

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Relationship between mothers and daughters is deemed as special, not only because they are of the same sex, but also how a mother's actions influence her daughter. The mother-daughter dynamic is a well-known theme often seen in literary works. As there are so many cultures in the world, the mother-daughter dynamic portrayed will also be different according to each culture. We can see this happening in the portrayal of immigrant families living in a country far from their own. Immigrants have distinctive lived experience when compared to the people native to a certain territory, hence the different portrayal.

The United States has more immigrants compared to the rest of the world. In the year 2018, most immigrants in the United States came from Mexico (11.2 million people), making up 25% of the total immigrants there. Mexico is followed by China (2.9 million, 6%), India (2.6 million, 6%), the Philippines (2.0 million, 4%), and El Salvador (1.4 million, 3%). From the birth region, immigrants from Asia surpassed Mexico by 3% (28% of total immigrants), followed by other regions such as Europe, Canada, and other North America (13%), the Caribbean (10%), Central America (8%), South America (7%), the Middle East and North Africa (4%), and Sub-Saharan Africa (5%) (Budiman 2020).

Furthermore, immigrating to another country comes with problems that immigrants have to face. According to Dow in her article *An Overview of*

Stressors Faced by Immigrants and Refugees: A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners, some of the problems are: (1) losses and distress faced post-migration; (2) dispersed social communities; (3) shifts in financial and status condition; (4) language barrier; (5) family difficulties; (6) receiver community's attitude; (7) racism and stereotyping (Dow 2011, 211-217).

Related to this issue of immigration, the 1990s minority and ethnic American fiction portraying mother-daughter relationships points readers toward social (society's perception regarding parenting, cultural and religious tradition) and psychological (mental condition of both parties) restrictions that shape these relationships. In spite of the distance causing the relationship to falter, the innate goodness in the relationship often wins and the mother-daughter connection remains intact. In Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers*, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, and Edwidge Danticat's *Breathe, Eyes, Memory*, dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship pattern is used to illustrate both the abuses of slavery and culturally patriarchal mistreatment by society of women, especially minority and marginalized group of women (Lautin 2007, iv).

Dysfunctional family is defined in the American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary of Psychology (VandenBos 2015) as "a family in which relationships or communication are impaired and members are unable to attain closeness and self-expression. Members of a dysfunctional family often develop symptomatic behaviors, and often one individual in the family presents as the identified patient." (343). The mother-daughter relationship in this novel can

be categorized as dysfunctional per this definition, hence the term dysfunctional mother-daughter being used throughout this study.

More specifically, the issue of dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships is dominant in young adult verse novels. One of them is Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2018), which earned prestigious awards such as National Book Award for Young People's Literature in 2018 ("National Book Foundation - 2018 National Book Awards" 2018) and the Carnegie Medal the next year (Flood 2019). This novel tells the story of Xiomara Batista, a fifteen-year-old Dominican American teenager who loves to write poetry. She wants to share it with the world, the only hindrance is her strict, religious mother who sends her to church confirmation classes. During the school year, she gets close to her lab partner, Aman. The relationship is later broken due to Xiomara's mother finding out. Despite that, she finds freedom in her school's poetry club which she later joins. Eventually, her poetry notebook is discovered by her mother, resulting in a confrontation between them.

The protagonist, Xiomara, grows up in a Hispanic community in Harlem, New York, around the year 2010s, where she is surrounded by "old church ladies, honking cabs with *bachata* blaring and drug dealers". Harlem is one of the areas in Manhattan, New York, and was a predominantly black neighborhood (Robertson, White, and Garton 2013, 864). Religion has been a big part of Harlem, which is home to 400 churches (Souter 1997). Xiomara's mother, Altagracia, is a highly religious Catholic, who becomes even more religious after Xiomara and her twin, Xavier, were born. She moved to the United States from the Dominican

Republic after marriage, attends La Consagrada Iglesia, a church in the Hispanic community, and works as a cleaner in an office in Queens, New York. Her husband is jobless, and Xiomara goes to a “typical hood school” which had a reputation of gang fights and drug deals, making them a member of lower class society.

The primary reason for the novel, *The Poet X*, being chosen is that the portrayal of immigrants in the United States and their children’s relationship is fascinating for the clash of values happening between them and the interesting form of narration being in the form of poetry verses (verse novel). This study intends to examine the mother-daughter relationship between the protagonist Xiomara Batista and her mother Altagracia Batista by using Psychoanalysis approach. This topic should be brought up for the scarce discussion about Hispanic mother-daughter relationship in literary works. There are currently no previous studies researching this novel from any perspective, as the novel is relatively new. Yet, the related studies of the same issue showed the discussion of mother-daughter relationship in some cultures, namely the Caribbean (Mehni 2011), various cultures in the United States (Girard 2006), England (Marone and Pozzuoli 2019), and Ireland (O’Neill 2016).

Verse novels are intriguing due to its unique narrative model of verses, and the scarcity of studies discussing novels in verse shows the importance of this research. To avoid confusion with narrative poetry, the narrative poetry is considered to be a predecessor to the verse novel that arises some time in the Romantic Period and is defined as a poem narrating a story. This form of poetry is

divided into three kinds, namely epic, metrical romance, and ballad, though some works of narrative poetry cannot be easily classified into these three kinds. The examples can be traced as early as the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh and works of Homer, like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Hirsch 2014, 416-417).

The verse novel is defined as a novel in several books or chapters that captures modern life just like its prose fiction counterpart, but in the form of verse/poem (Cuddon, Birchwood, and Habib 2013, 757-758). Per that definition, the setting is often a contemporary world with modern characters and issues, with the elements of prose novel often to be felt in the construction of the plotline. The early examples of this literary genre are Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea* (1797), Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1831), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857) (Cuddon, Birchwood, and Habib 2013, 757-758).

The novel tells the story of a Dominican-American daughter struggling with self-expression and being a proper Catholic daughter just like her mother wants her to be. Because of different views between those two (for the daughter is American-born whereas the mother is Dominican-born and raised), it leads to conflicts. Conflicts, be it in the family or other social settings, must have a psychological effect or impact on people. Psychoanalytic criticism, specifically in the area of defense mechanism, is chosen because the Dominican-born mother projects her conservative, religious values onto her daughter, who is American-born. The writer believes that the reason why the mother projects her values onto Xiomara is that she is anxious of losing her faith and losing her chance to get an "automatic admission" to Heaven. For further context, in the story, she lost her

chance to be a nun due to being nominated by the family to move to the United States and marry Xiomara's father.

1.2. Statement of the Problems

This study examines the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship in *The Poet X* using Psychoanalysis approach. Based on the background of the study, the writer formulates two problems:

1. How is the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship portrayed in the novel?
2. How do the defense mechanisms manifest in the behaviors of the mother and daughter pair?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

Based on the statements of the problem aforementioned, this study aims to investigate how the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship is portrayed in the novel and how the defense mechanisms manifest in the relationship.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The results of this study is expected to give some new insights and references towards anyone interested in the discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis, especially students of English Department in the Faculty of Humanities, specifically dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships and the effects of the said relationship in human life as portrayed in literary works. This study is

intended to introduce the topic of dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship and the defense mechanism that comes with it to people unfamiliar with these topics before.

1.5. Definitions of Key Terms

Mother-daughter relationship : a dynamic relationship in which the mother is attached to her daughter especially for seeking domination so that the daughter cannot develop a sense of self and is difficult to separate herself from the mother

Dysfunction : abnormal or unhealthy interpersonal behavior or interaction within a group

Family conflict : an ongoing/ functional hostility between members of a family