



Magic realism in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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Abstract

Magic realist techniques help Naylor create a world that lures the reader into its depths forcing him/her to question accepted ways of perceiving reality. An urban, realistic discourse set in New York enters into conflict with an archetypal, mythical discourse that presents the cosmology of Willow Springs, unfolding a dialogical encounter between two cultures, American and African. A mixture of genres and narrative conventions characteristic of different literary traditions produces a mosaic that functions as a revision of traditional narratives. Storytelling, oral tradition and folklore practices occupy a predominant position, conforming to anthropological magic realism. The slippage between two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, implies the crossing of multiple boundaries, between the spiritual and the material, animate and inanimate, life and death, nature and technology and ultimately between reality and fantasy.

Keywords: magic realism, storytelling, folklore, American African

Introduction

Mama Day starts with a prologue in which the communal voice of Willow Springs describes this peculiar island that belongs to no state and has an almost magical nature. The collective narrator sets the time of the events narrated in the novel: a summer fourteen years ago when Abigail's granddaughter, Cocoa, came visiting from New York with her first husband, George. The time is now August 1999 - but that, as the narrator remains us, is just another fiction, another part of the magic of reading: "Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and you're God-knows-where. It's August 1999 - ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own"(2) The fiction/magic of the novel is thus established from the beginning, forcing readers to question their perception of the world and the concept of reality itself, and therefore establishing the premises for a magic realist strategy. What is real and what is not? Is there more to be known behind what the eyes can see?

After the initial collective prologue, the novel is divided into two distinct parts: the first one takes place in New York and the second one in Willow Springs. We are presented with a dialogue between Cocoa and George who remember their first meeting, marriage and early life together. They address their first-person narrations directly to each other, providing two versions of their story and particularly of that eventful summer in Willow Springs. Only at the end of the novel do we realize that George has been dead for a number of years and we have been listening to a spectral voice all along. Cocoa talks to him on the rise over The Sound, where his ashes were dispersed, as she sits next to the family graveyard, where the voices of her ancestors mingle and survive. The novel ends with the same collective voice of Willow Springs back in the present, August 1999, closing the novel and the century/millennium with

Miranda ready to depart as she has passed her heritage to Cocoa, who has finally found the meaning of peace.

An outer and an inner frame can be distinguished: the outer story is archetypal and corresponds to the legend of Sapphira, an African slave woman who persuaded the white owner Bascombe Wade to deed the island to his slaves in 1823. The inner frame is a love story in contemporary New York. The modern, urban world symbolised by New York is juxtaposed against the natural world of Willow Springs. George and Cocoa's dialogue also inserts a narrative tension between a male and female heritage and a different background and world view

Mama Day is framed by two documents that aim to render a historical background however fictitious. They are part of a magic realist strategy to provide a legendary story with verisimilitude. First, we are presented with the genealogical tree of the Days' family, starting with Sapphira and her seven sons down to *Mama Day* (the daughter of the seventh son of a seventh son -a circumstance imbued with magical connotations) and Cocoa. The footnote to the tree reads: ... God rested on the seventh day and so would she. " Hence the family's last name' (1). With this indication, Sapphira is given a divine nature and equated with God. The names of her sons are all taken from the Old Testament, names of prophets, whereas her grandsons' names come from the New Testament. As already discussed regarding Morrison's writing, the Bible and family history have an enormous importance for African Americans. Naylor further appropriates and transforms stories from the Old and New Testaments in her following novel, Bailey's *Cafj* (1992).

The history of the family and of race are inextricably linked and, therefore, the narrative has to go back to slavery. The genealogical tree is followed by the bill of sale of Sapphira in 1819, a terrible testimony of the cruelty of white owners and of slavery in general. Described as 'inflicted with sullenness

and entertains a bilious nature' and 'suspicions of delving in witchcraft' (2), Sapphira is sold to Bascombe Wade for one-half gold tender, one-half goods in kind. (3) Time will do justice and the bill will become unintelligible except for a few words: 'law... knowledge... witness... inflicted... nurse... conditions... tender... kind' (280), which change completely the original meaning. The manipulation of the white owner's discourse offers a powerful revision of the negative implications of slavery.

The genealogical tree and bill of sale also offer a strong contrast with the oral quality of the prologue. The relevance of the prologue is immense on thematical and formal levels, as it provides the clues for the understanding of the novel. It introduces the main themes of *Mama Day*, namely, land, heritage, ancestry and the power of believing. Formally, it appropriates the syntax, vocabulary, and commentary of the whole rural Southern community of Willow Springs and thus inscribes the narrative within an oral tradition.

Gloria Naylor focuses a great deal on the issues of land and genealogy, as she had already done in *Linden Hills*. Although Willow Springs is located between Georgia and South Carolina, it does not belong to either state. Furthermore, as George will discover when he is making preparations to visit it, Willow Springs does not appear on any map. Connected to the mainland only by a wooden bridge that disappears with every hurricane, Willow Springs represents an isolated world, practically untouched by the Western American civilisation, where the original African culture of the slaves has survived.

Naylor locates Willow Springs among the Sea Islands, barrier islands along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina that have been populated for two centuries by black Americans descendants of slaves from West Africa and Barbados and who speak their own dialect, Gullah.

The Sea Islands, then, occupy a unique place as a source of black identity and an intact African heritage. They function as the symbolic centre of an autonomous African American expression. Since Bascombe, Wade was from Norway and Sapphira was African-born, there is a detachment from America: the island inhabitants are accused of being 'un-American'. The island community has kept its traditions and does not get fooled by the plans of real estate developers, since 'the only dark faces you see now in them "vacation paradises" is the ones cleaning the toilets and cutting the grass. On their own land, mind you, their own land' (6)

The location of Willow Springs on the edge of things, without belonging to any American state or appearing on any official maps, denotes the magic realist strategy of building an autonomous world with a particular cosmology where supernatural events are possible, and also a political strategy. The fact that it cannot be inscribed in the American geography and is inhabited by former slaves underlines the definition of a free territory, where a community that is deprived of its own culture and alienated in the mainland can escape white conventions and recover its own traditions, myths and way of life. Unlike the majority of Africans, who were expropriated of their freedom and culture when dragged as slaves to the New World, this group which populates Willow Springs presents an alternative to official white history.

The prologue is also highly relevant to the formal structure of the novel because it places it within a black oral tradition. The

use of a 'we' narrator conveys the idea of storyteller central to oral cultures. This communal voice introduces us into a magical world and also guides us towards its correct interpretation. It relates 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' (3) and her incredible powers:

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. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies. (3)

The community of Willow Springs is defined by the story of Sapphira Wade which, reciprocally, is whatever the people understand it to be. As in all oral narrative, there are different versions of the legend. Basing the narrative on a legend foregrounds one of the principal strategies of anthropological magic realism. Storytelling and oral tradition are fundamental to the mode of magic realism and, in Naylor's novel, they specifically conform to a black literary style as defined by Toni Morrison, with an oral quality, the presence of a chorus, the figure of the ancestor, and the participation of the reader.

The chorus is represented by the community of Willow Springs that comments on the events and shares textual information with the reader. The collective voice is essential to provide Western readers with a complete picture of rituals and traditions. Naylor plays with the limits of individual and collective knowledge. The chorus of Willow Springs symbolises the collective unconscious using Jung's terminology: the magic is attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dreams/visions. It is therefore very close to the concept of anthropological magic realism as has been defined in the introduction, which relies heavily on ancient systems of belief and local lore.

Together with the chorus, African cosmology is introduced through the figure of the ancestor, represented in the novel by both Sapphira and Miranda. Sapphira is the archetypal storyteller, some kind of Scheherazade: 'she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days' (3). Although 'Sapphira Wade don't live in the part of our memory we can use to form words' (4), she is part of the racial memory of people of African origin, of their collective unconscious. Following the tradition of conjure women initiated by Sapphira, *Mama Day* is the matriarch and spiritual guide for all the community thanks to her healing and psychic powers. Close to the magical Pilate in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Miranda uses her intuition and foreknowledge for the benefit of the community. Her extraordinary connection with nature and with the spiritual world turn her into a figure on the border between the worlds of the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural. It will be through this character that the major magic realist strategies operate in the text.

Mama Day is a multi-layered novel narrated by several voices.

Naylor has acknowledged her debt to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in the structure of her novel. The strategy of using a shifting, first person narration facilitates the presentation of different perspectives of reality, different points of view. The story has many sides to it: there is not a single truth. As Cocoa reflects at the end: "what really happened to us, George? You see, that's what I mean - there are just too many sides to the whole story" (31 1). The novel works as a commentary about reality and truth and recalls the main quality of oral narratives: they are told again and again, always providing different versions and permitting endless additions.

References

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