
**FREEDOM FROM THE HATRED OF WOMEN: A READING OF
GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY***

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Abstract

Misogyny is the oldest prejudice prominent in the mythologies of the ancient world and also in various religions. Misogyny means the hatred or dislike of women or girls. For thousands of years, the patriarchal society treats misogyny as an ideology or belief system that places women in subordinate positions with limited access to power and decision making. Apart from various types of hatred that a woman meets she has to face hatred from her own sex as Michael Flood states, “Though most common in men, misogyny also exists in and is practiced by women against other women or even themselves” (qtd. in “Misogyny”). The reason for a woman to hate another woman is generally because of jealousy. This article presents how Gloria Naylor guides her women characters to escape from the hatred of other evil women.

Key Words: Misogyny, hatred, ideology, patriarchal, power

Misogyny is the oldest prejudice prominent in the mythologies of the ancient world and also in various religions. Misogyny means the hatred or dislike of women or girls. In 2012, the Macquarie Dictionary (which documents Australian English and New Zealand English) expanded the definition to include not only hatred of women but also “entrenched prejudices against women” (“Misogyny”). Misogyny is the root cause for the oppression of woman. She is denied her basic rights only because of man’s hatred. Michael Flood says, “Misogyny functions as an ideology or belief system that has accompanied patriarchal or male-dominated societies for thousands of years and continues to place women in subordinate positions with limited access to power and decision making” (qtd. in “Misogyny”). Men

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proclaim misogyny through various ways such as sexual discrimination, denigration of women, violence against women and sexual objectification. As Allan G. Johnson points out, “Misogyny is manifested in many different ways, from jokes to pornography to violence to the self-contempt women may be taught to feel toward their own bodies” (qtd. in “Misogyny”). Naylor in her novels shows that the ultimate result of misogyny is violence. Her characters triumph over such violence through the everlasting love between them.

Naylor portrays woman as mother to all living creatures. The good nature of a woman is to spread motherly love towards another woman. When she hates another woman she is treated as an evil spirit. Apart from various types of hatred that a woman meets she has to face hatred from her own sex as Michael Flood states, “Though most common in men, misogyny also exists in and is practiced by women against other women or even themselves” (qtd. in “Misogyny”). The reason for a woman to hate another woman is generally because of jealousy.

Naylor’s *Mama Day* details such a woman character, who extends hate towards another woman in order to possess her man. Ruby is a jealous woman. She is introduced in the letter which Abigail and Mama Day write to their granddaughter Cocoa. She is an old woman who tries to marry the younger man, Junior Lee. She has killed her first husband in the sea long back. At present she tries to drag Junior Lee from Frances. Junior Lee is more than fifteen years younger than her. Even Frances is not young as she is nearing sixty. Mama Day discloses that Junior Lee is interested not in Ruby’s physical attraction but in her money, which he spends without working. She further informs that he is trying to use the wrong woman.

The people of Willow Springs know and depend on the medical skill of Mama Day. One day Frances meets Mama Day and informs her about Junior Lee’s action. She looks shabby as her hair is messed up one way, eyes are sunken in and two of the buttons are missing in her dirty dress. Mama Day notices her condition carefully because Frances is a proud woman “who strutted out to church on Sundays, creases so pressed she wouldn’t let nobody sit near her in the pew” (MD 89). Frances complains to Mama Day about Ruby’s interest in Junior Lee. He goes to her house for supper and lights are off but still he has not returned. Mama Day considers her to be a trouble and does not like to enter into it. She thinks that by taking such a man from her, Ruby is doing a favor to her. She tells her that if she wants him badly she can go and get him.

Frances insists that he is under a spell. The whole village knows about Ruby and her act of mixing something in his food and making him stay with her. She pleads with Mama Day to help her to retrieve him but the latter avoids her by announcing that a man cannot be taken unless he has the mind to go and that if he has made up his mind then there is no magic

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to stop him. No one in Willow Springs help Frances to retrieve her man. When Frances faces the hate of a woman alone without the support of another woman, she happens to lose both her man and mind. The event clearly shows that hate which a woman experiences cannot be treated without the support of another woman.

Frances is not in a condition to understand a single word of what Mama Day utters. She leaves by saying that Ruby has corrupted his mind and that now she will go and get him. Mama Day understands her condition and feels that she can find some con artist to make various tricks like making “as many trips to the graveyard she wants with his hair, her hair, his pee, her pee. Walk naked in the moonlight stinking with Van-Van oil—and it won’t do a bit of good. ‘cause the mind is everything” (MD 90). Some fools misdirect Frances. As per their advice she sprinkles salt on Ruby’s door steps and throws eggs on her porch. She hangs a hog’s head on her peach tree “—had a red onion stuffed in its mouth and nine little bits of paper with Ruby’s name written on ‘em” (MD 93).

Ruby becomes angry and takes Frances before the deacon board. She informs that she is a widow trying to make a living by renting a room in her house to Junior Lee and that in the coming spring they even plan to marry in the church. She complains that Frances is casting a spell on her. As Frances is not in her right mind she shouts at Reverend Hooper and the deacon board and calls them hypocrites. She announces that since all of them are afraid of Ruby because of her black magic they are scared to fight with Ruby. The deacon board considers Frances a nuisance and keeps her out of the church.

The people of Willow Springs celebrate Candle Walk festival once in a year in the month of December. During the festival Mama Day and Abigail discuss Ruby’s declaration that whether the deacons take care of Frances or not, she will stop hanging “hogs’ head on her peach tree” before the next full moon (MD 112). Her words come true as Frances goes out of her mind. Someone from the city takes her to mental hospital. Everyone believes that Ruby has cast a spell on Frances. Finally Frances’ story comes to an end with her losing everything she possesses in her not because of Ruby’s hate alone but because of the lack of support from other woman.

In Willow Springs Ambush, Dr. Buzzard and Junior Lee plan to take Cocoa to the programme Muddy Waters. When they come to get Cocoa, Mama Day informs them that Cocoa has a headache and sends them out. As she knows that Ruby hates every woman who comes closer to her man she sends them out and saves Cocoa from the latter’s hate. She knows that Ruby is watching them from her house. If Cocoa goes with them, Ruby may work something on Cocoa to cause her harm.

Cocoa becomes angry when she learns that Mama Day is not interested in sending her to the musicals. The latter discloses the incident in which May Ellen was once digging oysters

with Junior Lee when Ruby practiced hoodoo on her out of jealousy and killed her. Fowler points out that Ruby “uses her knowledge of voodoo to destroy those who spark her possessive jealousy” (100). Felton stresses the power of Ruby: “She is associated more with killing than healing—indeed has been implicated in at least two murders by poisoning” (149). Cocoa does not believe in Mama Day’s words and considers Ruby innocent. Then as Mama Day has expected Ruby comes to check whether Cocoa has left for the musicals with Junior Lee or not. She sees the latter as a jealous woman and informs her that Cocoa is staying at home, so that she can avoid the anger of the jealous woman. In doing so she saves Cocoa from the hatred of Ruby. Even though Cocoa does not realize Mama Day’s love and fights with her, the latter is always on her side to save her from such hatred. According to Fowler, “Ruby’s treachery had prevented Cocoa from going to a concert with Ambush, Dr. Buzzard, and Junior Lee. It is evidence of Cocoa’s own wilfulness as well as of her ignorance about the existence and power of evil” (116).

George and Cocoa give a party for the residents of Willow Springs, during which Ruby notices Junior Lee’s interest in Cocoa. She feels jealous of her and poisons her in the following days: “Ruby’s poisoning of Cocoa is straight conjure. The use of nightshade and snakeroot involves nothing mystifying—both are well-known and proven poisons in the hands of the experienced conjurer” (Felton and Loris 149). When Mama Day learns Ruby’s intention she decides to kill her: “Ruby deserved burning in that hell which don’t exist” (MD 264). Abigail asks Cocoa’s condition and what Ruby has done to her. She replies her condition is because of Ruby’s hatred: “How bad is hate, Abigail? How strong is hate? It can destroy more people quicker than anything else” (MD 267).

Mama Day goes to Ruby’s house and calls her but Ruby bolts her door and does not reply. She goes a little closer and calls her again. As she does not receive any reply she knocks the door with her hickory stick and calls her name the third time. When there is no reply she confirms that Ruby deserves the punishment. She throws silvery powder around her wooden house and leaves the place after confirming whether the powder has spread evenly. Lightning strikes Ruby’s house twice and burns her alive. People in Willow Springs feel that God has punished Ruby since her body is full of sins, which she has committed by harming others.

The reality is that Mama Day with the electric powder electrifies the earth in order to bring “the first exchange of electrical charges between the ground and the cloud, which in a sense is a strike” (MD 274). Thereafter she cures Cocoa with the power of love. “Love is the power that can overcome hate, but love is the most complicated force of them all” as Felton and Loris put it.

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Hate is bad whether it comes from man or woman; the poison that hate emits is unbearable. Ruby places her hoodoo on Frances and sends her to mental hospital. It is possible since there is no woman to support her. Even Mama Day considers her a trouble and rejects her plea. When Ruby exercises similar hate on Cocoa, Mama Day with love rescues her and burns Ruby alive for her hatred. Naylor means that woman experiences hate from man as well as woman but to overcome such hate she needs real love.

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