

# Triumph of Conjuring and Healing: A Close Reading of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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## Abstract

The Africans believe that the events occurring in the material world are not accidental; they are determined by the spirits inhabiting the invisible world. Conjuring is a traditional practice of the Africans to invoke the spirits for good or evil. Gloria Naylor by incorporating this traditional practice in her works succeeds in developing the African American oral tradition into literature. She keeps her culture alive with this effort. In the novel *Mama Day* using the traditional method which includes working with roots, using hands and herbs and communing with ancestors, Mama Day heals the malady of Bernice. This article explores how the author, in her novel *Mama Day*, portrays the failure of western medicine and the triumph of African healing practices.

**Index Terms : Healing, African, conjuring, spirits, medicine.**

## Full Paper

The Africans believe that the events occurring in the material world are not accidental; they are determined by the spirits inhabiting the invisible world. Conjuring is a traditional practice of the Africans to invoke the spirits for good or evil. The religious belief is that magic, the material world and the spiritual world are interrelated. So a person's well-being and happy life are based on the direction of the spirits in the invisible world. Similarly physical, social and psychological sufferings are also caused by the spirits. Carol S. Taylor defines conjuring as: "CONJURING, a complex system of magic referred to by a variety of terms, including 'roots,' 'goopher,' 'gris-gris,' 'hand,' 'hoodoo,' 'mojo,' 'juju,' and (in the Caribbean) 'obeah'" (Andrews, Frances and Harris 168).

Conjuring also refers to the use of magic to influence human behavior. Conjurers serve as a link between the material and the spiritual world. They often use bodily waste, clothes, hair or finger nails of the person to be affected. They acquire their power from the community they serve or from supernatural or gifted ability. Naylor by incorporating this traditional practice in her works succeeds in developing the African American oral tradition into literature. She keeps her culture alive with this effort. In "*The Conjure Woman* (1899), Chesnutt writes out of the 'magic' of black folk life, thereby finding a form for black authority that can avoid challenging prevailing white assumptions about literary power (since it emerges, unlike Christianity

itself, from an oral rather than a written tradition) yet at the same time allows him to portray black life on the plantation in realistic terms” (Pryse and Spillers 10).

African healing has a cultural value. There are two types of healing; the folk culture refers to the first type, which is healing a person from the spell cast upon them. In the process the conjurer removes the spell on the person and restores his physical and mental health. The second type is that of healing a person from natural illness or psychological pain. In her novels Naylor employs both types of healing process in contrast with the western practices.

Healing plays an important role in African culture. Naylor emphasizes that all sorts of pain inflicted on women can be healed through love between themselves. In *The Women of Brewster Place* the condition of Ciel becomes worse when her child gets electrocuted as she and her husband are quarrelling. As her child was her only support, she decides to end her life but Mattie showers immense love and washes away her pain. Mattie’s mystical bathing is a sensitive scene in the novel.

Naylor in *Mama Day* introduces Bernice Duvall as a wife who longs to become a mother. Miranda’s (Mama Day) healing power is expressed through curing her malady. Bernice meets Miranda in the first part of the novel and informs her about her husband Ambush Duvall’s hard work. As a result he becomes tired so that there is no positive result in her pregnancy. Miranda says that it will take time and will happen in good time. She loses her patience and informs her that she has been waiting for a long time for the baby. She then informs her about the fertility drug which is available in the stores and of two women who have already become pregnant by using it. She asks whether she can use it. Miranda is puzzled to know about the fertility drug because for her the real miracle in life is life itself and so she suggests using it with Dr. Smithfield’s prescription. Bernice replies that she has already consulted him and that the doctor has not prescribed it.

She fears that she may lose her husband for not giving birth to a child to continue his generation. Miranda holds her fluttering hands and declares that she had known him very well even before he knew himself because she was the one who had nursed his mother during his birth. So she knows very well that he is not the type who seeks a woman only to continue his generation. She advises her not to have such fear but Bernice is not in a condition to pay heed to her. She requests Miranda to take her to the other place but Mama Day does not answer. Mama Day verifies whether she continues taking star grass along with tea. Further she says that she will give some raspberry to strengthen her nerves. After Bernice leaves, she breaks eggs in the kitchen. Naylor symbolically represents Mama Day’s foresight through linking her egg breaking with the fusion of egg and sperm:

Real careful, she breaks a fresh egg so that the yolk stays whole. Cupping the shell in her hand, she watches for a while as the bloated yellow swims in the thick mucous—not this month. She breaks another egg—nor

the next. The third yolk is slipped into the sugar and butter—nor the next. She shakes her head. But she would still make up the ground raspberry for Bernice—tones the insides, strengthens the blood. (MD 44)

Mama Day's intuition shows the dominance of the African healing power. Felton and Loris proclaim the superiority of the African healing:

At the extreme other end would be traditional medicine, the mainland's way, the established Western form, clearly represented by Dr. Brian Smithfield. Miranda's way occupies a more central position; she retains the conjure woman's secrets of beneficial roots and herbs, and she is blessed with an intuition, a sensitivity to subtle physical signals, not often found in Western medicine. Like Pilate, the most natural women from Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Miranda is constantly associated with the natural symbol of eggs. (5-6)

Mama Day is known for her healing power in Willow Springs. Besides, she has sensory awareness of the future, otherwise known as "Second Sight." She has gained this unusual power from her great-grandmother Sapphira Wade. At the age of five she had used her foresight to know her sister's death under water long before her father and mother found her body. Naylor describes her knowledge of future: "Long after her mama will spend her days rocking and twisting thread, twisting thread, while her daddy spends his nights digging, digging into blocks of wood. But there will be no peace. She begins to learn even at this age: there is more to be known behind what the eyes can see" (MD 36).

W.E.B. Dubois uses the term 'Second Sight' in *The souls of Black Folk* to mean "double-consciousness." Naylor herself has quoted him in her essay *Love and Sex in the Afro-American Novel*: "The 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" (19).

Mama Day's healing power arises from the world of nature. She uses plants as medicine to cure all types of diseases. When she was young, the woods were her playground. Moreover she would walk inside the deep forest without breaking a twig. She knew how to walk in the woods as her father John-Paul had advised her: "No point in cussing, she hears her daddy's voice. Little Mama, these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way—learn to move around 'em" (MD 78). She moved with nature so easily without disturbing its way. Soon the folks understood her power and believed that she "became a spirit in the woods" (MD 79).

Ambush is a polite man in Willow Springs. Right from his childhood, he has gone to church every Sunday, but has not been too religious. He enjoys his Saturday nights with little drinks. He finishes his work two days earlier than the deadline and so he has a good name among the people. When he rushes his truck to Miranda's house, she understands that there is some problem. He tells her that his pregnant wife is ill and asks whether she can save the baby. The fever that started in the morning has not subsided.

Mama Day asks him about how many days Bernice has been pregnant. He replies that “Her monthly is six weeks overdue” (MD 72) and informs her that when she felt sick in the morning they were so happy that they thought she could stop taking the pills. Mama Day becomes cautious when he utters the word pills. To confirm whether Bernice took the pills on prescription or not, she enquires whether he was with her when Dr. Smithfield prescribed the fertility pills for her. She finds out that Bernice took the pills without prescription. With her knowledge of traditional medicine Mama Day knows that unless Bernice’s womb becomes strong no chemical can make her pregnant. She becomes angry with Bernice when she reaches their house because Dr. Smithfield has already warned her that her “system couldn’t handle ‘em” (MD 72). Bernice has stolen the pills from the store and risked her life. All this is because of a lack of patience.

She treats Bernice in a natural way, which contradicts with the western practices. She keeps the back of her hand on Bernice’s forehead to feel her heat and checks her pulse. She presses her ears against the latter’s chest and checks the heart beat. She asks the later where the pain exactly comes from. At first Bernice informs her that it comes from her stomach. When Mama Day asks her to feel the pain closing her eyes, Bernice cannot point out where exactly the pain comes from. Finally she states that the pain comes from her insides. She asks Bernice to lie still and gently “she presses her fingers along the bone under Bernice’s stomach, and then starts to move up along her sides” (MD 73). She tells Ambush that his wife is not pregnant and that the fever cannot be cured from outside. She asks him for a plastic bucket and a warm old cloth. When he goes out for them, she bends down over Bernice and informs her that she is not going to die and adds that the fertility pills she has taken have damaged the internal female parts. As she does not know about the chemical, she needs Dr. Smithfield to find out the pills’ effects. Felton and Loris opine: “When Bernice takes the fertility drug Perganol and becomes seriously ill, it is Miranda who makes the correct diagnosis of ovarian inflammation, although she summons Smithfield anyway because she knows that her knowledge does not extend to chemically constructed drugs” (148). If he does not know about the pills they have to find out about it from the store: “And you know what that means—you done lost your job if they’re kindly, and you’ll end up in jail if they ain’t” (MD 74).

Ambush brings water in a bucket and she asks Bernice to urinate over it. While the latter is doing as commanded, Mama Day inspects the pills and reads the name on it. The severe side-effects of the western medicine can be assessed through Mama Day’s reaction: “Perganol. Miranda shakes her head. God only knows what she done did to herself” (MD 74). She takes the bucket to the window and allows the sun light to fall on it. She finds out “pus in her, all right, and it’s in the upper parts” (MD 75). She washes her hands with hot water and cleans it with alcohol. Then she goes to Bernice and shows her the middle and pointer fingers: “I’m gonna dab a little Vaseline on ‘em, go up in you with this hand, and press below your belly with the other hand-it’ll help me to figure out what’s wrong. You won’t tense up on me, will you?” (MD 75) She puts her fingers inside her gently. She can understand the problem with “the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands” (MD 75) and can fix her cycle within a day.

When she pushes her fingers near Bernice's womb she finds it infected because it is warmer than it should be and it spreads down to the tubes. She finds her womb good and strong "—all my star grass and red raspberry tea—sized right, shaped right, moves about like it should. She could hold triplets in here. Lord, girl, why didn't you just wait? You done undone months of care" (MD 76). She finds a spot in her sides; it is of a dime size and of blazing heat. Bernice shouts when Miranda touches the spot. Using her hands Mama Day understands what the western medicine has done to her. She informs Bernice that her tubes are blocked by boils impeding her cycle.

Ambush tries to contact Dr. Smithfield over the phone in vain. The telephone in charge has only three answers - doctor is out, he is busy, and he will come tomorrow. The bitter comment on Western treatment is evident in that even though there are some good treatments in western medical practices, they cannot be reached in times of need whereas African healing is natural and available at any time.

Ambush asks Miranda to take rest but she affirms that she likes to walk in the woods to get fresh air. She borrows his pocket knife and goes inside the woods. In the woods she searches for the choke-cherry tree and finds it. She removes the outer bark, scrapes the green layer and takes a piece of it. Returning to their house she gives a pepper candy to Bernice. When the latter salivates, Mama Day takes the candy off, keeps the piece of choke-cherry bark in her mouth and asks her to chew it and not to gag. She directs her to move the bark in her mouth "cause if it stay in one spot, it's gonna burn the lining of your mouth" (MD 82). After some time she takes the bark out and gives back the candy and again the bark. She repeats the process till the bark becomes a pulp. Through this treatment Bernice's pain abates. Mama Day checks her pulse and heartbeat.

Dr. Smithfield comes there and has a professional talk with Mama Day. He informs Bernice that there is a cysts in her ovaries and gives some painkiller. He affirms the good thing that Mama Day's tea has done to her womb. While leaving, Mama Day meets Bernice and informs her that she has seen the room that the latter has prepared for her child. It must have taken a lot of work to make it pretty. She says, "Folks say I can do things most can't do" (MD 87), and offers to help her if she is willing to work with her. Bernice accepts her idea and asserts that she is ready to do anything. Mama Day whispers, "The hard work is just the beginning. And I ain't sure yet exactly how it will all end. But if it turns out that we gotta go to the other place together in the end, what happens there we gotta keep a secret. Not a secret for now or a secret for then—but a secret forever. Even from Ambush you understand that, Bernice?" (MD 87)

Mama Day takes a handful of pumpkin seeds and puts them in saffron water. She mixes a handful of crook-neck squash with a little dewberry juice. She dries them under the sun in Abigail's porch "in colorful rows of yellow and black" (MD 96). They become dry after some days. Mama Day scoops them and puts them into her pocket. She explains the purpose of the seeds to Abigail: "The mind is a funny thing, Abigail—and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are—magic seeds. And the

only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become" (MD 96). She takes the seeds to Bernice and informs her that the growth of the seeds indicates the growth of the baby in the latter's womb. Belief is everything in conjuring. Harris gives a similar opinion: "Since the primary ingredient for conjuration is belief, any series of patterns that tends to foster belief will enhance the reputation of the conjurer" (Flora and Mackethan 182).

Bernice changes her life style and food habits as per Mama Day's advice. About six months she and her husband work very hard and take different foods in order to prepare themselves for the baby. She walks three miles from her house to the bridge junction. She buys liver, beef kidney and beef heart from the store twice a month. Nobody asks why they are eating strange foods. Even she does not like to inform anyone.

Mama Day takes her to the other place in the first new moon of spring. At first Mama Day fears for bringing a new life into the world and later realizes that she is not bringing anything new but just using what is already present: "Nine openings. She breathes through two, hears through two, eats through one, the two below the waist, and two for the life she longs to nurse. Nine opening melting into the uncountable, 'cause the touch is light, light. Spreading each tiny pore on each inch of skin" (MD 140).

Mama Day helps Bernice to conceive while Dr. Smithfield fails. Her traditional practice triumphs over the western medicine. The success of African healing is revealed through Bernice's pregnancy. Mama Day has pursued a traditional method which includes working with roots, using hands and herbs and communing with ancestors. These are the well-known healing methods of the Africans.

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