

THE MOTHER - DAUGHTER CONCEPT IN KAINE AGARY'S YELLOW-YELLOW AND JAMAICA KINCAID'S THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER

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Abstract

This work probes the mother-daughter relationship in African and Caribbean literature using Kaine Agary's Yellow – Yellow and Jamaica Kincaid's The Autobiography of My Mother. It assumes that the mother–daughter relationship is a universal issue but it is experienced differently because of the complexities of kinship relationship in Africa and the New World. Since blacks in Africa and the diaspora share a common ancestry, culture forms a vital link between both continents. Therefore, the Social Learning Theory which is a feminist perspective to the study of mothers and daughters in a socio-cultural setting is deployed here to investigate the mothers–daughter relationship within the black family network—a phenomenon which projects the extended family through blood mothers and other mothers. The mother – daughter relationship is one of the main influences on the identity development process of daughters from childhood to adulthood. The nature of this relationship is defined by the environment in which the mothers and daughters find themselves.

Literature records human relationships which include male-female, husband-wife, father-son, mother-son and father-daughter relationships, among many others. In the 20th century the mother-daughter relationship came to the centre of discourse as an aftermath of the sexual revolution (feminism) which started in the west.

The bond between mothers and daughters is particularly unique because, of all the external forces that shape a young girl's sense of self, the mother is the most influential. Most often, it is through the mother that a young girl learns what is expected of her as a female child.

However, the mother-daughter relation is a recent development in African Diaspora literature that has helped in investigating the complexities of kinship relationship in Africa and the new world. The wind of female liberation in the west, and its effect on Africans through formal education increasing industrialization, urbanization and its attendant economic hardship. The tradition which made the man the breadwinner of the family began to change, such that it became increasingly difficult for him

to fend for the family alone. The woman then had to play an increasingly important role in the economic survival of her family as well as the primary mother role of training her daughters in domestic work.

Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the mother-daughter relation in Agary's *Yellow – Yellow*, and Kincaid's *the Autobiography of my mother*, respectively. The social learning theory which is a feminist perspective of assessing mothers and daughters in a social, cultural and racial environment.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the growing amount of research on women studies, there are few studies on the concept of mother-daughter relationship. These studies evoke serious concern to literary scholars, since mothers and daughters collectively experience sexism, racial inequality and injustice. The questions now are: how do these issues affect the daughter's passage from childhood to adulthood? Are there responsibilities that mothers owe daughters as role models? How does their awareness or otherwise affect the natural/communal bond that exist between mothers and daughters? This study seeks to unravel the issues surrounding the aforementioned questions in African and Caribbean literatures using Agary's *yellow – Yellow* and Kincaid's *The Authobiography of My Mother*.

Objectives of the Study

This study is undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the concept of mother – daughter relationship in the two novels.
2. To explore feminist perspective on mother-daughter relationship.
3. To compare and contrast the mother-daughter concept in the two novels.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts feminism as the theoretical model for investigating Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Kincaid's *the Autobiography of my mother*. The word feminism means different things to different people because it includes a variety of perspectives and ideas. According to Kemp and Squires (1997:1) "the diversity within feminism is now well established". It has helped to define feminism in different ways. Hooks (2000:26) defines feminism, as "the full political, social and economic equality for men and women. It is a movement to end woman's oppression". The author's definition reveals that feminists seek the liberation of women in every area of their lives, be it political, social and economic. According to Anderson and Hysock (2006:10). Feminism begins with the premise that women and men's position in society are the result of social, not natural or biological factors. Although different varieties of feminist thought have developed, feminists generally see social institutions and social attitudes as the basis for women's position in society.

This shows that feminism is premised on belief and actions which encourage equality of men and women in the society.

Feminists have attempted to study mothers and daughters from two theoretical perspectives (psychoanalytic theory and social learning theory). The Social Learning Theory is an applied science that explains the way people learn behavior and Albert Bandura is the leading proponent of this theory. According to Jeanne Ormrod (1999:1), “Social Learning Theory, focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning imitation and modeling”. This shows that everybody learns by observing others when they act or react and the effect is that positive behaviour begets positive behavior just as negative behavior gives birth to a chaotic state of mind. The adults that have the most influence on children’s socialization are usually their parents. Anderson and Hysock (2006:44) explain that, “Social learning theorists believe that children model themselves on the behavior and attitudes of same sex parents”.

This shows that sons learn gender roles from their fathers, while daughters learn gender roles by observing, imitating, and modeling after their mothers’ behavior. According to Carol Boyd (1989:1), feminists use the Social Learning Theory to “attempt to explain why girls become like their mothers”. Thus, we can say that women need women as role models.

Aside this, the social learning theorists see environment as a model to reinforce what the child will become, Patricia Collins (2000:2), stresses the centrality of the extended family and the “resilient woman-centered networks of blood mothers and other mothers” to the concept of black motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship. By implication, Social Learning Theory examines the reality in which the mothers and other mothers act as role models to their daughters. The submission therefore, is that daughters turn out to be like the mothers because of what their mothers and environment model for them.

Bio-Data of the Authors

Kaine Agary grew up in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, where she is also the editor of TAKAII magazine and *Yellow* – yellow is her first work of fiction. She is a contemporary writer who looks at issues concerning mothers and daughters in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Jamaica Kincaid was born in Antigua in 1949. She has become one of the most influential and important authors writing from the Caribbean. She has authored many novels including *at the bottom of the River*, *A Small Place*, *The Autobiography of My Mother* among others.

Comparative Study of Agary's and Kincaid's Perspective on Mother – Daughter Relationship

In *Yellow – Yellow*, Agary (2006:4) captures the mother –daughter relationship with its conflict. The novel is set in Warri and Port Harcourt, both in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria; the novel centers on Zilayefa the protagonist, her mother and the other mothers.

The novel begins with Zilayefa also called Yellow-Yellow and her mother (Bibi) confronting the devastating results of crude oil spillage on her farmland. It shows how oil spillage destroyed her mother's main source of income, creating a lot of hardship and poverty for them. Her mother is an adolescent single parent. She is a product of a (Greek father and an Ijaw mother. Her father impregnated her mother at 18 yrs and was gone. Thus, she was left to saddle the responsibility of motherhood.

While, in the *Autobiography of My Mother Jamaica* Kincaid captures a mother daughter relationship that is evident in the social order within a family in the Caribbean; a relationship with no emotional intensity, fraught with conflict, tension, bitterness and separation. The novel is the memoir of the 70 year old Xuela Claudette Richardson, who has spent her whole life on the Island of Dominica. The novel is told from the point of view of Xuela who describes the relationship with her mother and other mothers in the novel. The novel begins with the statement “my mother died at the moment I was born, and before my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity...” (Kincaid1997:3). This shows the physical absence of Xuela's mother and also, the mother-daughter relationship evident in the novel is rooted in separation; as such, it generates fear and tension.

Perspective on the Mother-Daughter Relationship

Agary and Kincaid, explore the mother-daughter relationship in their societies. Agary from the African standpoint, while Kincaid reflects the Caribbean situation. Agary shows through Zilayefa that every daughter must seek out a world in which she recreates her individuality.

Nevertheless, she emphasizes the necessity for the daughter to stay connected to her mother and othermothers as the rot of folk experience as well as project the important of positive female role model in the community. On the other hand, Kincaid presents the effects of mother and othermothers who are negative role models to the daughter. But despite the difference in views and cultural background there are similarities in their perspectives.

Agary and Kincaid have the gift of describing the relationship between mothers and daughters in a vivid way just as they unravel the influence of the environment on the mother-daughter relationship. Both novels contain a story about young females who are in search of their own self and identity. Both stories are written from the female perspective and describe the profound influence of mothers and othermothers on the

lives of the daughters even when the daughters explicitly refuse to live their lives according to the life styles of their mothers.

In both novels, the daughterly perspective is predominant. In *Yellow-Yellow*, nearly all narrative is presented from a daughterly perspective; and so, the reader gets insight into the daughter's feelings about her connection to her mother, but the reader never really learns how the mother truly feels about her connection to her daughter. This shows from the structure of the narrative, which is primarily based on the identity development of the protagonist, Zilayefa, and her perception of the mother – daughter relationship. The point of view of her mother and the othermothers is not clearly depicted.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the daughterly perspective is also predominant. The whole novel contains stories of the daughter and her mothers influence during her childhood and their remaining influence on her adult life. For example Xuela is the one telling the story about the absence of her biological mother from birth and the effect of the othermothers on her life from childhood to adulthood. Therefore in both novels, the maternal discourse is sparsely present as such there is no balance in the perspectives on the mother-daughter-relationship from both mothers and daughters. Hirsch (1989:163) points out that “feminist writing and scholarship, continuing in large part to adopt daughterly perspective, can be said to collude with patriarchy in placing mothers into the position of the object - thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility”. Capturing the mother from the object position, denies the mother the right to be heard. Therefore the mother cannot tell her own experience of the mother-daughter relationship from the subject position.

The differences in the perspective of Agary and Kincaid are seen in the use of the first person narrative in their novels. The first person provides total subjectivity and all the immediacy, intimacy, and urgency of the daughter's conflicts. The first person also shows character awareness at telling a story but both authors explore this style differently. In Agary's *Yellow – Yellow*, Zilayefa uses the first person. She starts her narrative from when she is conscious of her environment. This depicts the age in which Zilayefa starts her narrative, which should be within the age of adolescence. The narrative moves forward and backward in time as Zilayefa narrates stories about her present then goes back to the past to narrate incidents that lead to her birth. She does this in an omniscient voice. This gives the reader knowledge about what each character does and thinks.

Agary also uses the first person narrative technique in more complex ways in the novel. She writes in the voice of Zilayefa which gives her control over events in the text. At the same time, Agary inserts the voices of other characters in the novel still in the first person.

Academic Scholarship

In *The Autobiography of My Mother* even though Kincaid tells the story in the voice of Xuela which is the first person, the novel uses the omniscient voice all through. Xuela has absolute control and authority over the lives of other characters. She is all-knowing, having knowledge of the present as well as the past.

Conclusion

The mother-daughter relationship in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* have been examined with reference to the social learning theory, which is a feminist theoretical framework for studying mothers and daughters in the society. Though the two authors are from different cultural backgrounds they tend to examine the same issues but with slight differences which are dictated by cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, the mother-daughter relationship in *Yellow – Yellow* and *The Autobiography of My mother* is one of the main influences on the identity development of the daughters from childhood to adulthood and that this relationship is the outcome of the environment in which the mothers and daughters find themselves.

Recommendations

Too little effort has been put in Mother-Daughter concept in African literature. What should be done now is to examine the Mother-Daughter concept adopting a psychoanalytical framework. Also, effort should be made to examine the language used in Kaine Agary's *Yellow* and Jamaica Kincaid's *the Autobiography of my Mother*.

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