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Narrating Daughterhood: Family Dynamics in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction

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Abstract: This article aims to look at the different portrayals of daughters in the novels of Joyce Carol Oates, by examining various representations of their identities, the challenges that they come across, and the traces of their parents. Through analysis and interpretation, this study will shed light on the complexities of the daughter characters and their role as depicted in *We Were The Mulvanyes* (1996) and *Missing Mom* (2005). The role of the daughter in the context of American cultural norms within the familial frame is deeply rooted in traditional gender roles that frequently define their identities concerning the structure of the family. The typical image of a daughter is that of a reflector of family values, one that is expected to obey the rules of the family and thus the society. Through the characterization of the daughter, this paper will also look into the narrative structure that portrays the characters' emotional experiences in the novel.

Keywords: daughterhood, patriarchy, family, narration

Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates' name is among the most distinguished American writers who explore the dark aspects of American society, with an approach that is characterized by neutrality and skill to avoid overt moral judgments. In her *Why is your Fiction so Violent* (1981) article, Oates comments on frequently being asked questions about the reason why her fiction revolves around depictions of all forms of violence, highlighting that such questions allude to the idea that she should be "writing on "domestic" and "subjective" material, in the manner of Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf, that [she] should leave large social-philosophical issues to men." In this respect, it could be argued that through her fiction Oates challenges the phallocentric observations that serious literature reflects on serious matters.

Her portrayal of contemporary America serves as a social criticism, highlighting its dark aspects, in opposition to the idea of America being the land of opportunity and democracy. As Rastogi & Chatterjee (2020) observe the American home has been "celebrated as the site of familial affection, moral instruction and conjugal bliss, the idyllic suburban Christian homestead in America is a utopian microcosm of the society wherein decorum and satisfaction is proverbially derived through obedience, service and sacrifice" (p. 69).

Popular culture has generally depicted the American suburban home as a symbol of the quintessential American Dream. However, this idealized portrayal of domesticity has been seriously criticized by social theorists. Beneath the alluring mask of post-war domesticity, a very complex and oppressive reality of women is hidden. This home is no longer the archetypal heaven, it is a space where women are subject to strict rules and structural violence.

Being a female writer, Oates's primary focus is on female characters who are products of American society, displaying different ways of mechanisms that help them cope with social expectations. Whether they are mothers, daughters, or single women, they all share a common threat: male violence. Through her narratives, Oates investigates the ability (in some cases the disability) of women to overcome and challenge the oppressive structures of the patriarchal social order. These characters, very frequently do not meet the requirements of the social expectations, yet, against all odds, they manage to recognize and reclaim their power and identity.

The role of the daughter in the context of American cultural norms within the familial frame is deeply rooted in traditional gender roles that frequently define their identities in relation to the structure of the family. The typical image of a daughter is that

of a reflector of family values, they are expected to obey the rules of the family thus the society. These limitations put limits to their autonomy and enact certain roles and trajectories for their lives, imposing the notion that a daughter's primary role is to represent her family, and eventually create a family of her own. Creighton and Binette (2006) observe that Oates' daughter reflects a unique product of a complex environmental, cultural and psychological relationship. She does not idealize their struggles, nor are they simple stereotypes. With every character's encounter with a challenge, she conveys the complexities of being a woman in contemporary America. They further point out that an important aspect of the daughters' re-examination of the lives of their mothers happens through their awareness of the social demands and the systematic inequalities. This realization does not come easily, but, they gain the power to question and challenge these forces. Through the detailed depiction of mother-daughter relationships, Oates implicitly calls for a reconsideration and reimagination of the structures that lay the foundations of the American society.

The Father and Daughter Dynamics

Published in 1996, *We Were the Mulvaney*s explores the notion of daughterhood within the context of the Mulvaney family's tragic "fall from grace". The Mulvaney family story is set in Mount Ephriam, a fictional town in upstate New York. In the beginning, the Mulvaneys, reflect an ultimate image of the ideal American family: Michael the father, a hardworking charismatic businessman, and Corianne the mother, met at the early stages of their adulthood, they loved each other and their children. In the first part, from the mid-1950's to 1970's, Oates makes sure to portray their perfect family life up until 1976, when Marianne, Mulvaney's good daughter, popular enough to be the high school's prom is sexually assaulted on the dance night by Zack Lundt her senior, a boy whose father is also an upper-class businessman in Mount Ephriam. This traumatic event destroys the idyllic image of a happy family, leading to their tragic downfall.

"Softly she said, "It's Marianne, darling. Something has happened to her."

"Marianne? What? Where is she?"

She gripped Michael's hand tighter to steady him. There was no way to say this, yet she would find a way.

"She's all right now. She's upstairs in her room. I mean, she isn't in danger and she isn't ill. But something has happened to her."

That sick, sinking look in Michael Mulvaney's face. He was a man, he knew. The father of a 17-year-old daughter. He knew." (*We Were the Mulvaney*s, p133)

The tension in Corianne's words and her attempt to calm her husband before breaking the news are not sufficient to soften the effect of dread and anger reflected in his awareness of the potential violence that Marianne has gone through. Although Marianne is "safe" his response is marked by a "sick and sinking look" a reaction that leads to further violence. His anger suggests that his patriarchal role as a protector fails when his daughter is sexually assaulted. In his world, Marianne is not "all right", she's ruined, and she is dead. At the center of the family's downfall, lies Michael's inability to provide emotional support to his daughter. In his eyes, Marianne has violated the family's code of conduct, this, in turn, is perceived as a personal attack, which serves as a catalyst of the destruction of the family, further reflecting on the deeply rooted misogyny of America's bigoted patriarchal social order.

Profound to the story is the narrative voice of Judd, the youngest in the Mulvaney family. From his point of view, the reader can get insights into the communication dynamics of the family, especially after the traumatic experience of his sister. Judd's narrative point of view poses several questions regarding the objectivity of the story that he is telling posing questions about the reliability of his account. At the beginning of the story, he reveals that: "We Mulvaney's would have died for one another, but we had secrets from one another just the same" (p. 5). This observation indicates to the complexity of the familial relations. Even though the Mulvaney's reflect an image of loyalty and unity, the secrets they keep from each other reveal the fragility of their ties. Judd's account reflects a certain ambiguity in terms of the accuracy of the narration. He being the narrator and a member of the family, alludes to the fact that he has exclusive access to the private moments of the family members, yet this also suggests that his limited understanding and personal biases also influence his view. The family's "secrets" hinder his ability to provide an objective and complete account of the story.

Nathan Shank (2017) argues about mental underrepresentation, which he defines as a depiction of a narrator's or character's thoughts with lesser cognitive traits than a reader can typically expect, this type of "representation" creates two interconnected purposes: to emphasize the trauma experienced by his sister Marianne and to help explain the ambiguities of the narrative. This narrative ambiguity affects the way the story conveys the sexual assault of Marianne and her experienced trauma. Even though, the purpose of his narration is to depict the trauma, he also describes his sister with a muted or minimized consciousness in comparison to what the reader might expect given the seriousness of her experience. Shank,

further observes that the “underrepresentation” extends to Judd as well, arguing that her trauma has affected his narration.

The answers to both “Who narrates?” and “How does the narrator represent trauma?” determine one another, since as Judd represents what happened to Marianne through cognitive and emotional rhetoric, Marianne’s rape disrupts the stability and conventionality of the narrative itself. By regarding both Marianne and Judd as mentally underrepresented, readers gain a more concrete knowledge of the impact of her trauma than they would otherwise. Like real trauma, Marianne’s trauma is so severe that there is no way to give a full account of it, neither in the representations of Marianne’s mind nor in the narrator’s portrayal of how it affected the whole Mulvaney family. Still, by underrepresenting, the narrator reclaims and narrates what cannot be told through conventional methods (p. 94).

Judd’s narration serves as an indication to the disruption of family relations. As soon as Corianne realizes that Michael knows what has happened to their daughter, it is a powerful insight into their family dynamic and the seismic shift that is to take place. As the main narrative source, Judd’s observations of the events are filtered through a perspective that is unique to him. As a result, this creates a layered experience of storytelling where the reader is challenged to read between the lines in order to find the untold truths about the Mulvaney family.

Michel Mulvaney, the patriarch of the Mulvaney family, is central to this family saga. As much as the sexual assault is central to the story, Michael’s inability to control the situation is the reason for the devastating consequences that followed in the aftermath. In the beginning, Michael is portrayed as the pillar of the family, a successful owner of a roofing company, an archetypal father figure who is the main provider and protector of the family. Reputation is his driving force. Social acceptance and status lead him to prioritize the social image of his family to the wellbeing of his daughter and consequently the other family members. As he struggles to cope with the horrific situation, he gives into drinking, his business suffers, his relationship with the members of the established community suffer too. Ellen G. Friedman (2002) argues that the father’s presence fades from the foreground even though he is the key figure in the story, in addition, his absence almost goes unnoticed. She identifies a shift in American fiction, particularly in plot devices where the father figures and paternal narratives are crucial in shaping cultural ideologies, and myths, shift to narratives in which the fathers’ exit from the narrative center causes very little consequence. Instead of a direct rejection or rebellion against the father symbol, these new stories represent him as an ordinary signifier without the elevated mythical status. Even though the father or his stand-in figure is still

potent in the plot, he either vanishes in the new wave of post-patriarchal fiction or simply becomes an ordinary character. In these new narratives, the Father is portrayed as vulnerable flawed humans transitioning from a mythical, unreachable symbol to an ordinary everyday figure.

Michael Mulvaney is at the center of the family upheaval, his actions and inactions as the patriarch are very much resonant throughout the story. As Marianne's story unfolds through Judd's narration, the reader is confronted with the harsh reality of her silencing, her voice is lost by the cacophony of voices in the family. The Mulvaney saga is an example of a narrative trend where we witness a shift in the father figure, who is present enough to overshadow the daughter whose story remains unheard.

Reinventing Daughterhood in *Missing Mom*

Missing Mom (2005) is Joyce Carol Oates's 44th novel which evolves around the aftermath of a violent assault. This emotionally charged narrative portrays a complex mother-daughter relationship dealing with themes of grief, loss, motherhood, and daughterhood. Even though the central event of the plot is the murder of Gwen, (the mother), the focus lies on Nikki's (the daughter) deep sorrow and mourning for her murdered mother. Nikki Eaton, the narrator, and the protagonist emerges as a 31-year-old, overly confident, sexually liberated alluring woman. Her actions and decisions are mainly criticized by her few years older sister Claire who "was predictable and sensible" (9), and married with a daughter. In her mother's eyes, she is immature and unhappy, Gwen wanted Nikki to be "happy like Claire and that meant marriage, kids, home, family" (25). Nikki's story opens on a mother's day dinner party, hosted by Gwen.

In the introductory chapter entitled "mother's day", Oates portrays the Eaton women's family dynamics. Gwen, prefers to celebrate the day in a homely atmosphere. Against the backdrop of this domestic picture, Gwen's portrait as a nurturing yet peculiar personality is revealed via her outstanding skills in the kitchen. Gwen's decision to cook is a sign of her deeply rooted commitment to her family, and a manifestation of her maternal love and appreciation for family values.

While Gwen reflects the epitome of motherhood, prior to her death Nikki portrays an image of rebellious daughterhood. With the profound loss that she experiences with her mother's murder, Nikki undergoes a deep process of introspection and personal growth. It takes a tragic event to trigger a reassessment of priorities and values that lead to significant changes in outlook and behavior. The loss of a

mother forces Nikki to reevaluate her treatment of familial bonds and to confront her own emotions. Grieving allows Nikki to meditate upon her relationship with her mother and eventually recognize the depth of her mother's love and sacrifice.

Joyce Carol Oates portrays a mother daughter relationship that not only reflects on the transformative power of loss, it also holds a mirror to the values of the middle-class American society. As Samuel C. Coale observes (2016) despite the fact that the narration is rooted in middle-class American values and possessions such as "clothes and houses to habits and notions of status", *Missing Mom* primarily evolves around Nikki's discovery of her dead mother's body in the garage. This incident triggers a profound internal cataclysm for Nikki, which according to Coale is described as a rupture in her chest, a feeling that is unique for anyone who experiences such a shock. This "rupture" is seen as a driving force in Nikki's first person narration as her peaceful middle-class life begins to crash in front of her eyes and take a different surreal turn.

This type of narration, which is common for Oates's fiction, consciousness flows in an unpredictable way. The juxtaposition of the fragile internal world of the narrator and the harsh reality of the external world is expressed through the focal point of one single character. Nikki's attempt to cope with the terror that has shaped her new reality, and in the meantime her effort to stick to familiarity in the middle of the new unfamiliar circumstance.

Nikki insists as she tries to cling to old friends, present lovers and the daily detritus that has gathered in the abandoned silence of her murdered mother's house. Relationships shift and shatter, the murder "would keep happening" (301), and Nikki's writing for a local paper becomes "a way of not missing Mom, while I was working" (307). But questions and doubts persist; the daily anchors drift away: "How quickly your life can change: a day, an hour. And all the hours flowing from that, weeks and months. Years" (123). The reader is left with a devastating "why," the word repeated one-hundred-and-twenty-two times like some funeral chant on page 207, altering one's relation to time, to one's sense of space, and to life itself: "My life is defective. Nowhere to send it back" [343](Coale, 438).

Joyce Carol Oates masterfully conveys the notions of coping and understanding through Nikki Eaton's journey as she enters her mother's past posthumously, she is confronted with the fact that her perception of her mother was limited to the role of motherhood. This process of discovery allows Nikki not only to reflect on her relationship with her deceased mother, she also reflect on a more general concept of individuality and maternal identity. Through first-person narration, Oates depicts

a blend of consciousness, where the internal drama of the narrator hits the reality of the external circumstances so that this complex terrain serves as a reflection to the universal human experience of coping with the unknown while looking for solace in the familiar. Therefore, *Missing Mom* reaches beyond mere storytelling, yet it offers a unique perspective on the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, personal identity, and the human psyche.

Conclusion

Through *We were the Mulvaney*s and *Missing Mom*, Joyce Carol Oates breaks with the traditional narrative paradigm. The story of the Mulvaney Family evolves around a father figure who is who has lost his patriarchal authority. In *Missing Mom* she focuses on motherhood and the other images of the mother that have been traditionally neglected. In both stories, the actions are facilitated by the character of the daughter. Through the lense of familial narratives, Oates offers a poignant insight into the enduring impact of violence and loss. Both novels feature profound trauma with which her characters try to cope. The narrative ambiguity and the exploration of mental underrepresentation are used to deepen the reflection of trauma and its effects. Through these narratives, Oates challenges the conventional notions of daughterhood, family, and social expectations.

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