Writerly Introspection: Unraveling the Layers that Weave the Fictional Character

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Abstract

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What creates the character? And how does a writer mold a character that is tangible and complex? In this essay, I narrow the answer to these questions down to the following: familial relationships, cultural and/or racial identity, and lived experiences. Employing psychological research alongside literary criticism, I examine the various ways in which four authors weave these themes into narrative, and which of the factors, if any, is dominant when formulating a character's unique personality. The essay also analyzes my own fiction in conjunction with the works being studied in order to conclusively distill what I have gleaned from the authors I admire throughout my writerly journey. I present the claim that these aforementioned factors are interconnected, working in synergy with each other, and delve into how successfully the distinct works of literature, including my own, present them as such. I also detail how the process of amassing research for this essay shifted my perspective.

Several months ago, I was at a meet and greet that my writing cohort had organized to welcome the incoming first-years into our program. During this get-together, the topic of recurring themes unique to each writer's prose came up. My peers began identifying all the literary constants they encountered in each other's works. One writer was identified as including frequent color symbolism in fiction. Another was credited with always using the nature or animals to discuss the theme of colonization. Another was revealed to often structure stories around the theme of gender, and so it went on. As I thought over what possible themes were staples of my work, I realized I couldn't pin one down, and neither could my cohort. I mused, wondering what I could point out. I wrote a lot about women, being that it is a part of my identity, but so did most of my peers. I tended to include themes of religion and spirituality in my writing, but these weren't prominent in all my works. Memory, fragmentation, and trauma feature extensively in my two main writing projects in various forms, but really, to me, these themes were as broad as could be. The subject was dropped presently, and we moved on to discussing other things. It was only the day after the meet and greet that something came to me.

Ever since entering this program, every piece of writing I'd ever submitted featured a sister. Every piece featured a mother. And every piece depicted these parental and sibling relationships as formulating essential components of the characters' personalities, describing how they influenced their actions and thereby shaping the plots of my fiction. In all of my stories, to varying degrees, there exists a dichotomy of my protagonists' private and public worlds— the former being the world that they inhabit with their families at home, and the latter being the societal world— the one the protagonists venture into while carrying with them their upbringing and the impact of their familial bonds. The intersection of these two worlds is one I

explore in all my works without exception. What results when these worlds clash, as they are often apt to do, forms the groundwork for many of the stories I write: this balance between the private and the social, and how people react when the balance is disrupted. This often entails a figure from the public world becoming part of the private, as through marriage, which is the case with my novella. Or, on a more convoluted note, when a figure blurs the line between familiarity and foreignness, reality and fantasy, and trauma and healing, as is the case with my novel. These are all realizations that wouldn't have occurred to me had I not entered this program. Since gaining the chance to develop my writing under the tutelage of my professors and with the peer reviews of other artists in my discipline, I've been able to think more critically about my writing projects and how they align with the books I've modeled my work after, and how I've been following in the footsteps of the writers I've been influenced by. I came to find that every major author I admire, regardless of their culture or background, has tackled the issue of family and upbringing affecting one's psyche and adult relationships in distinct ways.

I have kept these discoveries in mind during the months since, and continued working on my fiction projects. In my endeavor to create complex characters and layering them with their unique circumstances and experiences, I came across many hurdles. In establishing these narratives, I needed to figure out just how much of my characters' lives had been determined by their experiences as opposed to their relationships to family. I also had to resolve how much these two determinants were products of each other— how much a character's culture affected their upbringing, how much their experiences were determined by their culture, and so on. Moreover, I had to consider how much my characters themselves believed their familial and cultural dynamics contributed to their current life situations, especially when it came to first-person narration that concerned my characters soul-searching to make sense of their lives. It was

a question I grappled with on my own while penning drafts, as well as one I often faced in workshops: How much of so-and-so's decisions and life circumstances are a product of her culture, and how much of it is because of her relationships with her family? A question that inevitably opened the floodgates for other questions to pour into my mind as I tried to analyze my characters and their environments: How much of an impact does my character's religion have on her culture and upbringing? How much has her culture influenced her religious practices, and how has it rendered her different from people from other cultures that practice the same religion? How much does she believe this to be the case, and is she right or is she wrong? Does the impact of these factors matter? Does she think it matters? Do *I* think it matters? Which then unfailingly brought me to my final question: Is it possible to tease these factors apart? Could anyone disentangle the ingredients that were poured into the formulation of a human being, and categorize them into distinct components? After reflecting on some favorite works of fiction, I concluded that the formulation of an individual's character into adulthood is inextricably tied to their upbringing, their culture, and their lived experiences. These interrelated factors are in constant synergy with each other along with the person whose character they mold, and to try and divorce them would be a futile endeavor. I maintained that it is this synergy—rather than family ties, religion, or culture alone—that determines the outcome of a character's internal and external worlds colliding. I chose this hypothesis to center my essay around, for I believed it to be a fruitful one which would impart upon me a more nuanced understanding of some of the stories that have inspired me the most throughout my journey as a writer. In hopes of substantiating my claim, I revisited and examined literature under its lens. I sought to give my own writing validation by determining whether it emulated the texts which played such a formative role in my writerly evolution.

I first attempted to find the answer in the works of Toni Morrison, whose works extensively feature how race or culture, familial structures and lived experiences co-create the character. In Morrison's *Beloved*, one key character's experiences determine the dynamics of her family, while the reverse of this is true of another character. Sethe's traumatic past results from her being a product of the damaging culture of American slavery, and this past leads to her family severely fractured. Consequently, her daughter Denver grows up isolated, shy, and introverted. This illustrates the theme of family dynamics determining a character's experiences in life: the opposite of what is shown with Sethe. *In Rewriting the Scripts: Marriage, Motherhood, Family, and Trauma in the Novels of Dorothy Allison, Barbara Kingsolver, Toni Morrison, and Sue Monk Kidd*, Michelle A. Liptak states the following:

> Though *Beloved* includes a strong three-generation matriarchal household, the women who reside at 124 Bluestone Road involuntarily cohabit without a leading male figure. In this novel, Morrison shows the immediate effects of slavery that resulted in the involuntary dispersion, fragmentation, and loss within the black family and the lack of freedom to adopt any family ideals during this time period. [Liptak, 94]

This solidifies the concept that the culture of slavery contributes to fragmentation in the black family depicted in *Beloved*. Through the dynamic of Sethe and Denver, it is portrayed as an unbreakable cycle, each factor heavily influencing the other. Owing to the dysfunction in her family, Denver seems much younger than her twenty-four years and harbors a near-crippling fear of the outside world. Liptak states that the "unspeakable trauma and terror" suffered by her family and race results in Denver's confinement to the home and the limitation of her "access to any knowledge". To Denver, "stepping into the yard" is akin to "stepping off the edge of the world" and falling into terror. Denver's family life, or "private" world is the only one she knows, and her life is limited to 124 until she is able to overcome her dread due to the rest of her family needing her intervention. She enlists the community's help in exorcising the specter, Beloved,

and in this case, bringing the outside world into her family's suffering serves to lessen it tremendously. I attempted to highlight many of these themes in my own works of fiction. My novel's protagonist, Yaara, lives a fairly isolated life in adulthood owing to childhood trauma. Her social life is negligible, and she rarely interacts with those outside of her immediate family unless compelled to. It is Firas, a jinn who begins haunting Yaara, that forces her into action, prompting her to face uncomfortable prospects and events that she ordinarily would confront, much in the same way as Denver in *Beloved*. While the ghost Beloved is a manifestation of Sethe's trauma engendered by her murder of her infant daughter, Firas serves as a manifestation of Yaara's trauma engendered by the death of her mother. Her mother's death has also estranged her from her entire extended family, and has left her relationship with her older sister, Shaheen, fraught. Yaara, Denver, and Sethe's personalities have all been formulated by trauma stemming from experiences that determine familial relationships, and this trauma continues to plague and compel them to interact with the public world, with varying results. I thought I'd found the validation my claim needed with *Beloved*: it taught me that a character's lived experiences, family relationships and culture are inextricable from each other when it comes to creating their personality. In Sethe's case, it was her traumatic experiences resulting from slavery that played the strongest role in formulating her character. Meanwhile in Denver's, her familial dynamics and upbringing were the most defining. Morrison uses two distinct characters to illustrate this theme, and how it gives rise to an inviolable cycle.

What *Beloved* accomplished was remarkable to me. It was among the novels that inspired me to craft my own fiction in its vein. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* was another. While these two novels have very different plots and characters, they both still successfully establish the themes that I weave into my prose, and I believe that they both validate my claims about the

factors involved in formulating characters as well. However, while *Beloved* does illustrate that culture, family and experience are the key ingredients when it comes to concocting an adult's character, it emphasizes the latter two. Upon returning to *The Joy Luck Club* for the purposes of writing this essay, I arrived at the conclusion that it emphasizes all three. A most noteworthy point is that it does so by utilizing different characters and their unique stories. What Tan accomplishes is one of the chief reasons why her works have helped shape much of the fiction I write. Her stories spoke to me on a level that others didn't. In each novel of hers that I've read, there exists a fraught relationship between mother and daughter, sister and sister, or both. These tensions exist to complicate the narratives, and they are also written in a way that are believable and tangible to me. Tan's novels are also among the ones in which I was able to first distinguish glimmers of the intersection between private and public worlds of the characters who would inspire me to go on to create my own. The way they reconcile the worlds they belong forms the basis for the musings of characters in my fiction who struggle with similar issues.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, every major character is either a Chinese or Chinese-American woman, and the cyclical connection between culture, family relationships and lived experiences is evident in all of these mother-daughter bonds. Ying-Ying St. Clair and An-Mei Hsu are the two mothers whose perspectives I find most relevant to this essay's claims. They reflect over their respective pasts and relationships with their daughters in an attempt to rationalize both their and their daughters' lives. Ying-Ying's marriage to Lena's father, an outsider to her culture and country, erases her identity. This is because she is removed her from her homeland and heritage, and has her name and birth year changed on her immigration documents. Due to this jarring experience, she later becomes what she calls a "ghost", a person with no chi, or spirit. This is not the sole cause of her spiritless state, however: throughout the novel, Ying-Ying is shown to be

deeply traumatized and mentally imbalanced. The root cause of this trauma is her abusive first marriage in China, which led to her drowning her newborn son in a fit of spite. She is severely psychologically impacted as a result, and is aware that being haunted by her past has rendered her an unfit mother for Lena: "Now I must tell my daughter everything. That she is the daughter of a ghost. She has no *chi*. This is my greatest shame. How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit?" [Tan, 144]. Ying-Ying believes that Lena has no spirit because has none to give her. She holds herself responsible for Lena's lack of *chi* due of her traumatic history in China. Ying-Ying identifies her past experiences for being the cause of her current psychological state of being. She sees her experiences as the precursor of Lena's situation as well, and believe they've set Lena on path to becoming a "ghost" herself, as evinced by the following passage:

> "Lena cannot eat ice cream," says my mother
> "So it seems. She's always on a diet."
> "No, she never eat it. She doesn't like."
> And now Harold smiles and looks at me, puzzled, expecting me to translate what my mother has said.
> "It's true," I say evenly. "I've hated ice cream almost all my life."
> Harold looks at me, as if I, too, were speaking Chinese and he could not understand.
> "I guess I assumed you were just trying to lose weight… Oh, well."
> "She become so thin now you cannot see her, says my mother. "She become like a ghost, disappear."
> "That's right! Christ, that's great," exclaims Harold, laughing, relieved in thinking my mother is graciously trying to rescue him. [Tan, 89]

The above exchange between Ying-Ying, Lena, and Lena's husband Harold demonstrates that Ying-Ying is aware of the disharmony in her daughter's marriage, and how it is erasing her spirit. She recognizes that her daughter is "disappearing", and claims she is becoming a "ghost", which she's referred to herself as numerous times. Meanwhile, Lena is conscious of her mother's mental state, and herself mentions that her mother has "disappeared":

> I always thought it mattered, to know what is the worst possible thing that can happen to you, to know how you can avoid it, to not be drawn in by the magic of the unspeakable.

> Because, even as a young child, I could sense the unspoken terrors that surrounded our house, the ones that chased my mother until she hid in a secret dark corner of her mind. And still they found her. I watched, over the years, as they devoured her, piece by piece, until she disappeared and become a ghost. [Tan, 53]

Like her mother, Lena thinks that her mother's past experiences, these "unspoken terrors", are responsible for her predicament. She wants to know the worst possible thing that can happen to her so as to avoid it and escape her mother's fate, indicating that she also believes that experiences are what ultimately define the person. Both Lena and Ying-Ying observe each other "disappearing", which demonstrates how their relationship and existences perpetuate the generational cycle mentioned several times throughout this essay. In Ying-Ying and Lena's case, their histories and mother-daughter bond are what link together to form this cycle. In other words, this relationship implies that familial ties and lived experiences are the two most important components that form a person.

Another mother-daughter bond in *The Joy Luck Club* which signifies valuable themes that validate this essay's— and therefore, my— claims is that of An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan's. An-mei thinks this to herself while reflecting on Rose's divorce:

> Yesterday my daughter said to me, "My marriage is falling apart."
> And now all she can do is watch it falling. She lies down on a psychiatrist couch, squeezing tears out about this shame. And I think, she will lie there until there is nothing more to fall, nothing left to cry about, everything dry.
> She cried, "No choice! No choice!". She doesn't know. If she doesn't speak, she is making a choice. If she doesn't try, she can lose her chance forever.
> I know this, because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness.
> And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way. [Tan, 121]

It is evident that An-mei believes it is her culture, "the Chinese way", and her maternal relationship with Rose that have had the biggest influences over who her daughter grew up to be.

She very clearly states that she views this generational transmission of character traits as mimicking "stairs", which is another way to view a never-ending cycle. The amalgamation of blood and culture supersedes the different upbringing and experiences Rose has been given, hence why An-mei believes she is "going the same way" as her and her grandmother. There are other evidences that An-mei believes family takes precedence over most things, such as when she tells Rose that "A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you. A psyche-atricks will only make you *hulihudu*, make you see *heimongmong*," after asking her why she would rather discuss her dying marriage with her psychiatrist over her mother. Rose herself is conflicted over what led to the demise of her marriage, and reflects over how she internally reconciled her mother's voice over the voices of other influences in her life[1]. She learns to fuse American and Chinese culture to dictate her choices and outlook on life. She internalizes her mother's teachings, is mindful enough to not let them consume her, and instead chooses to listen to those who are outside of her familial circle, thereby attempting to adapt to the public world.

Elsewhere in the novel, Rose comments on why she sometimes feels like a "sham" of a woman, and how therapy helped her realize that these thoughts were commonplace in women of her background:

> "At first I thought it was because I was raised with all this Chinese humility," Rose said. "Or that maybe it was because when you're Chinese you're supposed to accept everything, flow with the Tao and not make waves. But my therapist said, Why do you blame your culture, your ethnicity? And I remembered reading an article about baby boomers, how we expect the best and when we get it we worry that maybe we should have expected more, because it's all diminishing returns after a certain age." [Tan, 86]

[1] I still listened to my mother, but I also learned how to let her words blow through me. And sometimes I filled my mind with other people's thoughts— all in English— so that when she looked at me inside out, she would be confused by what she saw. Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American opinions had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. [Tan, 107]

Rose concludes that baby boomers, a product of the Second World War, thus a result of American political, socioeconomic, and therefore cultural history, developed unrealistic expectations out of life due to that history. She resorts to doing so in order to avoid blaming not only her culture, but the fact that she "was raised" with this culture— in other words, her upbringing. Rose consciously wonders how much of her life situation is due to her culture, how much of it is due to her upbringing, and how much can be blamed on the experiences she received in life that are universally shared by baby boomers. She does not appear to arrive at a concrete conclusion, but interestingly, Rose chooses to designate the baby boomer factor as the reason for her predicaments in adulthood— a factor that she shares with an entire generation of people who do not necessarily share her racial or cultural background. She believes that it's the experiences she undergoes as a baby boomer that are responsible for the complications she faces in life, unlike Ying-Ying and An-mei, who point the finger at a fusion of life experiences and family ties, and a combination of familial bonds and Chinese culture respectively. Thus, *The Joy Luck Club* effectively delves into all three dominant co-creators of a character's persona. It uses different characters and relationships to present the reader with distinct interpretations of the themes this essay discusses, and does not provide any insight as to which story, relationship or interpretation is the most valid. This is most likely because there is none. All of the theories regarding these themes possess equal merit, and I believe Tan maintains that one should not be discounted in favor of another. In other words, if each character's perception of what defines them is as valid as the next character's, then there is no way ascertain which defining factor has the most influence. They play equivalent roles in the characters' formation and it would be fruitless to try and determine the exact difference between their respective effects on an

individual, as a number of psychological studies have also articulated[2]. What seems to carry the most in *The Joy Luck Club* when it comes to this subject is the characters' own perceptions of what brought them to where they are. I adapted this phenomenon of self-reflection into my novella. When Mila ruminates on her own life, she thinks about all the influences that have led to her current predicament, much in the same way as Rose, Lena, Waverly and Jing-mei. She acknowledges that there were instances where she blamed her mother for poisoning her marriage, or wondered if her culture was responsible for the dissonance between her husband and herself. I sought to complicate Mila's relationships and background even further to make her narrative more compelling, thus I broadened my reading list for this essay so as to obtain more support for my claims.

To deepen my understanding of the themes my works discuss, I turned next to *Sula*, another novel by Morrison which describes the lives of two little girls from the Bottom, a black neighborhood in Ohio. The Bottom symbolizes the culture of vestigial slavery: a white slaveowner tricked his slave into accepting land which was unfavorable for growing crops. The slave settled onto this land and it would later become the Bottom, giving rise to the black neighborhood which both girls, Sula and Nel, were born into. Most interestingly, although the girls grow up in the same neighborhood, are the same age, are both friends and belong to the same race and culture, their lives turn out very differently. Upon scrutinizing the novel, I realized that this was due to one key factor: Sula and Nel's family structures are vastly different. While Nel has a traditional familial upbringing that the Bottom's community deems acceptable, Sula's

[2] [Global traits] claim that "studies of heritability, limited parental influence, structural invariance across cultures and species, and temporal stability all point to the notion that personality traits are more expressions of human biology than products of life experience" (p. 177). This view places too much emphasis on biology, and more balanced assessments of the influence of genes and environment (e.g., Maccoby 2000) suggest that personality corresponds to the area of a quadrangle, one side of which is genes and the other, environment. In short, personality emerges under the influence of both genes and environment. Furthermore, behavior is likely to be a function of not only culture and personality but also the interaction between personality and the situation. We review studies where most of the variance in behavior is a function of such interactions. [Cultural influences on personality].

family lacks structure and is mostly comprised of women, women whom the community perceives loose, in particular her mother Hannah. Therefore, Nel making a respectable marriage and Sula dying an early death is indicative that their growing up in the same societal environment and being exposed to the same culture did not prevent them from having vastly different adult lives. I was perplexed upon learning this, since it seemingly contradicted what I'd gathered thus far from *Beloved* and *The Joy Luck Club*, which thus far validated this essay's central claim. Sula and Nel's lives diverging due to their dissimilar upbringings seemed to suggest that one of the factors that determines the individual, namely familial influence, can be teased out from the rest, and, in the case of *Sula,* is more defining. I scrutinized my fiction in the context of this discovery, and discovered a dichotomy similar to Sula and Nel's established between Mila and Alizeh, characters that feature in my novella. Mila and Alizeh's cultural background is identical; both are Muslim women who have familial ties to Hyderabad, India, and both were born in Hayward, California in the same year. But their personalities are worlds apart: Alizeh is headstrong, rebellious, lighthearted and confident, while Mila abides by the rules, is introspective, responsible and insecure. The reason for this that Alizeh is an only child, while Mila is the youngest of four, her other siblings being boys. Mila and Alizeh exemplify how family dynamics are the dominant factor in the formulation of one's psyche, the way I believed *Sula* did. I expanded upon this relationship seeking to create similar narrative tensions, eagerly anticipating what I'd discover if I kept all other factors between them constant, changing only their family backgrounds.

After analyzing *Sula,* while I'd gained some fruitful insight into creating complex characters, I decided that it wouldn't support this essay's thesis, and was therefore an unusable text. However, upon reexamination of the novel, I discovered that my assumption was made in

haste. There are more shades of gray in *Sula*'s character formation process than I had thought. On the surface, it appears as though family dynamics and upbringing play a dominant part in a character's life, hence why Sula and Nel grew up to lead such contrasting lives. It would seem that Sula and Nel are foils, but rediscovering what Sula tells Nel on her deathbed regarding which of them was "good" forced me to second-guess this theory: "How do you know it was you? Maybe it was me." This decidedly suggests that Sula and Nel are not foils, that there isn't such a stark contrast between them. Sula is not a pure antagonist as the community presumes, nor is Nel completely blameless or high-functioning in terms of mental stability, as illuminated by the novel's subsequent revelation: while Sula was directly responsible for Chicken Little's drowning, it was Nel's idea not to tell anyone about it. Nel also remembers how she had inwardly felt thrilled to witness Chicken Little drowning, and was able to calm Sula down immediately following his death because "what she had thought was maturity, serenity, and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation." Nel's constricted upbringing, one that encouraged orderliness and propriety, caused a deprivation of imaginativeness and rambunctiousness in her childhood. This led to an imbalance in her psyche, and therefore vastly contributes to this transgression concerning Chicken Little, and her unexpected reactions to violence or disorder. *Sula* critiques not only unstable and dysfunctional families, but also cautions against a family life that is too rigidly conventional, because, contrary to what I'd initially theorized, both Sula and Nel are psychologically damaged and traumatized by their respective childhoods, different though their familial relationships may have been. The book postulates that Sula and Nel are not as dissimilar as they seem on the surface. Sula's childhood did lead to a volatile life, but Nel's life does not remain stable either: her husband leaves her to be a single mother by the novel's end, a fate eerily similar to Eva Peace's.

Moreover, I learned that family influences could not be pinpointed as the sole determinant of how Sula and Nel developed into adults. The book delineates distinct causes for these differing family structures. Sula's family background was determined by the lived experiences of her mother and, more importantly, her grandmother. Eva's husband left her to raise her children on her own, and she was forced to take in boarders often to make ends meet, leading to a crowded household without many rules and constrictions, which strangers frequented. This affected Sula's mother Hannah, making her sexually promiscuous, experiences which Sula witnessed and imitated as an adult. Meanwhile, Nel's mother, Helene, being the daughter of a prostitute of whom she was ashamed, made the conscious choice to suppress any improper or overly imaginative tendencies her daughter might have acted on as a child. Her experiences stemming from her parental background were what molded her into the mother Nel knew. In the same way, it is a combination of Nel's experiences and upbringing that create the life she grows to lead: the incident on the train when she'd witnessed the conductor display racism towards an uncharacteristically submissive Helene shocked her. This incident was what instigated her friendship with Sula and dissonance from her mother. The conductor's racist attitude had nothing to do with how Nel was raised; it was an isolated factor which, when supplemented with her upbringing, created her character in adulthood. Lastly, the girls' racial and cultural history serves as a major catalyst that defines their lives: both their lives begin in the Bottom, a product of slavery which represents the racism the black townspeople face, and the hub for all the culture they experience in their childhood. The Bottom is the setting for their childhoods, and in turn sets the limitations for their adulthoods. Being the birthplace of these girls, the Bottom indirectly dictates the experiences they will have in life, and both their families are subjected to the culture and society that the Bottom presents them with, which inevitably

impacts the way their daughters grow up. Therefore, not unlike *Beloved*, culture, lived experiences and familial relationships are in cyclical collaboration when it comes to molding a child's character into adulthood.

In order to successfully portray characters that were as realistic as possible in my prose, I knew I had to include all facets of their personalities and make them three-dimensional. Part of this meant making sure that characters who needed to be coarse or flawed did not have any of these flaws censored or sugarcoated, and that their roughness be on full display. Junot Diaz's works in *Drown*, particularly the short story "Ysreal", helped me accomplish this while simultaneously providing me with more evidence for this essay's focus. In "Ysrael", Yunior is a nine-year old boy who hero-worships his older brother, Rafa. The story witnesses the already-evident hypermasculinity in Rafa budding within Yunior as he tries to emulate him. By the end of the piece, Yunior, previously shown to be the more sensitive, pleasant, and emotional of the two, is mimicking Rafa's aggressive and impolite behavior by kicking his feet at the back of an old woman's seat on a bus [Diaz, 219]. His love for Rafa engenders within him a desire to please him and reluctance to display any kind of emotion for fear of angering him [Diaz, 212 & 216]. In both pieces, a younger family member is influenced by a relative who holds a position of authority in their life, which determines some of their more defining actions. This is evidenced in "Ysrael" by Yunior assisting Rafa in abusing another boy, the titular character, despite not initially having any desire to. This influence is portrayed as a powerful force that Yunior cannot escape. Diaz poignantly demarcates the theme of family pertaining to personality formulation and development through delineating the causes and effects of toxic masculinity.

Aikaterini Lampropoulou has this to say about familial roles in adolescents' development and wellbeing:

> It seems that when adolescents perceive the family relationships as warm and close, have a sense of autonomy, are clear about the rules and the limits set by the family and have a good communication with their parents, then, regardless of the family structure, they feel more satisfied and have a higher level of well-being.[3]

In "Ysrael", it is explicitly stated that Yunior and Rafa's father is not a positive consistent presence in their lives, since he is mentioned to be abroad in the United Stated while the boys live in Santo Domingo with their mother. It is understandable, then, that the boys' childhood ends up being dysfunctional and unstable. This inability to communicate with their absent father combined with the hypermasculinity they are expected to adhere to leads to an inability to communicate amongst themselves, as seen when Yunior cannot confide in Rafa about being sexually molested in the back of a bus. The brothers are oftentimes physically violent with each other, particularly on Rafa's part. According to Alejandro Soto's *Broken Men: The Failures of Machismo in Junot Diaz*, "Violence and power are key elements of what defines Dominican men who adhere to the masculine script of machismo in Diaz's work." [Soto, 15]. Diaz consistently examines and critique toxic hypermasculinity in the Dominican community in his fiction, along with the effects of said machismo on the family and society, as evinced by other stories in his Drown collection, most of which continue following Yunior and Rafa's lives into adulthood, and portray their father and uncles as also being victims and perpetrators of toxic male aggression. With this in mind, I went about layering another character in my novella: Mila's oldest brother, Faraz. While he is nowhere near as toxic a figure in Mila's life as Rafa since he possesses a deep love for Mila, is well-intentioned and truly believes he is acting in her best interests, he is usually unable to express this with tenderness and patience. In order to help Mila obtain independence and autonomy, he acts out aggressively, it being his most habitually used method for procuring

[3] Personality, school, and family: What is their role in adolescents' subjective well-being? Journal of Adolescence, 2018-08-01, Volume 67, Pages 12-21

successful results from her. Growing up witnessing the rockiness in his parents' marriage combined with the pressures that his culture bestows upon him as being the oldest son leaves him somewhat emotionally crippled. This, coupled with him seeing his mother suffer under the expectations that her culture demands from her, makes him fearful of Mila's future to the point of paranoia. He takes great pains to prevent her from meeting the same fate as their mother, ironically unaware that his stifling and overbearing actions are creating the very conditions he painstakingly sets out to avoid.

Kiana Davenport's "Bones of the Inner Ear" is a short story I became very taken with during my graduate career. I initially struggled with rationalizing its relevance to my claims regarding character formation, since components of it seemed contradictory to them, not unlike *Sula*. However, although it was more difficult to incorporate this one into this essay, I still found material within that validates my theories. Ana, the narrator, is a woman hailing from the Nanakuli district of O'ahu, Hawaii. The story describes her fractured and damaged family, and how her cousin Kiki's childhood was rife with horrific abuse stemming from her mother, Ava. A teenaged Kiki later becomes attracted to a man named Gum, who is the father of her younger half-brother named Taxi. She begins a sexual relationship with him. Despite it being a consensual relationship, the fact that Kiki was only sixteen at the time and his stepdaughter is grounds for it to be sexually exploitative and abusive on Gum's part. This perverse relationship, a product of unconventional and harmful family dynamics no doubt had a negative impact on her, particularly when Ava learns of it and is livid. After Ava's outburst at discovering the news, Ana and Kiki have the following conversation:

> "Sometimes I see things," Kiki whispered. "I hope they don't see me… I hope they don't come after me."
> I knew she was afraid she would inherit her mother's temper.
> "Do you think Grandma did the same thing to your mama?"

"Maybe. Maybe if Mama shaved her head, we'd see the scars." [Davenport, 82]

Kiki and Ana are aware of how Ava's nature can be passed down through her genes, which would indicate that they believe family ties are the dominant determinant of a character's psyche. They recognize that their Grandma had abused Ava, and her maltreatment of Kiki is a continuation of that cycle. Throughout "Bones of the Inner Ear", Ana, now an adult and reminiscing about her childhood, thinks about how this cycle of abuse is inherent in her family's bloodline and how it's had serious repercussions for her cousin and other family members who became embroiled in Ava's toxic behavior. This is especially evident with Kiki's half-brother, Taxi, whom Ava kills in a fit of hysteria when threatened with separation from him. Kiki and Ana's Uncle Ben even states that Ava's abuse of Kiki would "drive that girl to suicide" [Davenport, 86].

When Ava is released from the mental facility she was committed to after murdering Taxi, she resumes verbally and emotionally abusing Kiki. Ana notes how Kiki does nothing but eat as a result. Several years later, after Ava dies amid mysterious circumstances, Ana returns to visit and finds that to her horror, Kiki weighs over four hundred pounds, and now has a daughter named Lily whom she conceived with Gum before he abandoned the two of them. The connection between childhood maltreatment and obesity is examined in a study published in the *Journal of Adolescence*:

> A meta-analysis of 36 studies showed that childhood interpersonal violence, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and peer bullying, was positively associated with risk for obesity and central adiposity […] One study […] reported that sexual and physical abuse were associated with higher odds of obesity for females but not males.[4]

[4] The pathway from childhood maltreatment to adulthood obesity: The role of mediation by adolescent depressive symptoms and BMI, by Allison O'Neill, KennethBeck, David Chae, TyphanyeDyer, XinHe, Sunmin Lee

It is evident that Kiki's morbid obesity is a direct result of the physical mistreatment she had suffered at the hands of her mother, and I don't believe it would be erroneous to claim that the sexual relationship she'd had with Gum contributed to it as well. Considering these critical findings, Davenport has illustrated the phenomena of trauma and other psychological consequences of childhood abuse rather masterfully. She leaves the reader with even more to ponder over as Ana thinks of how she loves Kiki more and more every day because "our genes are warped together. Her morphology is mine. And I love her because she's still fighting the hole that wants to suck her in." [Davenport, 88]. She interacts with eight-year-old Lily after she finds the little girl behaving violently with her doll. She spits out obscenities at the doll as well, behaving in a way that is evocative of Ava's treatment of Kiki. When Ana hugs Lily shortly after, the following thoughts run through her mind:

> I feel her toughness and her tremor, as if her blood is already marshalling tiny armies that will reinstruct her genes. As if she is already breaking the mold, honoring the daughters born with no clues or codes, and the mothers of those daughters— golden, slow-hipped women who should have been running, not dancing. [Davenport, 88]

Ana, a nurse, is constantly thinking about whether Ava's violent and abusive nature is something that can be passed down to future generations, particularly through the women in the family. She acknowledges numerous times that genes and heritage are powerful, and that the dysfunction Kiki had experienced in her life can manifest itself into Lily. She believes Ava, Kiki, and even Ana and her mother, who committed suicide after Ana's father eventually left her for good, were products of what she and Kiki thought were their Grandma's inherent madness[5]. The fact that Ana blames the dysfunction in her family on her grandmother's genes is telling: it almost seems as though she feels that Kiki's horrendous experiences in life may have been

[5] For years, I blamed [Ava's] temper on that man (Kiki's father). Now, I know she was swollen with Grandma's genes. [Davenport, 80]

inevitable due to these genes. Ana believes that one's genetics, attributable to their family ties, are what leads to one's upbringing and experiences, which ultimately make the person.

According to Ana, these factors are interconnected, but there is a definite beginning to this cycle, that beginning being family. However, I posit that the text indicates something deeper. Within the first page of the story, Davenport states the following:

> Long before my birth time, Grandpa came home from World War I with his nose shot off. Doctors built him a metal nose, which he removed at night before he slept. Folks said that's why Grandma went insane, lying under his empty face. [Davenport, 78]

This quote is highly illuminating, since it complicates Ana's assumptions that Ava's madness, her subsequent abuse of her Kiki, and Kiki's adult life were products of her Grandma's "genes", or mental issues. A clear cause for these mental issues has been identified in the first page alone: Ana's grandfather's injuries from war. War itself symbolizes the impacts of the outside world, the "public" world, that appeared to be missing for most of the narrative, on an individual and their family. Ana's grandparents' life experiences were molded by the intrusion of war into their private lives, and therefore affected their psyche and family dynamics: their sons went off to war as well, and as a result, Ana's family was one that was known by her community for its "damaged men"[6]. Ava's uncles were damaged physically, like her grandfather, while her aunts and mother were damaged mentally, like her grandfather. Thus, the public world and her grandparents' lived experiences do play a large role in the formation of Ava's family structure. In the same vein as *Sula*, Ava and Kiki are two girls who hail from the same community, but lead adult lives that differ on the surface. This time, however, familial upbringing cannot be indicated as the sole reason for this divergence between them, since they grew up in the same home and are relatives themselves, who share the same family and upbringing. It is Kiki's

[6] Davenport, 78

experience of being abused which stemmed from Ava being her mother that mold her into the adult she becomes. Ana had been spared from this abuse, but also recognizes that she is living with trauma resulting from being a witness to these experiences and from her own mother's suicide and father's abandonment. Therefore, Ana is cognizant of the fact that she and Kiki are not as different in terms of mental stability as their public lives would suggest. Kiki's sexual relationship with Gum, another outsider from the public world who intrudes into the private, is also a key factor in her development. Therefore, according to Ana, her family is foremost to blame for her and Kiki's plight, but according to the text, their differing experiences are what set them apart. Once again, there is no concrete factor that can be designated as the singular force that defines a character in "Bones of the Inner Ear". I realized that my essay's claim was solidified through the works of fiction that I'd chosen, despite there being instances when I wondered if I'd meandered onto the wrong track while constructing it. At one point in time, especially before reexamining *Sula* and "Bones of the Inner Ear", I'd considered revising this essay to discuss how my endeavor to prove my claims using my chosen stories had been a disappointing one. However, upon further scrutiny, I finally felt as though my argument had a solid enough foundation.

After having familiarized myself with all the nuanced ways these themes correspond with each other in literature, I examined my own fiction under their lens, realizing how so much of them is already present in my prose. In my novel in-progress, Yaara and Shaheen live very different lives as adults. Shaheen is married and expecting a baby with her husband while Yaara is a Master's student at university. Shaheen is outwardly much higher-functioning than Yaara, who is in therapy and struggles with making personal connections with people. She is afflicted with depression and trauma, and, unlike Shaheen, avoids visiting their extended family who

reside in India. Being the only one out of the two who witnessed their mother's death, and having done so at a very young age, Yaara has had much more difficulty with overcoming her loss. Thus, despite being of the same culture and sharing the same upbringing, Yaara and Shaheen's lives are vastly different due to this singular event. However, Shaheen is later revealed to be battling demons of her own. She had married young to fill the void her mother's death left in her life, made wider by Yaara's departure to college. She is emotionally dependent on her husband due to being unable to confide in Yaara, whom she has been tasked with raising and protecting for over a decade. Yaara learns that Shaheen, too, has sought psychological help and is struggling with the prospect of motherhood, going far enough to have terminated a pregnancy despite craving children of her own. This is borne out of her fear that she, too, may abandon her children someday the way their mother had abandoned Shaheen as the age of thirteen, taking Yaara with her instead.

On top of this, the jinn that haunts Yaara is a figure from Islamic folklore who, if he is indeed a hallucination, appears to her in the form of a jinn because they featured extensively in her mother's bedtime tales. Yaara's mother's culture and religious heritage caused her to narrate these stories to her daughter, and form the reason for a variety of factors in Yaara's life. For example, a part of why she seeks therapy is because her mother didn't. Yaara and Shaheen's mother had been mentally unstable, but rejected traditional medical assistance, opting to hold fast to her faith instead. She believed that her mental imbalance was due to her gift for being able to see supernatural being such as the jinn, and Yaara wishes to avoid the same fate as her mother by ensuring that she get help for her trauma. Unlike Shaheen, she is ambivalent about religion, seeing how little it did to keep her mother alive, and fervently rejects anything to do with believing in the supernatural jinn, because accepting that they exist would mean accepting that

therapy or medication can not erase her problems or hallucinations. This was what her mother believed, and Yaara wishes to avoid repeating the cycle. The phenomenon of underestimating the gravity of mental health issues is prevalent in many cultures, such as mine, and much of my novel's central plot stems from said phenomena. Thus, much like the works that have inspired me, cultural and familial features in conjunction with psychologically traumatic events play a huge role in my novel's development.

In my novella, Mila and Alizeh were both raised with the same values and restrictions, yet, like Sula, Alizeh has had much more freedom and opportunity to rebel against these than Mila has. This is due to Mila having three older brothers to enforce these rules upon her while Alizeh is the only child. As a child and teenager, Mila also sees less reason to rebel; since she has grown up in a close, loving family, she is content with abiding by the rules. However, this causes her to allow herself to be coddled into what Faraz fears is dependency, a dependency that he believes would lead to her being manipulated or abused by whomever she took as a husband. Thus, Faraz, takes pains to be rough and unyielding with Mila, to ensure that she will be able endure life's challenges. Coupled with this, Mila witnesses how her mother's conformation to society's rules and expectations has brought her nothing good. In Mila and Faraz's childhood, their father had been unfaithful to their mother. Mila struggles to avoid being caught in the same situation as her mother, and thinks that the way to do so is by rejecting the impositions of Indo-Islamic society. She does so by getting into a toxic relationship once she enrolls in college that lasts four years before moving back to Hayward, California, and meeting and marrying her husband, Taylor.

It is then that the pitfalls of her relationship with Faraz fully manifest themselves: in her eagerness to not disappoint her brother and prove that she is independent, she often bars Taylor

out emotionally and is unable to communicate her reasons why. She cannot bring herself to stop seeing him as an outsider due in part to his not being Muslim or Indian, and in part to her mother's disapproval of him. Therefore, her private and public worlds are not harmonious, particularly since she is unable to view her husband as a component of the latter, a true part of her family. When she and Taylor argue, she refuses to relent to his pleas for reconciliation or entreaties to forgive him because she fears it is what Faraz warned her against, and that any weakness on her part would open the door for Taylor to be unfaithful to her the way her father was unfaithful to their mother. This is layered by the fact that Mila, being far less experienced with relationships, and, especially, sexual intimacy than Taylor due to her orthodox Muslim upbringing and values, does not know how to navigate a marriage. As a result, her relationship with Taylor becomes fraught and unhealthy, and she moves back in with her family. There, she ruminates daily about what went wrong in her marriage, and what combination of her upbringing and culture molded her into the type of person that would bring herself to the brink of divorce. She blames everything and nothing; she sees herself as the most culpable of them all for having failed to meet the expectations of every close personal relationship in her life. Eventually, Mila comes to the realization that it is fruitless to blame any one person or aspect of her life for her pending divorce. She realizes that everyone, including Taylor and herself, is the product of their environment, and that neither of them is more flawed or less complex than the other. She makes peace with the likelihood that the determinants of her identity are codependent on each other, and that the synergy of these factors is something that no one can avoid.

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