Voices Of Women Writers: Lessons Learned From Mothers And Daughters Essay, Research Paper

Parents play a crucial role in the development of children, varying from culture to culture. Although imperative, the mother and daughter relationship can be trivial. Many women writers have exercised their knowledge and shared their feelings in their works to depict the importance and influence of mothers upon daughters. Jamaica Kincaid, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Kiana Davenport are only three of the many women writers who have included mother and daughter themes in their texts. These writers explore the journeys of women in search of spiritual, mental and individual knowledge. As explained by these authors, their mothers? words and actions often influence women both negatively and positively. These writers also show the effects of a mother?s lesson on a daughter, while following women?s paths to discovery of their own voice or identity. In Kincaid?s poem, Girl; Hong Kingston?s novel, Woman Warrior; and Davenport?s short story, The Lipstick Tree, various themes are presented in contrasting views and contexts, including the influence of mothers upon daughters.

It is said that a girl can often develop some of her mother?s characteristics. Although, in their works, Kincaid, Hong Kingston and Davenport depict their protagonists searching for their own identities, yet being influenced in different ways by their mothers. Jamaica Kincaid?s poem Girl, is about a young woman coming-of-age receiving helpful advice from her mother. In this poem, Kincaid addresses several issues where a mother?s influence is beneficial to a young woman?s character. The mother, or speaker, in Girl, offers advice to her daughter- advice that she otherwise would not learn without being told or shown. The mother advises the daughter about everyday tasks, and how to go about them properly (in her opinion).

?Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to day; don?t walk bare-head in the hot sun;?this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; ? this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep the whole house??

Most importantly, the mother offers advice that only a mother should. Although she is being informative and authoritative, the mother?s tone is often condescending. In particular, she repeatedly utters the same phrase to warn her daughter of becoming a slut.

??On Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming;?this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming;? this is how to behave in the presence of men who don?t know you very well, and this way they won?t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming??

Above all, the mother in Girl wants her daughter to strive for what is correct according to her opinion and what society suggests is proper. As with any mother, the daughter is often a reflection of her own character. Judging from the length of the flow of the poem and continuity, except for occasional semi-colons, the mother is adamant about her daughter?s positive development into a woman. She presents herself as domineering and venerable. And so, when the daughter interjects with two statements, the mother overrides her, especially at the end of the poem.

??but what if the baker won?t let me feel the bread? ; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won?t let near the bread??

Although it is not defined whether or not the daughter follows her mother?s advice, it is obvious that the mother wants her daughter to mold her character into what she sees as proper. In order to find her own voice and identity, the daughter must first learn from these lessons that her mother has provided, like feeling the bread for herself. And from her mistake and/ or successes, the daughter will discover her own identity, yet reflecting her mother?s character.

In Hong Kingston?s novel, Woman Warrior, the mother?s influence upon her daughter is viewed in a different context. In Woman Warrior, Hong Kingston preludes her cultural journey to discovering her identity with a talk story from her mother in the first chapter, No Name Woman. Unlike Kincaid?s portrayal of a generalized mother-daughter relationship, Hong Kingston specifically addresses the mother?s influence upon her Asian-American daughter. In this novel, Hong Kingston describes the puzzling pursuit to understanding not only her identity as a woman, but also as an Asian-American woman. Hong Kingston displays the Chinese? dissenting view of women by using anecdotes and talk-stories, specifically her mother?s story about her aunt?s suicide and adulterous pregnancy. This specific talk-story is her mother?s way of advising her to be a perfect female.

??Don?t let your father know I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don?t humiliate us. You wouldn?t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful??

Hong Kingston?s novel explores her female and Chinese identity. Because of her heritage, and mother?s influence, Hong Kingston learns to accept her childhood and character by accepting her mother?s stories as an integral part of her identity. Also, the fact that she retells the stories shows the significance they had for her. From Hong Kingston?s recollection of the Fa Mu Lan legend of a warrior woman which her mother told her, tradition is seen as an important influence upon her character.

??After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father?s place in battle. Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war t settle in the village. I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman??

From this passage, Hong Kingston defines her strife to find her identity, not the identity her mother assumes for her. Her mother supplies the fuel for her children to reject tradition as Fa Mu Lan ironically does. Hong Kingston searches to understand who she is meant to be. She explains that she wouldn?t be satisfied as wife and slave, instead she wants to have her own independence that would allow cultural contradictions. From other talk stories, Hong Kingston shows how her mother has affected her spiritually, physically, and mentally. She shows that she can take care of herself and portray herself in a masculine way. In specific, through all her experiences with the old man and woman, she learns to become tough and convinces herself of her own strength.

??The old people waved once, slid down the mountain, and disappeared around a tree. The old woman, good with the bow and arrow, took them with her; the old man took the water gourd. I would have to survive barehanded? I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.

From these stories, Hong Kingston shows that even though she is female, she can be whomever she wants, despite society?s view or cultural expectations. Hong Kingston?s portrayal of warrior woman depicts her opposition to her mother?s presumption of becoming a wife and slave. From resolving her opposition to her mother?s views, Hong Kingston also reveals her feminine pride.

??There is an outward tendency in females which meant getting straight A?s for the good of my future husband?s family, not my own? I would show my mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency. I stopped getting straight A?s??

From her search of identity, Hong Kingston reveals that becoming an individual provides spiritual, mental, and physical strength. By opposing her mother?s assumptions, defying cultural tradition and learning for herself, Hong Kingston illustrates her individual voice as heroic and fearless.

In a different perspective, Kiana Davenport, defines a different type of warrior woman. In Davenport?s The Lipstick Tree, she uses fiction as a tool to comprehend a young woman?s search for identity. Similar to Woman Warrior, The Lipstick Tree unravels the young woman?s discovery of her identity based on cultural rejections. In this story, Eva was against becoming what her family expects of her. Instead, she strives to become more civilized and modern, unlike her village.

?Eva wondered if this was her future- a life of squatting in the bush, of hookworm and tattooed cheeks, and flesh caked with animal fat to ward off night chill and malarial mosquitoes??

Eva?s maternal influences were not only from her mother, but her friend Agnes. After witnessing Agnes? misery and later, suicide, Eva was inspired to move beyond Sepik and become what she wanted to be, not what her village expected.

??Eva was strong knowing whatever she would become, she was becoming now in flight??

As a child witnessing her mother and grandmother, Eva admired these women for their physical and mental strengths. Although, she did not want to become these women. Instead, she wanted to possess a different type of strength: spiritual and individual strength.

??She watched elders of her clan who bathed only when it rained?She studied her mother, head bowed from a life of carrying her bilum? hanging down her back from a braided strap across her head?And her grandmother had once hypnotized a python, dragging it home like a thick garden hose??

Like Hong Kingston and Kincaid?s characters, Davenport uses Eva to show that feminine individuality is imperative, and that the mother?s character usually influences the daughter. In Eva?s case, her mother influences her to find her own identity beyond all familiarity. Davenport shows that Eva?s newfound strength is individual, yet it reflects aspects of her mother.

?In the dark, she pulled an old sweater from her bilum, falling asleep wrapped in the smell of her childhood?She climbed to the top of the bunker again, and studied the horizon, seeing herself decanted into the future, going even further than WeWak??

Jamaica Kincaid, Maxine Hong Kingston, Kiana Davenport utilize the methods of fiction and non-fiction to represent influential relationships such as the mother and daughter. In each of these texts, the writers present their perspective and knowledge, varying by culture and context. From each writer, the expression that individuality and lessons learned from mothers are essential for the development for a woman?s identity. But most importantly, these writers evoke that it is beneficial to discover femininity and strength by going beyond tradition and the norm.

Davenport, Kiana. The Lipstick Tree. Women Writers coursepack. Fall 1999.

http://www.crwrl.utexas.edu/~natasha/usauto\_html/kingston/gender.html.

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