



UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN
Centro de Estudios de Postgrado

Master's Dissertation/
Trabajo Fin de Máster

**MULTIETHNIC
APPROACHES TO
MOTHERHOOD WITH THE
BURDENS OF THE PAST
AND THE UNCERTAINTIES
OF THE FUTURE**

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July 2023

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Abstract

This dissertation scrutinizes distinct approaches to motherhood from a multiethnic standpoint. It stems, firstly, from the necessity to intersectionalize all feminist endeavors to end the cycle of misrepresentation non-white women have endured historically and, secondly, from the need to enhance a more inclusive view of the literary canon accompanied by a postcolonial criticism committed to providing a voice for historically marginalized communities and to tackling present-day concerns. There will be a discussion of the factors historically marginalizing non-white communities, an in-depth analysis of the methodological approaches employed for diasporic phenomena, a scrutiny of how feminism can become intersectional, and an investigation of the traits characterizing African American and Afro-Caribbean approaches to motherhood, whilst also touching upon notions such as surrogacy and adoptive motherhood. All the theoretical concepts have been illustrated with in-text instances extracted from two primary sources: *Little Fires Everywhere* (Ng, 2017) and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Danticat, 1994). The evidence obtained evinces mother-daughter relationships characterized by a love-hate, and a closeness-distance ambivalence where overprotection seems to be commonplace. The findings are enlightening as they epitomize a reality observed in numerous Western countries, where non-white mothers are believed to misnurture their children while the socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors pervading the lives of these women remain overlooked.

Keywords: multiethnic, motherhood, feminism, Ng, Danticat, postcolonial

Resumen

Esta tesis escudriña distintos enfoques de maternidad desde una perspectiva multiétnica. Surge, primeramente, de la necesidad de interseccionalizar todos los esfuerzos feministas para poner fin al ciclo de falsa representación que las mujeres de color han experimentado históricamente y, en segundo lugar, de la necesidad de promover una visión más inclusiva del canon literario con la ayuda de una crítica postcolonial comprometida a darles voz mediante análisis de problemáticas contemporáneas. Habrá un debate acerca de los factores de dicha marginación, un análisis de los aspectos metodológicos más destacados para los estudios diaspóricos, un escrutinio sobre cómo alcanzar un feminismo interseccional, y una investigación sobre maternidad afroamericana y afrocaribeña, así como maternidad de alquiler y adoptiva. Todos los conceptos han sido ilustrados mediante citas extraídas de dos fuentes primarias: *Little Fires Everywhere* (Ng, 2017) y *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Danticat, 1994). La evidencia demuestra relaciones entre madres e hijas caracterizadas por una ambivalencia entre amor y odio, y entre cercanía y distancia en la que la sobreprotección parece ser un factor común. Los hallazgos son reveladores en tanto que representan una realidad que se observa en numerosos países occidentales, donde se piensa que las madres de color no proporcionan a sus hijos una crianza adecuada sin reflexionar acerca de los factores socioeconómicos y sociopolíticos que impregnan las vidas de estas mujeres.

Palabras clave: multiétnica, maternidad, feminismo, Ng, Danticat, postcolonial

1. INTRODUCTION

The success of the cinematographic adaptation of Celeste Ng's best-seller *Little Fires Everywhere*, which first aired in the United States in March 2020 with director Lynn Shelton in charge, has been stratospheric with figures that include a 79% of Google users having enjoyed the show, a score of 7.7 out of 10 on famed reviewing site IMDb, another 79% of Rotten Tomatoes critics convinced and, according to Parrot Analytics, the series has accomplished a level of demand in American TV that an exclusive 8.6% of all shows has been capable of accomplishing. Likewise, Ng's novel has managed the astounding feat of obtaining a score on Goodreads of 4.08 stars out of 5 and the astonishing figure of 1.080.078 ratings along with 70.746 reviews by readers and counting. What these figures epitomize is but a greater concern among readers and audiences alike with issues of social injustice, feminist preoccupations and questions of race, not only in the United States but all around the globe. Consequently, this reflects a shift in the tendencies of the preoccupations of the public as well as critics should the figures be juxtaposed to the interest Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* arose at the time of its publication in 1994. Whilst it cannot be denied that Danticat's publication attracted immense appeal among literary critics and considerable research has been conducted on it, its success ratio is a far cry from what is occurring with Ng's best-seller, even though both are concerned with issues of motherhood, albeit from dissimilar stances. This is indicative of the greater appeal postcolonial matters have managed to acquire in these almost thirty years.

Breath, Eyes, Memory touches upon a number of Haitian motherhood issues, including a mother abandoning her daughter at birth with the prospect of seeking better life opportunities in America and escaping trauma, and the subsequent task bestowed upon her daughter's grandmother and aunt to raise her, evoking the notion of othermothering. In a similar vein, in *Little Fires Everywhere*, what can be observed is the representation of multi-ethnic motherhood models, namely white American, African American, Chinese, surrogate and adoptive, and the manners in which they interact with one another in American society, especially denouncing the social injustices endured by the historically marginalized. It should be emphasized that, taking account of said tribulations, the African American mother and the Chinese one must rise to the challenge of raising their daughters on their own. Therefore, as can be inferred, these two novels

have the potential to provide enriching insight into issues of motherhood from a multi-ethnic standpoint.

Among the preoccupations of this dissertation are:

- To deconstruct motherhood to provide visibility to non-white, non-heteronormative and non-patriarchal maternal models.
- To denounce the situations of institutional and social injustice endured by the different types of mothers portrayed in both novels, especially the non-white ones, and which have been and continue to be hegemonically perpetuated by patriarchal values.
- To challenge the belief that supports the conception of Western motherhood as a paragon of maternal nurture.

The second section of the present paper will serve as the justification of the topical choice whereby there will be a discussion of the main concerns and the subsequent evolution of literary criticism from the twentieth century hitherto. Besides, this chapter will revisit the historical literary canon and its development from WWII with a mention of Alastair Fowler's (1979) and W. Harris' (1991) contributions. All these shifts in the trends of literary criticism have progressively paved the way for the inclusion of postcolonial issues among the intelligentsia.

The third section will strive to evince the paramount necessity to shift the focus of feminist criticism to a direction that will be inclusive of postcolonial women in order that the cycle of essentialism that has pervaded feminist theory for decades and which has rendered these women marginalized can be eradicated. This will be done by touching upon Mishra's (2013) denunciations of the homogenizing tendencies of traditional feminist criticism as well as Spivak's (1996) arguments concerning the role of women in the formation and development of diasporas. This chapter will also expound on the methodological tools that will be implemented throughout the research endeavors and will underscore the relevance of qualitative methods in the scrutiny of diasporic concerns, as postulated by Amelina and Burglowski (2018). Their arguments emphasize the significance of notions such as heterogeneity through the condemnation of notions and practices like "the ethnic lens" (Schiller and Çağlar, 2016), "ethnic groupism" (Brubaker, 2002) and "package cultures" (Amelina and Faist, 2012). These methodological strategies

will be enlightened through the employment of in-text examples from the selected primary sources.

What can be expected of the fourth section is a discussion of Ngugi's reflections upon the process named decolonization of the mind and the subsequent need to apply this notion to feminist theory so as to pave the way for a "feminism without borders" which has as its ultimate goal to gain intersectionality, as postulated by Talpade (2003). Besides, there will be an explication regarding the main traits and the foundations of postcolonial feminist criticism and of the manner in which this young form of criticism prepares the ground for a subsequent scrutiny of African American and Afro-Caribbean motherhood theories. Concomitantly, there will be analyses of in-text instances of maternal nurturing from the two primary sources selected to enlighten the theoretical notions postulated along this chapter and to throw light on the complexities and the heterogeneity of the maternal role, with the ultimate objective of decolonizing the field and fostering transculturality in Western society.

Providing closure will be a conclusion which will encompass the main findings from the selected primary sources and will prove that the objectives of the dissertation have been accomplished. Moreover, the conclusion will address the limitations of the research project and will pose questions in order that further research will be conducted on this topic and to encourage further interest in the topic.

2. THE LITERARY CANON AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRENDS IN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM SINCE THE 20TH CENTURY

It does not come as a surprise that Africans account for the world's most mistreated population in the entire history of the world hitherto. A fact that has not been addressed by academic research in a proper manner until well into the 20th century. The realization that African studies needed to be addressed from a critical stance stemmed from globalization and the fact that more and more citizens of the world are opting for higher education. As a direct consequence, an increasing number of people are becoming better informed about world history. Furthermore, the development of critical thinking skills has gained considerable popularity in the last years on account of wide-ranging worldwide socioeconomic and sociopolitical needs. Prior to this realization, both literary criticism and the literary canon failed to provide a voice for historically marginalized communities which, although they eventually managed to gain independence from the British metropolis, have continued to be severely punished in the sense that their history and stories have not been given proper attention until relatively recently.

To be specific, as regards the Anglophone literary intelligentsia, it is known that literary theory and criticism prior to the 19th century were mostly concerned with establishing a literary canon and portraying art as a discipline whose function was solely to reproduce reality as realistically as possible, a view of art and, thus, of literature that was first conceived by Plato and was inherited by later literary and philosophical figures. It was not until the 20th century that there originated a groundbreaking shift in the aforementioned monolithic considerations of literature, when German philologists managed to approach biblical texts from a more analytical, comparative and critical stance. The 20th century would see the birth of such literary theories in Europe as Russian formalism and linguistic criticism between the 1920s and the 1940s, psychoanalytic and Jungian criticism between the 30s and the 60s or, perhaps more importantly, structuralism in the 60s. All of them demanded a transition from an outdated appreciation of literature towards a more avant-garde approach to working with literary texts. Major works of literature would cease to be regarded as artistic artifacts, untouchable unless to read them in an appreciative manner, and would begin to be approached from different critical stances.

By means of illustration, structuralism came to be as the combination of Saussure's linguistic insights in his 'Course in General Linguistics', Russian formalism

and the American formalist school of New Criticism and, in short, it is mostly concerned with the assessment of the basic structures involved in the production of culture. Whilst it is true that structuralism rejected outdated understandings of literature in favor of the consideration of it as a diversity of structures, each with their function and connected by means of a grammar of their own, we should not ignore the fact that this theory postulated that the understanding of cultures was to be regarded as a structure-decoding process, in other words, the rites, traditions and practices of a particular culture could only be comprehended through a linguistic analysis of structures that possessed a logic of their own. Needless to say, from the perspective of a 21st-century literary critic, this practice would not be sustained for long as the contemporary social issues would call for a much more practical approach to cultural studies, which would be materialized through the heyday of a number of poststructuralist theories and that would, at long last, make room for the discussion of the issues affecting the historically marginalized, as the present study seeks to accomplish from a multiethnic feminist standpoint.

In essence, poststructuralism introduced a much-needed political turn to the study of literature, distanced from the belief in an unchanging order of things and managed to humanize literary and cultural studies. There was an important rejection of grand narratives, which attempted to explicate all knowledge and experience through the totalization of culture. The age of poststructuralism would claim, as is done at present, that legitimacy lies in the myriad micronarratives underscoring difference, contradiction, lack of sameness and of compatibility, and beliefs and desires. In order to accomplish this, it would be primordial to implement the process of deconstruction, the theoretical tool designed by Jacques Derrida and developed and further enhanced by poststructuralist critique with the aim of examining the hierarchies ruling Western culture and politics through the unearthing of contradictions and discontinuities in the supposedly logical structures of works of literature, the deconstruction of Manichean opposition and the subversion of exclusion in favor of inclusion so as to dispose of traditional devaluations of inferior groups.

Of great relevance will also be the rise of British cultural materialism and American new historicism for the purposes of this research project insofar as, in both, there was a fostering of the notion of literature and culture as a process of production inescapably affected by socioeconomic and ideological factors and, most importantly, in both there existed a focus on the marginalized through the analysis of how dominant ideologies in a specific society ignored any texts or documents refusing to conform to

such ideologies as well as appropriating canonical works seeking validation for their own agenda. Owing to such interest in sociological and anthropological issues, worldwide criticism has managed to comprehend that it is primordial to scrutinize racial and gender issues¹. However, this thesis aims to shift the focus to the last link in the chain of the historically marginalized: non-white women and their divergent approaches to motherhood.

Another relevant aspect which has undeniably played an important role in the otherization of non-white cultures is the historical literary canon². Throughout history, it had only served the purposes of Western, white, Christian, heterosexual men, with just a limited number of women deemed worth studying in terms of literary production, and most of them had to conceive their works under a male pseudonym. For both CM and NH, it would be possible to give a voice to the historically marginalized through the exhaustive analysis of the historical context of a given text, a close textual analysis of it, and a strong political commitment. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that the purpose was not the overthrowing of the literary canon, but rather the overhauling of it along with the establishment of a multiplicity of canons to cater to the wide-ranging needs that literature accounts for in this day and age, hence Alastair Fowler's (1979) establishment of six distinctive literary canons³ and Wendell Harris' (1991) subsequent contributions⁴.

As previously mentioned, only in recent decades has there been a rise in postcolonial texts for the agenda of the academia in Western countries on account of the lethargic process of decolonization of formerly colonized nations of the once-almighty British Empire. Similarly, only relatively recently has there arisen a process of intersectionality in Europe as regards the consideration of literary works that seek to share an essential message to the world, albeit more specifically to the metropolis although, needless to mention that these vernacular works have been groundbreaking in the former colonies ever since they broke free from the shackles of British domination. This paper

¹ For the emergence of postcolonial and feminist concerns in literary theory, see Selden et al. (1985:115-143, 218-242). <https://www.uv.es/fores/contemporary-literary-theory-5th-edition.pdf>

² In his journal article 'The Other Canon: Literary History and Marginalized Texts' (1993), Douglas Shields discusses the canon as a paradoxically necessary human construct which represents an apparatus of exclusion in that it "creates and maintains group identities [by creating] an us against [...] a them" (53). Shields provides insight into the evolution of what has been deemed canonical ever since the inception of the notion, which, in turn, serves to explicate the fluctuating interests of literary criticism from the early 20th to the present. <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104394>

³ For Fowler's revisitation of the canon, see <https://doi.org/10.2307/468873>

⁴ For Harris' reflections upon the canon, see <https://doi.org/10.2307/462827>

will aim to scrutinize the African American and the Afro-Caribbean perspectives of motherhood so as to challenge the pervading claims that any forms of non-white motherhood are inferior and flawed, a niched field of investigation that serves as the justification for the topical choice of this thesis.

3. THE RELEVANCE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS IN DIASPORIC STUDIES ILLUSTRATED THROUGH THE NON-WHITE WOMEN IN *LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE* AND *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY*

Although postcolonial feminist criticism is a relatively young discipline, the last decades have seen a flourishing of academic research on gendered postcolonial issues seeking to deotherize and demarginalize those whose voices have been historically suppressed. This way, a new feminist wave has imbued the research endeavors of the academia with a view to underscoring the villainies of the patriarchal powers that continue to pervade our society and their subsequent impact. However, as previously stated, this paper seeks to go beyond by establishing a well-delineated distinction between Eurocentric feminism and postcolonial feminism. The latter strives to denounce the lack of intersectionality on the part of traditional Eurocentric feminism in that, as Mishra (2013) noted, it has seldom sought to account for any class, racial, geopolitical, and psychosocial differences. Therefore, all these aspects have gone overlooked throughout the history of the movement thus far, an instance of essentialization that may remind us of other attempts of homogenization practiced during the era of colonization which rendered the former colonies voiceless and labeled as ‘the others’, with little to no distinction amongst them.

In other words, Eurocentric feminism would postulate that there are several dissimilar approaches to motherhood but would fail to expound on the racial differences that open the door for completely new (from the Western perspective) notions of motherhood coming from other geographical locations such as Africa and the Caribbean, or which can be found within a Western country itself, as is the case of the African American. According to Spivak (1996), women possess a leading role in the development of diasporas and “homeland” attachments, yet they are oftentimes misrepresented or not represented whatsoever in diaspora studies, which, in turn, reinforces androcentric philosophies. This is exactly the phenomenon addressed by Mishra (2013), the neglect

third-world women endure on the part of the patriarchal societies in which they live as well as on the part of traditional feminism.

Presently, there continues to be prejudice in Western cultures highlighting neglect as a common trait of non-white forms of motherhood. This is the sort of essentialization mentioned above which traditional feminism still fails to discontinue. Therefore, the objective of this research would be to prove this presupposition wrong by pointing to in-text cases of prejudice held by white American families and highlighting cases of racism and xenophobia. Moreover, amongst the interests of this paper is to find examples of misnurture on the part of these non-white women with a view, not to proving that white American families have a point, but to tracing where this supposed misnurture may stem from as well as instances of wholesome nurture in order to break the essentialization cycle. Furthermore, in-text instances of maternal misnurture on the part of a white American mother will be extracted so as to shatter the perception of white American motherhood as a flawless model and with a view to throwing light to the complexity of the role of maternity aided by an intersectional stance.

Before delving into African American and Caribbean feminist theories so as to throw light on the intricacies of the motherhood experiences of each ethnicity, it is crucial to pay heed to a number of methodological concepts postulated by Amelina and Barglowski (2018) which ought to be considered when researching diasporic phenomena. Contrary to what is generally taken to be the norm, social taxonomies originally conceived to represent forms of belonging, like ethnicity and gender, do not necessarily bind people together. In fact, more recent approaches to diaspora studies suggest that heterogeneity be underscored when investigating the experiences of individuals “confronted with attributions relating to gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, disability, age, generation and space.” This prevents homogenization or, in other words, diasporic individuals being predefined by their ethnicity or nationality, with a concomitant assumption of cultural similarity.

The notions of “ethnic lens” (Schiller and Çağlar, 2006), “ethnic groupism” (Brubaker 2002) and “package cultures” (Amelina and Faist, 2012) are intrinsically linked to the problématique of homogenization described above in that they address diasporic actors being portrayed as “uniform communities” displaying “consistent ethnically defined cultural traits”, which is an illustration of the essentialist practice performed throughout the decades of colonial and imperial rule. Therefore, failing to

acknowledge the heterogeneity which is natural to diasporic communities would be to rekindle the fire which perpetuates colonial discourse.

With a view to being able to depict the realities of the different mothers scrutinized in this paper, it will be essential to pinpoint the ways in which gender relations are established in society within both the diaspora per se and by means of the interactions between the community and its environment, as proposed by Amelina and Burglowski. Considering the two primary sources for the present dissertation are Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the research study will discuss the events that lead Mia and Baby Chow, in Ng's book, and Martine, in Danticat's, to make the contentious decisions which inevitably permeate their daughters' lives, making them grow a feeling of rancor toward their respective mothers, a common feature to the complicated mother-daughter relationship portrayed in both novels which, along with other various factors, will enrich this research.

Lastly, of great relevance will also be the following research strategies based on qualitative methods: firstly, the notion of "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 1995) has as its end "a reflection on cross-border spatiality"; in essence, research on diasporic phenomena should aim to analyze the ambiguous nature of diaspora formation that binds together a large proportion of ragtag individuals "within and across borders". To enlighten this, we have the fact that Mia and Bebe, the former an African American and the latter a Chinese woman, both single mothers living in America, meet in Ng's novel and aim to assist each other in a society imbued with sexism and racism. They both display different degrees of 'radicalism' when it comes to vindicating their decisions. Mia displays a more moderate attitude which becomes more radicalized as the novel progresses. It should be noted that her shift in attitude is motivated by her emotional response to the socioeconomic triggers which will imbue her and her daughter's lives, resulting in a certain degree of possessiveness over and overprotection of her daughter. An example may be the moment Mia addresses the issue of sexuality with Pearl by asking her whether she and Moody are having sexual relationships in light of Lexie's abortion: "'Are you—do you—' She paused. 'We've never really had this talk before.' [...] 'I know you and Moody are very close'" (247). The situation escalates until a point of no return where Mia is forced to break her promise to Pearl that this time they would stay in Shaker Heights indefinitely on account of Elena Richardson's investigative endeavors on her actual identity, and this prompts an emotional reaction by Pearl, who will now have to sever all the relationships she has build whilst in Shaker: "'I don't want to. But we have

to.” Mia held out her hand [...]. “Pearl, my darling,” her mother said. “I’m so sorry. It’s time to go.” She took Mia’s hand, and Pearl, uprooted, came free and followed her mother back to the car’ (306). Mia constantly tries to convince herself that her daughter’s involvement with the Richardson is part of a skin-changing process that all teenagers experience: ‘You wanted Pearl to have a more normal life, she reminded herself; well, this is what teens do’ (65), yet she is eventually overwhelmed by all the factors affecting their lives.

In Bebe Chow’s case, her most conspicuous instance of radicalism lies in her decision to ‘kidnap’ her daughter from the McCulloughs to bring her to safety in China, as will be exemplified later on. It is important to bear in mind that it is complex to conceive any strive against social and institutional racism and sexism without a certain degree of radicalism, and that Mia’s, Baby Chow’s and Martine’s decisions are, therefore, justified although, from a Western perspective, these women’s position is hard to fathom on account of a lack of need for radicalism in the lives of the Western characters. We learn this when we are becoming acquainted with the Richardson’s lifestyle: ‘Neither of them had ever been radical—even at a time of protests’ (73). Perhaps, the only Richardson who can comprehend the need for radicalism is the most neglected and misunderstood of the Richardson children, Izzy, as she herself ‘had the heart of a radical’ (80) on account of her parents’ strictures. Especially her mother will most often push her to become somebody she does not want to be: ‘At eleven, her mother—convinced that Izzy was overly clumsy—had enrolled her in dance classes to improve her coordination. Her father insisted she try it for one term before she could quit. Every class, Izzy sat down on the floor and refused to move’ (41). Another example of this is when Lexie explains that ““their mother thought [Izzy] wore too much black and bought her all these cute dresses. And Izzy just rolled them up in a grocery bag and took the bus downtown and gave them to some person on the street, [after which] [Elena] grounded her for a month”” (41). As the novel progresses, we learn that Elena’s strictures stem from the fact she had a complicated pregnancy with Izzy. In fact, she was born before she was due, which could potentially lead to a series of future complications for Izzy, therefore, ‘this list would be one of the few things Mrs. Richardson would recall about her time in the hospital. A list of things she would scan Izzy for over the next decade’ (109). It is at this point that we learn that ‘anger is fear’s bodyguard’ (110), therefore, Elena’s hostile attitude towards Izzy is actually a thick layer lying over all the fear and anxiety she experienced before Izzy was born. This will cause Elena to become an overprotective mother, which will, in

turn, act as justification for Izzy's non-conforming demeanor. Izzy poses questions that none of her siblings do and becomes the most inquisitive Richardson member. A clear example of this can be found when the Richardsons attend Mirabelle/May Lin's birthday at the McCulloughs and Izzy starts to inquire about issues which make the rest of the attendees, especially the McCulloughs themselves and her own family uncomfortable: "Is her name really Mirabelle?" [...]. "But she must have had a name before," Izzy said. "Don't you know what it is?" (115).

Arguably, the most contentious practice performed by any of the mothers under scrutiny in this paper is Martine's habit of 'testing' Sophie to ensure her virginity until marriage: "Where were you?" She tapped the belt against her palm, her lifelines becoming more and more red. She took my hand with surprised gentleness, and led me upstairs to my bedroom. There, she made me lie on my bed and she tested me' (85). This transgressive intergenerational practice will have dire implications for Sophie which will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

It is essential for women like Mia, Bebe Chow and Martine to act with a sense of suspicion at the affairs of the white individuals with whom they interact, some of whom do not hesitate to suspect their actions and decisions in the first place. An example of this is when, despite 'what leases said about limited rights of entry' (65), Elena pays a visit to her tenant Mia and, after learning everything we needs to, comes to the realization that 'a part of her wanted to study Mia like an anthropologist, to understand why—and how—she did what she did. Another part of her—though she was only vaguely aware of it at the moment—was uneasy, wanted to keep an eye on Mia, as you might keep your eye on a dangerous beast' (69). On her part, after reluctantly agreeing to become a maid for the Richardsons, Mia realizes that 'every afternoon, she would be there to check on Pearl, to observe these Richardsons who fascinated her daughter so. Every morning she would be free to investigate on her own' (73).

Secondly, it has been previously mentioned that there exists a misconception to portray diasporic communities as part of an unmoving continuum. Büscher and Urry's (2009) observations aimed to call into question such sedentarism by claiming that it is in fact interwoven with mobility and the two factors alike define diasporic formation and development, a phenomenon which has come to be defined as "mobile ethnography". Thus, we should not see Sophie's mother, Martine, in *Breath* as an individual who has settled in America monolithically since, in the novel, we see how various factors lure both

Sophie and Martine to come back to Haiti. For the former, returning to Haiti will be a form of severing the reconnection with her mother upon their reunion in America, whereas, for the latter, her visit to the motherland will epitomize a way to reconnect with her motherline physically and with her daughter. Similarly, in the case of Ng's novel, undocumented Chinese single mother Bebe Chow is in America in search of a better life prospect, yet this is no reason to believe that she aims to completely disconnect herself and her newborn daughter from her motherland. In fact, some time after having to abandon her newly born daughter at a fire station at the impossibility of providing for her and later learning that she has been adopted by a white American family who does not intend to keep the child connected to the customs and traditions of her motherland, Bebe Chow will plunge into a legal conflict with the McCulloughs over the custody of May Lin, which she will lose and will lead her to 'kidnap' her daughter and take her back to China. We learn this the night after the verdict confirming the victory of the McCulloughs; '[they], [...] exhausted [...], had fallen into the kind of sleep they hadn't had for months. [...]. In the morning, Mrs McCullough [...] realized it was ten thirty. Mirabelle usually woke them at sunrise [...]. She had leapt from bed and run into Mirabelle's room [...]. The crib was empty. Mirabelle was gone' (330). Therefore, although, initially, all Bebe Chow sought in America was to be able to improve her livelihood and to later be able to provide for her daughter, the socioeconomic factors surrounding the lives of undocumented immigrants like her will force her to be on the move and to have precariousness be her companion. After the caliber of her final actions concerning her daughter ('It would be a full day before the police could piece together the clues and figure out what had happened: [...] Bebe's absence from work; Bebe's empty apartment; and finally, a ticket, booked in Bebe's name, for a flight to Canton at 11:20 the night before' (330), it is hard to imagine Bebe ever returning to America, but we cannot dismiss the possibility of her seeking better life opportunities somewhere else after spending some time in their motherland, which serves to prove the phenomenon of "mobile ethnography".

In Mia's case, precariousness is also the main deterrent as regards her ability to settle down with her daughter, yet her experience will not be as extreme as Bebe, chiefly, in that she is not undocumented, albeit, as an African American single mother working as an artist in America, she will be forced at times to juggle various jobs to compensate for a lack of interest in some of her works. Therefore, '[when] the photos did not sell [...], [Mia] took up a series of odd jobs: housecleaning, flower arranging, cake decorating'

(27). This will leave her little time to actually mother and will, consequently, have implications on her daughter's upbringing. Upon first visiting the Richardson house after Moody's invitation, Pearl marvels at a level of life quality she has never known ("You live here?" It wasn't the size [...]. it was the greenness of the lawn, the sharp lines of white mortar between the bricks, the rustle of the maple leaves in the gentle breeze, the very breeze itself' (33) and constantly compares her and her mother's experience with that of the Richardsons, becoming absorbed by their seemingly 'domestic perfection' (33), and this becomes a preoccupation for Mia: 'it worried [her] a little, the influence the Richardsons seemed to have over Pearl, the way they seemed to have absorbed her into their lives' (38). This concern evolves in magnitude as the novel progresses. Serving as a stark contrast to the social position of the Warrens, we may observe the manner in which Moody reflects on the economic level of his new neighbors: '[He] had never thought much about money, because he had never needed to' (23). 'To [him], this kind of existence was all but unfathomable' (29). He goes as far as to romanticize their life experiences in America, failing to see beyond the veil of naïveté stemming from the capitalistic, patriarchal values of the society in which he has been raised: 'Their itinerant, artistic lifestyle appealed to him: Moody was a romantic at heart' (30).

In the third place, Mazzucato (2009) goes beyond to argue that diasporic actors are connected to a number of "home" and "host" localities, a dogma that was conceived through her development of the so-called "matched-sample methodology". This can be illustrated by means of the examples mentioned above concerning Bebe Chow and Mia.

Taking stock of the aforementioned ideas, it is important to underscore the importance of qualitative methods for the development of the ideas presented in the next section insofar as these methods are considerably more convenient as regards the study of diasporic formation owing to "their less structured character" and it is this qualitative approach that throws light on the ambiguities of diasporic experiences, as indicated by Burglowski et al (2015).

4. POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM AND MULTIETHNIC APPROACHES TO MOTHERHOOD

4.1 Intersectionalization of feminist endeavors

As has been previously argued, it is of the uttermost importance to urge all feminist endeavors to be intersectional so as to steer clear of any misrepresentations or attempts at silencing the voices of historically marginalized collectives. To fathom the manner in which the decolonization of feminism operates, we must first refer back to Ngugi's reflections upon the decolonization of the mind. In his collection of essays 'Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature' (1986), Ngugi passionately underscores the relevance of language for the "struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics, and culture from [the] Euro-American-based stranglehold" (378). So as to achieve said liberation, Ngugi emphasizes the importance of "[seizing] back their creative initiative" (378) using as a vehicle either African vernacular languages or, as Achebe put it, "a new English [...] altered to suit new African surroundings" (382), always bearing in mind that selecting the language in which to reflect upon social issues is essential in that language can be employed as a form of "political subjugation" (383). Another reason attesting to the importance of the language employed is that "language carries culture and culture carries [...] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (390), implying that there should be an insistence on orature (oral literature) insofar as this will open the door to a reflourishing of African literatures and to the shaping of a multiplicity of African identities, thus escaping the grasp of essentialism and preventing the annihilation of people's cultures. Ngugi argues that, by employing the language of the colonizers, formerly enslaved communities run the risk of assimilating their culture as if it were truly theirs pushing their own to oblivion, a prospect which Ngugi addresses as "the final triumph of a system of domination" (394). It is ultimately Ngugi's notion of "cultural alienation" (402) that postcolonial feminists must evade in that it aims to "[separate] the mind from the body" (402), therefore, whereas Western women may be conscious that their struggles are not necessarily alike to those of their non-white counterparts, their form of feminism has failed all along to acknowledge the tribulations which specifically affect Third World women, thus embodying colonial values per se via this principle of "cultural alienation": Western feminism has tried to convince non-white women that their position as women entails there is a common homogeneous strife

involving all the women around the globe. Consequently, non-white women ought to unite mind and body and take account of the specific struggles they must endure on account of their racial location. The process of mind decolonization depicted in this paragraph is inextricably linked to that of cultural decolonization in that the former opens the door to the latter. Cultural decolonization is fueled by the vindication of the existence of equally groundbreaking contributions coming from formerly colonized locations and it operates on two levels: nationwide and across borders. The former level aims at the awakening of the non-Western conscience to urge these historically otherized communities to claim a better place in the world based on their approaches to sapience and asserting their rigor. The latter encompasses the attempts on the part of these communities to write back to the West as a way of reclaiming their right to contribute as well as their demands that these contributions be regarded with dignity. Ultimately, cultural decolonization challenges the monolithic considerations of the world established by means of a process which Fanon (1968) managed to summarize in three stages: firstly, there ought to be an acknowledgment on the part of the formerly colonized communities of their assimilation of the culture of the occupying power as being superior; secondly, there should be a revisitation of the native cultures by the intelligentsia of these locations to vindicate their richness and their place in the world; lastly, these intellectuals must strive to trigger a new flourishing of native cultures which will inspire encourage the natives to actively partake in this revival.

Postcolonial feminist critics have long insisted that this process of cultural decolonization ought to pervade the agenda of Western feminism to foster a form of feminism that is completely intersectional or, as Talpade (2003) named it, a “feminism without borders.” She has addressed the 20th century as the one when most major developments of feminist ideas and endeavors occurred, not without resentment and challenges to the movement. Talpade identified three main issues permeating the US-based feminism underpinned by the theories and practices of the 20th century: firstly, collective feminist endeavors are lost to what Talpade has denominated ‘careerist’ visions, which promote individualism and, therefore, prevent feminism from reaching its full potential through collective efforts. Another direction in which US-based feminism seems to be moving is characterized by a concern with economic equality between men and women. This form of corporized feminism fails to see beyond consumerism and other capitalistic values and, yet again, favors individualism over collectivism. This is a serious concern which Talpade has addressed as the “Americanization” (6) of feminism. As

opposed to said form of feminism, what Talpade advocates is a new wholesome feminism capable of acknowledging the sociopolitical and socioeconomic implications of being a woman in society considering the sexism, racism, misogyny and heterosexism on which the patriarchal institutions of power are founded and which, ultimately, attempt to justify violence against women.

Talpade insists that in postcolonial feminism there must be an “acknowledgment of the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears and containment that borders represent” (2), and she argues that there must be a transcendence of these borders, albeit this should not open the door to the misconception that there exist no borders lest the feminism she advocates be confused for “border-less” (2) feminism. In short, there exist borders, which should be acknowledged, and these must be transcended so as to reach intersectionality. According to Talpade, it is this transcendence of borders alongside anticapitalistic critique and solidarity that will prompt an actual change. Said transformation must be rooted in socialism and democracy and ought to seek the freedom for women to live creatively, in all integrity and full health, with a right to choose whether to procreate or not, to choose whom they love, and to have their choices be determined by pleasure rather than duty. Moreover, racial equality, ecological sustainability and a redistribution of wealth ought to be prioritized and these endeavors can be pursued by means of a collective reorganization of feminist advocates who desire to march on the warpath against repression.

If the ultimate goal of postcolonial feminism is for intersectionality to permeate worldwide feminism, Talpade has defended that it must operate on three distinct levels: a daily-life level, through our individual identity-shaping everyday acts; a second level based on collective action; and a third enhancing textual creativity. Additionally, solidarity must play a role as important as democratic and socialist values for said transformation to take place insofar as it binds together communities who have opted for cooperation of their own accord to challenge the same oppressive agents. To enlighten this idea, Jodi Dean (1996) coined the notion of “reflective solidarity”, whereby “[a postcolonial actor] asks [another oppressed individual] to stand by [her/him] over and against a third” (3). This phenomenon can be observed in the unwavering support Mia provides for Bebe Chow along her legal conflict over the custody of her daughter against the McCulloughs: ‘So Mia had always avoided getting involved in the affairs of others. It made everything simpler [...]. These McCulloughs, Mia was sure, were good people.

But that wasn't the point. She thought suddenly of those moments at the restaurant, after the dinner rush had ended and things were quiet, when Bebe sometimes rested her elbows on the counter and drifted away. Mia understood exactly where she drifted to' (121). All the instances in which Mia imagines herself in Bebe's position are powerful forms of enlightening the notion of reflective solidarity, although, perhaps, the clearest case can be observed when Mia asks Bebe a question that implicitly carries the suggestion that she will assist her throughout the legal conflict in which she will embark: "'Listen to me. You want to fight this fight? Here's what you do'" (127).

So as to ensure reflective solidarity, it is crucial to bear in mind Talpade's criticism of the analytic presuppositions of Western feminist criticism, which can be summarized in three points: by and large, there is a misconception among Western feminist critics that women form a uniform group sharing pursuits and interests without taking account of their class, ethnicity, the potential contradictions that may exist or their racial location. As has been previously mentioned, the various socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors permeating the lives of the different mothers under scrutiny in this paper range from escaping trauma to striving to settle down in America or attempting to nurture a newly born here, which serves to evince the dissimilarities between these mothers. On a second level, Talpade criticizes the uncritical nature of the practices of Western feminist criticism to justify universality and cross-culturalism. On a final level can be found the outcome resulting from the combination of the previous two, namely an uncritical and unrealistic model of power and struggle basically driven by a homogeneous notion of oppression or what Talpade addresses as "sameness" (22) of oppression. It is precisely this notion that leads to the conception of "an average Third World Woman" (40), as postulated by Talpade, who is restricted by the constraints caused by her gender and her position in the world based on her ethnicity, racial location, and class or, as an alternative reading, this average Third World Woman would be defined by the fact that her gender renders her sexually constricted and by her being underprivileged, uneducated, bound to tradition, and devoted to family and domesticity. In fact, at some point in the novel, the narrator, through the eyes of a white family from Shaker, ponders whether '[a child would not] be better off in a home with a mother *and* a father, studies showing the importance of a strong male figure in a child's life?' (258), rendering mothers like Mia, Bebe Chow, and even Martine from *Breath* in a position of oppression, especially considering the employment of '*and*' in italics, a conspicuous indicator of the sexism and homophobia which pervades the beliefs of many of the Western families in *Little Fires Everywhere*.

In the main, it is the recent shift in the tendencies of feminist pursuits challenging the essentialism of 20th-century feminism and questioning the ethical values of the feminist endeavors imbued with capitalistic interests that have allowed postcolonial critics to gain visibility and credibility by the academia. A direct consequence of this is the current feasibility of researching the issue of motherhood from a multiethnic stance, a research topic which would have been condemned as trivial some decades ago. Via this topic, the cycle of essentialization can be broken and subsequently eradicated to make room for a scrutiny of the divergent approaches to motherhood coming from distinct racial locations both white and non-white. Conveniently, the next section will center around African American and Afro-Caribbean motherhood theories with a view to pinpointing the extent to which they differ from and interact with one another and also to identifying how the process of mothering is hampered by the socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors in *Little Fires Everywhere* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Notwithstanding, said multi-ethnic motherhood theories will be preceded by a discussion of similarly multi-ethnic feminist theories.

4.2 African-American feminist theory and approaches to motherhood

As has already been discussed previously, it is primordial to seek intersectionality in feminist studies. To do so, we must bring to the fore those divergent forms of feminism which have traditionally strived to voice the struggles of Third World women so as to challenge the essentialist endeavors of Eurocentric feminism.

According to the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women* (2001), African American feminism has been shaped to a greater extent by a bourgeois democracy and a capitalistic economic system historically ingrained in slave labor and legal discrimination, all of which was aimed at the disenfranchisement of black people. Traditionally, black feminism was overshadowed by the racism of Eurocentric feminism and the sexism of a male-dominated civil rights movement. Nonetheless, owing to the wide-ranging ideological dissimilarities of the pursuits of African American women, it has been suggested that the movement be addressed as black feminisms so as to enhance and acknowledge heterogeneity.

It was as recently as the 60s and the 70s that there flourished a considerable amount of anticapitalistic critique both in written and spoken form recognizing that this economic system would never favor the historically marginalized and, thereupon, the central concern of the black feminist movements ought to be to challenge a patriarchal

system that would never be preoccupied with gender, race, and class issues so that the power can continue to be hegemonically maintained. In this period, there also arose a certain skepticism towards those supposed black feminists influenced by the works of black male intellectuals like Fanon, Cabral, or Malcolm X insofar as who were regarded as the leaders of anti-racial movements were males, despite having been co-led and co-organized by women who contributed just as much. Alice Walker (1988) postulated that the endeavors and struggles of black women should not be associated with the term 'feminist' in that the term 'black' ought to be seen as superfluous on the grounds that white feminists do not have the necessity to state the whiteness and Westernness of their feminism and, likewise, neither should African American women. Consequently, Walker proposed the term "womanism" in place of black feminism. Besides, Hill Collins (1989) suggested that this so-called black feminism produced discomfort among many African American women on account of the fact that "it challenges black women to confront their own views on sexism and women's oppression." Furthermore, Collins made the groundbreaking assertion that white women are neither the only ones fighting for women's rights nor are their endeavors the paragon for other women around the world. bell hooks (1984) merged Walker's and Collin's contributions to posit that womanism should aim to construct all feminism efforts with the ultimate goal of challenging and opposing white supremacy, capitalism and the patriarchy, hence the need for an utterly intersectional movement which will pay heed to racialized women from lower social strata. Additionally, the movement should also acknowledge the issues faced by black lesbians, as pointed out by Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith, since their struggles have been overlooked even by this Afrocentric feminism owing to the prejudices and the subsequent homophobia existing in black communities.

On balance, womanism is a modern term that addresses the various black feminist movements conceived after a centuries-long process of racial injustice towards black women in America and galvanized by socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors such as an infant mortality rate which is double the one found in white child labor, a considerably lower life expectancy, ample precariousness rates, and the fact that approximately three quarters of the people incarcerated in the United States are individuals of color, many of whom are women who have been imprisoned for nonviolent crimes or offenses. Bearing in mind all the social injustices with which black women have been and are currently faced, it is only reasonable to wonder about the approaches to motherhood characterizing African American maternity.

In light of the unfathomable intricacies mentioned above, we may conveniently employ Audre Lorde's (1984) quote on black mothering that states that "raising black children [...] in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. If they cannot love and resist at the same time, they will probably not survive." Thus begins McClain's quest aiming to comprise the adversities and calamities endured by African American mothers in her book *We Live for the We* (2019). In her powerful introduction, she summarizes the contents of her non-fiction work, where she denounces said hardships and then proceeds to illustrate them through interviews with African American mothers who have agreed to share their experiences. McClain even begins the introduction by sharing a memory of her own mother and herself singing along to Whitney Houston in their car, a practice that now as a mother herself she interprets as putting on an armor suit (listening to songs about self-reliance and courage) which can prepare African American women for whatever racist and sexist challenges might be ahead every day. Therefore, McClain believes there is educational value in exposing African American children to African American artists such as Houston with a view to steeling themselves against the essentializing manners in which the society around them will try to depict them.

One of the most relevant reasons as to why it is essential to pay heed to dissimilar multi-ethnic approaches to motherhood is because the notion may differ across racial locations. By means of illustration, Gumbs et al. (2016) postulated that "mothering is the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming and supporting a life", a definition which may resonate with mothers from all over the world, however, McClain (2019) goes beyond by fending off any unidimensional interpretations of this definition by suggesting that mothering can be performed by "grandmothers, aunts, queer and gender non-conforming people who don't identify as women", thus widening the scope of the implications of being a mother. On this note, the narrator poses one of the most thought-provoking quotes in Chapter 19: 'It came, over and over, down to this: What made someone a mother? Was it biology alone, or was it love?' (258). This question can be answered with the arguments expounded prior to it as well as through the knowledge that the practice of mothering may be performed by other women in the community who may share no kinship with a child, a phenomenon which sociologist Hill Collins (2000) coined as 'other-mothering.' At some point in *Little Fires*, Izzy Richardson feels more identified with Mia: '[her] fascination with Mia proved lasting. Instead of sequestering herself in her bedroom with her violin, she would walk the mile and a half to the house on Winslow right after school, where Mia would be hard at work. She would watch Mia, learning to frame a shot,

develop film, make a print' (90). She will find solace in Mia's questioning of rules, which serves as a stark contrast with Elena Richardson's indoctrinated obsession with norms. In fact, upon being encouraged by Mia to take action after being suspended from school, she reflects that 'her own mother would have been horrified' (88). She will find Mia's more radical approach to life insurmountably more appealing than that of her parents, seemingly because until she met Mia, 'her life had been one of mute, futile fury' (78). All in all, Izzy escapes what she considers to be misnurture on the part of her mother to find nurture in Mia's teachings. Izzy even daydreams that the reality is that 'she and Pearl had been accidentally switched at birth years ago [...]. [I]t was easy for Izzy to pretend that Mia was her mother' (91). The same phenomenon occurs when Pearl begins to find among the Richardsons a distinct type of affection from her own mother's, albeit failing to realize that their welcome is meant as a display of good manners rather than actual affection. In fact, when Moody asks his mother whether Pearl can accompany their family to the birthday celebration the McCulloughs have prepared for May Lin, Elena firmly responds that "this is a family event [and that] Pearl is not part of the family" (112).

The idea of collective or community mothering portrays a stark contrast with the already-mentioned Americanization of feminism whereby the objectives seem to be merely individualistic to the minds of most womanists. Nonetheless, it is important not to confuse this idea for an association between feminism and motherhood. It should be brought to notice that, as was discussed in the section devoted to the intersectionalization of feminism, one of the main tenets of any intersectional form of feminism is the right to or not to procreate. Thus, what is emphasized in this paragraph is the juxtaposition between the collectivity of womanism and the individuality of white feminism. To further illustrate this notion, Cat Brooks, an interviewee from McClain's work, underscores the collective nature of African American feminists in that "[they] don't live for an I. [They] live for a [they]" (3-4) to ensure that their children are well-informed and well-equipped to face the adversities of the American society.

McClain suggests that it is the inception of the institution of slavery in America that caused African American women to adopt new, divergent approaches to motherhood and these, in turn, have led to new understandings which continue to be embraced at present. But for these, it would not be easy to cope with the adversities of American life as African American mothers. Historically, the events endured by these mothers necessitated employing an unprecedented inventiveness so as to challenge and navigate through everything that hampered their mothering. This, McClain insists, continues to be

true insofar as the mothers failing to confront present-day challenges would be partaking in their children's destruction. One of the main threats they have to face is police authority abuse, which, according to McClain, portrays every “black mother’s deepest fear” (5) in that they feel powerless to protect their children from said power abuse stemming from institutional racism. Although in Ng’s novel *Mia and Pearl* do not have many encounters with the police, Bebe Chow’s case can be used to illustrate the predisposition of this institution of power to exert their authority over minorities and the marginalized. When, in despair, Bebe plans to do anything it takes to see her daughter again, even if this entails stalking the McCulloughs and trespassing, the police officers did not hesitate to make physical contact with Bebe, which might make us wonder whether they would have acted in the same manner if a white person had been taking Bebe’s place. The constant cases of racist abuse of authority on the part of the police reported in America suggest otherwise: ‘Go, they had said, or they would take her down to the station and charge her with trespassing. This she recalled clearly: as the policemen pulled her away from the house, she could hear her child crying from behind the locked front door’ (126). Without this handicap, it is already an arduous enough task for these mothers to prepare their children for a world that, as McClain puts it, “has to be convinced of their worth” (5), hence the apprehension in which black (and other non-white) mothers are forced to live in America, albeit these mothers must be strategic as to the manner in which they manage their fear, lest they instill it in their children. Black women in America dread having to expose their children to environments with overflowing racist oppression and white supremacy, therefore, African American mothers seek to raise their children in a manner that will not handicap them further than they already are on account of the climate of insecurity that pervades the American society, given the arduous task they have as “buffers and translators”, the first term making reference to the ways in which African American mothers seek to muffle the racial violence delivered to their children by society, and the second to their need to make sense of this world to them, despite the injustice. As an inextricable consequence of this is the repression of certain emotions such as angst or outrage camouflaged by coldness, which undoubtedly takes a toll on their mental integrity, and inevitably, might result in outbursts toward their children. An example of this can be seen when Mia is forced to act normal in front of her daughter and the Richardson children upon being asked about a picture the children have seen in the museum where the model seems to be her. With a Mia reluctant to share any details about the picture and, let alone, the circumstances which led to her modeling, her tension

surfaced as a consequence of her emotional repression, therefore, 'all four of the children saw it: a slight stiffening of her posture, as if a string had been tightened' (96). Mia is conscious that the children have become close enough to an aspect of her past that she does not desire to disclose and, as a consequence, she feels like distancing from her daughter is the only way to protect her from every shady element of her life she does not want her to discover: 'For a moment, Mia did not look like her mother at all' (97). '[Pearl] had never in her life gone to bed without Mia coming to kiss her good night, but that night she did, and Mia sat in the living room in a puddle of light, her face still shut, lost in thought' (98).

In her work, McClain found to be commonplace for African American mothers to wonder about the manner in which they can expound to their children the choices they have made in their lives as individuals as well as the ones made by governments and corporations so that their children will not be dissuaded from pursuing their dreams irrespective of the tribulations they will encounter. McClain explains that no parent has been capable of safeguarding their offspring altogether and ensuring a wholesome maturing process until adulthood, yet affluent ones have an immense advantage with respect to 'the rest', despite the fact that 'the rest' constitute the vast majority. One of the main implications of this is that, unaware of their privilege, white individuals may question some of the contentious choices non-white women have found themselves forced to make or even their lifestyles, which we should remember are reliant on the socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors imbuing their lives. We can observe this lack of understanding or awareness on the part of white individuals when, pressing Mia to share more details as to the reasons which led her to model for the picture she saw in the museum, Lexie seems unaware of the possibility that Mia might have had to resort to this or any of her other jobs to find economic relief, to which Mia responds: "Lexie, I really can't remember all the odd jobs I've done," she said. "You know, when you're hard up, you do a lot of things just to try and make ends meet. I wonder if you can imagine what that's like" (97).

Last but not least, black women in America should have a right both to parent in a wholesome atmosphere and to abortion and contraception and so should any non-white mothers residing in America, as vindicated by the advocates of reproductive justice. Were the state to ensure a dignified level of economic stability for women at risk of poverty and social exclusion, Mia would probably not have accepted the Ryan's offer to bear their child as a surrogate mother: 'She could help them. She would help them. She

repeated this to herself, over and over, then lifted the receiver to dial their number' (220). It should be noted that, besides institutional sexism, racism and aporophobia, other factors such as disconnection from the motherline on account of rejection contribute to non-white women in America being doubly oppressed. In *Little Fires*, we learn that Mia's fascination with art is not supported by her family in the slightest, a sign that they are colonized by conservative values. This forces Mia to juggle her studies and a number of part-time jobs in order that she will find a way for the realization of her ambitions, a situation which will continue to be true until the time portrayed in the novel. Mia's parents' position becomes even more radicalized the moment they notice Mia is with child when she visits them and, upon learning about the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy, they verbalize their utmost rejection. Likewise, we learn soon enough in the novel about Bebe's underprivileged situation, although as the novel progresses, we discover other factors that have rendered her doubly oppressed as well. Bebe used to reside in San Francisco with her boyfriend and worked as a receptionist in a dentist's office, for which '[she] [got] good money', besides, '[she had a] really nice boss' (119). When her boyfriend was offered a new job in Cleveland, they both decide to move there, even if the decision implied sacrificing Bebe's stable status quo and her independence. Finally, Bebe '[told] him [she] [was] having a baby, two weeks later he [disappeared]. Somebody told [her] he [had] [moved] back to Guangdong' (119). Therefore, the combination of a lack of state resources to support immigrant and non-white native women in America alongside pervading conservative social and ethical values, and patriarchal powers most generally render these women in an unfathomable situation of precariousness, as the evidence demonstrates.

4.3 Afro-Caribbean feminist theory and approaches to motherhood

Vis-à-vis Caribbean feminism, we should probably start by addressing the vast richness of the territory, formed by a number of islands in the Caribbean Sea and some inland locations, in terms of languages spoken, including English, French, Dutch and Spanish; cultural heritage and ethnic populations, which in spite of the fact that the Africans constitute the majority, ranges from Indian to European, Chinese, Lebanese, Syrian, Mayan, and mixed ethnicities, according to the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women* (2001). Each one of the territories forming the Caribbean has a dissimilar history of colonialism and each has unfolded differently, paving the way for a range of distinct relationships to their former colonizers. Thus, some of these locations

are still possessions of whichever empire first seized control of them, others are semi-dependent, boasting internal autonomy whilst externally bound to a European power, and a lucky few are independent altogether.

In order to understand the Caribbean approaches to motherhood which will be portrayed by means of in-text citations from *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, it will be paramount to discuss the main features of Caribbean feminism. Caribbean society was labeled by anthropologists from the 50s and 60s as matrifocal, that is to say, a society that revolves around the maternal figure, a notion that stems from the combination of the kinship-based traditions of the migrants that settled in the Caribbean and slavery, and with women having to act as breadwinners. The main implication of this was the rise of a stereotype of Caribbean femininity associated with economic, social and sexual emancipation, attributed to women conforming to their responsibility to family and who firmly opposed colonialism and imperialism and leaned towards nationalism. On the other hand, the construction of this stereotype rendered men in a marginal position regarding family and home. Needless to say, this stereotype did nothing but homogenize the experiences and all ethnicities and classes comprising the Caribbean.

Arguably, slavery, indenture, and racism were the factors that most greatly contributed to the feminist endeavors of Caribbean women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which revolved around a long history of slave revolts in different locations of the Caribbean, some resulting in the death of the women at the forefront. All these experiences were different, for instance, Jamaican military guerilla Nana Yah, who confronted the British, was held in high regard by the African enslaved population on account of her spirituality, an idea which would later become associated with Caribbean womanhood. Serving as a stark contrast to this idea of empowerment, nineteenth-century East Indian women were associated with passivity and subservience to the patriarchal system in which they lived, from their masters to the men in their communities. However, this association was undoubtedly made for the benefit of the system and the reality is that they, too, became a major threat to the patriarchy of the time.

It would be wise to distinguish the two distinctive feminist waves which have flourished since the commencement of the 20th century with the first one spanning until the 70s and the second stretching into the present day. According to *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women*, first-wave feminist endeavors were shaped by a number of factors including the English and American suffragist efforts, the unquestionable contributions made by women in the Soviet Revolution of 1917, the

foreign advocacy of women's rights as well as a considerable growth at the time in the proportion of women who became educated as well as the rise of the industrial and commercial woman as opposed to the agricultural nature of women's occupations as of then. As has been previously discussed, in many former colonies of African descent there have been attempts at the enhancement of the term womanism over feminism depicting a disenchantment towards non-white feminism and claiming that a concept other than feminism ought to be employed with a view to emphasizing the realities endured by the women of these locations, and it was not any different in the Caribbean during the first wave in that feminism was a term associated with anti-maleness, lesbianism and separatism. Whilst this first wave was shaped by regional concerns alongside international affairs, the movement did not necessarily seek the liberation of women, but social and political reformations, which was paradoxically but a form of hegemonizing patriarchal values. It is in the second wave that the focus has been shifted to issues more enriching in a direct manner for women such as their professional lives, a revisitation of nuptial roles, childbearing and child-rearing, and travel. Of equal importance is that there was also a groundbreaking questioning of the status quo of their sexual and reproductive rights. More recently, there have been three major developments insofar as the 90s saw the implementation of women's and gender studies, the instilment of feminist activism into the institutions and women's vindication of the uniqueness of a Caribbean feminism which differs among social strata and ethnicities, hence the relevance of multiethnicity and social class for Caribbean feminist endeavors.

Having discussed the origins, development and principal preoccupations of Caribbean feminism, the focus will henceforth be shifted to the chief traits of Caribbean approaches to motherhood, albeit it is pertinent to emphasize the heterogeneity of the subject matter once again. In Chapter 2 of *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (2001), entitled 'I Am Me, I Am You: The Intricate Mother-Daughter Dyadic Relationship', Alexander relies on evidence from Kincaid's *Lucy* and *Xuela* to depict the intricacies of said bond, a bond deeply influenced by colonialism. From Alexander's thorough critical analysis, we learn that the mother-daughter relationship in most Caribbean nations is marked by an equal degree of affection and aversion⁵, and it is

⁵ Benítez-Rojo (1985) expounds on a series of factors which are pervasive and recurrent in the majority of Caribbean racial locations depicting a number of tribulations which can be addressed and scrutinized at archipelago level <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40375647>

relevant to note that there exists a transition from one sentiment to the other, the former marking the childhood of the daughter whilst the latter pervading her adolescence and even her adulthood. This becomes self-evident the moment Sophie, the protagonist in *Breath*, denies bearing any resemblance to her mother: '[The waiter] looked at us for a long time. First me, then my mother. I wanted to tell him to stop it. There was no resemblance between us. I knew it' (60). Despite the fact that Sophie's othermother, her Tante Atie, had partly informed her about the difficulties leading to her mother's decision to move to America and leave her in Haiti, Sophie is not yet prepared to accept or forgive and, consequently, her sentiments towards her mother will be a teeter-totter for the entire novel, even after having reunited with her in America. Interestingly enough, Sophie's mother, Martine, is so traumatized by the rape she suffered in Haiti that resulted in her becoming pregnant with Sophie that, she also claims to bear no resemblance to her: 'But now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father' (66). The same can be observed when Sophie explains that 'When [Martine] saw her face, she looked even more frightened' (83). There is a clear ambivalence in the signification implied by her reunion with her daughter: on the one hand, being with her again is all she ever wanted since she acquired a better frame of mind in America as well as some economic stability, despite the harsh precariousness she endures here. On the other hand, through Sophie, she sees the face of the rapist she actually never managed to glimpse and this takes her back to Haiti, the location where the rape occurred and where her trauma and her subsequent unsettling nightmares began.

Arguably, the aversion mentioned above stems from the mother's efforts to encapsulate her daughter in an attempt to protect her from racism and sexism, yet what lies beneath the surface seems to be a desire to control the daughter's life imbuing these efforts. This toxic behavior is but a by-product of the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean insofar as these mothers could not be educated by their respective mothers, the older generation, on how to bestow independence to their offspring wholesomely as a result of the disconnection from the motherline they experienced during the colonial era what with their mothers' incapability to exercise the practice of mothering. To illustrate this, we may consider the transgenerational practice among mothers to 'test' their daughters to secure their virginity until marriage. Martine explains that 'When [she] was a girl, [her] mother used to test [them] to see if [they] were virgins. She would put her finger in [their] very private parts and see if it would go inside' (66). Martine herself will embody the perpetuation of this act of transgression by claiming to have a right to perform

the same practice on Sophie: 'The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure' (66). Yet, what Martine fails to realize is that this will alter her daughter's relationship to sexuality for her entire life, forcing her to seek therapeutic assistance so that her marriage will not crumble. When discussing the practice of testing with her grandmother, Sophie indicates '[She] call[s] it humiliation,' [...]. [She] hate[s] [her] body. [She] [is] ashamed to show it to anybody, including [her] husband' (118).

Furthermore, this will also have long-lasting implications on their mother-daughter bond: 'I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but the words would not roll off my tongue' (82). In fact, Martine's appropriation of her daughter's body will eventually lead Sophie to an eagerness for disconnection from her mother that will only begin to subside after Sophie's brief visit to Haiti and their subsequent reunion there. This occurs after Sophie breaks her own hymen to put an end to her mother's weekly tests to which Martine, in a state of neurosis, responds: "Go," [...]. "You just go to him and see what he can do for you' (90), referring to Sophie's sexual partner Joseph. Martine's neurotic reaction stems from the feeling of not being able to have a claim on her daughter's body anymore. Nevertheless, it could be argued that Martine's trauma has been partly transferred to her daughter through her embodiment of colonial and patriarchal values.

In light of the aforementioned, Alexander conveniently likens the mother-daughter relationship to that between Europe and the former colonies. By and large, the mother does not seem aware of the consequences of her approach, yet the daughter will most likely experience what Rich has called "matrophobia" (25), or "a fear of becoming [her] mother." This apprehension can be observed when Sophie speaks to her own daughter and The main tribulation endured by the daughter will be the dilemma of whether to find means to silence the 'mother-master' and, consequently, experience the implications of not having a paragon through which to see herself, or surrendering to her mother's possessiveness. In the face of this dilemma, the presence of othermothers in the lives of these daughters will be absolutely essential in that these can bestow on them empowering oral life teachings that can compensate for the hollowness caused by the biological mother-daughter relationship, yet with an emotional attachment which is not as large as in said bond.

Oftentimes, daughters will experience abandonment by their mothers on account of these fleeing their countries seeking more favorable life opportunities, some of which cases take place during the infancy or childhood of the daughters. Notwithstanding, as

has been previously discussed, in the case of Martine, her chief preoccupation when leaving Haiti is her own frame of mind, to escape from the trauma this land has engendered in her, unaware that it is something that will accompany her wherever she goes. In these cases, there is an early severance of the bond which will hamper the daughter's efforts to self-define their identity. Thus, the responsibility for the daughter's upbringing will fall on the othermothers, who, in most cases, are members of the same lineage. Needless to mention that other women who are not relatives to the daughter are capable of raising her efficiently as well, as happens in Alecia McKenzie's *A Million Aunties*, whereby a number of individuals struggling to find their place in New York and France will find solace in Della's, whose efforts transcend lineage, othermothering capabilities.

Another important characteristic of the Caribbean-based mother-daughter relationship is the incapability of openly addressing the issue of sexuality. The mother generally highlights the hazards of heterosexuality in a society which is both racist and sexist, traits which pervade a society deeply rooted in patriarchy and colonialism. Martine's compulsive attempts to control her daughter's sexuality upon Sophie's arrival in America is a clear instance of this. An example can be found when she urges Sophie to '[...] keep away from those American boys.' The ones whose eyes followed [Sophie] on the street, [...] even though they called [her] a nasty West Indian to [her] face' (71). The main implication of this, according to Alexander, is the risk of falling victim to the mother's suggestions to label oneself as asexual whilst overlooking the chief opponent, colonialism. Trinh Minh-ha (1989) has labeled the position of the mother as a "double game" whereby she sees herself as completely entitled to the values she instills in her daughter whilst concomitantly serving as a vehicle for the perpetuation of the legacy of colonialism. This renders the daughter in a subservient position where she is to abide by the legacy of colonialism and the patriarchy; she becomes "institutionalized", and it is this prison that the daughter will need to escape to be able to shape her identity away from the grasp of societal racism and sexuality as well as from the possessiveness of her mother and, thus, transcend this position of subservience to become a subject, a strive doubly exhausting for the daughter that will certainly take its toll on her mental health. Yet again, it is first-generation women who will take charge of addressing the issue of sexuality with their granddaughters, something they were not always able to do with their own daughters.

Alexander postulates the relationship between grandmothers and granddaughters is “more spiritual than material”, and this spirituality with which granddaughters are endowed cannot be provided by the biological mother, thus forming an almost irreparable rift ultimately leading to “misunderstanding, alienation, and estrangement”, hence the indispensable role an othermother, be it a grandmother or any other woman within the community, plays in shaping a girl’s identity. Othermothers will thus become the embodiment of spirituality through orality. Both Grandmother Ifé and Tante Atie will play a crucial role in shaping Sophie’s identity by sharing the tale about the lark and about the woman who becomes metamorphosed into a butterfly. Both portray an act of freedom on the part of the Haitian woman but, whereas the former urges Sophie to protect herself from sexism, the latter is seen through Martine’s suicide. In the novel, it soon becomes clear that to be a Haitian woman is to suffer, and there comes a point where Martine realizes that to transcend the everlasting pain caused by her trauma, the only option is to stop being a woman. In the story of the butterfly, the ever-bleeding woman is informed by goddess Erzulie that so as to make her suffering cease, she will need to be transformed into a creature of her choice, to which she concurs and thus becomes a butterfly, yet Martine’s pragmatic employment of this tale is through suicide.

There exist cases whereby the daughter is born in a foreign land, typically, a Western nation such as the United States or the United Kingdom. But for his girl’s mother’s teachings, there is hardly anything binding her to the family’s motherland. And it is worth noting that, in most of these cases, it is the mother’s precariousness in her home country that leads her to emigrate, often to encounter more precariousness on account of institutional and social racism and sexism. Some of these women are faced with the heart-wrenching dilemma of keeping their child and jeopardizing their health owing to the harsh conditions in which they are most usually forced to live, or putting their child up for adoption, sometimes even abandoning them on the doorstep of any public institution if they do not possess a residence permit, which makes the experience all the more inhumane, turning the mother into a double victim. What is more, should one look back on history, from the days of slavery to the present, and reflect on the issue of Afro-Caribbean and African-American motherhood, it remains unquestionable that there has not been enough progress since then, considering that back in the day, children were snatched from their enslaved mothers, and, at present, some of these women of African descent in Western countries are forced to sacrifice one part of their soul by renouncing

to their children. Based on what Alexander suggests happens with the issue of surrogate mothers, it is safe to suggest that, in some cases, a child of African descent being raised by surrogate parents will often be confronted with “cold hearts and foreign tongues”, a phenomenon which speaks of the utter disconnection from the motherline and the motherland, the two terms inextricably linked via metonymy, the child will suffer. Needless to say, this idea does not intend to condemn adoptive parenthood, yet the cases in which the adoption or the surrogacy are instigated by precariousness need to be scrutinized through clinical eyes on the grounds that in these cases of forced adoption, the new surrogate mother can by no means replace the biological one insofar as, if we discussed that the biological mothers perpetuate colonial values, these surrogate mothers will be doubly colonial, often committing unconscious racist microaggressions or some other times openly exhibiting their racist values. To summarize the last paragraphs, we may employ Alexander’s quote reassuring that “the mother does not necessarily have to be biological, but she must possess maternal and nurturing qualities to advance her daughter’s coming into being” (2001:83). Furthermore, to grasp the intricacies of the distinctive Caribbean approaches to motherhood, one should not forget that the Caribbean was “raped by colonialism” and such transgression “has left the inhabitants indifferent and incapable of giving or extending true love”, thus, inevitably, “instead of a nurturing and caring mother, the colonial mother is a suffocating other” (83).

5. CONCLUSION

In light of the findings obtained from both selected primary sources along with the theoretical notions discussed throughout the paper, we should probably start summarizing the contents by asserting that both the literary canon and literary criticism ought to be up-to-date with the concerns of the humanistic concerns of the contemporary world so as to pave the way for more works addressing postcolonial issues becoming accessible and appealing to the public and researcher alike. Western feminism needs to acknowledge that Third World women are misrepresented by its agenda and that the intricacies of their relationship to the world demand special attention, especially considering that most of their suffering stems from the days of Western colonial rule and, although this domination has subsided in terms of the presence and role Western countries have in the former colonies, many individuals from said colonies continue to have colonized minds. Only after this is acknowledged can feminism aspire to intersectionality

and distance itself from the factors which motivate US-based feminism. For their part, non-white women need to put to paper their experiences and their views of the world with a view to portraying the heterogeneous nature of humankind, otherwise, they will risk continuing to be misrepresented.

It is crucial to understand motherhood as a beyond-borders phenomenon which needs to become a political act portraying diasporic actors as mobile, multi-sited and connected to a number of "home" and "host" localities. Moreover, awareness needs to be raised that the act of mothering will benefit or be hampered by the sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors surrounding the mother. In *Little Fires*, who we see in the spotlight is an African American mother navigating through American society, moving from one city to another seeking the conditions which will appropriately allow her to nurture her daughter. However, she will find that precariousness will be their most loyal life companion and there is very little this mother can do for the betterment of their situation, other than accepting multiple jobs simultaneously, which will leave her little time to actually enjoy mothering her daughter. For her part, her daughter will get caught in shifting sands in that a whole new world opens to her as she becomes absorbed by the apparent comfort and nonchalance of the lifestyle of the white family that welcomes her and, concomitantly, a mother who has never been so overprotective as now. Besides, Ng's novel meticulously depicts the tribulations of a Chinese mother who is forced to abandon her newly born daughter in light of the economic difficulties she encounters, being an immigrant mother attempting to raise her child by herself in America, and who, upon later finding herself more economically stable, wishes to reunite with her daughter, embarking in a legal conflict against her adoptive parents over her custody. The white mother of the novel portrays the considerable comfort and stability with which the act of mothering can be performed in juxtaposition with the experiences of non-white mothers. However, upon being indoctrinated with a series of hetero-patriarchal values, she will also be a victim of a system which cannot hold itself together and, therefore, as much as she declares herself a fierce advocator of employment of strict rules and abiding by these, she realizes life is too complex to respond to a fixed set of norms. In other words, one cannot become a successful mother by simply sticking to the way in which things are supposed to be.

The Caribbean perspective, albeit it displays a number of phenomena pervasive in the African American case, is dissimilar mainly on account of the long history of colonialism which rendered the archipelago devastated. Many are the Caribbean mothers who have become the embodiment of colonial rule themselves by imposing their authority

on their daughters, thus becoming double victims. Martine's rape forces her to flee Haiti and settle in America for her mental integrity's sake, even if this implies abandoning her daughter and having other members of her motherline, namely her own mother and sister, raise her. Upon reuniting with her daughter in America, Martine will portray the authority and overprotection mentioned above through regular "tests", leaving a lifelong mark on her daughter which will cause Sophie to find it hard to discern love from hate towards her mother.

It would be interesting to continue researching the experiences of women from different racial locations performing the act of mothering in America with a view to pinpointing further factors affecting non-white motherhood approaches in the United States. Moreover, more research should be conducted on the experiences resulting from the combination between motherhood and queerness, considering the heterosexual nature of the works selected for this project. By investigating the perspectives mentioned in this last paragraph, we will be able to dismantle the idea that America is a transcultural country. The American society was built by immigrants, yet, instead of being a paragon of transculturality, at most, America can be said to be a multicultural country, where the cultures comprised by it do not interact wholesomely enough, and, in this day and age, it is primordial to foster transculturality over multiculturalism so as to eradicate racism.

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