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## Cultural Autonomy as Impregnable Armour: Locating Black Feminist Autoethnography in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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## **Cultural Autonomy as Impregnable Armour: Locating Black Feminist Autoethnography in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day***

By Adishree Vats<sup>1</sup> and Anurag Kumar<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

The present paper argues that Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) embodies Black Feminist Autoethnography that critiques and commemorates her spectacular art of constructing cultural-autonomy within the marginal sphere of Willow Springs, permitting the inhabitants, especially the women of the island, to shield their individual identities, as well as combat the hegemonic pseudo power-structure. By eliminating the conventions of white contemporary bureaus, and alternatively putting up rational sets of credence, ethics, and practices, the novel embellishes the rhetorical manufacturing of cultural-autonomy, ultimately encapsulating the ethical-cum-mythical undertakings of the Black America. This effectuation of their own ethical reservoirs by these resistive cultures eventually helps in defending their distinctiveness and autonomy, in order to give a substitutive formulation to their standpoints, as well as to provide the associates of the white hegemonic power structure with an insightful critical assessment of their own ethnicity. Further, the paper bluntly negates the conjecture of ethnographic convictions, and relentlessly confronts the colonizing supremacy of objectified fractional truths because objectivity as well as aloofness vis-a-vis the field setting ultimately results in a failure to gather any information and statistics worth examining, as offered through the prototypical narrative of Reema's Boy and George. Instead, using autoethnographic subjectification as an arsenal tool, the chapter contemplates over the magnitude of fabricating cultural-autonomy that empowers the quintessential women characters of Willow Springs, like Mama Day, Sapphira Wade, and Cocoa, to defy the etiquettes of an obsolete universalism, and to construct their distinct standpoints.

*Keywords:* Black Feminist autoethnography, Black Feminist standpoint, Cultural autonomy, Ethnography

### **Introduction**

Black Feminist Autoethnography as a pedagogical tool divulges that it, retroactively and selectively, can be used to "look in and out connecting the personal to the cultural" (Boylorn, 2008, p. 413). This makes it possible to comprehend the systemic oppressions of African American women and how they endeavor to construct new definitions of selfhood on an everyday basis. It seeks to anatomize personal experiences of marginalized African American women, to understand their cultural happenings, by either possessing a particular cultural identity or associating with it.

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This helps in understanding the quotidian fights of these muted and insignificant women with omnipresent racism, classism, and sexism. It also emphasizes on the need to accept both the feminist insights and Afrocentric outlook, besides the amalgamation of both, to establish a successful self-defined standpoint. This is exactly what is witnessed in such iconic works like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1994), Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1988), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1979), and Toni Cade Bambara's anthology *The Black Woman* (2005).

Furthermore, comprehending African American's knack of constructing an alternate universe to preserve their cultural-autonomy, B. Mitchell and J. Feagin (1995) successfully attempt to provide what they call "a theory of culture of resistance" (Feagin, 1995, p. 65-86), where the marginalized and muted sections of the society engender a "culture of resistance" (Feagin, 1995, p. 68), displaying "a coherent set of values, beliefs, and practices which mitigates the effect of oppression and reaffirms that which is distinct from the majority culture" (Feagin, 1995, p. 68). Therefore, by catalyzing their own cultural-cum-ethical basins, these antagonistic and resistive traditions eventually aid in preserving their individuality as well as autonomy, so as to provide an alternative articulation to their standpoints. This also helps in providing the compatriots of the mainstream hegemonic power system with an insightful and discerning critical evaluation of their own ethnicity. As a result, the marginalized sections of the society "are not powerless pawns that merely react to circumstances beyond their control, but rather are reflective, creative agents that construct a separate reality in which to survive" (Martinez, 2005, p. 539-570).

The aforementioned theories are well apprehended in the novel, *Mama Day* (1988), where the island's (Willow Springs) locatedness and isolation from the American mainland says it all. Further, "the only thing connects us to the mainland is a bridge- and even that gotta be rebuilt after every big storm" (Naylor, 1988, p. 5), further justifies its marginality. In addition, the marginal positionality of Willow Springs could also be perceived through the factual description that "Willow Springs ain't in no state. Georgia and South Carolina done tried, though - been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Springs belong to one or the other of them" (Naylor, 1988, p. 4-5). As a consequence, the inhabitants of the island construct an alternative universe, commemorating its autonomy and confrontation to the mainstream power structure, and rejecting "the conventional wisdom and standards of behavior of the dominant culture and provides alternatives to the mainstream culture" (Simpson & Yinger, 1965, p. 35).

However, due to its marginality and cultural autonomy, Willow Springs not only rejects the conventional standards of the contemporary mainstream hegemony, but also allows the women of the island to construct their distinct postcolonial feminist standpoint. Here Maxine Lavon Montgomery exerts that the novel "lends a decidedly gendered postcolonial voice to the saga of black resistance as the author relies upon subversion and disruption in the creation of an alternative reality that challenges the discourse of the larger society" (Montgomery, 2010, p. 40). Correspondingly, Henderson observes that the novel juxtaposes the essentials of Blackness as well as femaleness, and provides an ideal testimony of the radical centrality of the marginalized black women's framing of a visualization which deposes the worn-out mainstream patriarchal outlook of the society and turns into "an expressive site for a dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference" (Henderson, 1990, p. 37).

### **The Objective Ethnographer Reema's Boy**

An artistic projection of the self-critique of the objectified ethnographic convictions in the genre of narrative fiction has been done through the character portrayal of Reema's Boy, the

ethnographer, who jeopardizes the cultural-autonomy of Willow Springs with his false elucidations because he simply "...distanced himself, geographically and linguistically..." (quoted in Blyn, 2002, p. 239-63) from his field of research. As a result, the inhabitants of Willow Springs ridicules him and his research, notwithstanding his attempts to "put Willow Springs on the map" (Naylor, 1988) and commemorate its culture of laudable confrontation to Western supremacy. In addition, as a symbol of parody, he is never given an accurate name throughout his novelistic journey, but only referred to as:

Reema's Son...The one with the pear shaped head [who] came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling his lips and clicking his teeth, all excited and determined to put Willow Springs on the map. (Naylor, 1988, p. 7)

The above-mentioned narrative evidently pigeonholes Reema's boy as an "outsider", who, despite being born in the same community of Willow Springs, is majorly besmirched by the mainstream college tutoring. In this context, Susan Meisenhelder unmistakably adumbrates that Reema's boy is "[i]mbued with the values of the white world in which he has been educated" and therefore "miss[es] the autonomous cultural identity of Willow Springs" (Meisenhelder, 1993, p. 405).

By applying objectified ethnographic methodologies from the mainland, he attempts to unlock the secrecy of "18 & 23" (Naylor, 1988, p. 07), but fails wretchedly in doing so. Through his narrative, Gloria Naylor successfully attempts to defend the autonomy of Willow Springs and lock the marginal space for any scrutiny, cognizance, as well as intrusion of the mainstream power-structure. For the reason that he carries the viewpoint of an outsider, Reema's boy ultimately meets with an ineffectual effort:

When he went around asking us about 18 & 23, there weren't anything to do but take pity on him as he rattled on about "ethnography", "unique speech patterns", "cultural preservations", and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of while talking into his little grey machine. He was all over the place- What 18 & 23 mean? What 18 & 23 mean? And we all told him the God-honest truth: it was just our way of saying something. (Naylor, 1988, p. 7)

The narrative accentuates that by implying false ethnographic techniques, Reema's boy ensues with his research and writes a book on the marginal community of Willow Springs, misinterpreting "18 & 23" as "really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map" (Naylor, 1988, p. 8). His objective methodologies fail to understand the autonomous cultural identity of the island, and, hence, disengage the inscrutability of 18 & 23, where the phrase essentially refers to the year 1823, when the episodes inspiring the prodigy of Sapphira Wade took place. This is made clear to the dedicated readers through the quintessential autoethnographic communal voice of the people of the island which protects the cultural autonomy of Willow Springs. This communal voice adumbrates in Reema's Boy's narrative that "he coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now" (Naylor, 1988). This Communal Voice plays an important role in making the readers understand the necessity and urgency of constructing a distinct Black feminist autoethnography

via cultural autonomy in order to protect African Americans from the brutalities of the mainland. It is this Communal Voice which further introduces us to the various traditions of the island, such as quilting, Candle walk, to name a few.

In addition, to the above-mentioned disaster, Reema's Boy brings yet another worldview to Willow Springs, by articulating about "asserting our cultural identity" (Blyn, 2002, p. 239-63), and "inverting hostile social and political perimeters" (Blyn, 2002, p. 239-63). This account provided by Reema's boy can consequently be comprehended, in Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) elucidation, as an "anti-conquest narrative", in which Western people "seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert [Western] hegemony" (Pratt, 1992). Unfortunately, his book "proceeds apparently unaware that the cultural relativism it offers as a cure for stereotypes of racial inferiority has produced the same imperialist symptoms inherent in the original racist discourse" (Blyn, 2002, p. 247).

Additionally, on one thought, the narrative of Reema's boy underscores his inability to listen, "he couldn't listen, he couldn't hear ... the right answers to the wrong questions he was asking" (Naylor, 1988, p. 10), where, rather than interviewing the inhabitants of the island using a tape-recorder, he could have just gone for asking them directly: "everything he needed to know coulda been heard from that yellow house to that silver trailer to that graveyard" (Naylor, 1988, p. 10). However, on a subsequent thought, the narration underlines, "someone who didn't know how to ask wouldn't know how to listen. And he coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now" (Naylor, 1988, p. 10). Through his narration, Naylor accentuates the need to "listen", by not only concentrating upon the diminutive particulars and fine distinctions of meaning, but also by autoethnographically and enthusiastically submitting ourselves to the sacraments, conventions, and ethics that comprise the marginal space of Willow Springs. With such elucidations and interpretations, Gloria Naylor convincingly transforms Reema's boy into a stock figure of Eurocentrism, assimilationism, and cultural imperialism.

The paper bluntly negates the applications of objectified ethnographic methods of data analysis represented first by Reema's boy, and then by George, and demands an improved modus operandi of savvyng the source of knowledge. This stipulation gives rise to an oxymoronic brand 'autoethnography', which not only announces an absolute obliteration of the colonialist perceptions of ethnography, but is also acknowledged as a radical reaction to the methods and agendas of ethnography which prefers, as Norman K. Denzin advocates, "the researcher over the subject, method over subject matter, and maintain commitments to outmoded conceptions of validity, truth, and generalizability" (Spry, 2001). Furthermore, combined with Black feminist standpoint, it permits us to spotlight the underpinning of African American women and underscores the magnitude of their exigent voices embodied in the ordeals of slavery, marginalization, objectification, and suppression, and underlines "the importance of listening to the experiences of women of color and attending to the politics that underlie these voices" (Calafell & Moreman, 2009). Such ideas and incidents shared by these women equip them with a "unique angle of vision" (Collins, 2009) vis-a-vis self and society, as impressively portrayed by Gloria Naylor in the novel.

### **George's Miscomprehensions vis-a-vis the Island's Black Feminist Cultural Autonomy**

This elucidation brings us to another postindustrial mainstream-centric character, George, whose dissociation from his own cultural history, as well as application of objective ethnographic techniques of understanding the autonomy of Willow Springs, ultimately leads to his tragic end. George, who grew up in an orphanage "run by whites" (Meisenhelder, 1993, p. 405-419), eventually, as Susan Meisenhelder claims, assimilates into the white hegemonic culture

(Meisenhelder, 1993, p. 405). His isolation from his own past as well as from the traditions and cultures of the Black world is accentuated by the verity "that he is not only an orphan but illegitimate" (Fowler, 1996, p. 104). His ironical linking-up with Edmund, who "made illegitimacy inevitable for thousands of African American sons and daughters" (Fowler, 1996, p. 105), is a clear reflection of his historical and cultural unconsciousness. Consequently, due to his ignorance, he even indubitably accepts his mother to be a prostitute, and centers his rage and antagonism, in spite on his father, more recurrently on his mother. It is due to this reason only that he hates "being called a son-of-a-bitch" (Naylor, 1998, p. 128), and on asking about the reason as to why he gets apprehensive and restless about his inability to ever discuss his past, he, for the first and only time slaps "the living daylights out of" Cocoa, and explicates that "My mother was a whore. And that's why I don't like being called a son of a bitch" (Naylor, 1998, p. 130).

Well-schooled in the mainstream patriarchal ideologies and doctrines of self-dependence and self-adequacy, George utterly and absolutely commits to the suggestion inculcated by Mrs. Jackson, the proprietor of the orphanage where George grew up, that "only the present has potential, *sir*" (Naylor, 1998, p. 23). His emotional detachment from the world indoctrinates him to rely only upon himself, which becomes evident when he says, "I had what I could see: my head and my two hands" (Naylor, 1998, p. 27). He neither has any past nor believes in future. Consequently, he puts up no conviction in any power superior to himself: "I never knocked on wood. No rabbit's foot, no crucifixes- not even a lottery ticket" (Naylor, 1998, p. 27). Here we could see George's progression collapsing any kind of superstition, gambling, or any insignificant form of faith.

Additionally, the admiration for as well as commemoration of feminine powers of creation successfully supplies George's apprehension of as well as repugnance towards these powers, as portrayed in the subsequent section of the novel when the thoughts of "living with a stranger" come across George's mind as Cocoa is:

"the first female I had lived with" (Naylor, 1998, p. 141). Here black feminist autoethnography permits us to comprehend how George, who sees Cocoa as a typical female, gets utterly flustered due to her potentiality to "manage disruptions and absorb ambivalences" (Naylor, 1998, p. 142), and seeks "objective rational ways" (Naylor, 1998, p. 142) to understand her.

This is because he himself believes in meticulously systematizing his life to the microscopic details using scientific rational methods, and sees all the relationships similarly as he sees engineering problems at his workplace. For instance, when Cocoa moves in with him after their marriage, she remembers him using sliding rules and graph-papers in order to calculate her "closets and figure out how much of our clothing we would have to store in the basement in order to share the space in your bedroom. And then when your damn diagrams didn't workout, you carried on as if I was purposely trying to sabotage our marriage because I hung up an extra linen blazer" (Naylor, 1998, p. 145).

Here autoethnographic convictions allow us to appreciate how Naylor artistically incorporates farcical effects while unfolding George's objectivity. But, whilst his inflexible resoluteness in enforcing scientifically objectified methods of problem-solving to the diminutive aspects of day-to-day living is not only hilarious, it turns out to be consequential and noteworthy on his appliance of similar objective approaches to comprehend the mysterious world of Willow Springs. His immediate panic and frustration on his decision to visit Willow Springs becomes

visibly evident when he fails in locating the island on any map, and articulates, "I really did want to go, but I wanted to know exactly *where* I was going" (Naylor, 1998, p. 174). On crossing the threshold of the island, he eventually apprehends that he "was entering another world. Where even the word *paradise* failed once I crossed over The Sound" (Naylor, 1998, p. 175). This failure of his to accurately comprehend the world of Willow Springs upshots directly from his incapability to forsake his mainstream hegemonistic cultural baggage. Additionally, by frequently underlining the insufficiency of charts, photographs, maps, etc. to pertinently convey the delicate as well as intricate truth of the everyday experiences of the black world, Naylor, blatantly accentuates the vainness of applying objectified mainstream artistic approaches to communicate the reality beyond the bridge.

### **Cocoa's Autoethnographic Narration**

Cocoa, or Ophelia, or Baby Girl, an outspoken character created by Naylor as a contrast of George's character, becomes an epitome of traditional rural South in the novel. Although Cocoa and George have very little in common, it is their alternating first-person narratives which forms the nerve-centre of the novel's quintessential Black feminist autoethnographic plot-structure. The first time Cocoa is introduced, she is attending an interview at Andrews and Stein, an engineering firm. Her autoethnographic narrative makes us understand the confidence, buoyancy and conviction she has in her origin and culture. This becomes veritable when she assertively and audaciously replies to George's question about her name during the interview:

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 could have moved up as fast as I did at my last job. (Naylor, *Mama Day*, p. 29)

George's fascination for Ophelia's nickname prompts her to know more about her origin. On further asking, she replies, "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..." (*Mama Day*, p. 29). Her conviction towards her tradition provides her with the necessary strength to negotiate with George, symptomatic of cultural isolation, and construct her own Black feminist standpoint and individuality. George, whose family tree is lost, envies Cocoa to some extent as she can determine part of her heritage through her skin tone. Cocoa's personality captivates George to an extent that he falls in love with her, and eventually marries her. Ultimately, George is forced to leave his Americanness and submit to the mysteries and autonomy of Willow Springs and *Mama Day* when he sees his loving wife dying in front of his eyes.

### **George's Intellectual Apprehensions Leading to his Tragic Death**

In the subsequent pages of the novel, we find George willingly and ardently trying to comprehend the cultural autonomy of the island by taking fatiguing footslogs with *Mama Day* all the way through East Woods, playing cards and getting inebriated with Dr. Buzzard, and endeavoring to appreciate the outlandish records of the Days on explaining to him by Cocoa and *Mama Day*. The narrative accentuates upon the fact that even though George endeavors to grasp the traditions and cultures of the island, he only does so intellectually. His approach as an outsider becomes more comprehensible when Cocoa, on referring to the grave of her grandmother's great-grandmother, is asked by George,

"But it was odd again the way you said it—she was the great, great, grand, Mother—as if you were listing the attributes of a goddess. The whole thing was so intriguing, I wondered if that woman had lived at all Places like this island were ripe for myths, but if she had really existed, there must be some record. Maybe in Bascombe Wade's papers: deeds of sale for his slaves" (Naylor, 1998, p. 218).

This validates the objective attitude of George, who instead of autoethnographically appreciating the cultural undertakings of the island, concentrates more upon his mainstream-influenced rational approaches of knowing the legitimacy of such undertakings.

### **The Postcolonial Feminist Legend of Sapphira Wade**

The succeeding section of the novel concentrates upon the legend of Sapphira Wade. The autoethnographic Communal Voice narrates her tale in the novel by describing her as a rebellious slave, whose subjectified postcolonial feminist outlook is contrasted with the objective ethnographies of both Reema's Boy and George. Her subsistence in an autonomous black universe of Willow Springs is justified by the communal voice of the island: "It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge" (Naylor, 1998, p. 3). Such chronological authenticities are drawn by Naylor to construct an atoll, the dwellers of which are assisted by the spirit of Sapphira Wade, an intractable slave, who ultimately attains the position of a goddess in the marginal sphere of Willow Springs.

Black feminist autoethnographic convictions can be effectively spotted in the narrative of Sapphira Wade:

"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...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" (Naylor, 1998, p. 03).

The legend of Sapphira, as the Communal Voice indicates, that "everybody knows but nobody talks about" has something to do with her marriage to a white man, Bascombe Wade, and the events that follow. Furthermore, through the character portrayal of Sapphira Wade, an epitome of motherly figure on the island, an attempt has been made to underscore the significance of maternal supremacy over the domineering patriarchal world. Additionally, the Communal Voice of Willow Springs also maintains that "if I can read outside of the dominant culture—which white and male, the world beyond the bridge—I, too, can participate in the heritage of Sapphira Wade" (Selvaraj & Manjula, 2015, 282).

A Black feminist autoethnographic attempt has been made to revisit the historical accounts of Black slavery through the narration of Sapphira Wade's legend, where Sapphira is portrayed as a self-governing, dynamic representative of Black feminist standpoint, who is supposed to have murdered her owner, Bascombe Wade, or forcefully driven him to "deed his land" (Naylor, 1998) in the year 1823, and eventually confiscated her independence—a genuine *femme fatale*. With this freedom, she liberated her seven sons from the shackles of slavery, who ultimately "lived as free

men 'cause their mama willed it so" (Naylor, 1998, p. 151). Certainly, she never thought of herself as a slave: "He [Wade] had freed 'em all but her, 'cause, see, she'd never been a slave" (Naylor, 1998, p. 308). Eventually, she becomes the founding mother of Willow Springs, and even formulates an emblematic name, the Days, which successfully serves, as Traub scrutinizes, "an antidote to and exorcism of that initial sale of human flesh as property" (Traub, 1993, p. 115).

### **Black Feminist Autoethnographic Subjectification: Mama Day**

The following pages of the novel converse about Miranda (Mama) Day, who, just like Sapphira Wade, autoethnographically endeavors to construct her distinct standpoint and a reputable place in the community of Willow Springs. Through the character portrayal of Mama Day, Naylor makes a triumphant attempt to explore the methods of envisioning history, veracity, and relationships, making it feasible for African American people, especially the women, to eschew reiterating mainstream patriarchal dramas. Naylor, furthermore, hypothesizes, through the autoethnographic symbolic representations of the Candle Walk, an alternative to Christmas Day celebrated in the white world, and through the significance of the quilt, alternate methods of perceiving historical as well as present-day realities of the island. This poses a direct contrast to the charts, photos, movies, as well as George's objectified white-induced ethnographic approaches to comprehend the reality of the place. Additionally, Naylor's most tangible portrayal of the exquisiteness comes when she, accompanied by Abigail, weaves the wedding quilt for George and Cocoa, adding to it whatever she could lay her hands on, including various different fragments from all the generations:

The overlapping circles start out as golds on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds for the middle of the quilt. A bit of her daddy's Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope's graduation dress, the palm of Grace's baptismal gloves. Trunks and boxes from the other place gave up enough for twenty quilts: corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great-uncles. Her needle fastens the satin trim of Peace's receiving blanket to Cocoa's baby jumper to a pocket from her own gardening apron. Golds into oranges into reds into blues... She concentrates on the tiny stitches as the clock ticks away... The front of Mother's gingham shirtwaist - it would go right nice into the curve between these two little patches of apricot toweling, but Abigail would have a fit. Maybe she won't remember. And maybe the sun won't come up tomorrow, either. I'll just use a sliver, no longer than the joint of my thumb. Put a little piece of her in here somewhere. (Naylor, 1998, p. 137)

Autoethnographic analysis of the aforementioned emblematic representation of the quilt, as a contrast to George's passionate individualism and objectification, also indicates a melodious relationship between the self and others, in which the individuality and distinctiveness of a person is not mislaid, rather amalgamated into a bigger whole. This quilt is not just a chronological manuscript of a deceased history, but signifies a concrete viaduct between herself, Cocoa's aunt Abigail, and Cocoa's children. It is not fabricated and stitched, as Naylor points out, to become just Ophelia's only possession, rather to be "passed on to my great-grandnieces and nephews when

it's time for them to marry" (Naylor, 1992, p. 136). Henceforth, this cultural artifact of quilt-making underscores, as viewed via Black feminist autoethnographic lens, a communal as well as familial bond, a relationship existing between the generations of the people, women to be more precise, of the African America. In this context, to underline the "multifaceted lives of African American women, "Floris Barnett Cash examines "the inventiveness of African American women in the decorative art of quilting" (Cash, 1995, p. 30). Additionally, using Black feminist autoethnographic convictions, he adumbrates that this cultural representation of quilting "can be used as resources in reconstructing the experiences of African American women" in the mainstream patriarchal power-structure that endeavors to overpower and counteract the role of African American women in the white hegemonistic historical records (Cash, 1995, p. 30).

The perfection with which Naylor infuses the importance of cultural autonomy in the plotline so that the inhabitants, especially the women, could combat the domineering power status comes out of her experiences that she has acquired as a result of her cultural upbringing. This understanding allows her to grant permission to her women characters to autoethnographically construct their distinct standpoints in the marginal locality of Willow Springs. We also find her mentioning about the same in her conversation with Angela Carabi (Carabi, 2004):

It goes back to the stories I listened to when I sat in the corner of the kitchen, and to the different ideas that my parents had regarding the old women who not only worked as quasi traditional doctors, but who used roots and herbs and had supernatural kinds of powers. My mother believed that there were things that happened in life that you could not question but my father was very reluctant to accept 'superstition'. The structure of *Mama Day* emerged from this dual interpretation. I wanted as well to look at women in history, especially at women connected to the earth who could affect behaviour. Until the Middle Ages, when the so-called 'witches' were prosecuted, women were the primary healers who knew how to abort or how to stop conception. They showed women how to have control of their process of creation. (Carabi, 2004, p. 121).

This above-mentioned narrative evidently underscores Naylor's cultural consciousness and her affinity towards conjuring women, like Sapphira Wade and Mama day, who resist and counter the set mainstream patriarchal guidelines, and autoethnographically endeavor to frame, and, eventually follow their own principles. Acknowledging Naylor's realization and empathy towards these conjuring women, Kathleen M. Puhr, in the paper "Healers in Gloria Naylor's Fiction", articulates that "healing and conjuring of these women offer the power to reassert the self and one's heritage in the face of overwhelming injustice" (Puhr, 1994, p. 519). He, additionally, elucidates that Naylor evidently defies "...a culture that has marginalized African American women, dictated where they must live, attend school, and eat, denied them economic opportunities, prevented them from voting, and psychologically abused them..." (Puhr, 1994, p. 518-27) by "depict[ing] heroic struggles and gallant role models who have helped their sisters not only to endure, but to prevail" (Puhr, 1994, p. 519). For example, Mama Day in *Mama Day*,

"...heals many inhabitants of Willow Springs", where her "healing powers arise from the world of nature: from the plants she converts to medicine

with the confidence of a shaman, from the chickens who surround her house, from the trees and birds of the forest" (Puhr, 1994, p. 523).

This healing, combined with the confrontation to the iniquitous white patriarchal world, fosters, as evidently seen in the novel, a kinship amongst the females of the island. And it is only due to her relationship with nature, that she is able to embrace the approbations of the inhabitants, and successfully stand unyielding against the subjugation and marginalization of the hegemonistic power configurations on the island. Consequently, she enjoys a decent and reputable position in Willow Springs: "...if Mama Day says no, everybody says no" (Naylor, 1998, p. 06), symptomatic of cultural bonding with the people at Willow Springs. Mama Day is trusted and respected by nearly everyone on the island. She can read every nuance in the land as well as people's personalities and is also reputed for having a second sight.

Further, Mama Day proves to be of a great help for the islanders, especially in case of Bernice, when Miranda (Mama Day), along with healing Bernice, also exhibits her sharp witty proficiencies in getting her pregnant by simply "relying upon the miraculous potentiality of nature and imbibing patience in Bernice" (Kumar, 2016, p. 116). Her healing powers take a step further when, by using her understanding of the nature, herbal medicines as well as by thoughtfully considering the importance of graveyard, she spectacularly heals Cocoa, her niece, from the poison which was applied to her scalp by Ruby, another jealous practitioner and follower of the dark magic. In this case, Mama Day's curative and remedial powers go through the toughest test of all when she had to scrap the effect of the exterminating poison off from Cocoa's hair and body. Her healing process commences with the chopping off her hair "and making Cocoa establish a communion with nature through a healing bath in the tub" (Kumar, 2016, p. 118). Also, as a part of her healing process, Mama Day rubs a charcoal-paste on her hair, just to eliminate the pain and consequence of that fatal poison:

There is a half tub of warm water waiting as she leads Cocoa staggering and mumbling into the bathroom. She spreads a charcoal paste on her head, leaving her slouched drowsy in the water, her head thrown back over the rim of the tub. Miranda balls up the sheets and pillowcases around the shredded hair and burns the lot in the backyard... The warm water spraying from the shower on Cocoa's bent head brings her out of her sleep struggling. Stay still now, Miranda tells her as she massages more of the grayish paste into her scalp, this needs to be soaked in for a while. Them red welts is coming up between her shoulder blades, but Miranda's got ignore 'em as she rinses the paste from Cocoa's hair. (Naylor, 1998, p. 265)

The above-mentioned lines from the text validate the truth behind the healing powers of Mama Day, who precisely and meticulously used the scientific knowledge of nature to cure the inhabitants of the island. But, as mentioned in the novel, Miranda's powers are constrained when it comes to curing her niece, and that she requires Cocoa's husband, George's assistance too in saving Cocoa for "[h]e is a part of *her*... And that's the part Ruby done fixed to take it out of our hands" (Naylor, 1998, p. 267). Below-mentioned is the tête-à-tête between Mama Day and George where she tells George:

I can do more things with these hands than most folks dream of - no less believe- but this time they ain't no good alone. I had to stay at this place and reach back to the beginning for us to find the chains to pull her out of this here trouble. Now, I got all that in this hand but it ain't gonna be complete unless I can reach out with the other hand and take yours... (Naylor, 1998, p. 294).

George had always been very supportive of everything which Cocoa did, like going back to college to complete her graduation or putting off her motherhood, until she finished her graduation. When Cocoa became deathly ill in Willow Spring, George battles nature and man to get her off the island to a rural doctor. When he sees, his way is not going to save Cocoa in time, he agrees to try Mama's way. The way Mama Day asks for assistance from George sounds like "a lot of metaphors" (Naylor, 1998) to him, yet he agrees to provide her his complete support. She asks George "to clasp hands with women" (Meisenhelder, 1993, p. 412), as Meisenhelder highlights, which becomes quite evident when Mama Day sends him on an assignment "armed with Bascombe Wade's old ledger and John Paul's walking stick" (Fowler, 1996, p. 113) (associating him with earlier patriarchal hegemonistic men who attempted to possess their women), and tells him to visit the chicken-house (symbolic of female-power, female-subjectivity and creativity all through the novel), look for an "old hen that's setting her last batch of eggs" (Naylor, 1998, p. 295), grab whatsoever he finds and hand it over to her. However, for the rational George, who objectively and ethnographically views the mysteries of the island, it was yet another superstition. Still, for his wife's sake, he agrees to do it. Through this section of the novel, Naylor autoethnographically points out Mama Day's way of making George embrace the subjectified female-world and its potential powers. Nevertheless, George, who had earlier cleaned and painted the chicken-house, although he "was a little afraid of live chickens" (Naylor, 1998, p. 221), is infuriated on finding nothing at the back of the nest "except for my gouged and bleeding hands" (Naylor, 1998, p. 300). He asks Mama Day, "Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?" (Naylor, 1998, p. 300). The whole act is quite horrifying and grotesque. However, his strong egoistic masculine individualism disables him to perform his part of the ritual accurately. Repudiating the ritual as just another "mumbo-jumbo" (Naylor, 1998, p. 295), he transforms John Paul's walking-stick "into a phallic instrument of violence against the Feminine that he can neither understand nor control" (Loris & Felton, 1997, p. 121). Just like his favorite Shakespeare's play's hero, King Lear, who fails to recognize his daughter, Cordelia's love for him, "according to [her] bond, nor more nor less" (Loris & Felton, 1997, p. 121), similarly, George also fails to recognize and accept the shared warmth and love from his wife, Cocoa. So, just like his favorite dramatic hero, he too, in the end, turns into a "madman, dying as the fatally flawed hero in a white tragedy" (Meisenhelder, 1993, p. 412).

George's behavior, combined with his approaches to determine, establish and verify veracity and legitimacy, is definitely not influenced by his recognition and realization that he has, in fact, penetrated in a different world than the one he rationally understands. According to Naylor, George would have easily saved Cocoa as well as himself if he had absorbed the lesson he got during the poker-party, by shunning away his objectified ethnographic view and by accepting the autonomy of the island by joining hands with Miranda. But, as mentioned in the novel, he fails to do that, and, thereby, meets fatal consequences. He endeavors to build the overpass bridge to the American mainland which has been utterly destroyed by the tempest, rather than constructing a connecting bridge between his wife and himself. Even Dr. Buzzard attempts to rescue him from his fatal ending by counseling him that a wise and sagacious man would eventually understand

that "really believing in himself means that he ain't gotta be afraid to admit there's some things he just can't do alone" (Naylor, 1998, p. 292). Nonetheless, George is stubbornly resolute in saving his wife's life without anyone's support, even if it means he has to do swimming, successfully or not, all the way to the American mainland: "Yes, I would begin to swim. And at that point in time, finishing would not be the issue" (Naylor, 1998, p. 283). This ethnographic blindness on George's part disables his acknowledgment to the fact that his own objective masculine outlook is what exactly prolonging his wife's sickness. Till his very last breath, he keeps believing that Cocoa's salvation is solely dependent on her moving out from that "godforsaken place" (Naylor, 1998, p. 266).

Naylor very significantly portrays in the novel how George, who is on his last legs, totters from the chicken-house to Abigail's residence, where his sick wife is kept, and "the road felt like water," which, for him, becomes "impossible to cross over, make it up those porch steps, and into our room. I did it. But I was too cramped to even unbend my body on the bed beside you" (Naylor, 1998, p. 310). Here black feminist autoethnographic convictions allow us to understand how George's pseudo masculinity disables him to accept the cultural autonomy of Willow Springs, ultimately taking his life amidst all his struggles of saving his wife and understanding the mysteries of the island. Through his sudden and tragic death, Naylor wants her readers to realize that it is only after becoming a ghost can George, who represents the rational mainstream patriarchal world, become one with her autoethnographically unique female-world. In this context, Suzanne Juhasz, in her work, *Reading from the Heart: Women, Literature, and the Search for True Love* (Juhasz, 1994), aptly adumbrates that "as a ghost, George has shed the encumbrances of his masculinity. Now he can stay on in Willow Springs and in the life of its next mother" (Juhasz, 1994, p. 203).

For the readers, the above-mentioned sagacity of George's outburst of sadism against the chickens- symbolic of feminine power, female-subjectivity and feminine ethics- is, in ways, contradictory with the George we as readers have known and cared about in the beginning of the novel. To justify this argument, Juhasz aptly calls George a "maternal hero" (Juhasz, 1994, p. 193), and by this proclamation, she means "that fantasy women create so that true love is possible for us as grown women living in a patriarchal culture"; the sadism and brutality displayed by him exhibits the verity of him being a fantasy, but that fantasy which we, as readers, do not like seeing pass away (Juhasz, 1994, p. 202).

Here feminist autoethnographic lens permits us to comprehend how Gloria Naylor vividly portrays the dominance of matriarchal pedigree over any other sort of contemplation when she forfeits George and saves Cocoa. In the similar tone, Paula Gallant Eckard, in her work, "The Prismatic Past in Oral History and *Mama Day*" (Eckard, 1995, p. 121-35), adumbrates that "[w]hile race figures into the manifestation of the Other in *Mama Day*, the bonds shared within the female community and between generations of women seem to be the strongest elements" (Eckard, 1995, p. 129). By this averment, she directs our attention towards *Mama Day* who, not just lets go of George to bring back her Cocoa, but also penalizes Ruby for practicing dark magic on Cocoa and intimidating their ancestral connection.

## Conclusion

Hence, to conclude, it can be evidently apprehended that through her quintessential matrix of narration, Gloria Naylor succeeds in professionally and proficiently providing to her committed readers an ideal substantiation of the priority of Black American women in autoethnographically formulating a Black feminist vision, overthrowing the ethnographically objective, old mainstream patriarchal outlook of the world, and thereby becoming "an expressive site for a

dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference" (Henderson, 1990, p. 37), and ultimately allowing them to fabricate their own standpoints. Additionally, the novel enables the reader to probe still deeper into the organic life of African-American culture especially the irreducible instincts related the resurgent and reawakened African-American female, who no longer desires, nor can tolerate, to confine herself and her identity within the cloistered confines of male-induced *ironic* status. These women go through life learning experiences according to the conventions of Afro-American society. We witness these coloured women, striking symbiotic bonds with each other, thereby raising their eventual identities to a level of strength, assertion as well as inspiration. Additionally, by effectuating their own cultural reservoirs, these oppositional and resistive customs of the inhabitants, especially the women, of the tiny island of Willow Springs provide them with the necessary potency to defend their distinctiveness and autonomy, in order to give a substitutive formulation to their standpoints, as well as to provide the associates of the white hegemonic power structure with an insightful critical assessment of their own ethnicity.

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