

The Power of Two: Mothers and Daughters in El Caribe

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Abstract

Relational psychology recognizes the importance of relationships as the central organizing feature in women's healthy development. The relationship between mothers and daughters in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico) is examined through the use of the novel, a reflection of society. Relational psychology will analyze the mother/daughter relationship in three novels: "Dreaming in Cuban" by Cristina Garcia, "How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent" by Julia Alvarez, and "The Ladies' Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets" by Irene Vilar. These novels are characterized by a sense of loss that surrounds the women: loss of "patria", loss of mother, and loss of language. The context of ambivalence and conflict that Latina mothers and daughters face is explored, as well as how redefining the mother / daughter relationship in light of these issues can impact their growth.

Key Words: Caribbean literature, relational psychology, mothers / daughters, politics, immigration

1. Relational Psychology

Relational psychology served as a vehicle for several movements of the 1960s, including the women's movement, to create a paradigm shift in the field of psychology (Robb, 2006). Women began exploring themes that had previously been neglected by academics. In 1975, relational psychology began to develop in the Boston area based on the findings of several women. First, psychiatrist Judith Herman and psychologist Lisa Hirshman counted cases of incest and found that it was much more prevalent than previously thought. Second, Carol Gilligan challenged Lawrence Kohlberg and developed a theory for women's moral decision making. Last, Jean Baker Miller conceptualized that women's weaknesses (i.e. hypersensitivity, merging, and dependency) were actually strengths (authenticity, empathy, and a drive and skills to be connected) (Baker Miller & Stiver, 1993).

The relational approach recognizes and appreciates the importance of relationships as the central organizing feature in women's healthy development. It also recognizes the powerful impact of the cultural context on women's lives. Thus, relational psychology views the Freudian aspect of a daughter's necessary psychological separation from her mother as unhealthy and unnecessary; instead, as the daughter grows up the connection between the two is redefined (Caplan, 2000). A disconnection between mother and child occurs whenever one or both is prevented from participating in a mutually responsive and mutually enhancing relationship. If mother/daughter cannot have an impact on the relationship, she will attempt to change herself. Changing herself will involve altering her internal image of herself, others, and the connections between herself and others. Consequently, her relationship with her mother/ daughter and others will lack authenticity because she is trying to please others by not being herself.

Relational psychology posits that psychological problems represent the ways people cope and paradoxically keep themselves disconnected, when they actually seek connection. During adolescence, the daughter internalizes distress whereby she feels disconnected and exhibits such conditions as phobias, addictions, eating disorders, depression, etc (Baker Miller, 1976). Freud's psychoanalytic theories (especially family romance), have defined the mother/daughter relationship by conflict, separation, and ambivalence. However, all relationships actually experience these three phenomena, and it is through resolution of each that the relationship matures.

First, the conflict in the mother/daughter relationship is representative of the daughter becoming aware of her position in relation to men. She becomes shocked and disappointed and consequently angry with her mother. There is a realization that one's mother is inferior which leads the daughter to also be inferior. A feeling of anger helps the daughter overcome her feelings of powerlessness. Second, a redefinition of the mother/daughter relationship, not separation, is part of healthy development. Last, the relationship is ambivalent because mothers are the greatest champions of their daughters' opportunities yet simultaneously the most vocal critics of them. Both mother and daughter feel ambivalent because they must come to terms with the patriarchy's message that familism is important, yet the daughter must separate from the mother.

2. Mother / Daughter Relationship in Literature

Literature is a microcosm for what is happening on a grander scale in society. Three works from the Caribbean will be analyzed to describe the mother-daughter relationship during the twentieth century from the perspective of relational psychology. These novels also reinforce the importance of a woman's own narrative and the roles she has taken on in numerous relationships: daughter, mother, sister, wife, lover, and political activist. Women writers of the Spanish Caribbean who have lived their lives straddling the two cultures of the Caribbean and United States have experienced multiple tensions. The Caribbean was the first point of encounter between Europeans and what was for the Europeans the "New World." Cultures clashed, mixed, and blended first in the Caribbean world.

Three representative women writers of the Spanish Caribbean: Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia and Irene Vilar, have a foot in both worlds, the Caribbean and the United States. Their particular representation of mother/daughter relationships have several threads in common: 1) the diasporic woman, 2) a sense of loss of mother, mother language and motherland, 3) varying degrees of displacement and assimilation 4) negotiation of an autonomous identity and 5) and the chaotic politics of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, which plays an essential role and emphasizes the relationship between the intimate and the social spheres in the Caribbean. Each writer, while carefully dealing with the complexity of each country's political situation, demonstrates how the above-mentioned threads pervade the works. In these three works mother//daughter relations take different turns. In each of these three works there is a very different manifestation of mother / daughter relations, spanning the areas of absence, confrontation, and negotiation. However, there is one constant: the effects of immigration and loss on both the mother and daughter are omnipresent.

2.1 Dreaming in Cuban by Cristina Garcia, 1993

In this novel, three generations of del Pino women are the main narrative focus. Politics divides the family between those who support the Cuban Revolution and those who are ardent *anti-castristas* (those opposed to Fidel Castro). Celia, the matriarch who refused to leave the island, continues to watch the shores for invaders as the novel opens and continues to support El Lider, Fidel Castro. Her two daughters, Lourdes, leaves the island after being raped by Castro's soldiers, and Felicia, remains in Cuba but does not share her mother's militancy. The reader also witnesses a third generation of del Pino. Felicia, a santeria priestess, has twin daughters who are estranged from her. Meanwhile, Lourdes has one daughter, Pilar, who was born right after the revolution and was brought to the United States at a very young age. Each woman in the story has had to overcome some tragedy. Celia's political beliefs clash with her role as mother when men from the government she supports rape her daughter. Furthermore, both of Celia's daughters create lives for themselves which are quite the opposite of their mother's, removed from politics.

Celia married Rufino although she fell in love with a Spaniard who she met in Cuba when she was single. The man returns home to Spain to his wife, and Celia writes him love letters she never sends over the next several decades. Rufino, her husband, marries her knowing that she loved the Spaniard and leaves her most of the year with his mother and sister who are very cruel and verbally abusive to her, while he travels as a salesman for an American company. Lourdes, along with her husband and daughter, leave for the United States after the revolution. Lourdes is happy to assimilate and opens The Yankee Doodle Bakery in Brooklyn, New York. For Pilar, Lourdes' daughter, migration is painful. Pilar remains estranged from her mother and seeks a connection with her grandmother, with whom she communicates in Cuba through telepathy. This adds the element of magical realism into the novel, which is expanded when Lourdes' father dies in New York after coming to the United States for cancer treatment and continues to communicate with the family by appearing to Lourdes. The focal point of this novel is Pilar. Her difficulty adapting to American culture and the genesis of her own creativity is reflective of her mother's inability to provide a model of relating to her own mother for her daughter.

When a mother does not provide an appropriate model of relationships for the daughter, perhaps due to rapid cultural change in the case of migration or an absent mother, the daughter creates her own model based on the experiences she has had (Gold & Yanof, 1985). It is through Pilar, the punk artist, that the reader learns the most about Lourdes and Celia. In a sense, Pilar unites the trio: her mother, her grandmother and herself. These three generations are torn apart by the diaspora and Cuban politics, each one trying to negotiate an autonomous identity while remembering a motherland and seeking a place. Lourdes displays her loyalty to her relationship with her daughter when she defends her daughter in front of the community in the United States for displaying art that is perceived as disrespectful to America. Both mother and child mature over time, and so does their relationship. While these three women seem very different, they are actually quite similar in their strength of character and values. While at times each mother appears to have a love / hate relationship with her daughter, the mother (Celia and Lourdes) transfers her values to her children and through confrontation (conflict) and engagement, all of these women forge stronger bonds.

2.2 How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent by Julia Alvarez, 1992

Not unlike the political diaspora of the Cuban Revolution, the Garcia family escapes The Dominican Republic because of the girls' father's (Carlos Garcia) involvement in a plot to overthrow the longtime dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The Garcia family belongs to the privileged and professional class during the sisters' (Yolanda, Carla, Sofia and Sandi) childhood. They attend a school for American children, so when they migrate to the United States their tastes for all things North American are already established. However, in the United States they do not live separated in their own compound surrounded by servants and walls, as they did in the Dominican Republic. In the United States they suffer discrimination: they are called "spics" and are relegated to an inferior status because of their accent, thus the title "How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent." Their father's plan was for these girls to assimilate into North American society and in order to reach his goal he sends them to exclusive private schools so that they will fit into mainstream American society. He is so successful in his plan, that when the novel opens, Yolanda, the narrator, is 39 years old and has returned to the Dominican Republic struggling to use Spanish, which she has mostly forgotten, and understand her past Dominican identity.

Throughout the novel, each daughter struggles to overcome the burden of differences, divided loyalties, and a fractured language identity by pitting Spanish versus English and conferring privileged status to English. For example, Yolanda uses different names: Yolanda, Yo, Yo Yo, and Joe, all pointing to a confused identity never truly Dominican nor North American. All of the sisters eventually suffer the negative consequences of assimilation: Sandra suffers from anorexia (reflective of increasing rates of eating disorders among Latinas), Carla and Yolanda have failed marriages, and Sofia runs away from home to be with her German boyfriend who she eventually marries.

The girls' mother models ambivalence to her daughters. She struggles with being Dominican versus American, a mother versus a career woman (she takes real estate classes and begins inventing things), and internally sees herself as a failed mother and wife. In turn the daughters are ambivalent about their mother. They are often critical of her and even as the girls grow up, they often maintain the self-absorbed perspective of a child. The mother never worked out her ambivalence, so neither did her daughters. The girls' parents want them to retain their Dominican customs while also wanting them to adapt and assimilate into American culture. The parents fail to understand that the consequences of full assimilation mean losing the original language, connection with the motherland, and even to a certain degree the mother.

In this novel the mother is not as central a figure as for example Lourdes or Celia in *Dreaming in Cuban*. The importance of the mother and her strength are more clearly seen through the prism of the cultural clash. Both the girls' mother and father want them to retain their Dominican customs and traditions while at the same time desiring that the girls adapt and assimilate into North American culture, while never really fully understanding that the consequences of their full assimilation will mean that they will lose their original language, their initial understanding of their motherland and to a certain degree their very mother.

While their mother represents the value system of their origin, the Dominican Republic, they feel they must separate from her to fully integrate into the North American way of life. The struggle to separate from mother rather than redefining the relationship is reflective of the struggle to assimilate rather than an attempt at being bicultural. This becomes very obvious in the first chapter when Yolanda has returned to the Dominican Republic, and she stumbles with the Spanish language.

She does not remember what *antojito* means; she ventures into the countryside at nightfall, and identifies herself as an American so that the men who come to help her with a flat tire will respect her. There is a certain sadness at the end of this novel because unlike the tenuous reconciliation of mothers and daughters at the end of *Dreaming in Cuban*, in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent* one understands that indeed one cannot exist in two places at once, and one is forced to question whether with migration more is lost than is gained.

2.3 The Ladies Gallery: A Memoir of Family Secrets by Irene Vilar, 1998

This memoir recounts the story of the struggle for Puerto Rican independence from the perspective of Irene Vilar, the granddaughter of Lolita Lebron, one of the four Puerto Rican Nationalists who scattered the United States House of Representatives with bullets in 1954, bringing the attention of the world to the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican Nationalist politics of the 1950s has been described by some as one of the few moments in Puerto Rican history when women could play a leading role. Through what some have called a cult of self-sacrifice, Puerto Rican Nationalist women began to participate in politics on a large scale. In this novel, the author attempts to understand her own attempt at suicide in the larger context of her family's place in history and different family members' attempts at suicide. When Lolita Lebron, the matriarch in the novel, was questioned about her intentions and role in the attack in Washington, she replied that she did not come to kill, but to die. In many ways this novel is the story of three generations of women grappling with the legacy of suicide.

Suicide is an important topic in the Latina population because Latina adolescents are more likely to attempt suicide than any other racial or ethnic group of adolescents (CDC, 2011). Suicide is a way of coping with internalized distress and a crying out for help, a frantic and perhaps last attempt to connect with others. Latinas may be away from their mother country or lack connections to relatives, communities, and familiar customs. This loss activates feelings of powerlessness and frustration. A Latina's relationship with her mother can act as a buffer and is the biggest factor in how well she copes with stress. Moreover, studies have shown that the mutuality (emotionally available atmosphere with feelings and understanding characterized by exchanges and thoughts) between girls and their mothers is lower among suicide attempters (Turner et al., 2002).

Lolita's suicide attempt can be seen as a frantic effort to connect with her mother country. In an act of frustration and desperation she sees no other way of connecting, and paradoxically attempts to disconnect herself from this world. Lolita's daughter Gladys, the author's mother, is left in Puerto Rico to be raised by relatives and married at the age of fifteen to an unfaithful husband. Gladys throws herself from a moving car in front of her eight year-old daughter, the author, and dies on the anniversary of her mother's guerrilla action. Vilar describes the first time she sees her grandmother, when she is released from federal prison to attend her daughter's funeral in Puerto Rico. There are police in riot suits surrounding her; people are pushing to see Lolita, to touch her. Lolita calls out to the crowd to remain calm for the sake of their country. She is surrounded by thousands of mourners, but she is alone. The funeral of Gladys Myrna, Vilar's mother is transformed into a Pro-Independence meeting. Motherhood and the Nation are united; the intimate moment blends with the social sphere. Lolita wraps herself in the flag of Lares, her hometown in Puerto Rico.

The author threads the stories of these women together: her childhood memories, the intimate and the social stories of Lolita Lebron the martyr, and her mother, victim of her own mother's fame. Vilar uses the metaphor of nation as woman, an ageless construct, to expose the dubious nature of this construction. The ceremonial nature of the long history of attempts at suicides and successful suicides leads one to view them as self-sacrifice. Within the context of this study and the loss of language, mother, and motherland, this memoir is perhaps the most vital in terms of the consequences of the loss of the mother. It is said that when a mother looks at her daughter, she sees herself, and it is through the mother that the daughter receives validation. As evident in the discussion of the other works, the mother transfers her values to her children. However, for the mother who is lost, the mother who intentionally commits or even attempts suicide, the daughter is left to make up her own values from her experience. She will use what she has learned from her mother's experiences and make up whatever information is missing to be able to have a model for engaging in relationships.

3. Clinical Implications

A girl's relationship with her mother is a buffer; it is the most important factor in how well she copes with stress. In the three novels analyzed, the girls looked to the mother for a working model on how to deal with acculturative stress.

Mutuality, an emotionally available atmosphere with feelings and understanding characterized by exchanges and thoughts, between girls and their mothers is lower among suicide attempters (Turner et al., 2002). For the lost mother, the daughter makes up her own values from her mother's as well as her own experiences. Respect is core to the relationship between madre e hija (mother and daughter) in Latina culture. Villanueva Abraham (2004) found that Latina girls showed significantly more respect for their mothers than African American or European American girls. Furthermore, Latina mothers reported more intense conflict with their daughters when they perceived that the daughters' level of respect was low. A good relationship with her mother helps an adolescent girl develop positive self-esteem and socially adjust well.

A close scrutiny of the relationships between mothers and daughters in these three works suggests the centrality of this relationship in the literature of Caribbean women of the diaspora, reflective of the importance of this relationship in Caribbean society. The relationship is influenced by the political scenario that surrounds it and the different losses that these women experience; and some losses are a direct effect of migration. The mother/daughter relationship lays the framework for a daughter to evaluate self, others, and experiences for all future relationships. The conflict, ambivalence, and psychological development of these women can be mutually resolved to help redefine the mother / daughter relationship rather than to terminate it.

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