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CHUNKS OF THE SELF, CHOPS OF SOCIETY: AN ALAZONIC-EIRONIC REVISIONING OF THE AFRO-AMERICAN FEMALE IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S MAMA DAY

Ms. Adishree Vats

Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies,

Akal University, Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda, India;

Research Scholar, School of Languages and Literature,

Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Jammu, India,

Email: vatsadishree8@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to contextualize the alazonic-eironic equation within the quintessential Black female narrative matrix of Gloria Naylor's third novel, Mama Day (1988). The paper pays special emphasis on the existential blessings and curses experienced by Black women, such as Sapphira Wade, Mama Day, and Cocoa, along with the benefits and losses emanating in a diasporic context, besides personifying the triumphs of these Black women when they attain an alazonic self. In Mama Day, the eironic-alazonic disequilibrium within the boundaries of gender politics, assumes a new status when these women break the shackles of male-hegemony and eventually succeed in investing themselves within an alazonic status, a remarkable departure from their earlier tribulations as eironic humans who would be helplessly victimized.

INTRODUCTION

Gloria Naylor, a celebrated African American female novelist, is known for making an honest, transparent, and sincere attempt, through her novels, at bringing to life and popular attention a sizeable segment of American population, that is, the Black Americans, hitherto ignored and largely misunderstood. Barbara Christian, in this regard, adumbrates that Naylor's novels, "when looked at as the developing opus of a single writer," (Christian,

1993: 107) are unique in their style. As an African American woman, Naylor becomes possibly the first one to have a deep and revealing access to the primal sources and characteristics of her tradition, the tradition of colored American feminist ideology, a gender politics and ghetto culture.

In the novel, Mama Day, Naylor dramatizes with special fullness, "the conflict between established and emergent traditions" (Erickson, 1993: 233). Her use of myth, magic and the elements is shown to be an attempt to recover the vital connection to reclaim the roots and salvage the strong community of Blacks, especially the women folk. The salvation of the repressed, ostracized and exploited colored female could only come through a redemptive renaissance of ethnicity, gender equality, and a resurgence of societal awakening.

The novel is about "the way one generation of women affects another, and the way the strong heritage of gentleness and anger, courage and frailty, can shape individual consciousness through several generations of family" (Wagner, 1988: 6-7). What makes Mama Day an exceptional work among African American cultural expositions is the fact that the existence of human superiority as invariably anti-woman gets totally demolished. The alazon-eiron existential algebra works in the novel in the feminist oriented spectrum. If the reader finds any traces of contempt for the concept of male identity as exploitive in the gender-game, Mama Day also reflects "contempt for femaleness or things associated with femaleness- body, sex, desire, need…." (Hein and Koremeyer, 1993: 73).

In its narrative, Mama Day symbolizes the preoccupation of Black women about the blessings and curses, the benefits and the losses, that accrued with the migration from rural to urban areas, in other words, from intuitive to rational life. The imagist pattern that emerges is one of a constellation of humans who undertake the task of reconstructing and redefining their lives, relationships and destinies. Like other novels of Naylor, the territorial location of the plot and the action is at Willow Springs at sea-island. Subsequently, the chief characters in the novel have been labeled as Sea-Islanders and two basic characteristics of African American culture get testified- the persistence of the past in the present, followed by the myth and archetype- become the participating motives in the fictional present of the novel.

Considering the plot, the very opening statement in the text mentions a legend of "Sapphira Wade". Sapphira is portrayed as a conjuring woman, in a peculiar dress and displaying an exceptional strength of character and demeanor:

Willow Springs Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. (Naylor, 1988:03)

Sapphira is neither black, cream or red, with the power to heal by using the moon as slave and the stars as swading cloth. African-born, she was sold in August 1819 to Bascombe Wade, and four years later, in 1823, she either smothered Wade or poisoned him. In the history of Bascombe and Sapphira, Naylor presents a story of liberation and metamorphosis of the human self, though "the inversion of gender radically alters this story: in a fireball bound for Africa" (Kubitschek, 1994: 75-91). The triumph of the Black woman in her alazonic incarnation gets symbolized when Sapphira departs from the man who bought but did not master her. From the thematic and gendered point of view, it can be safely assumed that in Mama Day, Naylor allows the Afro-American female to come forth as a character in fiction, "engaged in the business not of abstract reconciliation but of concrete and dramatic living" (Hassan, 1973: 69). Mama Day allows the reader to probe still deeper into the organic life of Afro-American culture, especially the irreducible instincts related to the resurgent and reawakened Afro-American female, who no longer desires, nor can tolerate to restrain herself and her identity within the cloistered confines of a male-induced eironic status.

Further, Naylor explores the theme of self-identity and the contrast between the mainstream society and an isolated black community of Willow Springs especially "black women in particular with the gains and losses that have come with the move from rural to urban, from intuitive to general life" (Brown, 1988: 16). Naylor talks about a radically separate African American community of Willow Springs, a mythical sea island where the Day family has dwelled since the time of slavery. The island is, in 1999, when the novel opens, still an all-Black folk community owned by the citizens, and, true to the actual sea island off the coast of South Carolina- the island of the Gullah slave population- Willow Springs retains many African influences. Willow Springs takes into the luminous world, where understanding comes through the mysterious, ethereal, that permeates the whole self. The plot deals with the story of Cocoa and George's courtship, besides talking about George's and Cocoa's fateful summer visit to Willow Springs.

Gloria Naylor creates an outspoken character named Ophelia alias Cocoa or Baby Girl. The first time Cocoa is introduced, she is on her way to an interview at Andrews and Stein, an engineering firm. When Andrews asks her name, she replied:

I'm used to answering to Cocoa, I guess we might as well start now because if I get the position and anyone here calls me Ophelia, I'll be so busy concentrating on my work, it won't register. I truly doubt I could have moved up as fast as I did at my last job. (Naylor, 1988: 29)

Cocoa's reply makes her appear self-confident. She does not just reply but also goes on to discuss her tenacity as a worker. George, fascinated by the nick name, wants to know more about its origin, and not about Cocoa's qualifications, for which she feels quite agitated, and answer, "I've had it from a child- in the south it's called a pet name. My grandmother and great aunt gave it to me…" (Naylor, 1988: 29). Cocoa, who leaves Willow Springs for

New York, is aggressive and shows her buoyancy to George. Yet, however urbane her life may be, she feels an undeniable pull for home. On the other hand, George Andrews, a Northern middle-class Black man grows up in a home for boys, symptomatic of cultural isolation.

The George-Cocoa combination has been portrayed by Naylor in a manner that symbolically as well as thematically approximates to the alazon-eiron symbiotic association in exceptional circumstances involving special type of protagonists. Mama Day simply functions as the existential catalyst, exerting a special guiding and shaping force. In fact, the very character and personality of Mama Day attains mythic proportions as the alazonic diva around whom the other personages in the novel are put into orbit.

George and Cocoa have little in common, but they gradually fall in love and finally get married. Naylor narrates the love story of the two black people, from strikingly different backgrounds- George, orphaned in the urban North, has grown up in an institution run by Whites; and Cocoa, raised by Black mother figures, has been drenched in the traditions of the rural South. Through the relationship, Naylor also deals with the maintaining a Black cultural identity in the world of whites simply to order, to control, and define Black alazonic identity. George, whose family tree is lost, envies Cocoa because she can determine part of her heritage through the lightness of her skin tone. Obviously, what interests Naylor "is her heroine's identity as a rural Black woman and her [alazonic] confrontation with urban American." (Simon, 1988: 11)

George and Cocoa represent an ideal combination as a married couple, and the former uses the term "star crossed" (Naylor, 1988: 129) from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet to describe their relationship, something that defies rational thinking. In the concluding pages of the novel, however, our gradually building suspicions as to the fate of George are finally confirmed: in reality, he has been dead throughout the entire novel; Cocoa has been talking to him in her family graveyard in Willow Springs, just to keep his memory alive and to continue to tell their unfinished stories.

African religions which have shaped Christianity in the Black South tends to stress upon the belief that one's life does not end with physical death; rather, death is a "door between two worlds", a rite of passage which allows contact with the living. This cosmology authorizes the "everlasting continuity of all the religious men and women". By explicitly including the personal narratives of a physically dead man to openly celebrate the African traditions, Naylor makes it clear that she is in no way courting a White readership as the primary audience for her novel. Thus, when White readers assume their responsibilities of listenership, they are reminded that historical presuppositions of their own authority as readers of African-American fiction are being revised.

Another alazonic character, Mama Day, nearly hundred years of age, is a matriarch, and the island is as deeply rooted in her as she is in it. George knows everything about Mama Day and about her ways of herbal treatments. She is trusted and respected by everyone on the island. She can read every

nuance of the land as well as of people's personalities, and is also reputed for having a second sight. Mama Day spends time with her dead ancestors' spirits. It is believed that these spirits tell her everything through premonitions. Cocoa, like her great aunt Mama Day, has come to realize her ancestral heritage and the spirit of Sapphira Wade, her foremother and the founder of Willow Springs. Cocoa also comes to Willow Springs to participate in the candle walk, an autonomous tradition of the island in which the inhabitants walk on road while holding candles in their hands, greet one another in a spiritual fashion, "Come my way. Candle walk […] Lead on with light" (Naylor, 1988: 119), and exchange gifts.

Later in the novel, the narrative shifts its focus towards Cocoa's sickness. She has been poisoned by one of the inhabitants, Ruby, who practices black magic and casts malevolent mephitic spell on the love couple George-Cocoa. However, Mama Day, with her profound knowledge of herbal medicines, removes the poison from Cocoa's scalp by cutting off her hair and applying her special paste to her head. While conversing with Abigail, Cocoa's grandmother, Mama Day asks her a pivotal question, "how strong is hate?" (Naylor, 1988: 267). Abigail's response to this is, "I believe there's a power greater than hate" (Naylor, 1988: 267). It is George's love for Cocoa that can make the difference.

George not believing in the mysteries and traditions of the island battles nature and man to get his wife off the island to a rural doctor. When he sees his way is not going to save Cocoa in time, he eventually agrees to try Mama's way. He goes through a blood sacrifice, a part of the ancestral bridge that saves Cocoa, but unfortunately, loses his own life in the process. Cocoa is saved by the philanthropic hell, rendered by her grandmothers, Abigail and Mama Day, besides the sacrificial devotion of George, who in spite of his physical ailment resurrects the life of Cocoa till his very last breath. George becomes an altruistic alazon who sacrifices his life simply to grant Cocoa a renewed one. Thus, for Cocoa, George not only turns out to be an instrument of rejuvenation, but also a Black African male who unlike his societal counterparts does not laud over his spouse, discriminate against her patriarchal pride and prejudice, nor does he exhibit any kind of male aggression and domination against a helpless female.

In Ralph Ellison's classic work, Invisible Man (1952), the unnamed hero lives in an underground basement, which is brightly lit up by powerful bulbs and the hero's opening statement in the novel highlights the existential "invisibility" of the Black or Afro-American hero within the ethically biased, racially prejudiced, and culturally dehumanized American society. Similarly, in Mama Day, the Black female identity is shown undergoing the alazonic renaissance of the self, besides radical restructuring of gender relations and sexual politics. In Toni Morrison's Sula (1973) and Song of Solomon (1977), she successfully projects the Afro-American novelistic female as an individual who undertakes a positive evolution of her identity as an identity of womanhood. Similarly, in Mama Day, Miranda as well as Cocoa besides Sapphira, we witness these colored women striking symbiotic gender bonds with their male spouses, thereby raising their eventual identities to the level of

strength, assertion as well as inspiration. The male hegemonic domination does not assert itself as the alazon-eiron disequilibrium vis-à-vis the man-woman syndrome in Mama Day.

To conclude, the alazon-eiron equation gets transcreated by Naylor in her work in terms of "invisibility" of colored women. Thus, what is revealed is the truth Black women that populating the fictional world of Naylor's novel do not allow themselves to become the cannon-fodder of their male-counterparts. These women undergo a metamorphic transformation within the inner world of the mind and the spirit, a radical reorientation from the status of the victim to that of the rebel, and eventually acquiring the connotation of the rebel-victim. Ultimately, Naylor succeeds in giving her fictional women the dignity of alazonic living and making them cast-off slough of a despondent eironic life.

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