

## Mother-Daughter Conflict in Margaret Atwood's "The Art of Cooking and Serving" and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"

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### **Abstract**

Family conflict refers to active opposition between family members. Conflicts may involve different combinations of family members: it can be conflict within the couple or between parents and children or between siblings. The increase in conflicts between mothers and daughters, for instance, arises out of clash of roles, which include household responsibilities, authority, social life and friends and increased desire for autonomy and independence. The way a mother treats her daughter can be a type of conflict, which affects the identity of the daughter. Thus, the mother-daughter in the context of the present study refers to two different parenting styles, firstly, the role-reversal relationship between a mother and a daughter focusing on the idea of "parentification" in Margaret Atwood's short story "The Art of Cooking and Serving" (2006), and secondly, the relationship between an authoritarian mother and her eleven year old daughter in Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" (1978). The study depicts the impact of the mothers' negative parenting behaviors on the identities of their daughters through a psychosocial analytical approach. Detailed analysis of the mothers and daughters in both short stories is provided using Diana Baumrind's parenting styles and various studies including Erik Erikson, Shiva Shayesteh, Pacey H. Krause and Donna Hoskins. In doing so, the research raises the following questions: How do the two daughters experience their relationships with their mothers? And in what way negative parenting behaviors create a conflict between the mother and her daughter which causes identity confusion?

**Keywords:** Mother-Daughter relationship, Authoritarian parents, Parentification, Conflict, identity confusion, Margaret Atwood, Jamaica Kincaid.

### **Introduction**

During adolescence, the adolescent comes in contact with a number of people but the most important relationship that makes maximum impact on his/her development is the parent-adolescent relationship. Numerous studies by

psychologists such as, Jay Belsky, Michael Rovine, Dawn G. Taylor and Paul Richard Perkins, demonstrate that the types of family interaction deeply affect children's/adolescents' social and moral behavior. In other words, parental communication styles affect the ways in which parents interact with their adolescent children, which consequently influence the latter's social experiences and manners.

The mother has been honored and loathed through all ages and in many languages. She is regarded as the most significant cause of positive and negative development of her adolescent child, boy or girl. The interrelationship between mother and daughter is one of the themes stressed in many anthologies of essays, written primarily by psychoanalysts and sociologists, that challenge or explore psychoanalytic models of the parent-child relationship in general and the mother-daughter relationship in particular. Among these anthologies are *Understanding Mother-Adolescent Conflict Discussions: Concurrent and Across-Time Prediction from Youths' Dispositions and Parenting* (2008) by Nancy Eisenberg, Claire Hofer and Tracy L. Spinrad, and *Handbook of Parenting: Styles, Stresses and Strategies* (2009) by Pacey H. Krause and Tahlia M. Dailey; in which they focus on certain parenting styles, stressors, and practices which promote positive and negative child/adolescent behaviors.

The mother-daughter relationship, as one of the family relationships, is typically the closest and most emotionally intense of other human experiences. Intimacy with the mother is an important element in the psychological health of an individual. The mother-daughter knot is perceived, by Rose Lucy Fischer, as having a 'life cycle' which is marked by several periods of transition, including the daughter's adolescent years, the daughter's transitions to marriage and motherhood, and the mother's old age and infirmity" (613). This relationship can sometimes be quite tumultuous and smothering. Thus, when serious problems arise in the mother-daughter relationship, the strong positive emotional feelings can be transformed into forceful negative emotions. This explains why there is always a growing interest in the mother-daughter topic among theorists and literary critics around the world.

According to the German-American sociologist, Lewis A. Coser, the mother-daughter pair establishes a very close "group" and when a conflict takes place within this close group, the hostility of one side towards the other deepens

the more the absence of communication is felt creating a threat to the group's harmony and identity. Thus, mothers and daughters may both be caught in mutual relational knot that can lead to serious conflicts and psychological injuries. In general, conflicts in the mother–daughter relationship are highest in early adolescence when the daughter attempts to establish a stable ego. According to James Youniss and Jacqueline Smollar, in many cases, mothers fail to show respect and empathy for daughters at this stage and this disrupts the relationship by being too controlling, critical or despotic. In return, daughters violate this parenting behavior by being rebellious or rude (45).

From this standpoint, the paper is divided into two sections; theoretical and practical. The first section begins with a review of literature that introduces Erik Erikson's fifth stage of development which is known as "identity vs. role confusion", focusing on the concept of "identity confusion", followed by a brief summary of "Diana Baumrind's Parenting Typology" with special reference to the authoritarian parenting style and ends with describing one of the most deleterious parent-child relationships termed as "parentification" in which a child or adolescent takes on roles and responsibilities traditionally reserved for parents or caregivers. This will provide the framework for analyzing the mother - daughter relationship in the second section. The second section examines "The Art of Cooking and Serving" (2006) by Margaret Atwood in relation to "parentification", and "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid in relation to the authoritarian parenting style. Thus, the aim of the study is to analyze both short stories in an attempt to explore the adverse aftereffects of two different undesirable parenting styles of some mothers on their adolescent daughters' identity. Since the age of the two daughters in the study range from 11-15, therefore, the term adolescent will be used all the time.

### **Erik Erikson's identity confusion and Diana Baumrind's parenting styles**

The concept of "identity confusion" was coined by the German-American developmental psychologist Erik Erikson in 1956. Identity confusion occurs in the stage of psychosocial development termed as the identity cohesion vs. role confusion; in which young people experience conflict while growing and changing into adults. "Identity confusion" is an extension of Erikson's ideas about identity development during adolescence outlined in his stage theory of psychosocial development which is called the "Eight Ages of Man". Erikson, in

his theory, divided the human life cycle into eight psychosocial stages of development. As individuals pass through each stage, they form personality strengths or weaknesses. Since the age of the daughters analyzed in this study is between 11 and 15, therefore, the focus will be on the fifth stage which pertains to adolescence. This stage takes place between the ages of approximately 12 and 18. During this period, adolescents explore their independence and develop a sense of self. In psychology, identity is the conception, qualities, beliefs, and expressions that make a person "self-identity". Any disruption in the process of identity formation will lead to many consequences such as role confusion and a negative identity. Identity confusion is defined by Erikson as "a crucial moment when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth recovery and further differentiation" (16). The way an individual responds to a crisis can be in two ways: either in a negative way or a positive way. During this stage, identity confusion can lead the adolescent to face the challenge of answering the overwhelming question, who am I, and what is my place in society? The following section examines the different parenting styles and some negative parenting behaviors that affects the identity development of the adolescent.

There are numerous elements that play crucial roles in identity development, such as peers, culture, school context, and psychopathology; nevertheless, parents and parenting behaviors are very important in shaping the character of an adolescent. This is because father and mother are the first people whom the adolescent builds a relation with. In "The relationship between parenting styles and adolescent's identity and aggression", psychologists, such as Shiva Shayesteh, Masoud Hejazi, and Gholamhoseen Entesar Foumany, argue that "the results of the studies conducted on behavioral disorders involved that behavioral disorders are mostly the outcome of parent's communicational approach rather than genetic or biological factors" (51). That is to say, there is a relationship between parents' negative parenting style, parent-adolescent conflict and "identity confusion".

Identity is attained by the self-assurance one has on their worth or their abilities, it is an essential aspect of one's life that influences their present as well as their future. The first social experiences that an adolescent gets are from his/her parents. Parents are the foremost socializing agents, and the rearing

practices they use to bring up and socialize their children are known as "parenting styles".

Diana Baumrind is a leading clinical and developmental psychologist whose work on parenting styles is pioneering and known as "Baumrind's Parenting Typology" (Jadon and Shraddha 910). She identified four patterns of parenting styles. The first pattern is the "Authoritative parenting" which is, according to Baumrind, "combination of high control and positive encouragement of the child's autonomous and independent strivings" (2). They set boundaries, explain punishments, and allow the child to actively participate in the family decision making process. According to Baumrind, authoritative parenting is identified by high responsiveness to the child as well as high demandingness regarding discipline and socialization. The second is the "Authoritarian parenting" in which the parents are "detached and controlling, and somewhat less warm than other parents" (2). They value obedience, and expect the rules and restrictions they set to be closely followed. Moreover, their demands from the children are too high and are not responsive at all. They do not motivate verbal give and take. Parents performing authoritarian parenting style generally have an attitude to keep their child protected and safe like any other parent would wish to, but their upbringing techniques are so firm, stringent and directing that they destroy child's self-esteem as well as his/her problem solving abilities, rather than keeping the child secure. A psychological study, conducted by Isabel Martínez, J. F. García and Santiago Yubero in 2007, has revealed that the adolescents (between 11-15) of authoritarian and neglectful families had the lowest score regarding self-esteem. The third pattern is "Permissive parenting" which is described by Baumrind as "noncontrolling, nondemanding, and relatively warm" (2). The final pattern is "Neglectful parenting" in which parents are neither demanding nor responsive. They are emotionally absent from the adolescent's life.

As for "the authoritarian parenting style", Anne C. Fletcher and others perceive parents who use this parenting style as having a strict set of rules and expectations; if rules are not followed and expectations are not fulfilled, then children are exposed to punishment. This parenting style, as Donna Hancock Hoskins posits in "Consequences of Parenting on Adolescent Outcomes" (2014), is "associated with parents who emphasize obedience and conformity and expect that rules be obeyed without explanation in a less warm

environment" (509). These parents are described as "high on demandingness and low on responsiveness" (Martínez et al 732) and they rely on "dogmatic" speech. They are often afraid of losing control over children and that is why they discourage open communication. A study on the relationship between parenting styles and adolescent's identity and aggression marks a significant association between authoritarian parenting style and children identity formation at diffusion identity, premature identity and delayed identity (Shayesteh et al 55). In other words, children/adolescents growing up in an authoritarian home, experience a loss of control over their own lives leading to a more negative behavioral outcomes such as, "poor social skills, low levels of self-esteem, and high levels of depression" (Hoskins 509), which widely associated, as Terri LeMoyne and Tom Buchanan suggest with the adolescent's diminished psychological self and lower levels of self-well-being (401). As a result, they may become rebellious/aggressive or obedient/submissive.

For the adolescent girl, the mother-daughter relationship is of central importance in the development of identity. In this relationship, the daughter, who chooses to submit to her mother's control, depends on her mother for information. Hence, she is put at her mother's mercy. This is one reason an adolescent daughter mostly turns vigorously to her friends: bringing in their opinions, to withstand her primary belief that her mother is correct. "The daughter who really believes, deep down, in her mother's correctness may find it especially hard to individuate herself from her mother; every decision she makes in the way that her mother would may seem another instance of obedience rather than being separate and independent" (Caplan 93). The following part moves to another negative behavior used by some parents in their relation with their children; that is, "parentification".

### **Role-reversal relationship/ parentification**

Introduced by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and G. M. Spark in their book: *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy* (1973), parentification refers to "the subjective distortion of a relationship as if one's partner or even children were his parent" (151). In the case of a parent-child relationship, a child or adolescent performs chores or occasionally offers emotional support for a parent, or has to take on an age-inappropriate role as the caregiver. Thus, in this relationship, the parent "can relate to his child as if he

were a generational equal instead of a different generation" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 152). A more recent and broader definition is provided by Nancy D Chase, in her "Parentification: An overview of theory, research, and societal issues" (1999), that serves as a good starting point for a better understanding of the term "parentification":

it is generally believed that parentification in the family entails a functional and/or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance in order to accommodate and care for logistical or emotional need of the parent. (5).

Thus, parentification is a kind of role-reversal relationship in which children/adolescents take on roles and responsibilities usually reserved for adults. To fully understand the meaning of "parentification", one must be aware of two types of parentification; "the emotional parentification" and "the instrumental parentification" (Harrison & Albanese 2). According to G. J. Jurkovic, Richard Morrell, and Alison Thirkield, emotional parentification is the participation in the "socioemotional needs of family members and the family as a whole" (94). The parentified child in this case attempts to fill an emotional or psychological gap in the family for the parent and sometimes for the siblings; often becoming the parent's intimate and sole support. In contrast, the instrumental parentification, for Jurkovic, Morrell, and Thirkield, is the participation in the "physical maintenance and sustenance of the family" (94), including preparing meals, doing household chores, and handling financial matters. More specifically, when parentified children/adolescents are reliably plunged into the roles of comforter, protector, problem-solver for distressed parents, this manner is expected to thwart their healthy emotional development and lead to serious child distress such as, feelings of anxiety, responsibility, numbing and depression. This endangers the adolescent to identity confusion as a result of being prematurely exposed to adult roles and duties.

Although a small degree of parentification can be beneficial to child development, this process can become problematic when the tasks become too burdensome or when the child feels obligated to take on the adult position in order to maintain a balance in the family system. Some scholars such as, Robert B. Stewart and Robert S. Marvin, demonstrate that adolescents who spend time working at home can play a role in developing healthy time-use habits later in

life. They further add that adolescents care for siblings with a mother present rate higher in taking decisions and social understanding. On the same wavelength is Diane L. Beach who, in her article "Family Caregiving: The Positive Impact on Adolescent Relationships" (1997), sees that adolescents working at home benefit from the work. They grow in responsibility and reliability, qualities that likely impact future success.

With respect to other scholars, Lisa Dodson and Jillian Dickert perceive that that performing home duties may thwart children/pre-adolescents from pursuing other developmental experiences. As a result, adverse effects take place "including internalized emotional distress, externalizing problem behavior, and interpersonal struggles" (Harrison & Albanese 2). Ofra Maysless and others view parentification as pathological "when it requires long-term age-inappropriate contributions from the [adolescent] and when the [adolescent's] own developmental needs are not met" (79). In support to these speculations, researchers such as, Marolyn Wells, Rebecca Jones, Deborah B Jacobvitz and Nell F. Bush note a connotation between role reversal/parentification and general problems in functioning, such as depression and anxiety as well as lower levels of identity exploration, particularly in female adolescents. On the same wave length is Nancy Chase, who asserts that a destructive parentification is described as a "chronic, unspoken, and excessive family dynamic..." when "...imbalances in the relationships between parents and their children persist and place excessive emotional or logistical demands on children or adolescents to function prematurely as if they were adults" (Parentified children 159). Judith A. Stein and others add that the emotional parentification has an impact on the adolescent's externalized maladjusted behaviors e.g., sexual disorder, alcohol and drug use, violence and criminal manner (195). Deborah Harrison and Patrizia Albanese generalize that the deleterious effects have to do with the original causes of the parentification such as, "parental addictions", "parental depression", "divorce" and "[adolescent] maltreatment and abuse".

The study departs from the previous theoretical literature by taking the analytical approach in the first short story, "The Art of Cooking and Serving" (2006) by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, examining the impact of "parentification" on the adolescent daughter in the story.

## The "parentified daughter" in Margaret Atwood's "The Art of Cooking and Serving"

Margaret Atwood (born November 18, 1939) is a foremost figure on the contemporary literary scene, and the Canadian literature. Her work ranges over many decades, starting in the sixties with the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Double Persephone* (1961) and continuing later with her novels, short stories, essays, screenplays, radio scripts, and books for children. Reingard M. Nischik, in his *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (2009), posits that Atwood, along with Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant, is one of the three most frequently anthologized Canadian writers of short fiction and among the most prominent critics of Canadian literature and culture. Moreover, she received Canada's most prestigious literary prize, the Governor General's Literary Award, for her poetry collection *The Circle Game* (1966) and then again for her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and has been shortlisted for the Noble Prize for literature and has long been "a hot candidate for it" (2). In 1994, the first anthology on Atwood was published in Britain and featured British and European critics as well as North Americans. Edited by Colin Nicholson, *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity: New Critical Essays*, considered Atwood's Canadianness from a postcolonial perspective. Lorraine York, in his Canadian anthology *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels* (1995), traces the continuities between later and earlier works in relation to thematics, i.e, wilderness, sexual power politics and Canadian nationalism. Her short story has been praised by the German critic Helmut Bonheim in 1981 as "the most active ambassador of Canadian literature abroad" (659). She is known for many critics, such as Neeru Tandon, , and Anshul Chandra, as "the first major novelist of Canada who attempts to focus on the new-woman as self-aware, independent, seeking to evolve an identity of her own" (12).

"The Art of Cooking and Serving" is the second short story in Margaret Atwood's collection *Moral Disorder* (2006) which seems to mark a new departure in her imaginative engagement with writing women's lives. This collection is Atwood's most "autobiographical" book, sketching the development of the female protagonist Nell over a long range of time; from childhood to adulthood moving to old age. However, when asked about the

autobiographical quality of *Moral Disorder* in an interview, Atwood responded: "Let's say it is a story about what I would have been like if I hadn't been who I was" (Surmiak-Domańska 16).

*Moral Disorder* is perceived as "a collection of eleven stories that is almost a novel ... or a novel broken up into eleven stories. It resembles a photograph album - a series of clearly observed moments that trace the course of a life, and the lives entwined with it - those of parents, siblings, children, friends, enemies, teachers and even animals". As Amelia DeFalco points out, *Moral Disorder* "grapples with the complicated ethics of obligation, particularly the conflict between selfishness and sacrifice that can arise within the praxis of care" (236). Two of the eleven stories deal with the protagonist's childhood, one with her youth and eight stories with her adulthood. Structurally, seven of the eleven stories in the collection are told in the first person narration with a nameless narrator and the rest are told from the third-person point of view of "Nell". Since all the stories run in chronological order from childhood to adulthood and the main character is always female, therefore, it seems logic to project Nell into all the stories. Thus, the study deals with the nameless protagonist in the short story examined in the research as Nell.

In "The Art of Cooking and Serving", Nell is eleven when the story opens. She narrates the story from her own point of view and is shown in a mother-daughter relationship, probably in the 1950s and "under strong conventional gender influence" (Nischik 84). Through the *persona* of Nell, she tries to protect her dangerously pregnant mother by being a perfect servant. She is presented, at the beginning of the story, knitting a layette (a set made up of mittens, booties, leggings, jacket and bonnet) for the baby that her mother is "expecting", doing chores at home and worrying over her mother's health. Thus, the story, as Reingard M. Nischik state, is "an initiation story telling of the daughter Nell's initiation into domestic life and mothering, and of her eventual distancing from her family as she comes to reject her mother's influence" (*The English Short Story in Canada* 115).

The conflict between mother and daughter is apparent in the story when Nell relates the birth of her little sister Lizzie. She finds her life turned upside down by the arrival of a new baby sister in the house. As a result of the "dangerous condition" of her "expectant" mother who is "old for such a thing",

she is forced to spend most of her time at her service. It's normal in this dynamic for the daughter to take on adult responsibilities at a young age such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of younger siblings, listening to the mother's problems, and trying to solve the mother's problems. However, being the only person in her family to bear the whole burden with no help from her father or brother's side marks the beginning of what is mentioned earlier in the paper; parentification or role reversed relationship which gradually leads to Nell's anxiety and identity confusion.

In the relationship between Nell and her mother, there is a gap filled with wordlessness. The mother never talks to her daughter about expecting a child nor about her physical disorder. That is why; Nell feels confused and perplexed about her mother's condition in pregnancy and tries to grasp the family matter in her own way:

By eavesdropping while [her mother] talked with her friends, in the city, and from the worried wrinkles on the foreheads of the friends, and from their compressed lips and tiny shakes of the head, and from their *Oh dear* tone, and from my mother saying she would just have to make the best of it. I gathered that something might be wrong with the baby because of my mother's age; but wrong how, exactly? I listened as much as I could, but I couldn't make it out, and there was no one I could ask. (*Moral Disorder* 12)

It has been argued by psychologists such as, T. Perrino, Gonzalez-Soldevilla A, Pantin H and Szapocznik J., that the family context exerts the most powerful social influences on adolescent development. Consequently, communications between the adolescent and his/her parents are closely related to the adolescent's sense of identity. In Nell's case, poor communication with her mother as well as the absence of information put her in a dilemma leading to feelings of alienation and bewilderment which is shown in her words "there was no one I could ask" (*Moral disorder* 12). Her perplexity and inability to understand what goes on around her, especially what is related to her mother's case mark the beginning of what Erikson termed "identity confusion". The absence of communication with her mother reveals to what extent her mother fails to identify her daughter's role as a member of the family. That is why, the reader always finds Nell receiving all information concerning the mother

through the father, for example, she says "I'd been told about the expectant state of my mother in May, by my father" , "My father did not say what this thing was, but his gravity and terseness meant that it was a serious business" , "My mother – said my father- was not supposed to sweep the floor..." and "We would all have to pitch in, said my father" (*Moral Disorder* 12-13). These quotes testify on the one hand to the emotional absence between the mother and the daughter and anticipate the future role reversal in the family on the other. Thus, the mother's absence of direct parenting and love paves the way to create a stressed and emotionally detached adolescent which results again in conflict.

Because of the mother's "dangerous condition", Nell, the father, and her brother are supposed to cooperate to take care of the pregnant mother but, in reality, the men in the family (the father and brother) seem to have little to do with the mother and it is only Nell who bears the whole matter:

In any case my brother wouldn't be there: he was heading off to a camp for boys, to do things with axes in woods...More helpful than usual, my father added in a manner that was meant to be encouraging...But he couldn't be there all the time. (*Moral Disorder* 13)

"The Art of Cooking and Serving" shows a highly complex concept of parentification. Out of responsibility, Nell feels that "something terrible might happen to her [mother]—something that might make her very ill—and it was all the more likely to happen if I myself did not pay proper attention" (*Moral Disorder* 12). Such "attention" implicates a great deal of effort and stress on Nell since neither her brother nor her father is available. Accordingly, "the parentified daughter" is placed in the role of someone "generally helpful" in the household chores (*Moral Disorder* 13). Recalling Morrell and Thirkield, Nell's responsibilities include "instrumental" help such as, sweeping the floor, pumping out buckets of water and carting them up the hill, doing the washing, scrubbing the clothes and weeding the garden, "all against the background of my mother's alarming passivity" (*Moral Disorder* 15) and "emotional" help represented in protecting and comforting the chronically "dozing" mother. The most terrifying time for Nell, particularly when she is left alone with her mother at their holiday cottage as her mother has turned into "this listless, bloated version of herself, thus changing the future—my future—into something shadow-filled and uncertain" (*Moral Disorder* 16). Placing excessive emotional

or logistical demands on Nell to perform prematurely an adult role revisits Nancy Chase's view of this type of parentification as being "destructive". She is left without the authority, support, supervision, or developmental capability to carry out such responsibilities, which are often poorly defined and exceedingly demanding. This is shown in her words:

[My father] was sure I would be up to it.

I myself was not so sure. He always thought I knew more than I knew, and that I was bigger than I was, and older, and hardier. What he mistook for calmness and competence was actually fright: that was why I stared at him in silence, nodding my head (*Moral Disorder* 13).

At this stage, the mother is hardly present in her daughter's life. She is always "dozing" (*Moral Disorder* 16) and never being the parental figure she should. This is evident in Nell's case. That is why, Nell's emotional needs are not being met because she is being emotionally neglected and is all the time overstressing herself mentally, emotionally and physically with loads of questions without answers about what may happen to the mother being left alone with her:

My mother was dozing. I sat on the dock, slapping at the stable flies and worrying. I felt like crying, but I could not allow myself to do that. I was completely alone. What would I do if the dangerous thing –whatever it was- began to happen? (*Moral Disorder* 16)

Throughout the story, Nell keeps on thinking and asking questions about worse scenarios for example, when her mother goes for a swim: "I had to prevent her from drowning...I would have to dive down and get my arm around her neck...but how could I do that?" (*Moral Disorder* 15). This overthinking and internal conflict is an indication of identity confusion, anxiety and mental stress which are among the most detrimental outcomes of the adolescent's adoption of the "emotional parentification" when playing the role of the problem solver for a distressed parent.

When Nell turns fourteen, the situation at home has further deteriorated after the birth of her sister, relegating overburdened domestic responsibilities to her. Her daily routine during this period reveals to what extent projecting too

much housework and childcare thwart her from all pleasures and explorations of adolescence, such as, talking to boys, watching movies, going to “drive-ins on double dates with their new steadies...and [rolling] around in the back seats of cars”, trying on “strapless dresses” and attending dances (*Moral Disorder* 22). In other words, “the parentified daughter” misses out on the developmentally age-appropriate and essential activities that typically characterize adolescence, such as the formation of healthy interpersonal relationships with peers, the development of secure attachment to her mother, and the development of a coherent identity.

Accordingly, Nell rebels against her mother and the parentified role her mother imposes upon her: “Why should I? [help her mother with the baby] I said. ‘She’s not my baby. I didn’t have her. You did.’ I’d never said anything this rude to her. Even as the words were coming out of my mouth I knew I’d gone too far, though all I’d done was spoken the truth, or part of it” (23). She reaches a point which evokes Erikson’s view of identity development in which the adolescent transfers from an inner upheaval to a new mastery reaching “a most decisive stage” (126). Nell’s rebellion is the only means to attain a coherent identity.

In a belligerent reaction against the adolescent’s rebellion: “My mother stood up and whirled around, all in one movement, and slapped me hard across the face” (*Moral Disorder* 23). However, Nell’s struggle for personal freedom and independence entails total, self-imposed separation from her mother, the domestic and nurturing role imposed on her, hence, she feels freed as an adolescent drifting into a new kind of outside world of peer groups, “to all sorts of...seductive and tawdry and frightening pleasures I could not yet begin to imagine” (23). There is not a single note about why the mother is so dependent on her daughter. Psychologically speaking, growing up with unmet emotional needs makes it more likely that mothers like Nell’s mother will unconsciously seek the nurturing that they didn't receive from their own mothers from their young daughters.

Moving to another parenting style which is considered a source of conflict in a mother – daughter relationship; that is the authoritarian parenting style. Through the analysis of Jamaica Kincaid’s short story “Girl”, the study attempts to investigate the dynamics of this relationship.

### **The authoritarian mother in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"**

Jamaica Kincaid, Caribbean American writer whose essays, stories, and novels are redolent portrayals of family relationships and her native Antigua. She is one of the most predominant writers of the twentieth/twenty-first century. Kincaid was born in the Caribbean island, Antigua in 1949, educated in the British tradition, and broke from her mother when she left the island for the United States. She was raised by a father who was never there and a mother who neglected Kincaid in her brothers' favor. Her fiction is best known as being rooted in her recurrent painful memories of childhood and adolescence (Maunder 124).

As a writer, she has emerged in the last thirty years as one of the most important contemporary Anglophone writers in the Americas. Kincaid admits that her mother played a very crucial role in her creative life as she taught her how to read when she was three and gave her Oxford Dictionary when she was seven. However, her mother became annoyed with her reading habits when she failed to do the household chores her mother asked her for. Kincaid's mother angrily gathered up all of her daughter's books and buried them. That is why; it is because of Kincaid's mother that the former is able to express pain. Daryl Cumber Dance, in her article "In Search of Annie Drew: Jamaica Kincaid's Mother and Muse" (2016), argues that everything Kincaid has written is about her mother (2). Unlike Margaret Atwood, who deals in her works with various themes, such as, feminism, animal rights, political involvement, and power of language, most of Jamaica Kincaid's works are centered on the difficulties of teenage girls coming of age and all of her characters originate from her life experiences.

"Girl", Kincaid's first debut into the literary career, is a very short narrative concerned with the mother- daughter relationship, representing a mother who tries to instruct her daughter in how a woman should do her "instrumental" chores, and then about how she should behave like a proper lady. Similar to "The Art of Cooking and Serving", Kincaid's "Girl" addresses the theme of disconnection between mothers and daughters and role conflicts. This is shown in the way the mother harshly gives her daughter strict and organized set of verbal guidelines that teach her how to be a proper woman in that society.

"Girl" was first published in 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1978, in the influential magazine *The New Yorker*, and it later became part of a short story collection, *At the bottom of the River* (1983). Although this was Kincaid's first book, it attracted more critical attention than volumes of short stories usually do. It received The Morton Dauwen Zabel Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and was nominated for PEN/Faulkner Award. Moreover, "Girl" has been selected for several important anthologies, including Angela Carter's *Wayward Girls*, *Wicked Women: An Anthology of Stories* (1987), Carmen C.Esteves and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam: Short Stories by Caribbean Women* (1991), David Holbrook's *Images of Women in Literature* (1991), and Aruna Sitiesh's *Beyond Gender and Geography: American Women Writers* (1994).

The structure of "Girl" is unique in that it is a one paragraph in length, 650-word dialogue between a mother and daughter. It is punctuated as one long sentence, stippled with numerous semicolons. There is no introduction of the characters, no action, and no description of setting. Although the setting is not stated in the story, Kincaid has revealed in interviews that it takes place in Antigua, her island birthplace. Like all of Kincaid's fiction, "Girl" is based on Kincaid's own life and her relationship with her mother.

Unlike Nell's mother in "The Art of Cooking and Serving" who represents the concept of parentification in relation to her daughter, the mother-daughter relationship in Kincaid's "Girl" is based on a set of instructions offered stiffly by the mother to her daughter, including domestic chores as laundry, sewing, ironing, cooking, setting the table, sweeping, and washing. The mother's voice simply begins commanding:

Wash the white clothes on Monday...wash the color clothes on Tuesday...don't walk bare-head in the hot sun...cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil...soak salt fish overnight before you cook it...always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach.  
(“Girl” 6)

From the above commands, it is noticed that the mother's voice is judgmental and domineering in the narrative, only interrupted twice by the

daughter who makes a meek attempt to show conflicting feelings for her mother. The mother places high demands on her daughter but is not responsive to the adolescent's needs. She allows one-way communication expecting her daughter to blindly obey without questions. Hence, her regulations seem drawn from a rigid behavior which recalls "the authoritarian parenting" suggested by "Baumrind's parenting typology". This explains why the mother's tone is cold, dogmatic and detached from emotions and intimacy.

The mother moves from the scrupulous suggestions on good housekeeping to give harsh comments on issues of gender and sexuality. She scolds her daughter for singing benna (an Antiguan folk song usually focused on scandalous and bawdy rumors and gossip) at Sunday school and gives a set of prohibitions: "don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street-flies will follow you" ("Girl" 6). As an authoritarian parent, the mother tends to take a more unresponsive and parent-centered role and exerts a high level of control over her adolescent daughter. Furthermore, she doesn't use words of comfort and never demonstrates affection or praise to her daughter. The layers of advice and commands spoken in one long, breathless way create a restricting sense of duty and even oppression that shows one-way communication. At the end of the first third of the story, the mother's strict instructions are interrupted by the daughter's docile voice in an attempt to defend herself, signaled by italics, "*but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.*" Without receiving any reply, the daughter tends to be dependent, submissive, and overly conforming in the presence of her mother. She carefully listens to her mother who does most of the talking. Although the age of the girl is not specified, one would perceive that her age seems to be between ten and fifteen because of the nature of the values that the mother is attempting to indoctrinate in her.

It is observed that the mother's concern about the increasing sexuality of her daughter is misused and becomes excessively protective, overanxious or even aggressive, which make her say contemptuous or insulting remarks to her daughter. Her psychological abuse of the daughter is just as violent. This is shown in the repetition of the mother's insulting words: "walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming", "prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming". By displaying a cold and abusive attitude toward her daughter, the mother completely neglects the

daughter's natural need for security and warmth which are so necessary for the development of a positive self-image. Instead, she displays low self-esteem, aggression, and anxiety, traits that are transmitted to the young daughter. Moreover, the repetition of such insults, not only perpetrate pain, but they also produce lasting scars of the acquiescent daughter. This provokes the reader's attention to the emotional state of the daughter. The girl doesn't understand the sexual connotations her mother refers to as she is still young, that is why; she finds herself speechless and mortified by the mother's judgmental and overcritical voice.

Towards the middle of the story, with less warm and more detached tone, the authoritarian mother again continues passing on to her daughter various guidelines, advice, and a group of "how to do" list about household chores as if this is her main role in life:

This is how you iron your father's khaki pants...this is how you grow okra...this is how you sweep a whole house...this is how you set a table for tea...for dinner...for lunch...and] for breakfast. ("Girl" 6)

As noted above, the "how to do" list reveals again a sense that the mother is imposing her will on her daughter, mapping out for her the role in life she wants her be; to be only a housewife. Like Nell in "The Art of Cooking and Serving", the daughter in "Girl" is asked to perform overburdened domestic chores without receiving any emotional support in return.

By the end of the story, the mother becomes more insistent and more critical. She continues giving commands to her daughter regarding sexuality and relationships with men. She instructs her on "how to behave in the presence of men ...and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming" ("Girl" 6). She continues inculcating her on issues including, how to make medicines to bring on an abortion, and how to bully a man and how to love a man. This emotionally distant mother, with her overloaded directions, transmits to the daughter personal tension and poor self-worth. Therefore, the most troubling part of the story is the fact that the mother forgets that her daughter is still a young girl. Alternatively, as a consequence of the mother's controlling behavior expressed with hostility, the daughter is forced to conform to the mother's way of life before she has the chance to grow up and

decide upon which type of life she herself might like to live, hence, losing her identity. Parents, as Erikson states, must be "able to represent to [their adolescents] a deep, almost somatic conviction that there is a meaning in what they are doing" (Youth and Crisis 103) which is not achieved in the mother-daughter relationship in Kincaid's "Girl". Unable to attain a coherent identity, at this stage, the daughter keeps subservient and does not rebel against her mother. Kincaid remarkably represents the mother-daughter relationship as a relationship between the powerful and the powerless "where the mother is privileged because of being a mother. The privileged status of the mother makes the daughter assumes an inferior position. The daughter is subjugated and strained to the point of bitter silence by the privileged status of the mother. She can hardly talk back to justify her position and even when she has the chance to reply or resists she whispers and almost talks to herself" (Rabea and Almahameed 158). Thus, the daughter's silence and compliance reveals her powerlessness and loss of identity. She is trapped in a world dominated by the authority of the mother whom she cannot escape. Psychologically speaking, just as the daughter is silent throughout most of the story, there is an expectation that she will be silent and submissive in life in her adulthood. The story ends with the same authoritarian, powerful, severe, and neglectful parenting style represented by the mother which makes attaining autonomy and self-assertion less possible.

### **Conclusion:**

There is a direct relationship between negative parenting styles and mother-daughter conflict. In Margaret Atwood's short story "The Art of Cooking and Serving", the study throws light on the role reversal relationship, "parentification", as a source of anxiety and uneasiness in the relationship between the mother and the daughter, heightening the conflict between the parentified daughter's own desires and the needs of others. The analysis shows the growth of Nell, the daughter, from a worried child suffering from "identity confusion", to a surely adolescent that eventually finds her strong voice and is able to assert a coherent identity by giving up the overwhelming and alarming household responsibilities.

The second part of the study deals with the negative impact of the "authoritarian parenting style" represented by the mother in the second short

story "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid. The mother's authoritarian behavior breeds a lack of self-worth in the young daughter. Unlike Nell, who attains her own identity at the end, the daughter in "Girl" remains passive and compliant till the end of the story without any attempt to change. The choice of these two works is rooted in the stories' commonalities, regarding identity and being, overburdened instrumental roles to play, however, being dominated abusively by different negative parenting styles of the mothers. The identity confusion that leads to internal and external conflicts that the daughters face is amplified by the negative parenting styles of the mothers in the two short stories.

The authenticity of both Atwood and Kincaid in portraying the mother-daughter relationships brings their characters to life. By witnessing Nell's plights and triumphs and how she directs her own life in a new direction through her rebellion against her mother's dreary household chores, the reader becomes part of her vision of change. In contrast, the girl in Kincaid's story doesn't develop a sense of identity during adolescence as postulated by Erikson in his theory of psychosocial development. Instead, she loses an authentic sense of self in her relation with the authoritarian mother, who lacks empathy and could not provide her daughter with genuine care.

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