

# RECOVERING THE MOTHER, FROM KING LEAR TO MAMA DAY, A QUEST TOWARDS FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

Ileana Molina Espinoza

The following reading is a comparison between Shakespeare's plays *King Lear*, *The Tempest* and Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* from the standpoint of feminism. Shakespeare's texts portray a patriarchal conception of the universe where men have absolute control and power over women. This reflects the Elizabethan social structure of Shakespeare's time and its notion of human relationships. In these texts, patriarchy is manifested through different aspects such as the absence of the mother figure, which contrasts with the presence of an omnipotent paternal figure. Therefore, families are created on a father-daughter basis in which the father becomes the center of authority and action literally owning and controlling the daughter's life. Patriarchy is also revealed in the use of stereotypes. In this kind of society, men's and women's behavior and social roles are conditioned and determined by the dichotomy male/female that has traditionally represented men as powerful and rational and women as weak and emotional.

*Mama Day*, on the contrary, creates a world where women recover their status as human beings capable of thinking and deciding about their own lives. The novel, however, does not present a reversal of patriarchy in the shape of a utopian land dominated by women. Instead, it constructs a space where human beings are allowed to be whole, embodying what traditionally has been defined as female and male features. By recovering the mother figure and breaking the stereotypes presented in Shakespeare's world, the novel recreates a different reality based on the union and not the separation of male and female forces.

Both *King Lear* and *The Tempest* reproduce a patriarchal society where female characters are depicted as sisters, daughters, wives or mothers subordinated to a male figure of authority. Significantly, mothers are literally erased from the social sphere. Gloucester's, Lear's, Alonso's and Prospero's families present this phenomenon. "This conspicuous omission... articulates a patriarchal conception of the family in which children owe their existence to their fathers alone, the mother's role in procreation is eclipsed by the father's, which is used to affirm male prerogative and male privilege" (Kahn, 35). The mother's absence denotes and reinforces the demanding presence of the father as the only source of love and authority.

In both plays, the absence and implicit death of the mother and the wife is not conceived as a tragic event but as a positive element in the family life. Mothers and wives are depicted as the embodiment of destructive not creative forces. In *King Lear*, the daughters do not recall nor mention their mother almost as if she had never existed. Lear refers to his wife only once and in the context of adultery. When he goes to visit his daughter Regan and she says she is glad to see him, he answers: "If thou shouldst not be glad, / I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb, / Sepulchring an adulteress" (2.4.131-133). Lear does not show any respect for his wife's memory. On the contrary, he implies that if Regan does not behave as the perfect daughter, it would be because she had some other father. Within his patriarchal conception of life, he could have only conceived good nature daughters while his wife could be accused of adultery if the "product" of her womb does not fulfill



the required canons of obedience and submissiveness expected from a daughter.

Similarly, in *The Tempest* Miranda does not remember her mother, although she can recall other women who attended her in childhood. Prospero alludes to his wife only once and, like Lear, in the context of adultery. When Miranda asks him if he was her father, Prospero answers: “Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and/ *She said* [underlying ours] thou wast my daughter, and thy father/ Was Duke of Milan, and his only heir/ And princess: no worse issued” (1.2.55-59). In a very subtle way, Prospero tells Miranda that even though her mother was apparently virtuous, he doubts her faithfulness since all the evidence he has to believe Miranda is his daughter and not somebody else’s is a woman’s word.

In *The Tempest*, there are other references to mother figures such as Sycorax, Caliban’s mother, which reinforce the destructiveness associated with motherhood. Sycorax is portrayed as a “foul witch” who gave birth to a monster like her. There is an implication

of bad children as being the product of bad mothers. Sycorax is described as an evil and damned being who mastered the island before Prospero’s arrival. The monster she conceived diminishes her motherhood and her femininity is related to evilness and cruelty. In fact, Prospero refers to Sycorax’s “most unmitigable rage” when she imprisoned Ariel into a cloven pine for disobeying her “earthly and abhorred” commands. The names of Sycorax and Prospero become symbolic of the forces they represent; while Sycorax denotes mystery and anarchy Prospero signifies prosperity and order. Actually, it is Prospero’s male presence that overthrows Sycorax’s female domain on the island liberating Ariel, establishing patriarchal order and usurping Caliban’s right to govern and perpetuate her reign.

As stated before, the absence of the mother in both plays produces families centered on the paternal figure. The father embodies security, guidance and love but above all authority, control and power. The figure of the father is represented as a sort of earthly god, beholder of the truth who determines women’s destinies. In this father-daughter(s) relationship, there are no

brothers who could compete to have the father's power or mothers who could interfere with his position. Thus, the pater familias becomes the absolute and only ruler of his private reign.

There is a strong sense of ownership on the fathers' behalf that treat their daughters as mere possessions. This sense of ownership is reinforced by the Elizabethan social structure of Shakespeare's time:

[...] The state also encouraged obedience to the pater familias in the home, according to the traditional  
 Analogy between state and family, king and father...  
 Kings are compared to fathers in families: for a king is  
 Truly parent's patriae, the politic father of his people. The  
 State thus had a direct interest in reinforcing patriarchy  
 in the home (Kahn, 38).

Lear, as the king and father, expects total obedience from Regan, Goneril and Cordelia, who are part of his properties like any other material object in his kingdom. Unconsciously, he feels he owns them physically and therefore wants to have access to them sexually. Many critics believe that Lear's crisis did not originate in Cordelia's denial to praise her love for him, but in his failed incestuous desire for her. "As a man, father, and ruler, Lear has habitually suppressed any needs for love, which in his patriarchal world normally would be satisfied by a mother or mothering woman" (Kahn, 40). Cordelia becomes a surrogate mother for Lear, representing the nurturing love and care he needs as a person of age approaching death and her inability to satisfy his need becomes the core of his tragic end.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero becomes father and mother for his daughter in the isolation of an island. Miranda is more than Prospero's property, she is his personal creation, "exclusively nurtured, tutored and controlled by him" (Kahn, 236). Prospero has actually trained Miranda as a sort of puppet by controlling her body and mind, determining her worldview, her behavior and even when she sleeps (with the help of his magic). She has become his greatest admirer and listener, which pleases the egocentric and narcissist attitude he has

towards her and the other creatures of his island. When Prospero tells her about his dedication as a schoolmaster to educate her, Miranda says: "heavens thank you for't!" (1.2.175). On the island, Prospero has created his own kingdom becoming, like Lear, the King. He commands not only Ariel and Caliban but also Miranda, who is expected to obey and follow his orders just as any other subject.

Patriarchal ownership is also translated in the father's strict control of the daughters' sexuality. Lear, as a father, is responsible for certifying his daughters' virginity, which was an essential requisite for women to be married. He is also in charge of providing a dowry for them to be accepted as wives. Marriage is presented as a financial transaction between men where women move from the father's sphere of domination to a husband's. When Lear disowns and disinherits Cordelia, he is actually making her unfit for marriage and unable to leave his protection. Lear knows he has the power to control Cordelia's life and destiny. However, France accepts her without dowry ruining Lear's selfish act to keep his daughter under his command.

Prospero has not only educated Miranda according to his wishes but has also assumed the role of guardian of her virginity. Prospero plans Miranda's marriage with Ferdinand, the son of his enemy, as a strategy to preserve his authority. It is his own benefit he considers when giving away his beloved daughter. Miranda's relationship with Ferdinand is loaded with Prospero's warnings against premarital sexual relations. These warnings are given to Ferdinand since Miranda's sexuality is not even acknowledged. For Prospero, she is just his little girl incapable of feeling any sexual lust. When giving away his daughter, Prospero says to Ferdinand: "Then as my gift, and thine own acquisition/ Worthly purchased, take my daughter. But/ If thou dost break her virgin-knot before/ All sanctimonious ceremonies may/ with full and holy rite be minist' red,/ No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall/ to make this contract grow... (4.1.13-19). Miranda is a "gift," an "acquisition" Ferdinand is "purchasing" from Prospero. As in any other financial contract, there are rules established by the owner of the property. By controlling Ferdinand's desires, Prospero reveals the power he exerts over Miranda's body and sexuality. Ferdinand will become her ruler by having access and control over her body when the appropriate time comes.

Patriarchy is also exerted and reinforced using stereotypes. In *King Lear*, masculinity and femininity are perceived as two opposite and irreconcilable spheres that determine men's and women's social roles and behavior. Masculinity is associated with superiority, authority, activity and reason while femininity is related to inferiority, obedience, passivity and emotion. Lear, when confronted with his daughters' rebellion, can no longer think or reason but feels anger, shame and sadness. He struggles to control himself and avoid being emotional, a state traditionally equated to femininity: "O! How this mother swells upward toward my heart/ Hysteria passio! Down, thou climbing sorrow! / Thy element's below" (2.4.56-58). Lear relates his sorrow to the mother figure, which he tries to subjugate and keep "down." The word "hysteria" refers to the womb, a metaphor of the creative feminine power. However, within this patriarchal view, the female power to give life is reversed into a sign of fragility and weakness. "Woman's womb, her justification and her glory, was also the sign and source of her weakness as a creature of the flesh rather than the mind or the spirit!" (Kahn, 34). In the midst of his tragedy, Lear struggles to remain a creature of the "mind," a man.

Since tears are the sign of strong emotions, they are perceived as a sign of weakness and fragility and therefore, associated to femininity. When Lear's affliction brings tears to his eyes, he says to the Gods:

If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts/  
 against  
 Their father, fool me not so much/To bear it  
 tamely,  
 Touch me with noble anger, / and let not  
 women's  
 Weapons, water-drops, / Stain my man's  
 cheeks! No, you  
 Unnatural hags... You think I'll weep, / No, I'll  
 not weep  
 (2.4.273-281).

Lear considers "anger" a noble emotion. Tears, on the contrary, are only "women's weapons" which "stain" his male cheeks. Lear feels ashamed of crying because that reduces him to the feminine sphere of emotions. The anger and frustration he feels towards his daughters' treason increase because they bring out a vulnerable side, which threatens his conception of

manhood. After cursing his daughter Goneril, wishing "her womb convey sterility," Lear says to her: "That thou hast power to shake my manhood/ thus / that these hot tears, which break from me/ perforce, / should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs/ upon thee!" (1.4.302-307). The tears that burn Lear's cheeks reveal his fragility as a human being. It is through a painful approach to this dimension, "feminine" in Lear's eyes, that he comes to experience a sense of completion at the end of the tragedy.

Similarly, *The Tempest* exposes a stereotyped microcosm divided into men and women determined by patriarchal rules. Prospero himself embodies the figure of the Patriarch. He also represents creative power, becoming a sort of God in paradise. On the island, he has created his own magic kingdom, feared by his slaves Caliban and Ariel, loved, and respected by Miranda. At the end, everybody on the island is forced to do his will, many times under the effects of his magic powers. Prospero who tricks them with magic spells and spies their acts through his servant Ariel controls even the shipwreck victims. "Prospero's magic power is exemplified, overall, as power over children: his daughter Miranda, the bad child Caliban, the obedient but impatient Ariel, the adolescent Ferdinand, the wicked younger brother Antonio [and the other men] ... are treated like a group of bad children" (Orgel, 60). Prospero, in his godfather role, decides what is best for his subordinates by imposing his law on the island. His masculinity is equated to power, control, creation and reason.

The female figures, on the contrary, are divided into two groups: the good or the bad women. Miranda is the representation of the angel-woman characterized by her purity, virginity, innocence, goodness and total submission to the paternal figure of authority. She is created as the perfect daughter who would eventually become the perfect wife someday. As Prospero's creation, Miranda is patriarchy's representation of what a woman should be. In opposition to this female version, the bad women are the ones in control of their lives. The witches Medea and Sycorax are mentioned by Prospero to indoctrinate Miranda about the dangers of not being a passive and submissive woman. Being different from what patriarchal standards establish implies for a woman the stigma of witchcraft and the placement in a demoniac dimension. The apparent

reconciliation and harmony experienced at the end of *The Tempest* is partly a result of following Prospero's rules and wishes, which is presented as a way of perpetuating patriarchal stereotyped patterns of behavior. To introduce the other book (*Mama Something*), some sort of transition is definitely needed here. This is to make the passage smoother, from Shakespeare's books to the third book. The transition is chopped and needs more works. Do not underline titles, rather bold the font.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, on the contrary, presents a world where women occupy their own space free from the father's domineering control. The name of the novel itself refers to the mother figure significantly absent in Shakespeare's plays. Women are the main characters in the text, which develops, in a matri-lineal course of action tied to the present through the collective memory of the island inhabitants. The history of Willow Springs is narrated through the memories and legends that go back to slavery days when Sapphira Wade freed herself from her master. Significantly, this event, which actually starts the novel, represents women's breaking from men's authoritarian power. Like Sapphira, most female characters in the novel are not portrayed as weak, fragile creatures enslaved to patriarchal canons but as free human beings capable of taking control of their lives and destinies.

In the novel, the main character is a woman named Miranda who does not have a controlling father to please and obey. She is an independent and powerful woman who embodies the maternal power, a power related to creation and life, not destruction and cruelty. Even though she does not have any children of her own, she has become everybody's "mama": "Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands, folks said. You have a gift, Little Mama... caught babies till it was too late to have my own... Abigail's had three [babies] and I've had -Lord, can't count 'em- into the hundreds. Everybody's mama now" (Naylor, 89). Miranda embodies the Mother principle caring, helping and nurturing people. She has indeed gifted hands that can almost do "magic" to cure people's bodies and minds from disease and anguish.

Unlike Prospero who uses his magic powers to manipulate and control people in his artificially created kingdom, Miranda, *Mama Day*, uses her knowledge

about natural healing to help the people on the island. Her closeness to nature has taught her the secrets to heal and help others, gaining admiration and respect from Willow Springs' inhabitants. Her "magic" is rooted not only in nature but also in the deep love she feels for people. Brian Smithfield, the local doctor, is forced to compete with her on a medical level: "No point in prescribing treatment for gout, bone inflammation, diabetes, or even heart trouble when the person's going straight to Miranda after seeing him for her yea or nay... Better to ask straight out how she been treating 'em and work around that" (Naylor, 84). After seeing the results of Miranda's abilities, the doctor recognizes her healing power. As the narrator says: "[...] being a good doctor, he knew another one when he saw her" (Naylor, 84). Miranda is a healer, and a listener always willing to help others in their daily difficulties.

Unlike *The Tempest*, *Mama Day* does not create a microcosmos dominated by women. Instead, it depicts the experiences of regular men and women coexisting with nature, evil, life and death. Patriarchal stereotypes of male and female behavior are broken in the text, which recreates human beings who can be rational and emotional at the same time. Ambush, for instance, is a hard workingman who loves his wife dearly and openly shows his feelings for her without being considered weak or not masculine. Similarly, Cocoa is represented as a strong and independent woman who is also fragile and insecure of George's love for her. She says to herself: "The guy is acting like a gentleman, damn it. Is that so complicated to understand?... Why is it so hard to believe that what I see is what I see: an ordinary man who only wants you to be comfortable and enjoy yourself?" (Naylor 99). The novel creates a space where features traditionally considered masculine and feminine, such as reason and emotion, stop being opposites to complement each other.

This process of reconciliation is manifested in *Mama Day*'s and George's effort to cure Cocoa's strange disease. George tries desperately to leave the island and get a doctor while *Mama Day* uses her herbs to alleviate Cocoa's pain. However, their efforts are not successful until they unify their forces: (Revise this quotation, I have my doubts. Is it single-spaced? What about capital letters?).

Miranda looks down at her hands again. In all her years  
 She could count on half of her finger folks she'd met  
 with a will like [George's]... She needs his hands in  
 hers –his very hand– so she can connect it up with all the  
 believing that had gone before... (ellipsis are always separated by a space of the bar) So together they could  
 be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over. Yes, in his very  
 hands he already held the missing piece she'd come  
 looking for (Naylor, 285).

Even though Miranda is a very powerful and skillful woman, she cannot help Cocoa on her own. She needs George's hand to bring her back. This act of holding hands becomes symbolic of the reconciliation of both female and male forces on the island. This is what finally saves Cocoa and restores some sort of harmony after the chaos created by the storm and Ruby's evilness.

The same way that the unity of female and male principles conveys life, the separation or denial of these two forces brings destruction and death. George's sudden heart attack is a consequence of his inability to acknowledge his instinctive dimension, traditionally associated with female dimensions. As a very rational man, George refuses to believe in Mama Day's instinctual ways to help Cocoa. He calls her "crazy woman" because her worldview goes beyond his limits of reason and common sense.

The task required by Mama Day to save Cocoa is for George to go to a coop where an old red hen is setting her eggs and get "whatever" is in the back of her nest. Significantly, the hen's feathers are "almost blood red," revealing a connection to life implicit in the blood image. Eggs are also associated to life and femaleness since they allude to reproduction and fertility, the principle of human life. (Do not forget that the testicles of a man are also some sort of eggs, that would be connected to maleness, and definitively reproduction). Even though George tries hard to do what is required, he does not believe in it. For him, Mama Day's request is absurd

and meaningless. His rational mind does not allow him to understand what is unexplainable. His lack of faith makes him doubt and fall into his own destruction: "There was nothing that old woman could do with a pair of empty hands. I was sitting in a chicken coop, covered with feathers, straw, manure, and blood. And why? I looked around me again and kept laughing until it started to hurt. Why?... All of this wasted effort..." (Naylor, 301). George asks himself "why?" without being able to find a rational explanation to Cocoa's disease, to Mama Day's healing methods, to his being in a coop chasing a red hen. Like Lear's, his hearts bursts, unable to reconcile with his instinctual side and achieve completeness.

Mama Day, on the contrary, reunites with both her rational and irrational sides when confronted with Cocoa's agony. While Mama Days waits for George to get back from the chicken coop, she starts fighting "back a heavy inner trembling. She needed George, but George did not need her" (Naylor 285). Even though, "walking over the bridge" can be a threatening experience, Mama Day is willing to do it. She knows this is necessary to be whole as a human being. She needs George because he "...held the missing piece she'd come looking for." Significantly, Mama Day literally crosses the bridge over to New York to help Cocoa pack her belongings, while George dies before taking this trip. It is after the dramatic encounter with George, that Mama Day achieves internal peace: "The candle don't light nothing but Miranda's face as she makes her way to touch to the circle of oaks surrounding the family plot... George done made it possible for all her Candle Walks to end right here from now on, the other place hold no more secrets that's left from her to find" (Naylor, 307). The reference to the candle illuminating Miranda's face symbolizes the process of self-recognition she has experienced with George's help. She is now complete, enlightened and free from "the other place's" memories and sorrows.

(Again to start the conclusion some sort of linkage is needed here, to smooth the transition) Shakespeare's plays *King Lear* and *The Tempest* create a world ruled by dichotomies. Men and women are reduced to patriarchal social roles and patterns of behavior. In this black and white cosmos, men are powerful, rational subjects of action while women are weak, emotional objects of possession. In both texts, the paternal figure of authority becomes central in the family concept,

obliterating and invalidating the mother figure. The use of stereotypes regarding male and female's notions of themselves and the world around them reinforces patriarchal ideology. Metaphorically speaking, King Lear, Cordelia, Prospero and Miranda stay on opposite sides of the bridge that separates them as either men or women with the social implications of each label. Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, on the contrary, recovers the maternal figure in the shape of a caring and powerful healer, building up a bridge of reconciliation where human beings can move away from dichotomies and achieve completeness. Opposites become complements like George's and Mama Day's hands holding each other. This act of union conveys power, life and light. Unlike Lear's and Cordelia's tragic death or Prospero's artificial contentment, *Mama Day* reconstructs herself as the amalgamation of opposite forces crossing the bridge that has separated men and women for centuries.

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