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**Nature as Resistance: Exploring Anti-Colonial and Black
Feminist Narratives in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day**

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DEDICATION

To my dearest parents, whose support and presence have always guided me every step of the way, bringing me to where I stand today. To my beloved grandmother, whose endless love has been the foundation of all the goodness in my life. To my dear friends, the blessing of my life, whom I consider sisters in this life rather than friends, I am forever grateful that Allah put you in my life and without also forgetting my dear brother. To the person that life had to part us away I am very sure that you would be proud of where I am today, may we meet in the next life.

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this research is to dive into Gloria Naylor's novel entitled *Mama Day* (1988) in order to explore the author's portrayal of black women in the American society. This research also sheds light on the constant struggles faced by black women and their double struggles against discrimination and sexism. At its core, this dissertation analyses the continuous connection shared between black American women and nature, mainly focusing on the land and its reflection of female existence. This novel is chosen due to its rich thematic elements that intertwine cultural identity, historical legacy, and the environment. The research is divided into two chapters; the first chapter provides a theoretical framework on black feminism and ecocriticism, as well as a discussion of how these perspectives shape the relationship between black women and nature. As for the practical part, it contains an analysis of *Mama Day*, focusing on the novel's representation of the power of black women, and their relationship with nature as a source of healing, empowerment, and resilience. Ultimately, this research aims to expand a discussion on topics such as race, gender, identity, and environmental justice within literary studies.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

Throughout the years, black women have been treated poorly and were seen as inferior. They were subjected to waves of oppression, racism, abuse from the white people, and at times, from their own communities as well. Many movements and organizations have sought to address these injustices, though black women have often been marginalized within both feminist and civil rights movements. While feminist movements have always prioritized the experiences of black women and civil right movement such as black liberations have only given the attention to gender issues. Black women were found in the middle neglected and ignored, so they have had to carve out their own space to confront the difficult challenges they face. Black feminism emerged as a response and as a critical framework to address these unique challenges they face considering race, gender, class and sexuality. Central to this struggle black women have historically been connected to nature, since it was already rooted in the African spiritual traditions. Nature has always been a source of power, comfort, refuge, and healing to black people, black women especially so it became a symbol of resilience and empowerment. Thus it has been always a mixture between black feminist thought and ecocriticism

The work of Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* is a great depiction of the struggles that black women are facing in the society exploring the themes of gender and feminism, self-discovery, matriarchy, and magical realism.

This dissertation is designed to delve into the novel from a mixture of angles, black feminism, ecocriticism and, even postcolonial ecocriticism through the work of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*.

This research paper will cruise down Naylor's novel in order to study the author's portrayal of black women in the society, and the constant struggles and oppression they have to face from all direction whether in their society, or white people's society. Also the study is to include the relationship that is formed between black women and nature, focusing mainly on Mama Day and her inherited mystical powers that allowed her to be the matriarch leader of Willow springs. Therefore, this research work will explore the following research questions

1. What is black feminism, and how it is represented in the novel *Mama Day*?
2. How does nature serve as a source of empowerment for black women?
3. What is the relationship between black feminism and ecocriticism?

For the purpose of answering the above questions, a critical analysis is to be applied to dive between the lines of the novel to depict the issues that are faced by black women, and to highlight their connection with their land.

This thesis is the divided into two chapters; the first is mainly concerned to give an overview of the term black feminism and its historical background with reference to female authors and writers that contributed to its emergence, while also showing the relationship between black feminism and ecocriticism then

merging the two discourses with post-colonial ecocriticism forming a term called feminist post-colonial ecocriticism. As for the second chapter it concerns the novel of *Mama Day* by the African-American female writer Gloria Naylor, on how a black women, a leader in her own society navigating her life and protecting her community from outside influence in order to preserve their cultural traditions.

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Introduction to Black

Feminism

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1.1. Introduction

Black feminism, as a field and a social movement, first appeared advocating for the rights and recognition of black women. It emerged as a response to the exclusion of black women from The Mainstream Feminist Movement and The Civil Rights/ Black liberation Movements that both neglected the racial and economic struggles black women faced. The work of many writers and activists such as Alice walker, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison and other black women developed a voice to talk back concerning the racial injustices and oppression that black women were facing in the African and African-American society. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, is an approach that examines the relationship between literature and the environment, and it serves to highlight the exploitation of nature alongside the oppression of communities. Merging the two fields together reveal a complex relationship between the nature and the oppression faced by black women

The Present Chapter is a broad vision on black feminist thought and its representation and relationship nature. It tackles briefly black feminism as a concept, its historical background and the historical figures that contributed to its emergence, as well nature as a framework to black feminism and how is served as a source of empowerment to black women. Finally introducing the concept of Post-colonial ecocriticism and its relation to black feminism

forming a concept that merged the three fields together titled “Feminist Post-colonial Ecocriticism”

1.2 Definition and Historical Background

Black feminism as a discourse seeks to articulate black women’s experiences of oppression, racism, and social injustices. It aims to create change and a more just society where black women are treated equally, and are given their rights in the society as much as other white people.

1.2.1 Black Feminism Defined:

As a compound term, “black feminism” embraces two spheres that have been at the center of literary and social debate for eons upon eons. As its core, it stands for the doubled struggle to defend, represent, and criticize racial and gender based issues side by side. Patricia Hills Collins, sociologist and scholar known for the influential work on black feminism in which she defined it as a theoretical and a political framework that centers the experiences and perspectives of Black women within discussions of gender, race, and class.

Collins argued in her work *Black Feminist through Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) that black feminism is rooted in the unique historical and social position of black women within systems of oppression. In the same work, Collins provides some important key elements of black feminism as a discipline. Mainly, these include Intersectionality, Black Women’s Experience, Critical consciousness, Empowerment and Liberation, and Knowledge production.

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Collins emphasizes the importance of Intersectionality, which refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, as they apply to a given individual or group. Black feminism recognizes that black women mainly experience multiple layers of oppression simultaneously, which these interesting identities shaping their experiences in distinctive and complex ways. (Collins 299-312).

Black women's Experience according to Collins is the immense importance and lies at the center of black-feminist discourse. Instead of separating "black" and race-based concerns from those of women and their daily socio-political concerns, black feminism brings the two discourses together and brings the voices and experiences of black women to the front line of criticism. Mainly, this discourse sheds the light on the black woman's life within a given society while combining gender roles with those of cross-race interaction. It acknowledges the historical marginalization of black women within the feminist circles and society as a whole. (Collins 1-29).

Black feminism encourages the development of critical consciousness among black women. A black-feminist perspective of the world would enable, and even encourage black women to activate a critical view of the world generally, and the social, political and economic structures around them. Instead of accepting social and political rules passively, women, according to black feminism, should think critically about the degree of which these structures are legitimate and the extent of which they should be respected or

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rather fought. Thus black feminism stands against regimes and structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression. (Collins 298-318)

In addition to the encouragement of women's experience and the enhancement of their critical thinking, Collins also emphasizes that black feminism is not only a theoretical framework but also a political project aimed at empowering black women and advancing their liberation. It aims to instigate social transformation by addressing the tangible circumstances of black women's lives and advocating for fairness, justice and equal opportunities.

According to Collins, all what has been mentioned could not be achieved without the unlimited power of knowledge. For this reason the critic highlights the importance of black women's knowledge production and intellectual contributions. Black feminism recognizes the expertise and insights that emerge from lived the experience of black women. By mixing the skills and strengths gained from daily experiences with those obtained through hard work and academic education, black women would gain a doubled power that grants them power against any possible threat. (Collins 251-271)

1.2.2The Historical Background

Black feminism emerged as a critical framework for understanding and addressing the Intersecting systems of oppressions faced by black women due to their race, gender, and often class. Black Feminism arose during the "Civil Rights Movement" in the late 1960's and early 1970's, as response to the marginalization of Black women's. While already existing movements such as

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feminism and civil rights movements addressed significant societal injustices, they often tackled the concerns of either black men or white women, leaving the struggles of black women largely invisible. Black feminists sought to rectify this by spotlighting the unique challenges faced by black women. (Collins 7-20)

In an article published by anthropologist Naomi Schiller in *The JBHE* (*The Journal of Black in Higher Education*), Schiller states that black women now make up about half of all African- American scholar's at the United States' colleges and universities. However, Schiller argues that despite the positive image of women's education, they still face an uphill battle to earn full recognition and respect. Responding to this situation, black women started to play a vital role in reshaping feminist theory and activism by centering the experiences and perspectives of black women and voicing their own problems and inserts to the world. (Schiller, 68-70)

Noteworthy, black feminism flourished due to the work of many scholars and activists whose efforts to give voice to black women in Africa and beyond resulted in creating a new intersectional discourse that serves a double goal. Mainly, those figures aimed at granting black women the right to express themselves and expose the inequalities they face. This was especially noticed in America where the existence of black women started with slavery and moved towards further steps of degradation, despite the supposed eventual freedom granted to such category both socially and politically. Some of the key Figures that had a major contribution to the history of black feminism include Audre

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Lorde (1934-1992) a poet, essayist, and activist whose work centered on issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In one of her most famous quote, Lorde says that she writes “for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We’ve been taught that silence would save us, but it won’t” (qtd.in Bollinger 138).

Patricia Hills Collins (1948-present) is another scholar and sociologist, her work was based on Intersectionality and black feminist thought. Among her most famous writings are *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology* (1992), and *Fighting Words: Black women and the Search for Justice* (1998). As the titles of her works indicate, Collins took it over herself to reflect, criticize, and assure equality and better living conditions for black women in America and the world. Until the present time, Collins’ efforts continue and her position as a university professor made her voice even more influential. In addition to the two mentioned activists, Alice Walker (1944-present) stood, and is still standing as a novelist, poet, and activist, best known for her work “The Color Purple” which explored the lives of black women and womanism. By using both non-fiction portrayal of women’s experiences and fictitious but realistic stories, this author copied and voiced the suffering and agony of African-American women to the world.

In the same vein, Bell Hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins (1952-2021) an influential cultural critic, feminist theorist, and author who wrote extensively on the Intersectionality of race, capitalism, and gender. In her works such as

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Talking Back: Thinking feminist, thinking black. And Earning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics Hooks sheds the light on the different difficulties and struggles that black women experience on the daily basis. By mixing society, politics, and race, Hooks mainly wanted her writing to give voice to the voiceless and to create change in the way black women are seen and treated. In most of her writings she wanted to change the usual image of black women and the “sexist stereotypes” that characterized “black females as loud, rude, overbearing, and in the relationship of black males dominating and castrating”. (Hooks ix)

1.3. Nature as a Framework for Black feminism:

Black feminism as discourse has developed multiple frameworks, each addressing the unique experiences and struggles of black women, precisely the intersections of race, gender and class oppression. The most famous key frameworks of black feminism include; Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw), Womanism (Alice Walker), and Black Feminist Thought (Patricia Hills Collins)

1.3.1. Introducing Ecocriticism:

Throughout time, a myriad of definitions have been provided by different critics and scholars who share numerous views of ecocriticism. According to Laurence Buell, a prominent eco-critic, eco-criticism is “the study of the relationship between Literature and the Physical environment” (Buell, 3). On the other hand, Cheryl Glotfelty describes it as “The study of the relationship

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between literature and the physical environment, with a particular focus on the ways in which literature reflects and shapes human attitudes towards the natural world” (Glotfelty, xviii). Overall ecocriticism reflects how nature can have a significant impact on literature by shaping its elements and functioning as a very important literary symbol that enables the author to draw a certain image of characters, places, and even historical events through a fictitious plot.

Although the term ecocriticism first arose in scholarly discourse in the early 1990’s, the concepts and the notion related to it had been evolving for some time prior to that rising. The origins of ecocriticism as a literary and critical discourse could be traced back to earlier environmental movements and naturalistic topics. As stated by Kate Rigby and Axel Goodbody in their introduction to the book *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, names such as Patrick Murphy and SuEllen Campbell could be taken as two pioneers of the ecocritical approach. According to Rigby and Goodbody, Murphy should be credited for harnessing Bakhtinian dialogics “to the practice of ecofeminist criticism” (1) where nature and feminist concerns married to form one discourse. On the other hand, Campbell is famous for highlighting a certain confluence and linkage between poststructuralism and the “kind of deep ecological thinking that informs much contemporary American nature writing” (Rigby and Goodbody 1). At a later time, the concept of ecocriticism started to obtain a wider acknowledgement with the publication of key texts such as *The Ecocriticism Reader: Land masks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold from 1996. By the middle of the 1990s, the term gained

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prominence and started to be used as a specific approach to read and analyze social and literary situations.

At its core, ecocriticism stands as an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the relationships between literature, culture, and environment. It explores how literary texts represent nature, ecological issues and human interactions with the natural world. (Garad 5). On a more specific level, in the field of literature and literary analysis, Ecocriticism is used to study the way in which the author uses natural elements for the purpose of tackling a specific theme or sending a certain message to the reader. Mostly, authors of black feminism and those who tackle themes of discrimination and oppression blur the borders between natural elements and the human body. One example could be seen in Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acers* (1991) where the author conflates the female body and the land. As the protagonist's body starts to lose its strengths, the land also becomes useless and ruined due to the chemical products that leaked into the heart of the land by abusive men. Indeed, American and British literatures are both famous with numerous instances where nature and the female body turn into one entity (Sussan Farrell Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acers: A Reader's Guide* 48). Mostly, the land is linked to female existence in American Literature. Annette Kolodny, a feminist scholar of American literature asserts that natural metaphors are extremely rich in American fiction and that "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy" includes "a harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine". (Kolodny 4)

1.3.2. Black Feminist Ecocriticism

The link that is formed between the concept of ecocriticism and black feminism permit to develop a nuance understanding of the existing environmental issues, and to address the interlocking oppression and power structures that mold people's perceptions of injustice and environmental deterioration. Both fields share a commitment to environmental justice and fair treatment, regardless of race, color, or income. They also explore how literature, art, and cultural narratives shape perception of nature, gender, race, and power dynamics. Many feminist authors, such as the editors of the book *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (2013) use nature in their writing, both non-fiction and fiction, to rewrite history from a new perspective. "It is important to reexamine and rewrite the grand narrative" argue Greta Guard et al. "that has only belonged to the most privileged male writers in the past...redefining how that place of power so often still omits other lives" (Gaard et al .xv)

Serpil Oppermann states in a book chapter titled "Feminist Ecocriticism" that a wider numbers of critics started to insist on the importance of questioning gendered nature and sexuality and conceptual associations of nature with women (Oppermann 4). As such, more literary works started to be produced with nature as a major symbol that stands for women and reflect their struggles and concerns. Noteworthy, the merging of nature and literature to reflect upon feminist arguments and the problems of women throughout times and places went further to cover the specific concerns and the doubled

suffering of black women in America and elsewhere. At this point, fiction, especially novels, turned into a medium of expression and empowering tool for black females.

1.3.3 Nature as Resistance

Black women have made a long history of forging a deep connection with nature as a site of resistance and empowerment that rooted in their experiences of survival, spirituality, and cultural heritage.

In an article written by Christian Brooks, Titled “The Sacred Connection between Black Women and The Earth” the author mentions that Environmentalism is considered as an issue for Black people, especially for black women whom they held a sacred connection with for centuries, and for them the environment is more than a place surrounding them, but a source of provision, a place of worship, and an escape from bondage. However the relationship between black women and nature was not only one sided. Their relation with nature is one of give and take, where care or harm toward one affects the other. African women have long been explorers and caretakers of the earth, embodying a deeper understanding of its role in sustaining life. (Brooks, p 1)

1.4. Nature and Black Feminist Activism:

Nature has a varied role in defining black feminist philosophy and action, influencing both frameworks and practical techniques used by black feminists. Nature serves as a rich source for metaphors, imagery, and inspiration for black feminist theory and activism, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human experiences with world and underscoring the importance of environmental justice in the fight for gender and racial equality. Important to mention, nature has been taken as a source of inspiration by numerous authors and feminists around the world. It moved from the place where one lives to become a weapon against discrimination, racism, and women abuse. The following lines reflect upon some of the main fields that used nature as a source of inspiration for voicing black female concerns and needs. These mostly include literature, poetry, and even feminist activism.

1.4.1. Literature:

1.4.1.1. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* 1987

In Morrison's novel nature serves as a powerful metaphor for both freedom and oppression, Seth's escape to the woods represents her desire for freedom from slavery, while the haunting presence of *Beloved* embodies the trauma and violence inflicted upon black women. In this context nature becomes a space for both liberation and memory, respecting the complexities of Black women's experiences. (Morrison 1987).

1.4.1.2. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* 1982

Nature has played such an important role in Celie's quest for self-discovery and empowerment. Celie took comfort in the beauty of nature, such as flowers she grows in her garden. Through her link with the natural world, Celie learns to reclaim her agency and assert her identity as a black woman. (Walker 1982)

1.4.2. Poetry

1.4.2.2. Nikki Giovanni's poem "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)" 1975:

In this poem Giovanni celebrates the power and resilience of Black womanhood through images from nature. The speaker imagines herself as a supernatural being, capable of extraordinary feats, affirming a proud and powerful identity that challenges stereotypes and asserts the richness of Black women's experiences. (Giovanni 1975)

1.4.3. Activism

1.4.3.1. Rachel Carson "Silent Spring" 1962:

Carson's book "Silent Spring" had a huge impact with raising public awareness about the dangers of pesticides and their influence on the environment and leading to policy changes. The book is also credited with launching the modern environmental movement. (Carson 1962)

1.5. Nature Writes Back:

1.5.1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism:

To apprehend the concept of postcolonial ecocriticism there must be an understanding of the relationship between the two concepts, not only that but also understand the meaning of each concept individually. Post-colonialism is a theoretical framework that examines cultural, political, and economic impacts of colonialism on formerly colonized countries, in which it explores various issues such as identity and cultural hegemony. Whereas ecocriticism as formerly defined, is a field of literary and cultural analysis that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment.

Therefore postcolonial ecocriticism merges these two fields to analyze the environmental outcomes of colonialism and to provide a comprehensive understanding of environmental issues in postcolonial context. Postcolonial ecocriticism was discussed and portrayed in many novels by postcolonial authors on how colonial powers exploited natural resources, causing significant environmental degradation, and disrupting indigenous ecological practices, as an example; Chinua Achebe in his seminal work *Things Fall Apart* offered a rich narrative for examining the environmental impact of colonialism through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, and as well depicting the life of the Igbo community; an ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria. They have a rich cultural heritage, including their own language, traditions, and social structures, before and during the early days of the British colonial rule. The novel explored various ecological themes portraying the relationship between the Igbo people and their land which is central to their cultural life, and the impact of the

colonial rule that brought significant changes to the Igbo way of life that caused a cultural and environmental displacement.

1.5.2. Feminist Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism and feminism intersect in several important ways, and by integrating these three perspectives, an understanding is developed about environmental issues that take into account the historical and the ongoing impacts of colonialism, racism, and oppression.

Scholars like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in their book in their book “Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment” argue that postcolonial ecocriticism is concerned with issues of oppression with the colonial subjugation of people and lands, and with the degradation of the environment. Huggan and Tiffin’s analysis suggests that these fields can mutually influence and inform one another. Postcolonial Ecocriticism examines how colonial histories have shaped the environment and its surrounding, and how it continues to have an impact on it and on the communities today. (Huggan and Tiffin 294) At the same time, Feminist perspective of the world becomes closely related to the story of the colonized people and their relationship with the land as a major postcolonial theme. As a matter of fact, postcolonial narratives never cease to reflect the oppression, usurpation of the land, and the usurpation of identity that comes along with it. Hence, the three fields have proven the sharing interconnectedness both in real life and in its representation through the medium of fiction. The ongoing wars and the

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western waves of colonialism forced a new type of productive conversation between nature, land, women, and the fight for the rights and freedom (Gaard 11). Indeed, postcolonial theory “in recent literary studies does attempt to illuminate the parallels among the destructive forces of colonialism on humans, animals, and the natural environment” (Crawford 88), in a way that makes studying while ignoring the other almost impossible. Mainly, the following elements serve as the knot that links the three discourses together:

1.5.2.1. Shared oppression: Both postcolonial ecocriticism and feminism show how power systems oppress marginalized groups, and feminism particularly highlights how gender intersects with other forms of oppression. One powerful example is how environmental degradation had a huge impact on indigenous women in Niger Delta. (Nixon 103)

1.5.2.2. Intersectionality: Intersectionality is considered as a key concept to the feminist theory and a crucial concept in postcolonial ecocriticism as well. This approach analyzes how gender, class, and race intersect to shape individuals’ experiences in relation to environmental issues. Women of color in postcolonial regions often face many challenges due to the intersection of these identities. (Crenshaw 1241-1299)

1.5.2.3. Ecofeminism: ecofeminism directly explains the relationship of women and nature, and how both are oppressed one way or another either by patriarchal or colonial systems. Huggan and Tiffin’s work explained how

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ecofeminist perspectives are complemented by providing a postcolonial perspective to these issues. (Huggan and Tiffin pages 172-174)

Postcolonial ecocriticism and feminism are three discourses that played a crucial part in the novel *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor. This novel gathered these three discourses in a condensed manner and portrayed the challenges faced by women of color and how they are linked with nature, especially *Mama Day* and how she uses nature to flip gender and power roles and by using nature as a healing tool. Throughout the coming chapter, a deep insight is to be provided into the way in which nature is used as a source of empowerment that places a woman of color at the top of the power pyramids. By doing this, the second chapter shows how the author uses nature to give voice to the voiceless and regain the position of the protagonist as a strong woman, an African-American leader, owner of the land, and a decision maker. Hence bringing more than two disciplines into one text to serve ends simultaneously while fighting colonialism, patriarchy, and destruction of nature.

1.6. Conclusion

This chapter tackled black feminism and its aspects, while providing examples of several writers that are credited to the emergence and the rise of this discourse, while also focusing on the relationship that black women seem to have with nature in using it as a source of empowerment, comfort, and healing. Ecocriticism is a discourse that serves to link literature with the physical environment, and specifically in this chapter it focuses on the

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intersection of black feminist thought and environmental justice, analyzing how black women's connection have been shaped by centuries of oppression and how they, in turn, challenge and redefine this relationship by rising against all of that spiritual and sentimental abuse through literature, poetry, and activism.

**Chapter Two: Nature as a Resistance in
Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day***

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Chapter Two: Nature as a Resistance in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

2.1. A Brief Summary of the Novel:

Mama Day is a 1988 novel written by Gloria Naylor. The story is set on a fictional island named Willow Springs located on the off coasts of Georgia and South Carolina in the United States. The novel interweaves the lives of Miranda (Mama) Day, her great-niece Ophelia (Cocoa), and George, Cocoa's husband. Mama Day is a powerful and wise leader of the island Willow Springs, she look after her people and protects them from the outside influence. However she couldn't hold her niece Cocoa from wanting to travel to New York to explore her life, and during that journey she met George whom he became later on her husband. All was going well until Cocoa goes back to her home land with her husband and things take a big turn after that.

2.2. Introduction

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) could be set as a model for multilayered narratives. It explores various themes and tackles a mixture concerns that the author and many of her contemporaries experienced at the time. As the plot gradually develops, the reader comes through themes of tradition versus modernity, magic and spirituality, identity and self-discovery, race and gender, and black feminism against patriarchal control. Through this story, Naylor delves into the struggles and strengths that black women had to face, especially concerning their cultural heritage and societal expectations.

The novel was published in 1988. Black women in the United States at that time were experiencing a significant period of challenges and struggles against systemic racism, sexism, and economic inequality. They faced multiple challenges, ranging from wage gap to workplace discrimination. In the history of America, the period of the late 1980's was significantly remarkable as the period of when the concept of black feminist thought firstly emerged by the help of many scholars and activists such as Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde.

The novel under discussion portrays different versions of women, their roles, and how they were perceived, and the challenges they had to face inside the island and elsewhere. Each character in this novel was linked to a specific feminist role and there are three central female characters where each one of them embodies different aspects of black feminism. At the same time, the novelist makes use of the natural elements by placing it at the heart of the narrative in a manner that turns nature itself from a mere place to a living character. Hence, this chapter is mainly designed to navigate between the lines of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* with the main focus of deciphering its codes and analyzing the author's representation of female characters and the way in which their identities progress in response to the surrounding circumstances. Meanwhile, this chapter will place the element of nature under a focused spotlight for the purpose of studying the author's systematic and studied use of nature as a main element that contributes to the development of the plot and the destination of its characters.

2.3. Portrayal of Female Characters:

Women in *Mama Day* play central roles in their community as nurturers, caretakers, and preservers of their cultural heritage. They are portrayed as powerful, complex, and deeply connected to both nature and their community such as Mama Day and Sapphira Wade who had such profound connection with nature and great spiritual powers.

2.3.1. Mama Day (Miranda Day)

Mama Day is portrayed as the matriarch of Willow Springs; she is wise, strong and independent. Her profound knowledge of traditional African spiritual practices and herbal medicines, along with her deep connection to nature since she was a child “the whole island was her playground; she’d walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear in the shadow of a summer cottonwood... folks started believing (the) little girl became spirit in the woods” (Naylor 78-79), and her spiritual powers are very central to her character, placing her in the role of both healer and protector “Everybody’s mama now”. (Naylor 89)

Mama Day embodies the role of a matriarch, a black female leader and protector of Willow Springs that subverts the patriarchal norms, challenging traditional gender roles and asserting the importance of female authority within the community

2.3.2. Sapphira Wade

Is the first owner of the island, the “great, great gran Mother” (Naylor 218), of Willow Springs. She was a “true conjure woman” (Naylor 3) because she was brought first to the island as an African slave woman bought by Bascombe Wade. Sapphira managed to gain her freedom through a cunning and mystical marriage to her enslaver and later on she coerced him into signing over the land to her people before his mysterious death.

Sapphira was the legacy and the foundation of the island's history she held great mystical powers and greater connection with nature, she could “grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of the lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot...and healed the wounds of every creature” (Naylor 3), and these powers were later on inherited by Mama day. Sapphira's story symbolizes resistance, survival, and the female power that is depicted through their connection between women and the land, and her presence carries on to influence the lives of her descendants.

2.3.3. Abigail Day

Abigail Day is portrayed as a caretaker and nurturer “Abigail never let go of her duty as a mother, to provide for and protect her family” (Naylor 88), she has a traditional role in the black community with more of a conventional and conservative character unlike her sister Miranda. Her character reflects the suffering the challenges that many black women experience through her quiet strength. Abigail's role in this novel represents a more realistic image of the

black women in their community, where they face crucial challenges in raising their children and providing a secure life for them “there is nothing stronger than the bloodline”. (Naylor 110)

2.3.4. Cocoa (Ophelia Day)

Cocoa was portrayed as a free spirit young woman who left Willow Springs to build her life in New York City where her journey of self-discovery began where she says “I wasn’t born on that island, so it doesn’t own me” (Naylor 53), this illustrates her detachment from her ancestral roots, as she tries to establish her own identity. Throughout the novel Cocoa learns to embrace her heritage and the powerful role of the woman in her family that permits her to finally accept and acknowledge her identity “I can’t leave this place behind, no matter where I go-it’s in me” (Naylor 290) .Cocoa in this novel represents the struggles faced by modern black women who must fit in with other communities while maintaining their identity and culture “I’ve spent my entire life trying to prove I’m not some country chick from Willow Springs, but no matter how far I run, it’s always with me” (Naylor 148) , and she also embodies the Black feminist idea that empowerment for Black women often comes through their understanding and embracing their culture.

2.4. The Role of Mama Day in the Novel

From the beginning of the novel Mama day is portrayed and viewed as the strongest character, she was a female leader of an island, not only that but she

was a black female leader, she was respected and viewed highly by the other villagers. Mama Day embodies wisdom and strength.

Her connection with nature allowed her to form a spiritual connection with the land and her community, that put her in a position where she is sought out for her wisdom and guidance, especially in matters that require more than just conventional medical intervention; for example when Mama Day used her spiritual and healing powers to help Bernice, a woman in Willow Springs that had an overdose from drinking fertility pills in desperate attempt to have a child. That moment was captured when “Mama day went out to gather herbs, mixing them with prayers that had been passed down through generations, brewing them into a tea she gave Bernice to drink” (Naylor 177) . However Mama Day also gave Bernice a warning about the dangers that come along with obsession and desperation in her pursuit of a child, insisting on her to let nature take its course; which illustrate that Mama Day understood the balance between the physical and spiritual realms. Mama Day was also portrayed as a complex character when George described her: “She’s a puzzle, an enigma-part healer, part witch, part ordinary old woman”. This highlights how Mama Day is seen as multifaceted character and difficult for the outsiders to fully comprehend” (Naylor 112). She is also a powerful black female leader that challenged the American racial societal norms leading an entire community facing the external challenges in order to maintain the cultural integrity of Willow Spring, and to protect the heritage left by her ancestors.

2.5. Aspects of Black Feminism in *Mama Day*:

Mama Day is a novel that highlights the experiences of Black women, while shedding the light on their struggles and strengths that characterize Black feminist thoughts, especially Mama Day, Ophelia (Cocoa), and Abigail, and how they navigate the intersections of race, gender, and culture in a racially oppressive and patriarchal society.

2.5.1. Race and Identity:

The complexities of racial identity are omnipresent in the novel, especially in the black community of Willow Springs that has isolated itself from the mainland of the American society. Cocoa is the vivid representation of the conflict of racial identity with the outside world when she moved to New York, and also her relationship with George since she married a man who comes from a different culture (mainland). Two cultures and backgrounds are obliged to reconcile and unite as soon as Cocoa and George decide to marry. However, Cocoa's culture remains more powerful as her marriage itself happened due to the magical powder that Mama Day used to enchant George into marrying her niece "But the magic was in cocoa. And the cocoa had been made by Mama Day. She'd sprinkled it with some secret thing she knew and had given it to George, so it was her power not just the cocoa alone, that made him love Cocoa and marry her." (Naylor 147)

Willow Springs is an island fully inhabited by black people, and black people only. It is kept feminine, matriarchal, and black because Mama Day

never allows the existence of white people or even white education or school system in the island. Thus she keeps it totally preserved, or rather totally black and away from any outside (white) influence. For instance even Cocoa had fears from the possibility of bearing white blood if she ever got married to a white man from New York, because in the novel the black color is seen as the norm and white is seen as degrading.

Throughout the novel the legacy of Sapphira Wade played a crucial part in representing a source of power and strength for the community and a necessary foundation of the culture and heritage of the island. Her story of being the African-born slave and founder of Willow Springs was passed down through generations served as powerful symbol of resistance, and the enduring strength of black women.

2.5.2. Dynamics of Female Power

Mama Day in the novel was embodied as the powerful, spiritual, wise matriarch; she was positioned as the leader and protector within the community because of her deep knowledge of herbal medicine and her connection to the land. Her power was passed down through the maternal line which represents the power Black women had, since Willow Spring was only under the leadership of women since its foundation. Mama Day inherited all of her supernatural and spiritual powers from the mythical figure Sapphira Wade, the woman that was a symbol of resilience and power in the face of oppression and racism in the American society, a powerful representation that not only an

African had the power to secure an island and claim it as her own, but it was an African black women.

2.5.3. Cultural Heritage

Willow Springs is a self-contained isolated island that was separated from the mainland. In the beginning of the book there is a map displayed that shows details of the island. It contains many natural resources where Mama Day is able to harvest herbs for her medicines, and where the rest of the inhabitants are able to grow their own vegetable in their own garden. This isolation and separation permitted the people of Willow Springs to preserve their traditions and cultural heritage from the influence of American society, as well through the stories and legends that are passed down through generation. These elements serve as a huge factor to connect the people of Willow Springs to their culture to reinforce the sense of belonging and identity.

2.6. The Novel *Mama Day* and its Portrayal of Ecocriticism

The novel's depiction of nature goes beyond being just a setting. It was used as a symbol of power, strength, and a mystical force deeply connected with the lives of the inhabitants of Willow Springs, in the novel the island itself was described as having a unique energy that sets it apart from the rest of the world because it was already not connected to any part of the mainland only by a manmade bridge that has to be rebuilt each time a storm, or a bad weather destroys it.

Naylor writes in her novel, "Willow Springs ain't in no state. It ain't no time. It's a world of its own," emphasizing that the island has to be set on its own away from any outside influence for it to preserve its natural and spiritual state. The unique energy that this island has is not only tied to the land but also to its inhabitants and the stories and tradition passed down through generations, which gives the island a sense of continuity and timelessness that empowered characters like Sapphira Wade and Mama Day to harness its power for healing and protection. Naylor uses the natural world as a living force in the novel; it is something that already exists in the African community, where they have a strong connection with nature as a source of power. Mama Day interpreted the weather and other natural elements as a sign to foresee events in order to protect her community. The Island in the novel indeed "speaks" to Mama Day through the wind, the rain and the behaviors of animals. This connection depicts the strong bond Mama Day has with the land that permits her to fulfill her role as the protector and the guardian of the island's traditions and its inhabitants.

2.6.1. Depiction of Nature in *Mama Day* Through Symbols

Nature played a central role in *Mama Day*, with various symbols that added a deep sense to the novel:

2.6.1.1. The Bridge:

The bridge is a manmade bridge that connects Willow Springs to the mainland; it is the only way on or off the island. When the bridge is destroyed

by the storms or the wind, the island is cut off from the rest of the world completely until it is rebuilt again.

This serves as a powerful symbol of the boundary between Willow Springs and the mainland, between the mythical, spiritual world of Willow Spring and the rational, modern world, "Mama Day had often spoken of the bridge as a place where the boundaries of the natural and the supernatural were thin" (Naylor 76) . The bridge also symbolize the great tension between traditions and modernity, and crossing the bridge in the novel usually signifies a shift in perspective for the characters, such as Cocoa when she left the island for New York; leaving the world and culture she grow up in, and entering a new world with different rules and different ways of thinking and living.

The bridge in the novel when it was destroyed by the weather, it was as if nature itself was trying to preserve the Island from the effect of the outside world.

2.6.1.2. The Candle Walk:

The Candle Walk in Willow Springs is a tradition celebrated on the 22nd of December in place of Christmas by the people of the island only, where they come together and walk through the island with candles, telling each other to "lead on with light", and exchanging gifts. And this tradition is celebrated because it is said "the island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to 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" (Naylor 110). This tradition serves as a way to honor Sapphira Wade's legacy, as a remembrance of her role in defying slavery, and as a reminder of the divine and the supernatural aspects of their world. This ritual contributed to maintain the bond between the people and Sapphira Wade.

2.6.1.3. The Weather

The weather in Willow Springs is unlike the weather in the mainland, it is connected to the spiritual side of the island. It serves as some sort of a reflection to the island's mood, or as an omen such as storms, rain and other natural phenomena that are interpreted by Mama Day as warnings or signs of things to come, showing the connections between nature and the spiritual life of the community of Willow Springs.

2.6.1.4. Sapphira Wade and the Land

Sapphira's connection to the land started when she first owned the land, and where she used her magical powers to secure it for her descendants, "The island's whispers spoke of Sapphira Wade as a part of its essence, a ghostly figure whose power and will were said to linger in every air of Willow Springs". (Naylor 4)

Sapphira Wade was the first of her family to own and rule an entire island, not only that but she controlled its elements as well. She had the unique power to connect with and manipulate natural forces to achieve justice for her own

people, and her deep connection to her land is only a living proof and a symbol of her empowerment and strength especially as an African black woman.

2.7. Conclusion

This novel is a powerful representation of the force of black women and the roles they represent within the society. The power that Mama Day holds permitted her not only to protect the island but to be their leader like her great grandmother Sapphira Wade, the female legend of the island.

The great power that Mama Day inherited to control nature and to use it as well a source of both healing and empowerment, permitted her to be the perfect matriarch leader in Willow Springs. Her connectedness with nature is natural bond that was established since she was a child. Cocoa in the other hand with her self-discovery journey that allowed her to understand the connectedness that she shares with her homeland is undeniable and surly inescapable, and that she will always belong to Willow Springs.

General Conclusion

General conclusion

For many decades, the voices of black women in both feminist and environmental discourses were neglected and overshadowed by dominant narratives that often overlooked the relation between gender, race, and nature. As a result black feminist began to craft their way out of that situation and assert their presence within feminism and environmentalism. Naylor was one of the writers that used literature to express their thoughts on racism and oppression towards black women, and to show the power they hold, and their connection to their communities and their land.

This research focuses on Naylor's novel *Mama Day* 1988 as a fiction story that talks about a matriarch leader named Mama Day, and engages with themes of nature, healing, and self-discovery. Through the lens on black feminism and ecocriticism, *Mama Day* offers a rich narrative that explores the connection between black women and the land, illustrating how nature serves as both a refuge and a battleground for identity and heritage. By delving into the mystical and historical aspects of the novel, this study seeks to uncover the ways which Naylor's works reflects the concerns of black feminist ecocriticism.

The thesis tackled all the aspects of black feminism and the role of each female character in the novel, in addition to the influence that each one of them has on their own communities and their relationship with nature, especially *Mama Day* and *Sapphira Wade*. The roles were reversed in this novel because

there was a female black leader unlike the typical stories to show the power they hold and how they can manage to lead and protect an entire community.

While the light was shed on black women's experiences and struggles they faced during the years through this research, it also aims to contribute to the growing work that examines the Intersections of race, gender, and environment, demonstrating how black feminist literature can provide profound insights into the ecological and social injustices. Future research might further explore the potential of black feminist ecocriticism in challenging dominant environmental narratives and advocating for more inclusive approaches.

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