited a faith in the supernatural from their slave ancestors who
practiced hoodoo. It is Mama Day who embodies the supernatural and possesses a
“gift” that she inherits from her great-grandmother a slave, Sapphire Wade.
According to Willow Springs legend, Sapphire was a “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 the lightning to start the kindling
going under the medicine pot. She turned the moon into
slave, the stars into swaddling cloth, and healed the
wounds of every creature walking up on two or down
on four (*MD*, 3)
According to the bill of sale for Sapphire that prefaces the novel, she “has served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse, not without extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft.” (MD, 2) This language expresses the white world’s view of Sapphire’s power, but the novel goes to great lengths to demystify and present in a positive light the powers Mama Day possesses. In the world of the Willow Springs where all the inhabitants are descendants of slaves, magic and the supernatural is part of everyday life and Mama Day’s gift is something to be respected and occasionally feared.

Early in the novel we are told about Sapphira, an African born slave sold to Bascombe Wade in 1819. Legend has it that the slave “married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose . . . persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble.”(MD,3) Obviously, that narration hinges on something phenomenal, to say the least. It is, moreover, intriguing that Bascombe’s last name is Wade, perhaps alluding to another version of his death, that he walked out into the Atlantic Ocean after Sapphira got away from him and headed . . . toward the east bluff on her way back to Africa.’ James Robert Saunders opines:

Naylor’s emphasis is nonetheless on the woman. Being a black woman herself, she is especially sensitive to this tragic history. Slavery allowed Bascombe to do a
terrible injustice to Sapphira who, in other circumstances, might have been able to give him as strong and pure a love as was humanly possible. (MD, 76)

Most of all the boys in the Days family are thrived. Mama Day’s father being the youngest of seven boys had Mama Day and Abigail living. In the last three generations nothing but girls in the Days family and only one is left alive, Cocoa. Who were the wives of those first two succeeding generations, totaling fourteen boys? Did they even all get married? We are not fully told, but we do get the impression that they were not much better off than the four wives of the Luther Nedeed generations. The names are of less significance that the probable fates they suffered as a consequence of the era and circumstances into which they were born.

Relatively more information provided about the mother of Mama Day. She too, is named Ophelia and in addition to Abigail and Mama Day, she had given birth to Peace who, while still a baby, fell into a well. The first Ophelia was so distraught that she had actually tried to jump into the well after her dead daughter. She was restrained then but would later go into a trance and wander into The Sound, a relatively narrow but deep body of water between the Willow Springs and the eastern United States mainland. She dies, in Mama Day’s words, “trying to find peace.” Naylor’s ingenious use of the name “Ophelia” and the action of death by drowning
draw on Shakespeare and thereby add a certain power to the message of repeated loss.

Of Ophelia’s three children only Abigail and Mama Day are living. Mama Day has no children; Abigail has had three: Grace, Hope, and yet another Peace. The symbolic import of those names becomes clear as we learn that all three of these daughters are dead. Abigail’s Peace died even younger than the first Ophelia’s. Abigail’s Hope was the mother of Willa Prescott Nedeed; Hope died shortly after Willa married Luther.

So what we are left with is the child of Grace, yet another Ophelia (Cocoa) who “came into the world kicking and screaming,” an omen of things yet to come. After coming of age, she journeys first to Atlanta and then New York and seems bound to survive rather nicely until upon a return visit to Willow Springs, she is propositioned by Junior Lee and then cursed by his disturbed wife. Among all others, Mama Day, the living female of the Days take the principle role as well as the title character of the novel.

Helen Fiddyment Levy establishes *Mama Day’s* oral tradition of the written (printed) text. *Mama Day* opens with a narrative celebration of the female seer Miranda, and her foremother, the founder of Willow Springs, Sapphira Wade. A voice tells the reader of the island women’s world, found on no map, lying just off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia and then the narrating voice-defined as
neither male nor female-in the preface enjoins us to hear the maternal language of Mama Day and Sapphira Wade. Naylor seeks to bring the reader immediately and intuitively into Willow Springs as she insists on direct personal communication. Miranda’s voice, or more precisely the voice of the community-she is the oracle-merge with the reader’s own emotions and memories, a part that the mainland has taught the reader to ignore: “Think about it: ain’t nobody really talking to you. We’re sitting right here in Willow Springs, and you’re God-knows-where. It’s August 1999-ain’t but a slim change it’s the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own.”(MD, 10) The community’s voice comes closer, enters the reader’s experience, demanding that he or she, black or white, young or old, reach back, to remember the wise woman. Although the voice clearly arises from the black community, it invites the reader into the homes as the seer’s legend is passed, as the community members fix their autos, prepare their dinners. With the insistence on the oral nature of the printed narrative and its direct, immediate, even telepathic transmission, Naylor attempts to transcend the limits of modern language and summon the connecting strength of myth. And in her refusal to classify the opening narrator as belonging to either gender, Naylor insists that the home place welcomes men as well as women. The mystery of religion is once again merged with the acts of the daily life as the domestic acts and manual labour of the working man and woman are elevated to the sacred.
The narrative voice recollects the college-educated Reema's boy, who returns from the mainland to study Willow Springs's customs and language. This figure allows Naylor to juxtapose Mama Day's maternal language with the impersonal associational language represented by the writing of Reema's boy – he is known on Willow Springs by his mother's name and the language and calculation of the mainland investors who seek to persuade Miranda to sell the island for 'development'.

Levy acknowledges Naylor's *Mama Day* moves toward this ideal as the author seizes the voice of the community:

The communal voice of Hurston, her courageous defiance of both black male and white definitions, has empowered Naylor, as well as other African-American women authors, to write out of their experience of doubled marginality as woman and black, and like Hurston, Naylor reaches back to the local language, which exists at the margins of the competitive bureaucratic social order. By refusing the authority of the scientifically detached introspective author, Naylor, like other women here, negates the idea of the self-created genius and instead insists on the vitality of woman's communal voice.10
Sapphire and her female descendant, Mama Day, guard the gates of birth and death, bringing her healing powers of growth to the natural world. Like the male deity, Sapphira has her own day of commemoration, Candle Walk, whose nature implicitly comments on the mainland's commercialized Christmas, a holiday most notably portrayed in Naylor through Luther's fiery demise. The story of Candle Walk's founding comes from a local legend, which says that when God threw down the island from heaven, he brought along some stars. The mighty conjure woman, Sapphira Wade, tells the deity to let them stay, so that she can lead on with light. Thus the ritual of celebration asks each member to carry a candle and gift as they walk from house to house in a ceremony something like the Mexican posada. Instead of exchanging purchased gifts among friends, the members of the community carry a gift, however modest, as long as it is homemade or the product of the earth. Those gifts are given to the needy and the lonely as the givers walk about on Candle Walk.

In Willow Springs the women carry the memory, the magic, and the creative power of the ideal community. Together Sapphira, Cocoa, and Mama Day form a sort of woman's trinity with mother, daughter and spirit. The antagonist of the narrative is Ruby, a woman jealously in love with a younger man, transformed into an evil sorceress; Naylor portrays Ruby's obsession as the source of disorder.
and evil within the community. The supposed conjure man Doctor Buzzard is, in fact, an ineffectual figure of fun.

Naylor implies that the home place, existing in "no state," enriches the America outside despite its distance and isolation. Cocoa, for example, sees New York not as a city, but as a collection of small towns; her childhood experience of the mothers enables her to humanize the impersonal urban setting. Her experience with Willow Springs accompanies her to the city, but George's childhood leaves him unable to understand the mores of Mama Day's island as his experience with the gambling circle illustrates—he exposes and defeats an ancient male charlatan, robbing the old man of one of his few illusions. When the mainland developers seek to buy the island, promising jobs and prosperity for Willow Springs, Miranda sends them packing from her women's world because "even well-meaning progress and paradise don't go hand in hand." The regimented impersonal society and its language gain no foot hold on Sapphira's island.

In the far more positive Mama Day Naylor emphasizes generational or historical sisterhood even more, reflecting what Susan Willis calls the predominant theme of contemporary black women writers: "The journey (both real and figural) back to the historical source of the black American community."11 Yet, at the same time she ties its success increasingly to the resolution of tragic tensions between men
and women, and between the community as an organic whole and outside influences
that threaten its values.

Female power and wisdom are vividly incarnated in Miranda, the title
character, a further development of Mattie Michael and Grandma Tilson and
comparable to many grandmother figures in black women's fiction e.g., Eva Peace in
Morrison’s *Sula* or even Lutie Johnson’s grandmother in Petry’s *The Street*. Forced
prematurely into a nurturing role in her family after her mother’s suicide, Miranda
eventually becomes not only a mother to her grandniece Ophelia but a “Mama” to the
whole island community of Willow Springs. For decades she is not only the
community’s midwife but also its guardian of tradition and its central authority figure
if ‘Mama Day say no, everybody say no.’ She is a powerful conjure woman with
special gifts derived, in the community’s view, from “being a direct descendant of
Sapphira Wade, piled on the fact of springing from the seventh son of a seventh
son.”(*MD*, 6) She feels the burdensome responsibility of her intuitive powers and her
knowledge of nature and uses them only to advance the cause of life making Bernice
fertile or calling down lightning to punish the murderous Ruby.

The novel makes a clear distinction between the kind of conjuring or
hoodoo that Mama Day practises and two other kinds: the trickery of Dr. Buzzard,
and the evil practices of Ruby. Mama Day uses her powers for such benevolent
purposes as healing the sick, helping women give birth, and helping Bernice get
pregnant. Ruby uses spells, poisons, and herbal mixtures with graveyard dust to kill and drive insane the women whom she fears are after her man. The only time Mama Day kills is when she attracts lightning to Ruby’s house in revenge for Ruby’s poisoning of Cocoa. And while Dr. Buzzard also claims to heal his remedies are fake consisting mostly of alcohol and nothing of any real medicinal value. He also exploits the villagers’ fears and beliefs in ghosts to hawk his charms and talismans.

Mama Day’s practices are described in great detail to emphasize her vast knowledge of effective herbal remedies. She also uses her understanding of psychology such as when she helps Bernice by giving her black gold seeds, which, represent her negative feelings about her mother-in-law and her hopes for her baby rather than anything supernatural. Naylor, therefore, demystifies some of Mama Day’s practices and shows the reader that her supernatural powers are natural extensions of her understanding of the real world.

George is an engineer from New York. He is abandoned while an infant in New York and grows up in a shelter for boys. He is brought up in a non-emotional, but practical world - a world that does not even believe in future. The guardians in the boy’s shelter, the Andrews teach him to believe and live in present. They often say, “keep it in the now, fell as... only the present has potential, sir.” (MD, 22-23)

George’s mother is mentioned in Naylor’s fourth novel, Bailey’s Café(1992) and his birth place as Bailey’s Café in Harlem. His mother was a
prostitute and his father a john. George thus has no family history in comparison with Cocoa. Cocoa is brought up by two black mother figures: Mama Day and Abigail in the traditional rural South Willow Springs. Hence, Mama Day is a balancing of two different cultural identities. It gives the readers a scope to draw a distinct line between the two. This appealing aspect of the novel provides the readers an opportunity to study the urban northern society which George represents and, the complexity of Willow Springs, an African community in the rural south to which Cocoa belongs.

George also draws the striking contrast between Cocoa and himself:

I was always in awe of the stories you told so easily about Willow Springs. To be born in a grandmother’s house, to be able to walk and see where a great grandfather and great-great grandfather was born. You had more than a family, you had a history. And I didn’t even have a real last name. I’m sure my father and mother lie to each other about even their first names. (MD, 129-130)

Further, he tries to accept reality with his situation, saying:

How could he [George’s father] know years later that I might especially wonder about his? When the arrangement is to drop twenty bucks on a dresser for a
woman, you figure that's all you have left behind. I had no choice but to emphasize my nows, (MD, 130)

George’s last name is given at the shelter after the guardian’s Wallace P. Andrews. Along with that he also imbibes the perfect philosophy of the directors of his shelter. Rosellen Brown gives a note of his successful life despite the fact that he has no family of his own:

He has grown up a perfect representative of the benign but fiercely focused philosophy of the directors of his boys’ shelter who help their charges overcome the blackness of their beginnings by exhorting them to “keep it now, fellas.” This has made him a successful engineer, a sincere pursuer of culture at the same time that he is a fanatic football fan, a connoisseur of the here-and-now pleasures of New York City, a thoughtful lover.12

George experiences a contradictory life style during his visit and stay at Willow Springs. His logical western mind and precision are thoroughly challenged ever since he enters Willow Springs. The gripping portion of the novel studies the life and people of Willow Springs through the eyes of George. George, in spite of being rational, logical and scientific in outlook, maintains human interest in love and
marriage to Cocoa and with the people in Willow Springs. He carries out human relations with a sense of abundant emotional intensity.

Naylor’s protagonist Cocoa is a young woman in her twenties with roots in Willow Springs. Cocoa is raised by her grandmother Abigail and her great aunt Miranda (Mama Day). She tries to establish herself in New York City when she is introduced in the novel. Hence, *Mama Day* is Cocoa’s conflict with urban white America as a rural black woman. The lesson that Cocoa must learn is that she cannot escape her past and cultural heritage. Even though she has spent the last several years in New York, in the last half of the novel she must come to terms with the Willow Springs and her heritage which means the loss of the “peace” that the women in her family have suffered.

Daphne Lamothe regards the narrative technique *Mama Day* as an adaptation of culture and history in the form of oral tradition of storytelling:

The characters’ navigation of this landscape [Willow Springs] the weaving together of places as they travel both around the Island and between it and the mainland, becomes a metaphor for the constitution of memories, for the weaving together of narratives about those memories. The multiplicity of routes taken and memories formed is embedded in the novel’s structure, which recreates an act of collective rememory and storytelling. Miranda or Mama Day,
Cocoa, George, and an anonymous voice that represents the collective view of the Willow Springs folly all narrate the same events from slightly different—their respective—points of view.¹³

Naylor’s success as an African American woman writer lies in her romanticizing of rural South with the same eloquence and emotional involvement she shows in depicting the urban life, especially New York City. The two contradictory life styles are meticulously shaped in the characters of George and Cocoa. George is seen trying convincing means and methods of happy married life. He admits that he is a stranger to such an experience: “You were the first female I had lived with, and that itself was a challenge. I had no practice with sisters, cousins or even aunts. I did what I normally did when a subject was new to me: I bought books.”(MD, 141)

George, in the process of understanding a woman’s mind, tries to get into the intricacies of ‘the tampon complex’—the inborn difference between the two sexes. He also sees it as a reason for natural inequality between men and women, and the ultimate cause for female grudging the male. Naylor induces her ideals of a husband in George and makes him declare: “Men should try to be supportive.” (MD, 142) In the process of understanding a woman and being supportive, he realizes: “Living with a woman is a day to day balancing act and I really enjoyed the
challenge. Because the times I got it right, you being different made all the difference in my world." (MD, 143)

The young black couple are shown by Naylor as ‘social smarts’ opposite to the ‘street smarts’ generally depicted in the fiction of the urban poor. But, in Mama Day, as Brown realizes Naylor’s purpose is to bring her back to her cultural heritage. She takes Cocoa back to Willow Springs and puts her in the care of his great aunt, Mama Day. Naylor’s emphasis is on the Willow Springs rather than on New York City. She values retention of African-derived traditions such as oral folklore, quilting, herb and root work in opposition to the cultural forces of Western society. George and Cocoa are found admiring Willow Springs and at the same time they hesitate to accept them.

Early in the novel George chides Cocoa for “following [the] myth” of New York as fast and impersonal. He teaches her to appreciate the city as a native would by taking her to the outer boroughs, the parts of the city that are like Willow Springs in that they are not “on the map.” He tells her, “My city was a network of small towns, some even smaller than here in Willow Springs. It could be one apartment building, a handful of blocks, a single square mile hidden off with its own language, newspapers, and magazines-its own laws and codes of behavior, and sometimes even its own judge and juries”. Because the outer borough neighbourhoods do not occupy any real space in outsiders’ minds as significant
places, they are like Willow Springs in that they are, at least figuratively, unmapped, says Daphne Lamothe.

George opens Cocoa's eyes to the existence of the village in the city. According to Donald Gibson, this approach, introduced by Toni Morrison, “avoid dichotomizing, and therefore simplifying, the issue. [Morrison's] brilliant analysis allows recognition of the negative aspects of the urban experience of blacks without defining the very nature of that experience as wholly negative and of necessity pathological” (MD, 41). Naylor shares with Morrison an aversion to demonizing the urban experience at the same time that her characters' lived experience of city and country challenges the desire to idealize them. Nonetheless, her depiction of the urbanized George is, if not pathological, then certainly problematic because his thorough inability to claim or own a cultural identity makes him the only character in the novel unable to carry any trace of identifiably African American culture with him as he travels. It is his lack of personal history that makes George's only recourse to collective identity the essentialist discourse of race as biologically determined.

Naylor's theorization of change, movement, and loss manifests not only in the portrayal of her characters, but also in her challenge to the relegation of the rural South to the mythic past. Naylor marks the supposedly idyllic Southern space with its own traumas and transformations, geographical and historical. Although Willow Springs is imbued with the language of myth, its inhabitants wrestle with its gradual
transformation. For example, its inhabitants celebrate Candle Walk each year before Christmas: "Over here nobody knows why every December twenty-second folks take to the road—strolling, laughing, and talking—holding some kind of light in their hands. It's been going on since before they were born, and the ones born before them." (MD, 110) This annual event ritualizes continuity even as the practice slowly changes with each succeeding generation's greater contact with the mainland: "There's a disagreement every winter about whether these young people spell the death of Candle Walk." (MD, 111) The young people carry sparklers and lanterns instead of candles, they exchange not store-bought but handmade gifts, and they measure others' generosity in the gifts they themselves receive. Consumerism and display replace communal sharing and individual creativity. Once again the island's agrarian, communal economy clashes with the materialism of the capital-driven mainland. Although the movement of the young folk 'beyond the bridge' and their importation of mainland values and technologies (electricity, automobiles) is met by most island elders with fear and distrust, Miranda, 'known to be far more wise than wicked,' views change as inevitable, and "says there's nothing to worry about." Her powers as conjure woman and herbalist, her intimate knowledge of every corner of the island, and her affinity for nature make her the novel's central figure for African American folk traditions, so her acceptance of cultural transformation is both significant and ironic: "And even the youngsters who've begun complaining about having no Christmas instead of this 'old 18& 23 night' don't upset Miranda. It'll take
generations, she says, for Willow Springs to stop doing it at all. And generations again to stop talking about the time ‘when there used to be some kinda 18 & 23 going-on near December twenty-second.’ By then, she figures, it won't be the world as we know it no way—and so on need for the memory.”(MD, 111)

George imagines Willow Springs to be an edenic place of origins, a mythical, ancestral home. Upon first arriving on the island with Cocoa on her annual visit home, George reflects, “I had to be there and see—no, feel—that I was entering another world. Where even the word paradise failed once I crossed over The Sound” (MD,175). Although he increasingly grows more ambivalent about and even hostile toward the island, at first, even its inhabitants seem mythic to George, who describes Mama Day and Abigail (Cocoa' grandmother) as appearing eternally young. The mythical rendering of Mama Day is deliberate when contrasted to her depiction in Naylor's earlier novel, Linden Hills. In that work, Mama Day makes a brief appearance as Willa Nedeed's aunt, come north for a visit. Willa remembers her as homespun and unsophisticated, a woman spouting unwanted folk Wisdom, “Coming with her cardboard, suitcases, loose-fitting shoes, and sticky jars of canned whatever” (LN,147). This decidedly unflattering description of Miranda reveals more about her niece (upwardly mobile and self-satisfied at the time of the visit), than it does about Mama Day. Likewise, George's description of Miranda and Abigail speaks more to his state of mind than it does to their actual condition. His visceral response to the
island arises from his rootlessness. George's investment in viewing the island in mythic terms is the fulfillment of his desire for the recuperation of a lost and fragmented identity.

But to conclude that the novel's sole focus is on George's immersion into "authentic" cultural blackness would be to overlook Naylor's simultaneous concern with cultural transformation and hybridization. The opposition between Willow springs and Mainland values can be understood as signifying a binary between African American and Euro-American values, but to attend exclusively to this reading privileges cultural purity as an ideal and suggests that cultural hybridity should only be viewed as a type of mongrelization. Susan Meisenhelder's reading of the novel exemplifies an approach based on the notion of the South as site of cultural purity and racial authenticity. In "'The Whole picture' in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day," she argues that "a measure of both Cocoa's and George's alienation from their black roots early in the novel is their extensive use of white cultural norms to define themselves and to understand their relationship." Meisenhelder offers a number of examples of this alleged alienation from "racial roots"; among them are George's love of Shakespeare and his invitation of Cocoa to dinner by sending her roses and a note, a gesture she reads as his playing the role of white urbane sophisticate. The labelling of certain behaviors as "white" and others as "black" is clearly problematic. Yet Meisenhelder's attention of both characters' appropriation of a common cultural
script of languages and behaviours to direct their actions is necessary, for we see that a layer of artifice to their behaviours does exist. The problem is not, however, that Cocoa and George are "acting white", but that they suffer from a self-alienation and an alienation from others that is symptomatic of urban living. Yet, while Naylor implies that they must shed the neurotic need to filter their experiences through the hegemonic narratives of the dominant culture, this discard cannot be articulated through stereotypical notions of what is authentically white or black.

The strength of Meisenhelder's argument lies, however, in her observation that both Cocoa and Georges suffer displacement, for that contention deviates from the critical norm, reads George as the one who suffers most from fragmentation. Such an interpretation assumes that those who stay closer to home are more authentically black, and that mobility is an exclusive prerogative of whites. This notion of migration is a fallacy that Naylor rejects. While it is certainly true that Cocoa is more grounded in African American traditions than George is, she is like him in her negotiation of geographic and social mobility and of the cultural changes that result from it. She chooses to live in large urban centers like New York and Charleston; accordingly, her connection to an ancestral home is maintained primarily though memories that ground her shifting subjectivity: "Measuring your new against old friends, old ways, old places. Knowing that has long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total
stranger" (MD, 49). One can argue that if for George the attraction of Willow springs lies more in its mythicism than its reality as "home," then in some respects, for Cocoa, the island is more desirable as memory than as living space. This preference emerges, in part, because the traditions preserved by the island include a set of patriarchal norms that privilege women's roles as child-bearers and caretakers, illustrated primarily through a subplot in which Miranda enables Bernice to realize her feverish desire for motherhood, and secondarily through Miranda and Abigail's preoccupation with, first, Cocoa's marital status and then with her procreative status. Cocoa's resistance to these norms illustrates how her geographical distance from the island enables a critical distance that allows her to imagine other possibilities.

Nonetheless, Cocoa's feelings of nostalgia for the island buffer her from an urban experience marked by "change and difference," offering her the reassurance of the familiar in the face of a "nightmare" of instability. Yet elsewhere, Naylor suggests that change and rootedness are not necessarily in opposition, and in fact can be found in specific bodies of people, or land. Cocoa's fair complexion and reddish gold hair, for example, is evidence of a history of miscegenation even as Mama Day looks at her and sees "pure black". She thinks: "but the Baby Girl brings back the great, grand Mother. We ain't seen 18&23 black from that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun" (MD, 47-48). Cocoa, like Willow Springs, is transformed by time and history, while Miranda
perceives in Cocoa a mythic and transcendent self-possession. Like the island, Coca bears the evidence of a long history of cross-cultural encounter and exchange.

This definition of blackness that acknowledges hybridity is nonetheless viewed through a historical lens “18&23 black” that refuses to erase the memories of violence and the misuse of power integral to African Americans’ new world racial and cultural identity. This point of conflict at the site of cross-cultural encounter is where the tearing of memory is liable to happen. But on Naylor’s terms, it is also where the most energetic reconstructions and reconceptualizations of individual and communal identities can occur because that is where subjects try to assert themselves most forcefully. Naylor’s vision of cultural hybridity is far from utopic, and the kind of encounters between mainland and African American cultures is often marked by conflict, miscommunication, distrust, and the abuse of power. She exemplifies the latter, for example, by discord between villagers and the ethnographer Reema’s Boy, and by their distrust of the corrupt real estate developers who offer to buy their property.

*Mama Day* also celebrates the prospect of pure love as the heart of the novel which is not found in Naylor’s first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*. She touches upon the concept of ‘pure love’ in her second novel *Linden Hills* through the characters of Ruth and Norman Anderson. In *Mama Day* Naylor presents a character like George for the first time. He is kind, responsible and an interesting husband
figure of Naylor's imagination. In spite of his own inadequacies, he is Naylor's lofty male character, heroic enough to emancipate his wife Cocoa from destruction. He values love, and sacrifices himself at the altar of pure love. He lives even after his death in Cocoa's heart. In fact, most part of the story is a long dialogue between dead George and Cocoa by his tomb, giving the novel a supernatural touch.

George and Cocoa, when fall in love frequently fight, and finally learn to listen to each other by taking turns, expressing themselves in long monologues. This continues even after one is in grave (George) and the other (Cocoa) is sitting next to the grave. The novel speaks of death in the early pages and what one might hear in the cemetery. The courtship and marriage are recounted for the reader after the marriage has been broken by death. George and Cocoa recall memories of the details of arguments, happy events, and of their childhood. The alternative passages in the novel develop a kind of antiphonal poetry, with long questions and long answers. The love story is told in first person by the two narrators; George and Cocoa in alternating sections. Only occasionally and when another person appears in the story does the third person, the omniscient narrator speaks. The connected monologues begin in New York City and end in Willow Springs. Daphne Lamothe acknowledges Mama Day as: "The novel is a modern day romance novel that takes us through courtship, marriage, and its aftermath."
Naylor plots her novel in such a way that it offers several different interpretations to George’s death. His sacrificial death to save Cocoa makes him a ‘saviour figure’. Lamothe offers three different purposes for George’s death. First, it figures as an incident in which the rational, scientific mind must be given up to native beliefs. Therefore, George is left without an opportunity to save Cocoa, but to obey her inscrutable ways. Secondly, George is not allowed to be assimilated into those collective values. So, he must die to signify his rootlessness. The third interpretation to George’s death is ‘the defeat of his western, masculine mind in opposition to the African derived matriarchy that rules over the island.

Naylor explains why George has to die, when the novel is about the restorative powers of love:

George had a choice - - - George had a choice to either hold on to all of the things that willow Springs represented – that were there in the Other Place – or to save Cocoa in his own way and with his own love. Being the kind of man he was, he wasn’t able to take that leap that saw redemption in the Other Place and the powers of Mama Day. He willed Cocoa to live just by himself. But the stress of it all weakened his heart. If George had gone to that chicken coup and found and brought back what Mama Day wanted. All she wanted was his hands. If he had been able to be the kind of man to do that, he would be alive. But when he
found nothing he thought he had been made a fool of. So he goes to the excretion of wrecking the chicken coup and that’s what causes and brings on his heart attack. But, he wills himself across the road, and he wills Cocoa to live. Mama Day told George, “There’s a way we can do this we can do it my way, it saves us all.” And, she couldn’t have been plainer than that because she knew that if he didn’t choose her way, it was going to kill him. So, George was a self-made man. He had taken nothing and turned it into something all his life. And so he wasn’t now at this stage of the game going to see nothing and call it something. He just couldn’t do that which was unfortunate that he couldn’t do it, you know, because it cost him his life. At least it cost him his physical life. But their love was so strong. If you want to talk about redemption, it was able to resurrect him each time Cocoa came to that island, and they would set there and talk. The whole book is narrated by a dead man.15

Naylor elucidating the death of George as an inevitable, and glorifies their love as eternal. George becomes a part of the island and its heritage only after his death. He is buried in the island, and later his name is carried on, as Cocoa gives his name to one of her sons from a subsequent marriage after George’s death.
Mama Day works out on gender relationship, as well. The greatest sacrifice made by George for bringing Cocoa back to life and her emancipation at the cost of his death, is what Naylor can credit her male characters with. Cocoa would be dead and the historical line of the Days would have come to an end unless she is saved by George. Larry R. Andrews states about the male characters in Mama Day as:

The men in the novel tend generously to support the women to a point and are respected by Miranda for uprightness and strength. Bascombe wade had freed his slaves out of love for Sapphira, yet he could not let her go, not beyond the possessiveness of male love. John – Paul Miranda’s father, was a sensitive woodcarver who despaired over his wife’s madness but could not let her go. Bernice’s Ambush and Ophelia’s George offer their wives a rich love, but George is limited to childhood in securities and certain masculine attitudes towards women that cause miscommunication.

In spite of the sense of sisterhood operating among the women in Mama Day, Naylor successfully creates certain male characters that redeem their women from their inadequacies. Like in her other novels she hopes to resolve the gender conflict and rich suggestions to that effect are made in Cocoa’s monologues to
George’s spirit. George, speaking from the grave and Cocoa sitting by his tomb’s side openly communicate and discover each other.

When *Mama Day* was published in 1988 it evoked mixed responses and many are critical about the narrative technique Naylor uses. Many critics find the novel’s technique complicated while the plot is simple. Rita Mae Brown observes:

When you read *Mama Day*, and surely you will read it, “surrender” to it. Don’t Worry about finding the plot. Let the plot find you. The different voices are beautifully realized, but Naylor’s technique can be a confusing one to read. Occasionally the narrator’s voice is not so cleanly, stylistically marked, and the reader must press on doggedly before knowing who is speaking, realizing that a plot is developed through these fragmented viewpoints.  

Lindsey Tucker applies Cocoa’s remarks about ‘too many sides of the whole story’ to *Mama Day*’s structure and points to Naylor’s use of ‘magic and fantasy’ against reality:

There are too many sides to the whole story,” Cocoa tells George near the conclusion of *Mama Day* (311). The truth of this remark is reinforced by the structure of the novel itself- by the fact that Cocoa’s words are spoken in a time which has not arrived (1999) and addressed to a
person who has been many years dead. In deed, this very “speakerly” novel has gathered together many voices, past and present living and dead, individual and collective, and while the oral quality of this work may not trouble readers and critics certainly prank the realism that had come to define Naylor's works in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* had suddenly it seemed, become contaminated with ingredient of magic and fantasy. One reviewer complaints, 'the reader is never sure what is imagine and what is authentic, what is to be believed and what is unbelievable' and another object that 'what is men to be mystical too often ends up mystifying.\(^{18}\)

About the characterization:

How will Cocoa manage to hand down to her children her own sense of history and heritage, far from her family in Willow Springs? How will she find a way to her heritage to strengthen herself? How will she transform herself into a matured one? How will she integrate her knowledge of white culture and history with Black culture and history? All these issues remain unexplored. All it is too bad, because they are important, more important than the tale of terror and suspense that *Mama Day* becomes.\(^{19}\)
But it is in 1990 that *Mama Day* received substantial attention from critics and scholars. Missy Dehn Kubitschek points out how the previous major reviews fail to recognize the novel's donned message.

In 1987, Barbara Christian asserted that the importance African American literature is suffering critical neglect by an academy preoccupy with developing literary theory, her specific examples include the works of Frances Harper, Alice Walker with an exception to her *The Color Purple* and Gloria Naylor. Since, then, Hazel Caraby’s excellent *The Reconstruction of Womanhood* has discussed Harper, but no major work has emerged to engage Naylor’s novels. To some degree the problem may lie in the precursor to extended critical interpretation, reviews.  

The major reviews of Naylor’s *Mama Day* refuse to grant the novel’s donnee, even when they are generally positive. To some extent, this judgement stem from the critic’s classification of the novel in one or another overtly exclusive tradition. Thus, Rosellen Brown situate the novel as part of ‘a preoccupation of black writer’s in general and black woman in particular, with the gains and losses that have come with the move from rural to urban, from intuitive to rational life.’ But the equation of rural and intuitive greatly over simplifies the functioning of the novels’ Sea Islanders characters, and besides, omits another clear part of the novel’s
parentage what Bharathi Mukherjee calls 'its roots in The Tempest'. She inturn, over emphasizes the Euro American sources so that she distorts the plot, saying inaccurately, for example, that the book shows the title character's acquisition, exercise, and relinquishment of magic.

The review commentary repeatedly singles out for criticism the novel's 'strident parallels' with earlier texts its need to elevate by making symbolic or by fitting everything into a large scheme. Linda Simon's article in Women's Review of Books extends the implications of these arguments and incorporates them in a vitriolic attack on Naylor's artistic choices. In her view, the novel's theme could evidently develop beautifully if Naylor could only adapt the proper mode of development.

Kubitschek asks why Naylor or any other writer should be obligated to write a naturalistic novel remains unclear and says:

In many ways, the narrow contemporary critiques of Naylor who feel that the African American women writers would be permitted access to more genres than the sociological or the naturalistic. Further, Simon's assumption about 'reality', no matter what her heritage bespeak a profoundly Euro-American prospective. 21
The symbolic levels of Naylor's novels are not layered, and *Mama Day* testifies to two fundamental characteristics of African American culture. The past's persistence in the present, the present's participation in myth and archetype. For example the devastating hurricane in *Mama Day* travels a naturalistically accurate route from Africa West to Willow Springs over the Sea Islands to the mainland, the United States— that is the route of the Middle Passage. The storms are the heritage of slavery, periodically ravishing the land; the novel's perspective recognizes no division between their literal physical being and then symbolic meaning.

Margot Anne Kelly emphasizes the importance and significance of 'quilt imagery' in the novel. George and Cocoa on their return to Willow Springs are presented with a quilt, hand made by Abigail and Mama Day as a wedding gift. It has been stitched using:

A bit of her (Cocoa's) Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope's graduation dress, the palm of Grace's baptismal gloves. Trunks and boxes from the other place gave up enough for twenty quilts: corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great—uncles. *(MD, 137)*

The most prominent interpretation of the novel focuses on the use of Quilt imagery, as it emphasizes the importance of quilting to both form and substance.
of *Mama Day*. Susan Meinsenhelder observes Naylor’s use of quilt culture to reinforce the novel’s message. It represents African American community’s history, heritage, and human relationship with one another. She contends that George fails miserably in understanding the implications of the quilt presented to them as a wedding gift. She says: “Naylor repeatedly stitches past, present and future together and *Mama Day* is a complex narrative quilt of distinct voices. The pieces can be readily identified, but stitched together they create something whole.”

Unlike the society in New York City where individual identity is merged with the society, here, in Willow Springs, and in the quilt, it is not lost.

George’s society studies history found in charts, photographs, movies and books, but in Willow Springs no such provisions are available. It is found in the form of a quilt. *Mama Day* uses cloth from both female and male ancestors to imply gender perspectives in the family quilt. Another interesting interpretation of quilt imagery is Naylor’s implication of the relationship between George and Cocoa. Cocoa is drenched in her cultural heritage whereas, George is devoid of it. Further, it is seen that their relationship cannot be strong since two rags can never make a part of the ‘quilt’ in Willow Springs. Since she is buried in the Willow Springs he becomes a vital part of Willow Springs and the quilt.

There are several interpretation of *Mama Day* as indicated by Cocoa, herself at the end of the novel. “[Because] what really happened to us, George? You
see, that’s what I mean- there are just many sides to the whole story.’’ (MD, 311)

Despite the fact that it has many serious aspects and concerns about its plot(s), *Mama Day*, by Rosellen Brown makes an impressive observation:

*Mama Day* is the essence of all good things to Naylor: respect for life, for family and nature, a comprehension of the way to harness natural forces, an acceptance of death. Hers is the single face “that’s been given the meaning of peace.” . . . George, on the other hand, as sympathetic as any man to appear in the recent fiction of black women, has no family history.  

James Robert Saunders while summing up the themes of Naylor’s first three novels, glorifies *Mama Day* as a powerful love story of George and Cocoa.

In *Brewster Place* we had been presented with a world in which relationships between males and females were devoid of the required mutuality. *Linden Hills* presented one such reciprocal relationship, rendered through the marriage of Ruth and Norman Anderson. But by casting Ruth in the mold of a Christ-like figure, we wonder what the prospects would have been for average people. Finally, in *Mama Day*, we see how love between a mortal man and a mortal woman can be strong enough to conquer anything.
REFERENCES


5. Ibid, p 19.


21. Ibid, p 76.
