



AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S MAMA DAY

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Abstract

Gloria Naylor's Mama Day (1988) represents a powerful exploration of African American womanhood rooted in history, culture, spirituality, and communal memory. Set primarily on the fictional island of Willow Springs, the novel foregrounds the lived experiences of black women who negotiate racism, sexism, economic marginalization, and cultural erasure while sustaining their communities through ancestral wisdom and female solidarity. This article examines the major issues faced by African American women in Mama Day, including the burden of historical oppression, gendered labor, identity formation, spirituality, and resistance to patriarchal and racial domination. Through an analysis of key female characters such as, Mama Day, Abigail, Cocoa, and Miranda this study argues that Naylor redefines black womanhood as a site of resilience, agency, and cultural continuity. The novel challenges dominant Western epistemologies by privileging African American female knowledge systems, thereby asserting black women's voices as central rather than marginal within American literary discourse.

Keywords

African American Women, Gloria Naylor, Mama Day, Black Feminism, Spirituality, Identity, Community, Gender and Race., etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

African American women's literature has consistently served as a vital space for articulating the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class. Writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor have foregrounded black women's experiences that were historically silenced within both mainstream American literature and patriarchal African American narratives. Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* occupies a distinctive place in this tradition by centering African American women not merely as victims of oppression but as custodians of cultural memory, spiritual power, and communal survival. Published in 1988, *Mama Day* moves beyond urban realism to embrace folklore, myth, and magical realism, situating African American women's issues within a culturally autonomous black space. The novel explores how black women confront racism and sexism while sustaining identity through matrilineal heritage and collective strength. This article investigates the major issues affecting African American women in *Mama Day*, arguing that Naylor represents black womanhood as a dynamic force that resists marginalization through community, spirituality, and self-definition.

One of the central issues faced by African American women in *Mama Day* is the inherited trauma of slavery and racial oppression. Willow Springs itself stands as a symbolic space shaped by



a legacy of enslavement and resistance. The ancestral figure of Sapphira Wade—an enslaved woman who secured land and autonomy through her intelligence and defiance—embodies the historical struggles of black women. Mama Day's authority is rooted in this legacy. She represents a lineage of women who have survived oppression through knowledge and endurance. Naylor suggests that African American women carry the burden of historical memory, often serving as living archives of cultural experience. As Mama Day reflects, "We done survived because we remembered who we were" (Naylor, 110). This remembrance becomes a strategy of resistance against historical erasure. Different dominant historical narratives that marginalize black women, *Mama Day* reclaims history through oral tradition and female storytelling. African American women emerge as active agents in preserving communal memory rather than passive subjects of oppression.

Gender, Labor, and Economic Marginalization:

Economic hardship and gendered labor constitute another significant issue for African American women in the novel. Characters like Abigail and Miranda Day dedicate their lives to nurturing others, often at the expense of personal fulfillment. Their labor—domestic, emotional, and spiritual—remains undervalued within patriarchal systems. Naylor exposes how black women's work is naturalized and rendered invisible. Mama Day's healing practices and agricultural labor sustains Willow Springs, yet they exist outside capitalist recognition. This reflects the broader reality of African American women's labor history, where black women have been exploited as caregivers, workers, and sustainers of families.

Though, Naylor reframes labor as a site of empowerment rather than mere exploitation. Mama Day's work connects her to the land and ancestors, offering autonomy absent in oppressive economic systems. Thus, the novel critiques capitalist and patriarchal definitions of value while elevating black women's alternative economies of care and survival.

Cocoa (Ophelia Day), one of the novel's central characters, embodies the identity struggles faced by African American women navigating between tradition and modernity. Raised between Willow Springs and New York City, Cocoa experiences alienation from both spaces. Her struggle reflects the broader dilemma of black women negotiating cultural roots within a modern, often hostile, urban world. Cocoa's insecurity regarding beauty, love, and self-worth reveals the psychological impact of racialized beauty standards and patriarchal expectations. She internalizes societal judgments that devalue black femininity. As Naylor writes, Cocoa is haunted by "a fear that she wasn't enough—never enough" (Naylor, 67).

Through Cocoa's journey, Naylor highlights how African American women grapple with fragmented identities shaped by migration, racism, and gender oppression. Healing occurs only when Cocoa reconnects with her ancestral roots and accepts a culturally grounded sense of self. Identity, in *Mama Day*, is thus relational, historical, and communal rather than individualistic.

Spirituality emerges as a crucial dimension of African American women's experience in *Mama Day*. Mama Day's healing powers, rooted in folk wisdom and African-derived spiritual practices, challenge Western rationalism. Her authority is not institutional but experiential, passed down through generations of women. Naylor positions black female spirituality as a counter-discourse to patriarchal religion and colonial knowledge systems. Mama Day's power destabilizes binary oppositions between science and magic, rationality and belief. As the narrator notes, "There are some things science can't explain, and some truths only women like Mama Day understand" (Naylor, 142).

This spiritual authority empowers African American women to reclaim agency over their bodies, communities, and destinies. Rather than portraying spirituality as superstition, Naylor frames it as a legitimate epistemology shaped by black women's historical survival strategies.



Another critical issue explored in *Mama Day* is the importance of female solidarity. African American women in the novel survive not in isolation but through networks of care, storytelling, and mutual support. Willow Springs functions as a woman-centered space where female bonds sustain communal life. The relationships between Mama Day, Abigail, and Cocoa illustrate how intergenerational support enables healing and continuity. Even in moments of conflict, the community prioritizes collective well-being over individual desire. This contrasts sharply with patriarchal structures that isolate women and undermine communal bonds. Naylor's vision aligns with black feminist thought, particularly the idea that liberation emerges from collective struggle rather than individual advancement. By foregrounding female solidarity, *Mama Day* resists narratives that depict African American women as perpetually fractured or competitive.

This article argues that *Mama Day* redefines African American women's issues by shifting the focus from victimhood to agency. While Naylor does not deny the realities of racism, sexism, and economic marginalization, she refuses to reduce black women to suffering subjects. Instead, African American women are presented as cultural producers, spiritual leaders, and architects of survival. Naylor's narrative challenges Eurocentric literary traditions by centering black women's voices, epistemologies, and histories. The novel asserts that African American women's experiences are not peripheral but foundational to understanding American identity itself. By foregrounding matrilineal power and communal memory, *Mama Day* becomes a radical intervention in both feminist and African American literary discourses.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* offers a nuanced and empowering portrayal of African American women's issues. Through its exploration of historical oppression, gendered labor, identity crises, spirituality, and female solidarity, the novel foregrounds black women's resilience and cultural authority. Naylor reclaims African American womanhood as a source of knowledge, healing, and resistance. In the end, *Mama Day* challenges dominant narratives that marginalize black women by presenting them as central agents in shaping history, culture, and community. The novel affirms that African American women's struggles are inseparable from their strengths and that survival itself becomes an act of resistance. In doing so, Naylor contributes significantly to black feminist literature and reimagines the possibilities of African American women's representation in contemporary fiction.

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