



The Real and Unreal Worlds in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and *The Men of Brewster Place*

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining the real and unreal realm of the Afro-American writer, Gloria Naylor, in her two novels: *Mama Day* and *The Men of Brewster Place*. The study sheds light on Naylor's treatment of the concept of "Magical Realism" as a literary device used in the Afro-American fiction. It focuses on Naylor's employment of magical realism throughout some fictional tools such as narrative structure, mysterious male and female characters, magical setting, and other thematic notions of the black heritage and folklore.

Key words: Gloria Naylor; Magical Realism; *Mama Day*; *The Men of Brewster Place*



1. Gloria Naylor's Life

Gloria Naylor was born on 25, January, 1950, in New York. From African American originality, her Parents were migrants from Mississippi where they worked as cotton Sharecroppers. Her father worked as a subway motorman, and her mother worked as a telephone operator In New York. After graduating from high school in 1968, Naylor worked as a Jehovah's Witness missionary in New York, North Carolina, and Florida until 1975. Then, she returned to New York City to work as a telephone operator in several hotels. She attended Medgar Evers College and completed a B.A. in English at Brooklyn College in 1981. Later, she earned an M.A. in African American Studies in 1983 in receiving a fellowship to Yale University. She is discovered as a talent black female writer in her college.

1.2 Naylor's Style of Writing Magical Realism

Throughout the method of magic realism, Naylor attempts to analyze Afro-American fiction to distinguish the real and the unreal worlds. Naylor creates a new approach to explore the reality throughout the presentation



of imagined, supernatural, and magical elements as if they were real to find the hidden meanings behind them. Magical realism is "an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms", in elaborated urban or rural mode in closed or open structure (Faris:121). The writer depicts the reality to reveal the mysterious objects and character in different places and situations. Naylor tries to exemplify the perplexing world of fantasy, magic and myth in the realism of their daily life.

Naylor offers a unique vision of magic within an African American context. Magic realist techniques help Naylor to create a world that attract the reader into its depths forcing the audience to question conventional ways of perceiving reality.

1.3. *Mama Day*

Mama Day is a novel written in 1988 by Gloria Naylor, which talks about the life of Miranda, or Mama Day, and her family. She is influenced by her grandmother, Sapphira Wade, who believes in magic and healing rituals. They live in Willow Springs, which is a private island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. Miranda is the



matriarch of the island who tries to keep Afro-American heritage alive in this island. Abigail is her sister who shares her life on the island with Abigail's granddaughter Cocoa, and she has gone to live in New York City. Cocoa finds love with a polite engineer named George Andrews, then they get married together and live in New York. They visit Willow Springs from one time to another.

The novel blends reality and fantasy into the cruel world the characters live. Naylor perceives magic as: "I believe in the power of love and the power of magic -- sometimes I think that they are one "(Interview with Angels Carabi :42). Therefore, in *Mama Day*, Miranda appears to show human potential that can create magical miracles. She is a wise old woman with divine gifts and matriarchal power.

Naylor links the magical realism approach to the African American culture. She addresses the black African American audience focusing on folk cultural traditions as she attempts to create vibrant and healthy images of black people on southern soil ... "to reflect the awareness of the people, heritage, and traditions of the south" (Harris:53-



54). The magical performance, such as witchcraft, healing, conjuration, Hoodoo, and voodoo - appeared as a gateway into the magical past of African American heritage on the Island of Willow Springs in Naylor's *Mama Day*, that developed spiritual traditions and beliefs. Naylor adopts the mode of magical realism to tell the events of the novel in an extraordinary exploration of the "intangible and the power of belief that brings into question the limits of reality and truth"(Sanchez:16). Naylor follows a unique technique throughout the use of power of magical realism in order to pull the readers in an exciting way into many important issues related to the Afro-American world. She attempts to explore the negative aspects of the life of black people, such as slavery, racism, and discrimination.

Naylor uses magic and myth as powerful themes to link her characters to the African American community. She represents the characters in a distinctive method to give them magical traits and challenging roles of both genders. Thus, the readers can perceive individual identities and the impact of environment upon each one.



Naylor depicts Miranda's character with powerful abilities of magic and invisibility to rule the lives of the people in the magical island of Willow Springs, "One moment she wasn't there. One moment she was. The smoke clears on the silent figure, staring up at the porch from the gate. A mountain"(Naylor, 158). They describe the relationship between characters in a narrative mystery that explains every possible influence: "familial, historical, psychological, social, gendered, spiritual, and mystical"(Wilson:87). Thus, it is clear that Naylor encourages the reader to consider the various factors that shape our lives.

Mama Day is a good example of describing the characters inhibited in the magical community. The characters are distinguished with magical skills, midwifery practices and healing rituals. Naylor invites the readers to look into magical characters, mysterious landscapes, black cultural rituals, and African American communities. Sapphira Wade is characterized as a true black conjuration woman with powerful abilities of magic. She appears with



the legend characteristic of black woman who heats her medicine pots by the cosmic lightning rather than the household fire. In addition to the magical activities, Sapphira helps to give birth to seven sons which is definitely the material of legends. The influence of such magical belief and rituals, *Mama Day* is presented as one of Sapphira's seven sons. Naylor depicts the characters in a unique way to describe their pure activities and characteristics of legend.

Mama Day is narrated in a complicated and subtle way, with multiple narrative perspectives. The novel is narrated in both the first person narration and third person omniscient narrative points of view. It is told in first person narration in the form of a dialogue between Cocoa and George. Then, it switches to third person omniscient narration when looking back to the shoulder of *Mama Day*.

The novel focuses on dialogue between characters to reveal their mental and magical powers, such as George and Cocoa's dialogues across the grave. It reflects their individual points of view throughout the first-person narration of many characters: Miranda, John-Paul, and



Jonah. This initial introductory narration discloses many important details: the magical location of the island, the genealogical chart of the Day family, and the black ritual of Sapphira Wade. Naylor invites the readers to hear the voices of Miranda and Cocoa to the living and the dead to empower the magical narrative structure of the novel. The conversations between characters give a good opportunity to the readers to tell the story of their relationship. Throughout the voice of the third person narrative point of view, the readers can share "*Mama Da*" thoughts and performances.

Naylor utilizes the method of narration to show the function of the different voices within the text. The oral narrative structure is fundamental to the mode of magical realism. In *Mama Day*, Naylor depends on the legendary presentation of the Sapphira Wade in the Afro-American community. The storytelling is defined to a black literary style with oral quality, the presence of chorus, the figure of the ancestor, and the participation of the reader. Throughout narration, Naylor introduces the limits of individual and collective knowledge (Sánchez:64). In this



novel, the chorus is represented by the community of Willow Springs which symbolizes the collective kinship rather than to individual memories or dreams. There is a close relationship between the magical realism and the ritual performances.

The narrator plays an important role to give a full description of many aspects: the relationships between characters, the magic island, and the legend of a conjuring woman. In this novel, the texts provide commentaries of themselves, drawing attention to the magical power of fiction itself, and refer repeatedly to the process of storytelling (Faris:175). The diversity of voices is expressed with a distinctive narrative technique to express the important issues with a magical aspect. Each narrator conveys a point of view throughout telling the story to convince.

Naylor illustrates various geographical locations in the description of setting in her novels. She describes the rural and urban situations to reflect the world that the characters inhabit. *Mama Day* is depicted on a mythical sea-island of Willow Springs which is located off the



Western coast of South Carolina and Georgia. "Willow Springs ain't in no state". Georgia and Carolina try to prove that Willow Springs belongs to one or the other of them (Naylor:4). In *Mama Day*, the characters appear more akin the magical situations in which the "scientific laws of time, space and probability are unraveled" (Stave:10) than to the realistic life.

In *Mama Day*, the setting is portrayed in a magical way. *Mama Day* focuses on a rich, unified rural community, describing the magical world. In this novel, Miranda's attitude toward the magical island is both aggressive and benevolent. Even the mythical island of Willow Springs is mysterious, George can easily accept the rural life though he belonged to a realistic urban life. He is able to feel the difference of the place. The variety of setting is illustrated in Naylor's works with a magical way in order to portray two different landscapes. She makes a distinction between the urban and rural life, and its impact upon the character.

1.4. The Men of Brewster Place



The Men of Brewster Place, is a novel written in 1998 by Gloria Naylor, which talks about the life of eight black men in Brewster Place as it is considered the home of many ethnic groups of black inhabitants. Ben is a building janitor who can see and hear what's going on the neighborhood. Brother Jerome is a talented man, with musical abilities that give him relief and comfort in spite of his mental retardation. Basil devotes himself to behave with good manner to skip his problems of escaping and destroying his mother's life. Eugene tries to find himself and solve his demotic problems. Reverend Woods is destroyed by the consciousness of the community and attempts to build a legacy. C.C. sells his soul to the street in a stupor of confusion about what it is to be a man. Abshu struggles to keep Brewster Place alive against political desires to destroy the neighborhood and rebuild it for middle income people. Although the stories of those men's lives are not pleasant stories, rather there are powerful lessons that can be learned from each individual.

The setting of *The Men of Brewster Place* is described in a realistic way. It derives from the name of the



housing, Brewster Place. Brewster Place is depicted in this novel, the notable places are The Barbershop of Greasy character, the blues.

The Men of Brewster Place portrays a variety of black male characters and it presents series of biographies of their lives. It gives a good outlook into the lives of the male characters in a distinctive way. Naylor illustrates the maturity and growth of those dynamic characters as the readers grasp a more complete sense of the characters' internal problems and their frustrations, as well as their aspirations and pride moments of achievement. They cope with the difficult circumstances challenging the world they live. The men offer their perspectives on the issues that have challenged not only their neighborhoods, but also "their self-perceptions and their relationships with the women in their lives"(Wilson:153). In a skillful way, Naylor succeeds at creating a range of outstanding individual characters to reflect their problems and suffering in a realistic way. She pays attention on the plight of the black man "to render a compelling fictional exposure of his dilemma" (Montgomery,176). Naylor's goal is to elevate



the man's personal situation from the individual to the actual realm.

In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor represents a good description of the events in a distinguished narrative structure. The novel is composed of short stories which provide the divisions of chapters in a more elaborated way. Each story depicts the life struggle of different men, and it presents details of individual characters. Naylor describes the actual realm of eight black men, who are fully developed and depicted in a complicated way. The novel is narrated by many characters to represent a full description of the environment the characters live in. Ben is represented as narrator and witness in order to develop the authorial narrative structure of the novel. The readers disclose many details about the inner life of characters, for instance, the tragic story of Greasy, the crack addict who lost his work, family, and health. He recites only two phrases: 'I'm a man. And I'm trying; in the barbershop'(Bell:279), where he desperately looks for maintaining his manhood. He introduces complicated



circumstances upon the lives of various men and their condemned street.

In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor concentrates on the masculinity and manhood concepts to reflect important issues that the black male characters suffered in their realistic lives, such as oppression, violence, and cruelty. She tells those problems on the voice of character Ben to narrate. Ben reminds the reader to look at "his own personal oppression in Tennessee by white male authority, [and] also on the history of black male oppression"(Wilson:1), when he links the childhood problems of his grandfather and the man's bitterness throughout life. This novel focuses on a male space, Naylor indicates that "there was always a Her in his story, frequently delineating the role of a man. It is commonly in a realistic mode despite the fact that Naylor "performs some authorial magic by reviving the character Ben" (Levin:279). Throughout the narrative structure, the reader can clearly perceive the suffering of black people of many issues such as gender, race, and discrimination – which affect the lives of black people. Naylor's conception of the



Southern subjects has played the more important role in shaping [her] life as a writer"(quoted in Wilson:89). She confirms the significance of her black heritage in her outlook on the actual world that the characters live in her writings. Naylor's presentation of a male voice as a literary device of narration is to allow the reader and audience access to the varied subjects presented in her writings.

Throughout the characterization of Naylor's *Mama Day* and *The Men of Brewster Place*, it is important to indicate that Naylor focuses on the black characters to reflect their problems and suffering in such a harsh world. The characters attempt to escape from their suffering and frustration to live in an unreal world as a shelter and protective place.

In *Mama Day*, the male characters take less important roles than the female characters. They "lack much of the emotional involvement and depth that make Naylor's female characters so memorable" (Montgomery:176). Naylor reflects the inner life of black men from the black woman's perspective. While in *The Men of Brewster Place*, the male characters take dominant



positions than the female characters. *Mama Day* gains useful insights of the characters in the magical unreal world while *The Men of Brewster Place* is less magical in which the characters are depicted in the realistic realm. In the two novels, Naylor focuses on similar issues of identity of black people and African American traditions. She examines the masculine and feminine approaches. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor explores African American male identity, while in *Mama Day*, she examines the black female identity.

Naylor successfully "links their trails of her African American characters to the struggle of human beings at variance with seemingly insurmountable obstacles"(Wilson:89). She examines the negative aspects of Afro-American life upon the male and female black inhabitants to give the reader some insights on their physical, emotional and spiritual obstacles in their different communities.

2. Conclusions



In her two novels, Naylor depicts the realistic and magical world that the characters live in a unique style throughout utilizing the strategy of the magical realism in many ways. This approach employs the coexistence of the two opposite realms upon the life of Afro-American people: real and unreal, realistic and magical, actual and mythical, natural and supernatural, material and spiritual worlds. The function of the magical aspects is an attempt to define the desire of the characters to create an ‘unreal’ world as a defense method to the harsh reality of their lives. The magical territories represent an alternate shelter where the characters feel the safety and protection from the cruel reality they suffered.

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