CHAPTER – 5
MAMA DAY

“I remember my grandmother and my great-grandmother. I had to answer to these women, had to know that whatever I did was easy in comparison with what they had to go through.”

A conflict facing many African Americans in the modern world is the loss of African roots and heritage in a society that does not encourage cultural identity but stifles it instead. For the African American experience, going back to the roots signifies establishing a close proximity with the family and the larger community which have always been the very substance of their existence. They have always believed that their lives are all entwined, and it is this fundamental connection that gives them their basic strength.

In the representation of the community, one problem that African American women fiction repeatedly faced is that of striking a balance between reality and ideology, between what the community actually is in the larger American capitalistic society and the wished for ideal, of a community which is constructed in a more inclusive manner involving an expanded notion of time and space, bringing within its ambit the distant as evoked by the sense of the Afro-centric, with its larger geographical connotation and spiritual dimension. Attempts were made in The Women of Brewster Place, in the figure of Mattie Michael, but Naylor’s extended engagement with this idea of a larger community in a definite space is reflected in the narrative structure of Mama Day (1988). It is significant that the site is visualized and constructed as an island away from, though close to the American mainland. It is a utopian space, created for the representation of the ideal, though utopian space aimed
at achieving that which was not achievable in a culturally realistic setting of the
1980s.

*Mama Day* brings the all-black inhabitants of the island of Willow Springs very
close to the spirit of Africa. Located on the border between Georgia and South
Carolina, Willow Springs is represented as a place not charted on any map, nor is it
actually a part of any state. As Tucker says, “Naylor’s choice of location has
obviously been dictated by the historical relationship of the islands to the perpetuation
of African culture” because the "Sea Islands are, with the exception of New Orleans,
the most African of places in America.”^2 Naylor’s choice of creating Willow Springs
away from any real geographical location provides us with an instant idea of whether
she wants to create a utopian space projecting her concept of community. Given the
constraints of the time period when she was writing, it was no longer possible for her
to portray a homogenous entity of the African American community. The Willow
Springs island, even though a fictive place, is thus, closer in spirit to the south – trying
to go back to the roots of the African American culture and identity. Interestingly,
Gloria Naylor has always been situated in the north, but her novels are based on the
south and the idea of the southern community, and she herself asserts that the
“...South is the closest we’ll ever come to Africa.”^3

In southern communities, the compelling need ‘to talk, to tell’ can inspire
numerous types of oral performances. In *Mama Day*, Naylor has strategically
manipulated the personal narrative – an oral story – in order to problematize story-
listening in racially separate southern communities. Story-telling and listening events
thrive in the south because of the self-conscious privilege of orality, community, and
intimacy in the region: through story-telling, members of a southern community
vigorously reaffirm their connection to each other. As Paule Marshall says,
The group of women around the table long ago. They taught me my first lessons in the 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.

*Mama Day* is a novel that spans two worlds. One is the southern barrier island of Willow Springs – a place exempt from the laws of nature and the often racist laws of man. The other world is New York City: polyglot, multi-racial, and governed by strict and seemingly heartless codes of love and survival. Naylor gives each of these worlds its own narrative and narrator; then she brings them together. She also interweaves these two narratives with a third-person narrative relating the stories of the members of Willow Springs community. It has been identified that —

(1) the rhythmic alternation of voices and locales here (in *Mama Day*) has a narcotic effect that inspires trust and belief in both Mama Day and Naylor herself, who illustrates with convincing simplicity and clear-sighted intelligence the magical interconnectedness of people with nature, with God and with each other.

In Willow Springs, the presiding presence is Miranda (Mama) Day, nearly one hundred years old and still going strong. She is the great-grand daughter of Sapphira Wade who was a slave and “(a) true conjure woman” (3), her mythic powers rendered in these phrases: she could “grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand” (3), and she “turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four.” (3) The mother of seven sons, she made the year 1823 synonymous with magical events, notably her own liberation from slavery by bewitching her master and lover, Bascombe Wade and persuading him to deed the island to his slaves. In the power of Sapphira Wade one is reminded of the power of conjure woman in African tribal cultures, such as Chinua Achebe presents in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in which Chielo, priestess of Agbala,
the Oracle of Hills and Caves, carries the favourite child of Okonkwo to Agbala, temporarily holding in her hands, the happiness of Okonkwo. The idea of conjure, coming from, among others, the lore of the Yoruba and Igbo religions (Yoruba and Igbo being the tribes that were frequently taken from Africa as slaves), is a common and accepted part of life to the people of Willow Springs.

Possessing some of her ancestors' gifts, Mama Day is a healer of the community with roots in the past, strength in the present, and insight into the future. Lindsey Tucker pieces together from her research, an idea of the true African-descended conjurers –

Conjurers are said to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves. Also, conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjure man or woman inherits his/her aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines. Conjure women often carry the name Mother and hold considerable power within their communities, and conjurers are, almost without exception, especially gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second sight.

Gloria Naylor creates the perfect conjure woman in Mama Day. Obviously, being called Mama Day or Little Mama by her entire community, even by her sister, she carries the honorary name of Mother. Her healing powers for the community transcend the world of science and verge on the magical. Aside from powers as nurse and midwife, she has the gift of second sight: precognition derived in part from a high degree of sensory awareness. Interestingly, the term "second sight" harkens back to W.E.B. DuBois, who uses it in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to mean "double-consciousness." Naylor herself quotes DuBois in her essay, "Love and Sex in the Afro-American Novel": "[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world."
Even as early as a child of five, Mama Day has demonstrated the ability for premonition: knowing, for example, that her baby sister, Peace, was going to be drowned in the well and sensing that “there is more to be known behind what the eyes can see.” (36) Her ability to read signs is not only an important component of African belief systems but is also crucial to the construction of the novel. She also has “(gifted hands)” (88), which she used in caring for her mother, who had become almost insane after the death of Peace. She now uses those hands to care for the sick, to deliver babies, and to cultivate gardens. She is much closer to her roots than the rest of Willow Springs, as is demonstrated by her conversations with ancestral voices during her solitary walks in the woods or during her clearing of the graves in the family cemetery. Where Mattie Michael is on the verge of having magical powers, recognizing and reacting to Lucielia’s death, Mama Day really possesses them. With her magical abilities, she serves as the mediating figure of the community, the bridge between the everyday world and the sacred world of her African ancestors.

In African American communities, the concept of community mothers or othermothers has always been a central issue. Children in southern rural communities were not solely the responsibility of their biological mothers. Aunts, grandmothers, and others who had time to supervise children served as othermothers or community mothers. Naylor had already used the concept of ‘community othermother’ in her first novel in the figure of Mattie Michael who is portrayed as the epitome of motherly love and affection and demonstrates an almost magical ability to mother the other women of Brewster Place. Mama Day also with all her gifts of magical powers serves as a community mother for the inhabitants of Willow Springs. She works with nature, especially in treating Bernice Duvall, who is desperate to have a baby. When being too
desperate, Bernice takes the fertility drug, Perganol, and becomes seriously ill, it is Miranda who makes the correct diagnosis of ovarian inflammation and then summons Dr. Smithfield because she knows that her knowledge does not extend to chemically constructed drugs. The way she diagnose Bernice’s problem and administer a chokecherry bark mixture to reduce the pain, we are reminded of Mattie Michael’s healing Lucielia. We are also given further information about Mama Day’s abilities by way of Dr. Smithfield’s memories of two instances when she had actually performed surgery with a knife –

…once when Parris got bit by a water moccasin, and the time when Reema’s oldest boy was about to kill ‘em both by coming out hind parts first. Brian Smithfield looked at Miranda a little different after that birth. Them stitches on Reema’s stomach was neat as a pin and she never set up a fever.(84)

The most ritualistic example of Miranda’s magical powers to help the community is the ritual she performs for Bernice, a fertility ritual based around “(a) rhythm older than woman….”(140) The ritual involves the chicken, the egg, the woman, and the ‘other place’: the source of Mama’s strength. Weik has identified that “(t)he chicken is one of the most powerful symbols of the woman…and the egg is the most powerful symbol of fertility in African Voodoo.”(11) The whole scene is filled with the power of the ‘other place’, the most sacred spot in Willow Springs (since it was the home of the original mother, Sapphira Wade), the solemn-sacredness of the hen and Miranda, and the hope and belief of Bernice in the power of the ritual. While Miranda’s own powers go beyond her medicinal practices, she nonetheless views sympathetic magic as “a little dose of nothing but mother-wit with a lot of hocus-pocus.”(97) Thus, she makes Bernice plant black and gold seeds to aid and abet her fertility and to drive away the influences of her mother-in-law (Pearl) for psychological reasons, and as ritual-actions all these are clearly beneficial to Bernice because she is finally able to give birth to a
child. But what underlies Mama Day’s treating Bernice is not only magic, but more of motherly love and concern. Her subsequent cure of Carman Rae’s baby once again highlights her acting as a community othermother. Hour by hour, she sits with the baby cradled in her arms, making him sip the mixture that she has made, until his spasm of coughing decreases and he sleeps peacefully. But her role as a community mother does not end with helping the child; she also gives a piece of her own mind to Carman Rae who is unable to take care of her children. In an authoritative way, she says, “A sow takes better care of her young. And don’t be sitting there whining about a no-good daddy – if he ain’t never here, it means he ain’t stopped you from cleaning this house.”(193) Subsequently, she guides her in ways of bringing up her children in a better way. This concept of mothering among black women seeks to move towards the mutuality of a shared sisterhood that binds African American women as community othermothers. Just as Mama Day, other black women in African American communities do not act only as mothers in their family networks, but also as community othermothers. The institution of black motherhood encompasses a close connection with subsequent generations as well as the larger community. Collins says that “(i)n local African American communities, community othermothers become identified as powerful figures through furthering the community’s well-being.”

Mama Day’s involvement in fostering the Willow Springs community development forms the basis for her community-based power. This is the type of power which is usually referred to in describing the ‘strong black women’ in traditional African American communities.

In *Mama Day*, the power of community bonding comes from folk tradition, from fore-mothering, and from nature where both a connection in the past and the present among men and women are important. Naylor, in this novel, has moved away from an
exclusive focus on females and portraying only women-centered networks to the
exploration of the involvement of the entire community to associate with each other
for survival. But still then, Naylor emphasizes generational bonding headed by a
woman; i.e., Miranda, who eventually becomes not only a mother to her grand-niece
Ophelia, but a ‘Mama’ to the whole island community of Willow Springs. A critic
identifies that —

Like Mattie Michael, who is concerned about improving Brewster Place, Mama
Day heals more than just one or two individuals: she heals the island as a
whole, inspiring her neighbors to resist the overtures of developers who would
pay less than the land was worth and exploit the owners, descendants of
slaves.¹³

Female power and wisdom are vividly incarnated in Miranda and this power is there
in the legendary past for the inhabitants of Willow Springs to learn, to accept, and to
draw strength from in their own lives. Ultimately, Mama Day is an eternal, immortal
figure: “…to show up in one century, make it all the way through the next, and have a
toe inching over into the one approaching is about as close to eternity anybody can
come.” (6-7)

Mama Day’s bonding with the community stems from her deep attachment
towards her family – her only living sister, Abigail, and Abigail’s grand-daughter,
Ophelia (Cocoa). The two sisters have lots of differences, as Miranda points out
“We’re like two peas in a pod, but we’re two peas still the same.”(153) But even with
whatever differences they have, together they form the concept of ideal motherhood
for Cocoa. Abigail had always been lenient towards Cocoa, whereas, Mama had been
the strict disciplinarian. As Cocoa recalls,

Mama Day just didn’t believe in cuddling. But if Grandma had raised me alone,
I would have been ruined for any fit company. It seemed I could do no wrong
with her, while with Mama Day I could do no right. I guess, in a funny kind of
way, together they were the perfect mother.(58)
African American mothers have always placed a strong emphasis on protection of their daughters by trying to shield them from possible difficulties. They do so by teaching them skills of independence and self-reliance so that they will be able to protect themselves. As Patricia Hill Collins puts forward "(b)lack mothers are often described as strong disciplinarians and overly protective; yet these same women manage to raise daughters who are self-reliant and assertive." Abigail and Miranda together had been the ideal mother for Cocoa and had reared her up to face the outer world. Now that Cocoa is settled in New York, these two women still bond with her by sending her letters once every month. In writing letters to Cocoa, Abigail and Mama always have different opinions and "although it's the same fight every letter they answer, it never occurs to either of them to write back to Cocoa separately." (66) This familial bonding operating throughout the novel confers identity, purpose, and strength for the survival of all these three women.

Ophelia’s strong tie with her grandmother and great-aunt is further enhanced by her deep-rooted bond with the Willow Springs community, her true home. ‘Home’ itself is a magic word for Cocoa, and whatever may happen, every August she returns to Willow Springs for a visit. Home, for Cocoa, is —

being around living mirrors with the power to show a woman that she’s still carrying scarred knees, a runny nose, and socks that get walked down into the heels of her shoes …It’s being new and old all rolled into one. Measuring you new against old friends, old ways, old places. Knowing that as long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total stranger. (48,49)

Cocoa, thus, returns to the island to renew her bonding with her family, both past and present, for only on the island can she be in contact with them both physically and spiritually. The Willow Springs community also receives Cocoa with open arms whenever she comes. It is this contact with the larger community that instills in Cocoa
a sense of her own selfhood. Even when she is away from home, she depends a lot on her grandmother’s and great-aunt’s letters that inform her about each and every incident at Willow Springs and make her aware of their existence even in their physical absence. Whenever Cocoa opens her letters she feels, “(t)he same old news from home, but if those letters had ever stopped coming, I don’t know what I’d do.”

(122) African American mothers, just like Cocoa’s, try to protect their daughters from the dangers that lie ahead by offering them a sense of their unique self-worth. Black daughters like Cocoa, must learn how to survive amidst difficulties of race, class, and gender oppression. In order to develop these skills in their daughters, mothers and othermothers provide them with basic necessities and protect them in dangerous environments. The Willow Springs community also protects its children and extends its bonding even when they go out to the larger world. Cocoa’s relationship and her deep bond towards her family and the entire Willow Springs community offer her a sense of her own selfhood.

The Willow Springs community extends its ties not only to Cocoa, but also to her New York-bred husband, George. He, unlike Cocoa, is not a product of the Willow Springs community. He is an orphan who had been brought up in a state shelter for boys, where the guardian, Mrs. Jackson had always reminded the inmates – “You have no mothers or fathers. This is not your home.” (26) George starts recognizing the importance of familial and community bonding once he gets married to Cocoa who he feels has more than a family – an entire history. The love and care that is showered on him by Cocoa’s family when he visits Willow Springs is something that he had never come across – “Up until that moment, no woman had ever called me her child.” (176) George was so much carried away by this love and affection that much to Cocoa’s surprise, he plans to leave New York and stay forever in Willow Springs. George also
establishes a deep bond with the men of Willow Springs, playing poker with them and trying to be a part of their community. The Willow Springs community, thus, enfolds George within its wings even though he is an outsider.

Naylor, all throughout the novel, has given subtle hints of the Willow Springs community bonding through certain important symbols; one such is the ‘Candle Walk’. The most important night of the year for the people of Willow Springs is Candle Walk night, which occurs on the night of the midwinter solstice each year. Observed on the 22nd of December, Candle walk “suggests a recognition of the fact that this longest night of the year also marks the beginning of the return of the sun from its lowest zenith, a rebirth that correlates with the rebirth of the terrestrial world.” As the people walk up and down the main road carrying some form of a light; they exchange gifts and food, and they tell each other “Lead on with light.” (110) As Tucker says, “…Candle Walk which, although half-forgotten and misunderstood, still carries on the Willow Springs text of creation.” The story of the creation of Willow Springs goes as follows:

The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. ‘Leave ‘em here, Lord’ she said, ‘I aint got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light. (110)

Miranda recalls frequently the story of the origin of the island and the importance attached to Candle Walk. In Miranda’s younger days, Candle Walk was different from the present time. At that time, after going around and leaving what was needed for others, folks used to meet in the main road, link arms and hum some ancient song and then, walk to the east end of the island with their candles saying, “Lead on with light, Great Mother. Lead on with light.” (111) Candle Walk was mainly a way of getting help from others without feeling obliged. Giving something back was never a
hardship – only it had to be any bit of something “as long as it came from the earth and the work of your own hands.” (110) In the Candle Walk tradition, a great deal of importance was put on the giving of handmade gifts because it is associated with the creation myth of Willow Springs which echoes the reference to Sapphira Wade’s hands all throughout the novel.

But things have taken a little different turn with the young folks having more money and working beyond the bridge. Now they buy each other fancy gadgets from the catalogues and at times say ignorant things like, “They ain’t gave me nothing last Candle Walk, so they getting the same from me this year.” (111) A few youngsters, without understanding the real significance of Candle Walk, even drive their cars instead of walking, flashing the headlights at folks they passed, yelling out of the window, sometimes drunk, “Lead on, lead on!” (111) But whatever might be the changes, the basic community bonding by means of Candle Walk, is still inherent in Willow Springs and even Miranda feels that there is nothing to worry about these little changes as Candle Walk has kept on changing and reshaping over the past generations. But what is more important is the bond achieved by means of Candle Walk among the community members and the way it is extended to the scattered children of Willow Springs, like Cocoa, who has gone beyond the bridge to settle down. Miranda and Abigail send a Candle Walk package to Cocoa every year to New York and this is what gives her some solace in the initial years of her stay in a “cold and unfriendly” (122) place. The Candle Walk ritual is something which describes the Willow Springs community bonding and is closely related to the community’s very existence which may not seem easily believable to an outsider. That is why, when Cocoa tells George about the island and its customs, she doesn’t even try to explain Candle Walk to him as she knows that his mainland rational mind cannot understand
it. Erin Weik rightly puts forward – "Naylor appears to admire self-sufficiency and rationality, but clearly she also sees the need for people to join hands and share their strength with each other and their trust"\(^\text{17}\) – and therein, lies the true significance of Candle Walk.

Another important symbol of community bonding is brought out in the novel through the idea of 'quilting'. "Quilt-making can be seen as a paradigm for the effects of the African diaspora..."\(^\text{18}\) When Cocoa and George marry, Cocoa asks her grandmother, Abigail and great aunt, Miranda for a double-ring wedding quilt as a wedding present. The sisters make the quilt entirely from scraps of clothing worn by themselves and the rest of their family - sisters, fathers, uncles, and mothers. Miranda even finds a piece of cloth that she concludes must have been worn by the great Mother of Willow Springs, Sapphira Wade. Critics have recognized that —

\[(\text{w)eaving, shaping, sculpting or quilting in order to create a kaleidoscopic and momentary array is tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos...} A patchwork quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora.\(^\text{19}\)

This type of quilting is central in African American culture because it brings together the fragments of black families separated by slavery and other ways, and pieces them together into a seamless whole where, "you can't tell where one ring ends and the other begins."\(^\text{20}\) The making of the quilt is also an important event for Mama Day, the conjure woman. Working alone one night with the old clothes from her scrap bags, she becomes more deeply in contact with her ancestors' thoughts which give her insight into the future. She tries not to see the signs, but the power of sewing the ancient fabrics together is too strong, and she cannot avoid the premonition. When George and Cocoa receive their present, George is so much awed by the beauty of the seven square feet quilt that he immediately wants to hang it on the wall as a work of
art rather than use it. But Cocoa, unlike the so-called educated Dee in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use”, knows it was not meant to be admired, but rather to be used – “They had sewed for my grandchildren to be conceived under this quilt.”(147) She recognizes the art which is created for everyday use, not just for art’s sake. Doing so would further the generational continuity of the quilt that was a part and parcel of her ancestors. The central idea of quilt making here, as in Alice Walker’s story, is the celebration of the works of those women who have been able to devise something beautiful and functional out of throwaways. Quilting, then, may be projected as the central metaphor for this unrecognized female creativity and familial and communal ties.

Other symbols of community bonding central to the story are interweaved in the novel. One such is the idea of braiding hair. In an interview to Charles H. Rowell, Naylor says,

…I recall, when I went over to Senegal and I was researching a historical novel I’m going to write, I had my hair braided there. The woman, the beautician in the beauty shop, had a little low stool; they sit you on that little low stool, between their knees, and they braid your hair. A lump came into my throat, because it brought back memories of how my mother did my hair. She’d sit you between her knees.22

Braiding hair has also close associations to the African culture and the idea is used by Naylor in this novel to highlight on the Willow Springs community relationships and their culture. As Naylor recalls her own memories and associations with the idea of braiding hair, we find a similar picture in this novel where Cocoa gets her hair braided by Ruby when she comes to visit Willow Springs. It reminds her of the old memories of her younger days and her association with the Willow Springs community. Seeing her hair done, George is reminded of the braids that he had seen on the "prints of African women" (247) and it gives us a vivid idea of Willow Springs community's
close connection to the 'Motherland', Africa. Another important idea of the community bonding among the inhabitants of Willow Springs is brought out by the social gatherings, especially the marriage parties. Not always very grand affairs, these gatherings bring forth the mutual supportiveness of the community members.

The Willow Springs community is close to Africa in spirit, and thus, we find Naylor celebrating the African heritage of black Americans and their community’s distinct beliefs and culture. Explaining the significance of the community’s beliefs and rituals for the Africans and the African Americans, Sobonfu Some states, “Rituals are to the soul what food is to the body. Without rituals, a community suffers from fragmentation and confusion; with them our pathways are clear.” He also explains that the ‘elders’ who function as the anchors of the community, lead their communal and private rituals, such as, welcoming the newborn and bidding farewell to the deceased. An example of one such ritual is the funeral of the child of Bernice and Ambush. Central to Naylor’s novel are beliefs about the spirit world, beliefs that have their origins in African religion. For African groups, “the afterlife was a reality; death was a journey to the spirit world, which, nonetheless, did not constitute a break with life on earth.” The funeral portrayed in the novel is clearly not about the belief in an earthly finality for Little Caesar and thus, is closer to African belief system — “The church, the presence of the minister, were concessions, and obviously the only ones they were going to make to a Christian ritual that should have called for a sermon, music, tears – the belief in an earthly finality for the child’s life.” For the Willow Springs community, although their world was peopled by both bad and good spirits, ancestral spirits were especially important in the New World and served as guardians of the living, because like most African American community, they also believed that the dead were not remote from the living and everyone is supported by
an ancestral spirit. Patricia Jones-Jackson observes that, even when islanders die away from the islands, their relatives make every effort to have them return for burial, reflecting a view that is held among the Igbo, Yoruba, and other Nigerians, "who believe without question that the dead are dependent on their ancestors for spiritual nourishment and thus must be buried among them to find peace." All these views find poignant expression in the funeral scene in the novel and bring forth not only the community beliefs and culture, but also their bonding with their ancestors and with each other.

In order to portray the bonding among the community members, Naylor frequently makes use of plurality instead of singular pronouns while referring to relationships. To mention a few, the terms 'we' and 'our' are used constantly as against 'I' and 'mine'. The use of such terms strengthens the vision of community bonding among the Willow Springs residents. So, we find Dr. Buzzard telling Miranda "Don't they always stay our babies?" (114, emphasis added), as he gives candies as Candle Walk presents for Cocoa, even though she is twenty-seven. The same thing is repeated once again by Ruby when she meets George for the first time and tells him, "It’s a friendly place...And that’s what we stopped by to tell you. You’re one of us, ’cause you married one of us. And Cocoa is our own." (181) This sense of belongingness and bonding is enhanced by the use of such appropriate language.

In representing the realistic scenario of the 1980s when projecting a homogenous African American community was no longer possible, Naylor has created Ruby, the other local conjure woman, who in defining herself solely as a possessor of men, has rejected all ties with women and seeks to do them harm. This failure of community bonding on the island reflects tensions within Willow Springs and between it and the outside world. Ruby becomes excessively jealous and possessive of her husband,
Junior Lee and being so, breaks her ties with the Willow Springs circle. Her knowledge of magic appears to equal Miranda’s, but she is associated more with killing than healing. In fact, people opine that Ruby must have been “working roots on him (Junior Lee)” (112) to keep him with her. Throughout the novel, the islanders talk about Ruby and “(t)hat them roots she’s working may have got Junior Lee to the altar…” (134) Her voodoo induced relationship with Junior Lee makes for quite a bit of gossip and concern in Willow Springs. She becomes so possessive of her husband that when May Ellen dies a horrible death soon after digging oysters with Junior Lee, people get so scared that no one wants to associate with either Ruby or Junior Lee. Ruby’s magical powers to destroy people are also implicated by the way she harms Frances, ex-wife of Junior Lee – “Frances went clear out of her mind, wouldn’t wash or comb her hair. Her city folks had to come shut down her house and take her to one of them mental hospitals beyond the bridge.” (112) Ruby had “accused every woman in Willow Springs – with the exception of Mama Day – of fooling around with (Junior Lee)”. (162) But she does not even leave Mama Day once when she gets jealous of Cocoa. She buries a bag under Miranda’s porch, containing salt, verbena, and graveyard dust – all dangerous because “salt burns and corrodes; and graveyard dust is considered to carry disease…."^26 Miranda is able to read the signs of the contents in the bag and she knows that the verbena included in the bag is also known as the “herb of grace”,^27 and that, therefore, it represents Cocoa – the literal child of Grace, and her engulfment in destructive substances. Mama Day is able to recognize the dangerous implications of Ruby’s magical powers because she knows that “(a)in’t no hoodoo anywhere as powerful as hate.”(157) The spirit of competition that Ruby feels with the other women causes her ostracism and her ultimate insanity during which she poisons Cocoa. The use of nightshade, snakeroot and graveyard dust by
Ruby to poison Cocoa has been recognized as proven poisons in the hands of the experienced conjurer. Zora Neale Hurston has noted that graveyard dirt is poisonous, and that studies have shown it to contain lots of infectious diseases. She remarks that “…the African men of magic…discovered that the earth surrounding a corpse that had sufficient time to thoroughly decay was impregnated with deadly power.”\(^{28}\) Cocoa’s subsequent illness – the welts all over her body, her strange hallucinations and the appearances of the worms decaying her body – are symptoms of her dangerous condition and the after effects of Ruby’s poisonous hatred. In describing Cocoa’s illness, Naylor has allowed some of the more mysterious events to coexist with the more natural ones. But what most importantly she has focused on is the rift caused in the community, breaking the trust and understanding among people.

Mama Day’s biggest challenge as a community mother and healer involves saving Cocoa from the clutches of Ruby’s hatred. In this battle, Mama as the incarnation of love can do only so much to combat Ruby; to heal Cocoa, she needs George’s love and help too because he has become a part of her existence. As Larry R. Andrews writes, Mama Day “sees Ophelia’s illness in terms of the whole tradition of suffering women: from Sapphira’s slavery to Miranda’s mother’s grief.”\(^{29}\) Mama Day knows by her second-sight that she will need the help of George to cure Cocoa and she tells Abigail – “It’s gonna take a man to bring her peace….” (263) Despite George being an outsider, Miranda depends on George’s belief in himself, his ability to work with his hands, his resolve to hold on to what he loves most, to never let Cocoa go. Although George has temporarily ‘crossed over’ and is immediately responsive to Willow Springs and can see himself “staying (t)here forever”, (220) he is also distressed when the bridge is destroyed, and unable to escape the island, he is forced to deal with the consequences of conjure. But George also desires to “hold on to what
was real” (291) and craves to feel “those oars between (his) hands” (282) as he fantasizes about rowing Cocoa across ‘The Sound’. Miranda knows that to help Cocoa, George must hand over his belief to her – “She needs his hand in hers – his very hand – so she can connect it up to all the believing that had gone before....So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over.” (285) By placing his hand in Miranda’s, by joining the secular with the sacred, the real with the magical, they can save Cocoa. George is asked to perform certain tasks by Mama which appear to him as the irrational demands of an old woman. Armed only with Miranda’s walking stick (a symbol of power) and the ancient ledger which contains within it the partially erased bill of sale of Sapphira Wade (history and knowledge), he has to go to the nest of the brooding hen—the object he fears most – and bring back to Miranda “whatever (he) find(s).” (295) George fails Miranda’s riddling test because his fear and disbelief get the better of him, as he battles the enraged hen, he glimpses something of Miranda’s meaning: “Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?” (300) While he does save Cocoa, asserting that “…these were my hands, and there was no way I was going to let you go”, (301) he is unable to make a genuine surrender of belief to Miranda, and hence loses his life. Ophelia, however, survives beaconing the triumph of Mama’s love over Ruby’s hatred.

In this novel, Naylor has moved from a view of the power of the community as a refuge from oppression to a celebration of community bonding as empowered by folk tradition, by nature, and by abiding spiritual forces. In an interview to Angels Carabi, Naylor said, Mama Day “…is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles.”

Given the picture of the disturbed African American community of her time, Naylor in her third novel has projected an imaginary location outside any realistic locality
where selfless love and bonding, even if required to be achieved beyond the community, are essential requirements for survival. *Mama Day*, then, is an ultimate celebration of community bonding cutting across the barriers of time, space, and nature.
5. Publisher’s Weekly, 22nd February, in “Unofficial Gloria Naylor Homepage”. <www.lythastudios.com/gnaylor/md.html>
   *[All quotations in this chapter from Mama Day have the same publications details.]*
16. ibid.


27. ibid.


I am the woman: Dark
repaired, healed
Listening to you.

I would give
to the human race
only hope.

I am the woman
offering two flowers
whose roots are twin.

Justice and Hope
Let us begin.

(Alice Walker)