

Feminine Melancholia in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*: A Kristevan Perspective

Onuora Benedict Nweke, Ph.D.

Department of English,
University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper is an interdisciplinary approach to literary criticism. As the principles of psychoanalysis reveals, many opinions often expressed about some literary works can be interrogated, and in this case, such opinions suggest that social factors exclusively are responsible for the behavioural traits of protagonists of the narrative investigated. Psychoanalytic principles have shown that for a better understanding, works of literature, which portray human actions, should also highlight the influences of unconscious factors on characters' behaviour. Without this, the critical endeavour is incomplete.

*This paper investigates Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* with the intention of identifying the behavioural traits in the major protagonists of the narrative that establish them as victims of 'melancholia'. The paper is a psychoanalytic critical reading of the novel in which Julia Kristeva's postulations are utilized in determining the presence as well as the motivations for the psychological problems in the female protagonists of the narrative.*

Key words: Mourning, depression, loss, love-object, melancholia

In this paper, I intend to employ Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective in examining Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (MD). My responsibilities include identifying 'melancholia' as a psychological problem afflicting the protagonists of the novel under review; utilizing Julia Kristeva's precepts to identify how the protagonists fit into her notion of 'melancholia' and examine the manifestations of 'melancholia' in the female protagonists in the novel and how it has impacted negatively on the protagonists.

Before proceeding on this task, a brief explanation of the place and importance of Julia Kristeva as a feminist psychoanalyst and the imperative of her psychoanalytic postulations in the present endeavour is necessary. Julia Kristeva is a Hungarian-born psychoanalyst influenced by the theories and postulations of Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Linguistics, Philosophy and avant-garde literature. She is one of the French feminist psychoanalysts along with Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, whose ‘feminine ecriture’ was initially embraced as tending towards the subversion of the ‘masculine realism’, but Julia Kristeva’s works have more recently been seen as reinforcing traditional notions of ‘femininity’, which encourages the binary configuration of biologism and sexual difference. While Kristeva and Cixous are said to further develop and “apply Lacan's theories to their own feminist criticism”, critics like Jennifer Stone argue that “Kristeva’s work is no longer in women’s interest” (Kelly Ives: 187). Nevertheless, K.K. Ruthven considers Julia Kristeva’s efforts in *La Revolution du Langage Poetique* (Paris, 1974), as “the most ambitious attempt to re-think for feminist purposes the psychoanalytic theory of language acquisition” (1984: 97).

According to Kelly Oliver, three elements of Kristeva’s thought that have been particularly important for feminist and psychoanalytic theories include: her attempt to bring the body back into discourse in the human sciences; her focus on the significance of the maternal and pre-oedipal in the constitution of subjectivity; and her notion of abjection as an explanation for oppression and discrimination. Kristeva is also credited with other fundamental contributions to feminist psychoanalysis as the ‘chora’, which refers to the pre-oedipal phase when the infant has not yet differentiated itself from the mother but experiences powerful drives and affects which cannot be expressed symbolically; the ‘semiotic’, which also refers to the non-linguistic dimensions of communication which uses rhythm, intonation and gesture, to express the drives and affects of the chora. ‘Herethics’ on the other hand, is a neologism, which means to convey an ethical model based on the experience of pregnancy that blurs the distinction between self and other.

All these concepts are fundamental to Kristevan theory and analytic enterprise as they interact in a very unique manner to enable Kristeva to change “the place of things” and displace the “already-said” according

to Roland Barthes¹. One other important peculiarity of Kristevan theory is in the relevance of the ‘father’. She thinks that the ‘imaginary father’ is necessary for the child so that it can grow away from being too dependent on the mother, and then develop a place as a signifying subject” (Ives, 1997). It is based on all these and more that this paper explores Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* in order to identify some disorientative tendencies that constitute ‘melancholia’ in the female protagonists.

Gloria Naylor is an African American female novelist who claims to have entered the literary scene in response to the marginalization of her group as woman and as Black. She is also motivated to write in order to redress a perceived under- representation of women in literary productions. She reveals, “I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a Black woman in general had been underrepresented in American literature” (Dialogue; No. 83, 1/89, 42). In another interview with Charles Rowell, Gloria Naylor notes:

everything I’ve ever lived, or ever wanted to live as a black woman comes out in my work... You came of age implicitly being told it is the white male world, and everything that’s been given to us of substance, everything that has lasted, has been just that their buddies kept them in the canon. (p.188 – 89)

So, it is to complement the efforts of other female writers, who Naylor considers her role models, which further help her to realize her potential as a writer. Some of the other African American women writers include Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange and Paule Marshall. In fact, she confesses that “(Reading) *The Bluest Eye* (was) the beginning (of the ability to conceive myself as a writer) ...The presence of the work... said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth in this society, not only is your story worth telling, but it can be told in words so painfully eloquent that it becomes a song.”²

However, we are interested in how Gloria Naylor reflects the complex problems besetting the African American woman in American culture and how these women cope with those situations. In her first published novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor portrays the powerlessness and subjection of black women in the ghetto. But these

are resilient women who have refused to accept the “end of the line” as the end of life. They make their stand together to fight a hostile world with love and humour. Naylor explores through her lyrical portrayal of the realities of black life, the cruelty that poverty breeds and the various ways people can achieve redemption. Also in *Mama Day*, her third and arguably her most completely realized novel so far, Naylor concerns herself with examining, deconstructing and redefining the past. Recreating the bond shared by the female community and between generations of women, Naylor seems to also argue that “the real basic magic is the unfolding of human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles.”³ Before proceeding to address the individual psychological problems of the female characters in the novel under review, it is important to identify these problems from Julia Kristeva’s perspectives.

‘Melancholia’ is one form of disorientation identified by Julia Kristeva in her discussion of feminine depression. She revises Sigmund Freud’s version of melancholia in his ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ of 1917. Freud argues there that a state of melancholy expresses itself in a diminution of self-regard, “an impoverishment’ of the ego (cited in Easthope, 1999: 54). Kristeva is of the view that there is no imagination that is not, overtly or secretly, melancholic. “Without a bent for melancholia,” she argues, “there is no psyche, only a transition to action or play” (cited in Oliver, 2002: 181).

The concepts of depression and melancholia are closely related. Freud always used ‘depression’ and ‘melancholia’ interchangeably. However, Julia Kristeva makes significant efforts at differentiating between the concepts. Freud marks off ‘mourning for the dead’, as a largely conscious process which leads to renewal of normal life, from ‘melancholia’, an unconscious effect, in which the mourning cannot be completed, cannot be worked through. Kristeva on her part sees melancholia as “the institutional symptomatology of inhibition and asymbolia that becomes established now and then or chronically in a person, alternating more often than not with the so-called manic phase of exaltation” (cited in Oliver: 184). This means a private, subjective and protracted, almost endless mourning; indicative of despondent moods. Berrios and Porter's recent *History of Clinical Psychiatry* asserts, implausibly I believe, that up to the period of the Napoleonic

Wars, "melancholia was but a rag-bag of insanity states whose *only* common denominator was the presence of few (as opposed to many) delusions," while "sadness and low affect, which were no doubt present in some cases) were not considered as definitively symptoms" (385)

Nevertheless, Kristeva regards melancholia and depression as a "composite that might be called melancholy/depressive, whose borders are in fact blurred, and within which psychiatrists ascribe the concept of 'melancholia' to the illness that is irreversible on its own" (cited in Oliver, 2002). It must be understood that 'melancholia' in comparison with depression can be said to be more intense and frequent. According to Tsu-Chung Su: "compared with depression, which is of lesser intensity and frequency, melancholia of the institutional and chronic type, is a serious affliction characterized by more frequent manic/depressive alterations" (2005: 166). Therefore, Julia Kristeva's melancholia, which is more intense, and depression, which in her opinion is milder, can immediately recall the orthodox psychoanalytic distinction between neurosis and psychosis. This explains the use of Neurotic Depression and Melancholia to describe the unconscious malaise identified in the problems of the protagonists.

Nevertheless, one identifies the nature of melancholia in Antony Easthope's example. According to him, in 1861 Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert died; the Queen retired from public life, wrapped herself in widow's weeds, and lived in seclusion in Windsor Castle for the next twenty years. Her mourning became melancholy, as did that of Hamlet for his father (1999: 54). In 'melancholia', there is an identification of the ego with the abandoned object, which is possible on condition that the ego ideal becomes active in criticizing and judging the ego. In a melancholic person, it is common to explain the pleasurable sad feeling of nostalgia, when a former image of oneself is resuscitated by realizing that it is gone forever. Therefore, the presence of melancholy may not be discerned by observing or watching the outward behaviour of the victim, but rather it is identifiable in the inherent perceptive nature of the affected character.

Sigmund Freud in '*Mourning and melancholia*' describes the melancholic's 'plaint' as stemming from a real or imagined disappointment with a loved one. Unable or unwilling to become

detached from the now broken love relation and to make a new start elsewhere, the melancholic makes an identification with the lost object, obliterating the ego, with the result that, paradoxically, he or she becomes the abandoned object, forsaking and forsaken, now plagued by the superego (Elizabeth Wright, 1998: 43).

In Kristeva's version of the same shadow metaphor, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one. Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus (Kristeva, 1980: 5). Also, birth itself is a separation within the body, a violent separation from the body of the mother. In the maternal body, excess gives rise to a separation that is material and maintained by regulation (regarding availability of the breast) that is prior to the mirror stage. Julia Kristeva simply elaborates Freud's theory on 'melancholia' and maintains that melancholia arises as a result of the child's loss of the symbiotic relationship with the mother (the semiotic).

The above background offers this paper the basis for identifying the characteristics of melancholic persons in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. 'Melancholia' in Kristeva's view manifests the anguish of losing the other through the survival of self. In what she calls 'melancholy cannibalism', Kristeva insists that the refusal to accept loss is here imaged as devouring and containing. This is an attempt to absorb the alien and different, and make its energies one's own. She posits that a situation arises which produces "an implosive mood that walls itself in and kills me secretly, very slowly, through permanent bitterness, bouts of sadness or even lethal sleeping pills" (1985: 29).

In the same vein, what Kristeva means by 'asymbolia' has to do with 'loss of speech and meaning'. Therefore, in the reformulation of Freudian 'mourning and melancholia', Kristeva reconceptualizes the disease as 'a linguistic malady' in which there is a disinvestment in language's symbolic power, a split between language and affect. There is also a failure of symbolic activity and a state of abjection. It is based on the above positions that the female protagonists in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* are considered and appraised as 'melancholics'. They not only fail to forget the memory of their sad past, they also seem to experience that symbolic failure which Kristeva calls 'asymbolia'; the "immobilized ... the condition of suffering without being able to speak

it...” (Tsu-Chung, 2005: 165). This study, because of space will concentrate only on (Miranda), the eponymous character, and Ophelia, whose love affair with George (a male character) constitutes the intervening narrative of the novel.

Before delving fully into the nature of Miranda and Ophelia’s ‘melancholia’, a little background to the characters’ past is necessary. In *Mama Day*, Naylor brings the reader face to face with human beings who live through the complexity, pain and mystery of real life. She describes life in a hermetic black community and its influence on two lovers whose different backgrounds affect their appreciation of and relationship with people around them. The novel explores myth, magic and superstition and Mama Day, a matriarch, the vessel of wisdom in a community, looming larger than life in the narrative. The novel emphasizes very strongly the importance of the family structure or tradition in African American society, and tends to venerate the extended family structure as opposed to the nuclear family structure of Western American society.

The level of decimation, dismemberment and destabilization of the family structure in the African American societies has debilitating effects on the psyche of the blacks, even on their younger generations. Some of these negative effects manifest in various forms, including attempts to retrieve and preserve cultural memory through the repetition of material practices, as well as maintaining cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to control, order and define their life for them. Gloria Naylor seems convinced that traditional ways and the communities that sustain them will have the resilience to survive and adapt to temporal and social change, as this seems to be the preoccupation of Mama Day in the novel. Naylor therefore in *Mama Day* examines how through the ‘coincidence’ of history and memory the major characters in the novel articulate and represent how they relate with their past. As Daphne Lamothe testifies: “Naylor’s intricate exploration of history and memory... examines different ways of conceptualizing, articulating, and representing our relationship with the past” (2005: 1). And Margaret Earley Whit equally observes that the structure of the novel takes its shape out of the history and way of life and death that is the heritage of Willow Springs (1999: 118).

Already in her eighties when we first encounter her in the narrative, Mama Day has witnessed the loss of several loved ones. She is also known as Miranda. She lives an agonizing type of life; the kind Julia Kristeva would describe as “a life that is unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows, tears held back, a total despair, scorching, at times, then wan and empty” (Wright, 1998: 43). No wonder she dotes on the only surviving member of the Day’s lineage (Ophelia), who belongs to a younger generation, and would go to any length to protect her from any harm. In her everyday living, Miranda seeks either an ‘avenging death’ or a ‘liberating’ one, since her life is lived as a wound of deprivation. This is also what Kristeva would describe as a failure of ‘primary identification’ and being unable to model oneself on a figure that has achieved a separation from the Thing. Nevertheless, expectedly, Miranda clings tenaciously to a lost loved object, so that the shadow of the lost Thing is “cast on the fragile self hardly dissociated from the other, precisely by the loss of that essential other” (Kristeva, 1998: 5).

Mama Day (Miranda) is therefore in a protracted mourning that never ends which is also indicative of the state of melancholia. In fact, Tsu-Chung thinks that in Kristeva’s opinion, ‘melancholia’ is an uncompleted mourning for the pre-objectal mother – the maternal Thing. So, what are these lost loved objects to which Mama Day clings, and what are those things that have subjected her to protracted mourning? In the first place, Mama Day’s anxiety and desperation for Cocoa to have children who will perpetuate the Days’ lineage is borne out of the fear that the Days’ lineage has the prospect of facing extinction if Cocoa fails to pursue this agenda with the utmost urgency it deserves. She promises herself that she is going to cling to life as long as it takes Cocoa to have children. This insecurity about Cocoa’s prospect of perpetuating their lineage makes her dote so much on Cocoa that even when Cocoa is not physically present, Mama Day through her magical powers ensures that no harm comes to her. She also watches Phil Donahue on Channel Six simply to keep a tab on her and how she might be living in the cities. It must be understood that Mama Day’s memory is a burden to her as she looks at and perceives everything from the perspective of the past. Whenever she thinks of Cocoa, she is reminded of the past, and since this past has been characterized by the loss of loved ones, Mama Day is inwardly always sad. Always looking at things in terms of the past, she mourns in particular the loss of her

beloved sister, Peace whose death she equates with the absence of peace:

Long after her mama will spend her days rocking and twisting thread, twisting thread, while her daddy spends his nights digging, digging into blocks of wood. But there will be no Peace. She begins to learn at this age: there is more to be known behind what the eyes can see. (MD, 36)

The level of intimacy between the sisters is such that Mama Day crawls into the bed to offer physical comfort to her little sister: “They are four arms and legs, two heads, one heartbeat” (p.36). Such love is difficult to forget easily when interrupted by death like this case. It is therefore observable that within her unconscious, Mama Day represses very serious hurts, while her everyday relationship with people whom she nurses, midwives and saves from several difficult situations, is an effort at ‘displacing’ these painful experiences. She has not completed mourning Peace’s demise, and because she had concluded within herself that there can never be peace without Peace, her life has been lived in search of this elusive death with which both peace and Peace are associated.

In the same vein, most of the times that Mama Day has had cause to use her powers; she has always used them in defense of her family. Her family represents for her part of an ideal tradition that must be sustained. Part of this tradition is the perpetuation of the magic powers of the legendary Sapphira, as well as through biological process. This explains Mama Day’s resistance to any form of infiltration of their tradition and her desperation each time Cocoa who is the only surviving link of this idyllic past and the future is threatened.

Mama Day uses her melancholy to transform the grief of Willow Springs to cohesion and rebirth. The inhabitants of Willow Springs enjoy not only protection but also the nurturance of both the living and the unborn in the area. Referring to a melancholic woman, Marina Zuylen avers that she is “the resourceful woman of sorrow who manages to escape her world through a complicated machination that I will call therapeutic melancholy” (85).

In a similar vein, Daphne Lamothe has noted that one of the locus of resistance by the Blacks in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* lies "in the island inhabitants' retention and transmission of African-derived traditions and values, such as orally conveyed folklore, quilting, and root work, in the face of cultural forces that would efface them" (2005: 2). *Mama Day* not only resists the adulteration of her traditional practices by confronting the forces of Western tradition, she engages in the traditional practices of midwifery, as in the case of Bernice and Ambush's search for a child; the quilt she presents as a wedding gift to Cocoa and George; and her retaliatory encounter with Ruby who poisons Cocoa's hair, which nearly costs Cocoa her life. All these and other events, which involve *Mama Day* in the novel, present her as ensuring that the cultural values of her ancestors are preserved. This implies that as society continues to experience inevitable changes, *Mama Day*'s continued attachment to the past is a kind of uncompleted mourning for things that are already irretrievable, and which are also irreplaceable. This behavioural trait can only be exhibited by a melancholic person.

Cocoa (Ophelia) or Baby Girl is the other female central character portrayed as melancholic because of her behavioural traits. She is one of the narrative voices in the novel and from her perspectives on issues and perception of herself and others around her; her melancholic disposition is incontrovertible. The entire narrative of *Mama Day* is told after George, the lover of Cocoa had died, and through Ophelia's recollections, her past with her love object (George) is relived. This makes George the second narrator of the story. Cocoa (Ophelia) can be described as 'a deeply hurt mind,' who re-memorizes the incidents of the past to alleviate the hurtful feelings and torturous pain she is undergoing as a result of the loss. The third narrator of the incidents of the novel informs the reader of how Cocoa would return from Charleston, which she did more often now than she did while she lived in New York city, and visit George's grave where she will spend two hours "so they could talk about that summer fourteen years ago when she left, but he stayed ...neither one saying a word" (MD 10).

But before the events of the narrative involving Ophelia, her relationship with those she encounters including George who she eventually marries qualifies her as a melancholic person. Michiko

Kakutani describes Cocoa as a “bigoted, demanding woman, who seems lucky to have found a husband at all, given her large mouth and even larger ego,...” (1988: 52). Whit also observes that when Ophelia (Cocoa) recollects the first time she saw George Andrews, she takes the reader to a coffee shop on Third Avenue in New York City and unwittingly draws a picture of her earlier self, shallow and bigoted (MD, 127). As George perceives and puts to Ophelia in the novel, she regards people as “stuff you chew up in your mouth until it’s slimy and then leave behind as shit the next day” (MD 62). It should be noted that bigotry, egotistic feeling and screaming insecurities as obtains in Cocoa’s character are aspects of narcissistic dispositions of melancholic persons. She thus surrenders in to insecurities and in New York therefore, she constructs defences as a decoy to her insecurities. The life style she adopts, which borders on narcissism is necessary as a “way of coming to terms with never knowing what to expect from anything or anybody” (63).

When Cocoa first meets George, their differences begin to manifest first from their perception of time. Cocoa’s obsession with the past clashes very strongly with George’s insistence on the here and now. Cocoa’s knowledge of a rich history of her own past interferes with her relationship with others. She would regale George with stories about life on Willow Springs and her great aunt and grandmother. The implication of this however is that Willow Springs represents the traditional past and Cocoa is always willing to tell these stories because she is merely an extension of that heritage. She is unconsciously enamoured with this heritage, to which she is spiritually linked. It thrives on the preservation of the Africa-derived cultural values. While she represents this rich heritage with its conventional wisdom, George represents what the inhabitants of Willow Springs pejoratively refer to as ‘across the bridge thinking.’ This reflects narrow and shallow comprehension of the world’s ways.

Cocoa also displays the tendencies of narcissistic melancholia when she demands excessive admiration and devotion from George. Cocoa feels that the time George devotes to football is unjustified when she is there to have all his attention. She does not like football and all her attempts to get interested in it fail, “...where is the fun in all of it when you can’t see the ball? They line up, bend down, and all of a sudden they’re in a

pile, smelling each other's behinds...this was a part of your life I couldn't share ..." (126).

She believes that nothing should take his attention away from her. Whenever this happens, Cocoa describes it as neglect. She expects George to become her second self and like all she likes and disapproves of all she also disapproves of Sigmund Freud writes that with narcissistic object choice, a person may love: (a) what he himself is (i.e. himself), (b) what he himself was, (c) what he himself would like to be, (d) someone who was once part of himself. (quoted in Elaine Baruch: 18)

Cocoa on her part wants George to act as her mirror at all times. This means that as her mirror, he must not devote attention to any other thing outside her. But George does not regard football as pastime, but a passion, and he is not ready to compromise this interest for anything or anybody. Yet, he makes concessions to Cocoa, which ultimately leads to their visit to Willow Springs.

She is so demanding and insecure, which is why she wants George's absolute attention. She is afraid that George may not be genuine, and regards his love as creating a void in her that will be difficult to fill in future, because she fears that the relationship would not last. She is distrustful and does not believe that genuine love exists anywhere:

Things were going so well between us that I dreaded the day when it would be over. Grown women aren't supposed to believe in Prince Charmings and happily-ever-afters. Real life isn't about that - ...Your touch was making new and alive openings within me and I would lie there warm and weak, listening to you sleep, thinking. What will I do when he's not here? How will I handle this space he's creating without him to fill it? (119)

Her fear of losing George is traceable to the other losses she has suffered in the past. Her father had run off when she was still young and her mother passed away while she was a toddler. The duo of Miranda and Abigail combine over the years to 'mother' her, and ensure that she takes up the responsibility of perpetuating the lineage of the Days. But the above losses have contributed in putting her in such a melancholic mood that further losses, like the death of her cousin, Willa, and her husband

and son, resurrects the painfulness associated with the past, which includes her mother. As a result of her melancholy, out of fear she sees George as unreal, but as a "... part of some vision, or at best a temporary visitor in my life. Too good to be true. Too good to last" (119).

Even after her marriage to George, the insecurity does not leave her as she still persists with such far-fetched and stupid questions as: "George, if something happened to me, would you get married again?" (143).

Cocoa's ambition to pursue a History degree up to the Master's level is significant in the narrative. It seems that her role as the future custodian of the history of Willow Springs and that of her family beckons to her. In one of her mid-August visits to Willow Springs, Mama Day decides that the time has come for Cocoa to understand her own history instead of the 'inconsequential' history of 'across the bridge' knowledge. Mama Day believes that the only way peace could settle on the Days' family is for Cocoa to begin to interpret the stories of Willow Springs. The point being made here however is that in every aspect of Cocoa's life whether determined by her or not, she is seemingly overwhelmed by past events, and these events continue to make her melancholic especially where they are sad experiences.

Lastly, the behaviour of a melancholic person may be characterized by arrogance, haughty behaviour or attitudes coupled with rage, especially when frustrated, contradicted or confronted, in search of what Julia Kristeva would describe as 'avenging death' or 'liberating' death. Several incidents in the narrative portray Cocoa as not only haughty but also capable of rash action, like when she goes to sleep with her old boy friend and at Willow Springs, when she injures George in what she describes as "our worst fight ever" over her looks. She considers her physical features an asset, and George fails to complement her looks after her make-up. She also flies into a rage when Miranda prevents her from joining Buzzard, Ambush and Junior Lee to a party. She reacts violently and shouts at her great aunt: "You have always been an overbearing and domineering old woman. But I am not a child anymore – do you hear me? I am not a child. I will pack my things and leave tomorrow" (156).

George points also to her temperament especially when things, which

have to do with her complexion, are mentioned:

I stopped asking you questions you couldn't answer, because it was irritating you. ... You were always very sensitive about your complexion...We only had to get into an argument for me to be reminded – your fists balled up on your hips, you drawing blood with your never-ending mouth – you were, in spirit at least, as black as they come....(219)

Even though she claims that her patience is what has sustained the relationship, it is evident that impatience makes her take some irrational decisions, which she regrets later. On several occasions, she has admitted that George's positions on issues are superior. But these admissions come only after actions would have been taken and mistakes made. There are so many other actions of Cocoa's that indicate that she is melancholic like the selfish motive behind the toothpicks she offers to some male folk at restaurants. With this action she attempts to seduce men to herself, but her lack of empathy makes her use this gesture for selfish ends. She confesses that "My toothpicks had already gotten me two dates in the last month" (16). These attitudinal behavioural traits depict Cocoa as a melancholic character, and it is based on the above unravelling of the characters' traits that this paper has argued that the female protagonists in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* are in melancholic states or mood.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to identify the melancholic characters in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and equally examine how these characters qualify to be so described. But more important is the fact that melancholia obtains primarily when a loss occurs. The mother (semiotic) being the first love object, ensures primary identification with the child, and according to Elizabeth Wright, if this primary identification fails to take place, all secondary identifications will be flawed. Then, "instead of acceding to an endless metonymic deferral of the Thing in language, the depressed person is in thrall to its 'black sun', too bedazzled to break into desiring speech" (44). But this loss is inevitable.

Upon the loss of the symbiotic relationship with the mother (semiotic), the child begins to mourn, and because of the symbiosis, the mourner is forced to retrieve the mother through the ‘outside’ world of language and signs (the symbolic). The mother is then retrieved as sign, image or word. Without this retrieval to represent the mother in language, mourning evolves into melancholia, no longer yearning for the Freudian object of desire but “the maternal ‘Thing’, a non-object of desire and loss that escapes. This is what happens even outside fiction, and outside the pages of the printed words. In our society today, the depressive characters that pervade the environment are suffering from one loss of a loved one or the other. Melancholy is a ‘sorrowful pleasure’. We are always conscious that we are destined to lose our love ones and we even become more grieved to notice in our lover the shadow of a loved object, already lost. It must be noted that psychoanalysis plays important roles in bringing about social justice and progressive social change. It does this through the proper understanding of the inner functioning of the characters’ mind as the society would be better off with such knowledge. Julia Kristeva helps us therefore with principles that apply analytical practice to the healthy, normal life of the society by helping us understand despair, melancholy and depression. Depression can be very debilitating to the human mind and in it we are concerned with the shadow cast over the fragile ego, barely dissociable from the other: a shadow cast, precisely, by the loss of this necessary other – a shadow of despair⁵ as Kristeva would contend.

Notes

1. See Julia Kristeva “Art, love, Melancholy, Philosophy, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis”. Crescent Moon, 1997.
2. see ‘Portfolio: Nine Novelists’ in Dialogue, no.83, 1/89, p.42.
3. Mama Day undoubtedly believes in the inner qualities of individuals and the uniqueness of Blacks as special people with special attributes and gifts to the world.
4. This information is contained in the bill of sale of the mythic or legendary Sapphira.
5. Julia Kristeva in her ‘Melancholic Imaginary’ contends that that no writing exists that is not amorous, nor there be an imagination that is not, manifestly or secretly, melancholic and there is no meaning aside from despair.

Works Cited

- Baruch, Elaine Hoffman. (1991) *Women, Love, and Power: Literary and Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Berrios, German and Roy Porter. (1998). *History of Clinical Psychiatry*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Easthope, Antony. (1999) *The Unconscious*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1963) *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis Part 1 & 2*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Ives, Kelly. (1997) *Art, Melancholy, Philosophy, Semiotics and Psychoanalysis*. Crescent Moon.
- Kakutani, Michiko. (1988) "Mama Day." *The New York Times Book Review* February 10.
- Kristeva, Julia. (1980) *Desire in Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- _____. (1989) *Language*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lamothe, Daphne. 'Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*: Bridging Roots and Routes' *African American Review*, Spring - Summer, 2005.
- Naylor, Gloria. (1982). *The Women of Brewster Place*. New York: Penguin Books.
- _____ and Toni Morrison. "A Conversation." *Southern Review* no. 21 (195): 67 – 93.
- _____ (1988). *Mama Day*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries.
- Oliver, Kelly, ed. (2002) *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ruthven, K.K. (1984) *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsu-Chung, Su. "Writing the Melancholic: The Dynamics of Melancholia in Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* vol. 31 no. 1 2005: (163 – 191).
- Whit, Margaret Earley. (1999). *Understanding Gloria Naylor*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- Wright, Elizabeth. (1998) *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal*. New York: Routledge.
- _____ (1999). *Speaking Desires can be Dangerous: The Poetics of the Unconscious*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Zuylen, Marina Van. "Maghreb and Melancholy: A Reading of Nina Bouraoni." *Research in African Literature* vol. 34. no. 3 (Fall 2003): 84 – 99.