

# African American Mothers & Daughters:

Socialization, Distance, & Conflict

The black women's literary tradition began in a conscious effort to create a space for black women's writing and to illustrate a distinction between black women's reality and the realities of others (Christian 348–359). The literature within the tradition is influenced by how black women perceive themselves and the world around them. As a result, identity is an important part of African-American women's literature (Hooper 74–81). Race, class, gender, and sexuality are all components of one's identity and are critical in the formation of one's lived experiences (Crenshaw 357–383). Family, from its structure to the function of specific members within the unit, also has a significant influence on one's identity development. Relationships with family members help young people develop a sense of self-awareness, pride, and individuality. One of the most significant familial relationships in black women's literature is the one that exists between mothers and daughters.

Collins argues for the importance of including the lived experiences of black women when thinking critically about motherhood (45–65). Black feminist theory offers a useful framework for thinking deeply about the black mother-daughter relationship. The theory calls for a careful look at how race, class, and gender, as interlocking oppressions, inextricably impact the mother-daughter relationship. Here, I use black feminist theory as a tool to look at the mother-daughter relationships in Angela Johnson's *Toning the Sweep* and *Heaven*, Rita Williams-Garcia's *Blue Tights* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, and Jacqueline Woodson's *The Dear One* and *I Hadn't Meant to Tell*

## Synopses of Novels

Johnson, Angela. *Toning the Sweep*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.

Emily, the protagonist, and her mother visit Emily's grandmother, Ola, in the California desert. They are preparing to take Ola home to Ohio with them because she is dying of cancer. Emily learns a great deal about her grandmother, her grandfather, her mother, and herself while videotaping her grandmother's friends.

Johnson, Angela. *Heaven*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1998.

Marley discovers her biological father's twin brother and his wife adopted her when she was much younger. She struggles with notions of family and identity, as she attempts to learn about a mother she does not remember.

Williams-Garcia, Rita. *Blue Tights*. New York: Puffin, 1988.

Joyce Collins, an aspiring dancer, wants to feel love and a sense of belonging. At school she doesn't fit in with her middle-class schoolmates, and she believes her ballet teacher is discriminating against her. At home she struggles to cope with her fragile relationship with her mother.

Williams-Garcia, Rita. *Like Sisters on the Homefront*. New York: Lodestar, 1995.

When Gayle becomes pregnant with her second child, her mother forces her to do two

things that change the direction of her life: 1) Gayle has an abortion and 2) she goes to Georgia to live with relatives. In Georgia, she learns the rich history of her family and improves her self-value.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *The Dear One*. New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1991.

Afeni becomes unhappy when Catherine, her mother, decides to take in Rebecca, a college friend's pregnant daughter. In time, however, the two girls put aside their differences in an effort to forge a promising friendship.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1994.

Thirteen-year-old Marie recalls her friendship with Lena, and how they bonded as a result of being motherless.

*You This* (See Sidebar for Summary). Each of these novels offers rich, poignant depictions of black mother-daughter bonds. Three themes that merit discussion shape the mother-daughter connections in these six award-winning novels: socialization<sup>1</sup>, distance, and conflict.

## Socialization

Societal messages that devalue and debase people of color and the poor influence the identity formation of black girls. As a result, Wade-Gayles asserts that black mothers “socialize their daughters to be independent, strong and self-confident” (12). This can be difficult because, while black mothers want to teach their daughters these concepts, they must also prepare their daughters to live in a society that devalues them. This is seen clearly in an exchange in between Catherine and Afeni (*The Dear One*). Afeni says, “There’s always going to be someone deciding what I can and can’t do. If it’s not because I’m a kid, it’ll be because I’m a woman. If it’s not because I’m a woman, it’ll be because I’m black” (Woodson, 31). Catherine replies, with “something like fear” in her

1. I realize socialization is an overlapping theme, as distance and conflict impact socialization.

facial expression, “Don’t ever feel like you don’t have power [ . . . ]” (Woodson, 31). Catherine’s response expresses the contradictory teachings of black mothers. Though Catherine wants to prepare Afeni to live in a world that does not value her, she also wants to empower her.

Afeni’s mother also strives to teach her about African American pride amongst middle-class black professionals. Her mother is the vice president of a public relations firm, and her mother’s friends, Marion and Bernadette, are an attorney and teacher, respectively. Catherine wants Afeni to see that black professionals are important and valuable to the black community. She also suggests Afeni learn the significance of middle-class black people working together to help blacks who are less fortunate. Catherine makes this evident to Afeni when she joins with Marion to help a college friend’s pregnant daughter.

In a similar vein, Diane (*I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*) teaches Marie to respect all people regardless of socioeconomic levels. Though her father repeatedly refers to poor whites as trash, her mother insists that they be referred to as people. For Diane, it is important that Marie learns that “[w]e [are] all just people here” (Woodson, 59) and that she should acknowledge that poor people, regardless of race, are disenfranchised, which is one of the hallmarks of black feminism (King, 294–317).

In Joseph’s 1991 study, she expresses a particular interest in how adolescent mothers socialize their daughters:

As the children of the adolescent mothers grow older, what messages can the mothers give their daughters about marriage; about men; about getting ahead in the world and getting an education? These are the major lessons that traditional Black mothers give to their daughters, and they are important ones (101).

Because of bitter and hostile experiences with men, Aunt Em and Minnie (*Blue Tights*) attempt to advise, and, in some cases, warn, Joyce about men (Bethel 176–188). At sixteen, Aunt Em had become pregnant and had given herself a coat hanger abortion when she realized that the baby’s father had deserted her. Also a deserted teen mother, Minnie had Joyce just turning sixteen; as a result, Minnie becomes frightened that “history will repeat itself” when she learns J’had is interested in Joyce. Socialization becomes an important part of the mother-daughter

relationship, as mothers hope to isolate their daughters “. . . from the dangers of the larger world until they are old enough and strong enough to function as autonomous women” (Troester, 163). Yet, for some mothers, adequate time for socializing daughters is often hard-won, if won at all.

## Distance

In spite of attempts at mother-daughter closeness in some of these novels, some mothers are still distant. The distance between mothers and daughters can be labeled as physical and/or emotional distance. Physical distance refers to the actual physical separation of mothers from their daughters for various reasons, most of which include some type of work. Emotional distance involves the mothers’ inability or unwillingness to express affection toward their daughters. Both types of distance are detrimental to the mother-daughter relationship and make it difficult for mothers to help their daughters negotiate identity formation.

Wade-Gayles suggests that black women have an approach to mothering that is influenced by their socioeconomic standing in society (8–12). For this reason, a number of the mothers in the novels discussed here work full-time jobs, creating distance, whether physical or emotional, between themselves and their daughters. The girls repeatedly refer to the amount of work their mothers do or to their mothers’ physical distance because of work. Several times throughout *Blue Tights*, Joyce and Minnie’s relationship is described as being similar to a relationship between sisters, partly because of their closeness in ages, but there are also times when Minnie distances herself from Joyce because she chooses to focus on her career. As a teenager, Minnie leaves Joyce with Aunt Em while she dances professionally. By the time Minnie decides to stop dancing, Minnie tells Joyce she is “too big for all of that ‘come-to-Mommy’ nonsense” (Williams-Garcia, 102). Later, Minnie’s decision to pursue a degree in nursing and marry a man with several children takes her further away from Joyce. Working a part-time job and attending school, the mother-daughter gap widens and physical distance continues to be a problem even after Minnie becomes a nurse.

Similarly, Afeni’s mother works “sixty to seventy hours a week” (86). Initially, Afeni does not realize how problematic this is because she considers herself to be a “true-blue loner” (86). Afeni thinks, “I liked being by myself and thinking thoughts no one else knew about, not even Mama” (86). This assessment changes later, however, when Afeni sees her relationship with her mother through Rebecca’s eyes and accuses Catherine of putting her own daughter second: “You want a career and stuff. You don’t have time for a daughter,” (83). It is important to note, however, that Afeni feels comfortable having such a difficult conversation with her mother, which suggests that the two share a certain amount of closeness despite some physical and emotional distance.

Conversely, Gayle (*Like Sisters on the Homefront*) does not enjoy the comfort of communicating with her mother. In fact, it is clear that Gayle does not know her mother well long before Auntie says, “I get the feeling you don’t know your mother” (117). Gayle’s mother, Ruth Bell, is the sole provider for her family; as a result, she spends a significant amount of her time working outside the home. This is problematic for Gayle as it makes it easier for her to participate in adult practices such as sexual intercourse. Because Ruth Bell cannot be home to supervise her daughter, she is unaware that Gayle’s affair with a married man is initiated in her home and ends with Gayle’s first pregnancy.

When Gayle goes into labor, she is refused anesthesia because she has no advocate to protest on her behalf since, as Gayle explains to Cookie, “Mama couldn’t take off from work early and I didn’t have no doctor [. . .]” (45). When Ruth Bell does request a day off, not only is she penalized via lost wages, but her dignity is compromised, also. Gayle listens as Ruth Bell uses her “best ‘work voice’” while talking to her employer and surmises, “now Mama was angry because she had to sound like a child begging permission to take care of business” (2).

Ruth Bell’s inability to be physically close to Gayle weighs heavily on how Gayle feels emotionally about her mother. When Aunt Virginia tells Gayle about her mother’s past, particularly her relationship with her father, Williams-Garcia writes, “[Gayle] didn’t want to understand Mama, because understanding would loosen the grip on her heart” (120). Ruth Bell seems to

be partly responsible for Gayle's tough exterior. After Ruth Bell forces Gayle to get an abortion, "[She] wouldn't give Gayle room to vent her feelings about her ordeal [ . . . ]" (9) Refusing to allow anything to make her cry, not even the pain from the abortion, Gayle tells Cookie, "Me cry so Mama could start hollering 'What you crying for?' Please" (45).

Collins asserts, "For far too many Black mothers, the demands of providing for children are so demanding that affection often must wait until the basic needs of physical survival are satisfied" (55). Similarly, King maintains, "[W]hen black women become the primary or sole earners for households, researchers and public analysts interpret this self-sufficiency as pathology, as deviance, as a threat to black family life" (298). Black women view their labor quite differently, however. For them, work outside the home is an expression of love for their families, particularly their children, not negligence.

When Joyce feels rejected by J'had, Minnie cannot understand why Joyce would jeopardize her future in exchange for physical intimacy with a man. Nevertheless, Joyce explains her motive as a desire to be loved. Upon hearing this, Minnie becomes even more perplexed, as she insists that she gives Joyce love: "Don't I feed you? Put a roof over your head? Scrimp and put up with trash on the job so you can go to any college you want? That's all for you" (Williams-Garcia, 113).

Afeni is also unaware that she and her mother interpret love and affection differently. Several times throughout *The Dear One*, Afeni feels her mother does not care about her, yet she never considers that her mother expresses her love via opportunities she makes available to Afeni. Catherine tells her, "Don't you ever let me hear you say I don't love you, because if I'm not showing it with words, I'm showing it with actions! 'I love you' is in every meal you eat, every piece of clothing you wear, and every clean sheet you sleep on!" (84). This distance, emotional and physical, often confuses the girls and presents a challenge to mothers who attempt to socialize them and help shape their identities.

## Conflict

Emotional and physical distance between mothers and daughters often lead to conflict. Mothers and

daughters in the novels analyzed here express differences in opinion via verbal disagreements, and in at least one mother-daughter duo, physical altercations. For example, tension exists between Gayle and Ruth Bell for several reasons (*Like Sisters on the Homefront*). Early in the novel, Gayle admits that Ruth Bell "be pissing her off" partly because of Ruth Bell's treatment of her and also because she believes her brother is her mother's "favorite" because he looks like his father.

However, a large part of the antagonism between Gayle and her mother is the result of Ruth Bell's discovery of Gayle's second pregnancy. Immediately, Ruth Bell exerts control over Gayle, insisting that she get an abortion and move "down Souf" with extended family. On the way to the clinic, Ruth Bell argues, "As long as you fourteen and in *my* house, you mines [ . . . ] . Only one woman in my house. I say what goes on in my four walls [ . . . ]" [italics in original] (4). Mother and daughter seem to be in a tug-of-war even when it appears that Ruth Bell is in control. In her final effort to prove Ruth Bell wrong, Gayle verbally attempts to exercise her right to keep the baby, maintaining, "That 'doption sounds good" even as she realizes "it was hype. Ain't nobody breaking they necks to adopt black babies" (6). Gayle, fully aware that she must submit to Ruth Bell's wishes, gets the abortion, though she is forced to request local anesthesia because "[t]hey didn't have extra money for sleep" (7). Powerless, Gayle also goes on the life-changing trip to Georgia to live with her uncle and his family.

Fear fuels the conflict between Joyce and Minnie. One of the first causes of Minnie's fear occurs when Joyce tells Minnie that her stepfather is looking at her inappropriately. Minnie's first reaction is to slap Joyce. However, when Minnie observes that her husband's "eyes are follow[ing] the twelve-year-old girl in and out of the living room," she leaves him (Williams-Garcia, *Blue Tights*, 21). The tension and fear further increases when Joyce, feeling neglected by her aunt and her mother, begins to reach out to J'had. Angry and confused because she does not know how to prevent Joyce from repeating her mistakes, Minnie tells Joyce she does not love her. Joyce believes this, and continues to look for love elsewhere until she realizes it is actually inside her.

## Conclusion

Contemporary novels such as the ones discussed here continue to shine light on the complex role of motherhood. Analyzing the mothering role, in general, and the mother-daughter relationship in particular, provides insight into how race and class largely impact mothering. Black feminist theory is especially useful for considering some of the nuances of mother-daughter relationships influenced by race, class and gender. As these novels indicate, black mothers, even in the midst of conflict, and in spite of physical and emotional distance, are determined to socialize their daughters, impacting their overall development into womanhood.

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