(S)Mothering Secrets: The Things That They Carried

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Abstract

Black girlhood trauma is often not acknowledged or discussed in real-life or in fiction. In addition, how this trauma and dysfunction is sometimes mirrored in mother and daughter relationships is also not often discussed or studied, which is at the core of this analysis. This research examines the topic of secrecy as being a catalyst for dysfunction and trauma related to black girlhoods. Through the novels of Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple*, Chimimanda Adiche's, *Purple Hibiscus*, and Tayari Jones's, *Silver Sparrow*, this research shows how secrets can have a destructive impact on Black girls. Celie, Kambili, and Dana must discover that secrets do not define them, and that they do not have to continue to carry these emotional burdens; they must navigate beyond them. This discovery process will offer insight from the perspectives and experiences of the girls who are "carrying secrets" that have been placed on them by their mothers.

Keywords

Black girlhoods, matrilineal dysfunction, motherhood, trauma,

In 1990, Tim O'Brien wrote a novel about a group of soldiers in the Vietnam War and the items that they carried in a physical sense as they struggled for survival. What's also quite profound about the items that are carried is that they give readers insight into the psychological and emotional burdens of the characters. Each character is carrying something that is weighing him down, and this is certainly the case with young Black girls who are struggling for self-actualization while living surrounded and engulfed by the crippling secrets of their mothers.

Many authors have written stories that depict this phenomenon both in a conscious and subconscious manner. For example, Alice Walker gives the world the heroine, Celie, who is the subject of abuse, rape and what she believes is incest as a girl in the novel, *The Color Purple*. Her mother carries the secret that Alphonso is not Celie's father to her grave, and thus Celie carries into womanhood the shame of the violations and the belief that her children are also her sister and brother. Likewise, Chimamanda Adiche's novel, *Purple Hibiscus,* presents readers with a girl who is forced to live with the secret of abuse in her family. Kambili struggles to self-actualize as she tries to make sense of her father's abuse and her mother's tolerance of it. In *Silver Sparrow*, Tayari Jones shares with readers another girl who is carrying a secret that is too large for her soul. Dana's mother, Gwen, is knowingly married to a man who is also married to another woman, and he has another family. Dana shoulders the complications of this arrangement, while seeking to understand her mother's choices.

The girls must discover that these secrets do not define them and that they don't have to continue to carry these emotional burdens; they must navigate beyond them. This research examines these texts, explores the discovery process, and offers insight from the perspectives and experiences of the girls who are "carrying secrets" that have been placed on them by their mothers.

Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple*, begins with secrecy as a prevailing theme, and the stage is set for the protagonist, a 14-year old girl, to endure a life of oppression and subjugation by the men in her life. Those cold words, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy," inform readers that there is a secret that is important to the plot of the work (1). The secret that Alphonso, Celie's father has raped her,

impregnated her, and taken her children, seems at first glance, to be the most profound secret of the highly acclaimed novel; however, this research concludes differently. It is not the secret that Celie keeps from her mother that infiltrates and permeates her life; rather it is the secret that her mother keeps from her— that Alphonso is not her real father; he is her stepfather— that shapes the young girl's life in a negative and detrimental way. With the only information that she has, she is doomed to live a life of shame, degradation, abuse, and pain. In essence, the effects of Celie's mother's secret are truly profound.

Noted author, Peg Streep, who has spent more than twenty years writing and researching mother/daughter relationships, concludes that mothers have extraordinary power in shaping their daughters. Accordingly, in *The Color Purple*, the mother does indeed shape the young impressionable protagonist. The novel does not give readers much information about Celie's mother. Interestingly, she is not even formally named. She is only referred to as Ma, Mama, and Mammy; however, she plays a critical role even though she dies early in the story. In *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion*, professor Gerri Bates contends that, "a strong bond exists between Celie and her mother, who is unseen and helpless, but an unspoken maternal bond is there" (96). Although this is a traditional expectation of mothers in general, the text does not support this claim. It does, however, reveal that Celie's mother does not meet this expectation, and the most important information given to readers that sustains this belief is that she does not tell Celie the truth about her husband, Alphonso, being her stepfather; she instead dies with this life changing secret. Of course, there are those who believe that mothers have the right to do whatever they wish. In general, motherhood seems to be a sacred topic. There is not much criticism about motherhood and the basic expectations for the role in fiction. In her

new book, *Daughter Detox*, Streep declares that "Mothers can be cruel, heartless, and punitive, and it's about time we collectively acknowledge that fact" (269). Still the topic is taboo, and people don't want to talk about it. There is little dispute that "Everyone wants desperately to believe that in a world where love is so hard to find and even harder to hang on to, one kind of love is inviolable—a mother's love" (10). This cultural myth may be the reason why readers have not typically given much attention to the mother in this work. It seems to be natural to make excuses for or overlook the shortcomings of mothers and not hold them accountable for questionable and deceptive behavior toward their children. In this fictional work, as a girl and even later as an adult, Celie, does not hold anger against her mother for mistreating her. She writes in a letter, "I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her" (41). This is, of course, in spite of the fact that the text seems to show that there is some abuse present. Early in the novel, and from a girl's perspective, Celie describes the mistreatment, "My mama she fuss at me an look at me" (1). In another letter, the young girl writes, "She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough" (2). Words and interactions like these actually seem to be the only insight that readers have into the mother and daughter relationship that exists between Celie and her mother, and they do not give credibility to a strong maternal bond between the two characters. In contrast, it shows toxicity and perhaps a rationale for the mother's failure to tell Celie the truth about her identity. As Hannah explains in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, "…You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57). Celie's mother does not seem to like her, and whether or not she even loves her is open for discussion. As a mother, she failed her so miserably, and this failure may be associated with a denial of the basic and fundamental knowledge of self, to which one is justly entitled. While the right

to know one's father is not an inalienable right like the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it is a very important truth as evidenced by the painful life of this protagonist. Certainly, in this case, it must be regarded as selfish or negligent behavior on the part of the mother. For her to pass this secret on to her daughter was destructive.

Some may argue that Celie's mother had mental illness, so she can't be held responsible for her behavior; however, she was sane enough to ask Celie about the paternity of her child. Celie writes, "She ast me about the first one whose it is? I say God's" (2). Then she finally asks where the child was, and Celie answers, "…God took it" (2). Also, she had sense enough to ask about male hair in Celie's room. Celie later shares, "…Mama finally ast how come she find hair in the girls room if he don't never go in there like he say" (112). In fact, these excerpts could possibly support that the mother was complicit in the abuse. Also, there are parts in the text that suggest that she took an active role in the concealment of the paternity. For example, in a conversation with Shug, Celie gives readers a clue, "I never even remember Ma calling him by his name. She always said, Your Pa. I reckon to make us believe it better" (244). Likewise, as a young girl, Celie writes, "Maybe cause my Mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her" (5). Of course, in the African American community the usage of the word "story" by a child is understood to mean "lie." This powerful statement not only indicates that the mother had some knowledge about the transgressions, but it also shows an inversion of roles. In that, Celie attempts to protect her mother with no hope of reciprocity. She consciously and continuously shows sympathy for her mother, but she is not shown any sympathy in return. Instead, the mother leaves Celie a corrosive secret to carry.

According to professional counselor and best-selling author, John Bradshaw, in his book, *Family Secrets*, "things we don't know can cause devastation in our lives" (2). Because Celie does not know that "Pa not pa," she believes that she has been physically and sexually violated by her own father, and because of religious beliefs she is bound by God to accept the mistreatment. She rationalizes, "couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what" (42). It is possible that had she known that he was not actually her father, she could have processed the abuse differently, and at the very least, she could have not been mentally tormented by the shame of incest—believing that she has been impregnated by her own father. In fact, before finding out the truth of her paternity, Celie constantly grapples with the secret from this perspective. For instance, when she is in an intimate conversation with Sophia discussing their father, she confides in one of the letters, "My daddy got six by my mama before she die… He got four more by the wife he got now. I don't mention the two he got by me" (41).

The fact that Celie's mother carried the secret that Alphonso is not Celie's father to her grave is at the core of many of the young girl—turned woman's— issues. Indeed, it is the most destructive secret of the narrative because once the truth is finally revealed, readers are shown an immediate shift in Celie's attitude and behavior, and one of her very first declarations is, "My children not my sister and brother" (177).

In addition, after thinking that she never wanted to see him again, Celie is finally able to confront Alphonso about her paternity and ask about her real father's grave. Furthermore at this time, she keeps it in perspective and remembers, "…he not my daddy, just my children daddy" (180). Obviously, this knowledge is important. Knowing the truth of her paternity

allowed Celie to gather the pieces of her childhood and adult self. She can tell Mr. _____, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice to say to everything listening. But I'm here" (207). Seemingly, truth and being freed from the yoke of incest gives Celie the power to pursue self-hood.

Celie's next letter after visiting Alphonso is to Nettie, and in it she writes, "I don't write God no more. I write you" (192). Here readers see that Celie is abandoning her religious belief system. She writes, "What God do for me?" (192). This question posed to Shug shows a contrast from her earlier reference to God and His commandments. Celie then answers her own question and presents it in the letter, "…he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a low-down dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again" (192). She also adds, "If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you" (192). These statements show that the protagonist is able to show some emotion about her reality now; whereas, before she could not do so. Moreover, though scared, she is not haunted by the secret at this point, so the anger that Celie is finally able to project is the catalyst to her freedom. She is no longer quiet about her oppression, and teacher and critic, Tuzyline Jita Allan, in her book, *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics,* concludes that "speech or the end of silence is the key marker of female self-hood" (88). Conversely, speaking or communicating is the enemy of secrecy. Alphonso and Mr. _____ both counted on Celie to exist in silence which created and sustained the environment for abuse. Once Celie is empowered to no longer be silent about her pain, none of the secrets—especially her mother's secret, can hold her hostage. She speaks her truth and becomes a whole person because as Audre Lorde confirms, "...you're never really a whole person if you remain silent…" (42).

Celie is no longer burdened even though she has memories. The protagonist, once a girl and now a woman, evolves and overcomes in spite of the secret.

The mother and daughter relationship in Adiche's *Purple Hibiscus* is different from the one in Walker's *The Color Purple*, but it is just as dysfunctional, and the secret is just as damaging on the young protagonist, Kambili. The mother in *Purple Hibiscus* is similarly selfish, and Adiche shows readers how and why her behavior is harmful to her children, especially to Kambili. To start, Beatrice is selfish because she uses self-pity and economic security to stay in an abusive marriage that is unhealthy and destructive for herself and her children, and she expects her children to carry and harbor this secret from the world. While Adiche is careful to paint the mother as somewhat sympathetic and even pitiful, she also does not absolve her from blame either. In fact, Adiche gives readers a powerful heroic character in Aunty Ifeoma. The contrasting behaviors of the two women maternal figures magnify the mother's flaws because Aunty Ifeoma is strong, supportive, and independent. She is not selfish or weak. Kambili finds solace, independence, and love through this surrogate relationship. After Kambili has been beaten and hospitalized by her father, she wakes up and asks for her aunty. It is quite telling that when the mother reaches out to hold her hand, Kambili thinks to herself, "I wished I could get up and hug her, and yet I wanted to push her away, to shove her so hard that she would topple over the chair" (213). This statement is perhaps one of the most powerful of the novel as it relates to the mother and daughter relationship and the damage that has been done by the secret. Readers see here that Kambili holds her mother responsible for the secrecy of the abuse, not protecting her and her brother and for just being weak. She admires the strong nature of her aunt, who does not tolerate the secret, and this is why the aunt essentially becomes her

role model. The aunt does not condone or make excuses for Eugene's behavior even though he is her brother, while Beatrice does. For example, Beatrice tells Ifeoma, "It has never happened like this before. He has never punished her like this before" (214). The key words here are "like this" (214). She has not even tried to stop the assaults or at least let the children know that she does not approve of the abuse. She just allows the abuse to persist and empower the secrecy. On the other hand, Ifeoma says, "This cannot go on…" (213). In fact, Ifeoma even raises her voice when she senses some resistance from Beatrice about getting Kambili out of the toxic environment. Readers see this same strength later when Eugene has resolved to remove his family from Ifeoma's house. When Eugene calls, Ifeoma does not even let the mother go to the phone; she says, "I hung up…" (249). The mother questions her, and Ifeoma raises her voice and says, "…sit down right now!" (249). At this point, the readers and Kambili need Beatrice to show strength, but she does not. After Beatrice talks to Eugene and he convinces her to come home, Kambili says, "She looked possessed by a different demon" (250). Beatrice forces the young protagonist to tolerate abuse because she keeps them in an environment where they cannot truly experience the beauty of the "purple hibiscus." Readers are told that the special flower had "undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at the Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do" (16). Kambili (and Jaja) are never really free as a result of Beatrice's secret. By the time she does decide to act and have a voice by poisoning Eugene, it's too late. Kambili says that, "nobody listened to her; they still don't" (296). Author and researcher Marianne Hirsch in her book, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, maintains that good mothers are not silent (6). They speak up, and they act. Hirsch even uses Toni Morrison's character, Sethe, as an example, though extreme, of a mother who acts and uses her voice in an attempt to save

her children (7). Streep believes that protecting one's child should be a part of maternal instinct, and when mothers fail to protect their children, they are behaving in a dysfunctional manner.

Furthermore, Teri Apter, author of the book, *Difficult Mothers*, states that neglect is dysfunctional in the mother and daughter relationship, and she reveals that there is what one could call neglect by omission (18). Beatrice fits into this dysfunctional "mothering" category because she can be described as depressed, disengaged, and or nonresponsive. According to Apter, children of neglectful mothers often feel helpless and frightened, and Kambili is shown to display both characteristics because of this secret of abuse (19). Beatrice's inability to successfully protect Kambili from her father is problematic, and her failure to do so produces dysfunction in the mother and daughter relationship.

Throughout the novel, Beatrice deals with her personal and psychological pain by polishing figurines each time Eugene abuses her. The text states, "The étagère had three shelves of delicate glass, and each one held the beige ballet-dancing figurines. Mama started at the lowest layer, polishing both the shelf and figurines" (35). Polishing the figurines is not a particularly empowering action on the behalf of the mother. This seems to be her coping mechanism, but it does not appear that she has given any thought to how this is affecting Kambili emotionally and mentally, and the behavior is selfish because Kambili is not nurtured or taught how to have a coping mechanism. Instead, she has to witness this "polishing" constantly without any outlet of her own. Also, she is left with the burden of her mother's secret, and unlike Celie, readers are not given the benefit of watching her grow into a woman and successfully overcome the burden of this devastating secret. Kambili has both mental and physical scars.

The scars are so deep that at the end of the novel, Kambili and her mother can't even communicate. The narrator says, "There is still so much that we do not say with our voices, that we do not turn into words" (297). The relationship is still dysfunctional because of the secret. After Eugene is dead, and Ifeoma has moved, Kambili still has to go to Nsukka to feel peace because solace cannot be found at home with her mother. She says, "…Nsukka could free something deep inside your belly that would rise up to your throat and come out as a freedom song. As laughter" (299). She goes there to laugh; she cannot laugh at all in the space with her mother; however, the fact that she can now laugh is certainly progress and proof that the secret is no longer holding her completely hostage. There is hope that the pain of her girlhood will not destroy the bright possibilities of her womanhood.

Dana is the initial narrator and the main protagonist in Tayari Jones's compelling novel, *Silver Sparrow*, in that the work begins and ends with her voice. Published in 2013 and set in Atlanta, this novel presents another earth-shattering secret that another young girl must seek to navigate. It's not a secret of paternity or abuse that burdens Dana; it is a secret of bigamy, a distinct crime that is rarely discussed. It is the central issue of the work, and like Walker, Jones establishes the secret in the first lines: "My father, James Witherspoon, is a bigamist. He was already married ten years when he first clamped eyes on my mother" (1). Furthermore, chapter one is strategically named "The Secret," so the author is clear that this work is about deception. Initially, readers are introduced to Dana in a very intimate way. She tells the story of her childhood and how her life became infused with the dangerous secret that is similar to fire. It starts small, eventually becoming uncontrollable, seeming to have a life of its own, and

damaging everything and everyone in the path. It can't be readily put out; the secret burns wildly, and unfortunately, Dana barely escapes alive.

When James Witherspoon describes Dana as "the secret," she is forever changed. This conversation appears to be the start of Dana's insecurities, and as a result of her insecurities, Gwen's obsession is manifested. Gwen grows and nurtures the obsession, and it is eventually mirrored in Dana's life. According to the story, when she was about five years old and in kindergarten, Dana draws a picture at school that has two mothers and two daughters, and her father is disturbed by the picture. He tells Dana, "You can't tell your teacher that your daddy has another wife. You can't tell your teacher that my name is James Witherspoon." Dana asks for clarification, "Your wife and your other girl is a secret?" James then tells Dana, "No. You've got it the wrong way around. Dana, you are the one that's the secret" (9). He also makes it clear that, "…what we do in this house has to be secret, okay?" (8). Dana does not really know how to process this information and she is troubled by the conversation with her father. It's somewhat telling that the mother asks Dana if she is okay, and she was very apprehensive about even letting them talk alone. In fact, Dana says, "She left the room, but I don't know that she trusted him not to say something that would leave me wounded and broken winged for life. I could see it in her face" (7). Also, upon finding out what James said to Dana, Gwen says, "That motherfucker… I love him, but I might have to kill him one day" (13). These excerpts allow readers to see that Gwen is aware that this secret could damage Dana, and it does. Dana initially feels that "Of course James wanted to keep me a secret. Who would love a girl with a gaping pink hole in the middle of her mouth?" (11). Because she is missing

a tooth, she is questioning her worth, and her self-esteem has become attached to the secret at the age of five; sadly, at this early age, she says, "I want to be like the other girl…" (12).

The effects of the secret on Dana's life do not end with her self-esteem. Notably, Dana is affected psychologically and socially by this damaging secret. She struggles to feel her father's love and feel legitimate to the world. The labels "legitimate" and "real" haunt Dana when she only wants to be loved and accepted in spite of the circumstances. She is seeking to understand questions similar to the ones that author, Anita Shreve, poses in a book review for the *Washington Post* like, "Which family does the man love most? The family to whom he confides everything, thus hurting it in the process? Or the family to whom he tells nothing, allowing it to live in ignorant normality, but always with the possibility of a terrible surprise?" These questions explore the consequences of the secret, and they also give insight into Gwen's fears.

Gwendolyn, the mother in Jones's novel, is perhaps the most complicated one of all three examined. The other two mothers seemed to have some economic reasons for being in the relationships that breed the secrets their daughters inherit; however, there does not seems to be any of that type of survival-based motivation present in this story. Gwen knows in the beginning that James Witherspoon is married, yet she engages in a relationship and an eventual marriage with him anyway, and becoming pregnant with Dana only complicates the arrangement. Dana almost becomes a pawn or negotiation factor for Gwen as she continues to be involved with James Witherspoon. The text says that she reminded him, "…how much he wanted a baby. Laverne had been lying beneath him for a full decade, but she had not been able to give him what he most wanted" (50). In essence, Gwen seemed to view herself as a

"prize winner" by conceiving Dana. She thought Dana was "destiny" (51). Because she, like his other wife, also has a child with James, Gwen believes this validates the relationship, and she is narrowly focused on the secret. By comparing her and Dana's life to Laverne and Chaurisse's life constantly, she subconsciously deforms Dana's being. She is obviously obsessed with the arrangement of her and James Witherspoon's lives. Looking at her life is critical because she transfers that obsession to her daughter. She is a flawed and complex character, and her choices complicate her daughter's life. The secret belongs to Gwen, but she is not satisfied to carry it alone. At various places in the work, she uses plural pronouns to characterize her and Dana as they relate to James. For instance, she tells Dana, "James needs *us* right now," and "…*you* must have represented us well" (150). Note the use of the identifier "us" in both conversations that relates to the sickness and death of Ms. Bunny, James's mother, and Dana's opportunity to meet her. This "package" mentality transfers to Dana as well. She also uses plural pronouns to reference her and her mother. She mentions that he entered the house, "…calling my mother and me by the name of our rivals" (147). While the pronoun "our" is important to show Dana's mindset, the use of the term "rival" also shows Dana's fixation on James's other family. This fixation is heightened by Gwen's constant comparing herself to Laverne and consistently comparing Dana to Chaurisse. From telling James that Laverne has a fox fur coat and she doesn't, to telling Dana, "You're smarter, more mannerable, and you've got better hair," Gwen appears to be trying to convince herself and Dana that they deserve to live equal or superior lives because they are guarding the secret. The secret is indeed destructive and corrosive because the whole arrangement hinges on the protection of that deception. At a point of desperation and through "clenched teeth" she says, "These people are not better than us…We have everything that they have. I work hard every day. I have my

associate's degree. She's only been to beauty school. And you are a better daughter. We are better people" (158). She is totally consumed. In reality, Gwen is almost possessed. This is shown further by the "surveilling" or spying in the novel. In Dana's words, "We were accustomed to covert endeavors… When we shadowed Chaurisse and her mother, we were nervous and excited, like rookie cops" (109). To define the behavior fully, Dana says, "Surveil was my mother's word. If he knew, James would probably say spy, but that is too sinister. We didn't do damage to anyone but ourselves as we trailed Chaurisse and Laverne while they wound their way through their easy lives" (5). Gwen introduces to Dana to it, and Dana moves it a step further to what many would call stalking.

In fact, Dana seems to become intoxicated by James's other family's life. She is much like an alcoholic or drug addict she cannot seem to get enough of "peeking" into that other life, and after a while the addiction escalates. Peeking is no longer enough; her behavior approaches voyeurism. Dana crosses the line and enters the forbidden life of Laverne and Chaurisse. The first time, she explains, "I was just going to fill my eyes with her as I walked through the double doors. This was all I had in mind. Who would believe me, but this was all I had planned to do. No talking, no touching, just a good look" (45). Then she confesses, "This, I know, is how people go crazy and do things they regret" (45). Clearly, Dana is past a healthy curiosity. In actuality, she later builds a friendship with Chaurisse for the purpose of infiltrating their lives. She has been infected with Gwen's secret, and it has started to fester. As a matter of fact, the conduct is so unnatural that Chaurisse becomes uncomfortable. She states, "I wanted her to admit that she was curious about me. I know how people act when they have an interest… My Daddy calls it sniffing around" (213). She continues:

She didn't say anything, she just looked around our kitchen like she had never seen one before. She stood up and opened the drawers, picked up a spoon and frowned at her reflection. "Can I open the fridge?" I shrugged and she pulled open the door, taking a long look, like she was counting my mother's cans of Fresca lined up on the door rack. She shut it and opened the freezer side. "No ice maker?" I shrugged, but I felt embarrassed. "Ice trays make good ice." "Ya'll have all new appliances? Electric range?" (214)

As shown here Dana exploits her friendship with Chaurisse to feed her obsession, and as Chaurisse claims, to "elbow[ed] her way into our lives" (325). Dana continues to push the boundaries by maintaining a secret relationship with Chaurisse. Only when she is almost face to face with her father, while hiding in the bathroom because she has sneaked off to a party with Chaurisse, does she seem to regret her deception, but it's too late then. The die is cast. Because of a flat tire, Dana's plan to "nibble at the edges of [Chaurise's] life" had been exposed (317). Dana and Chaurise's friendship crumbles, and Gwen is no longer resolved to harbor the secret. She and Dana go to the Pink Fox, Laverne's beauty shop, and expose the secret. She tells Laverne the truth— that her husband, James Witherspoon, is a bigamist. Gwen says to Chaurisse, "I just came to the shop and showed myself. You have been showing yourself to me for every day of your life" (328). Interestingly once "Pandora's box" is open, Gwen uses the singular pronoun "I" to reference herself, and during the confrontation with Laverne, she tells Dana, "You started this… You started this whole thing" (305). Here she uses a singular pronoun reference to refer to Dana instead of the pronoun "we" as she normally does before the provocation. Moreover, Gwen is blaming Dana for the turmoil even though it is a result of her secret that Dana has spiraled out of control. This out-of-control behavior is

also seen in Dana's secretive and abusive relationship with Marcus McCready. When her father opposes the relationship and her date, she knows that he does not want to be exposed to the world as her father, she taunts him with the secret, "Watch out… he's going to see you" (96). In defiance, she thought, "I knew he saw the fire in my face, the challenge in my eyes" (96). Even after being forbidden to see Marcus, Dana does not stop the relationship. She begins to take much pride in carrying and protecting her own secrets and not just the secret of her mother.

The deception in this work is so destructive. Psychologists and the Center for Disease Control refer to secrets like this as adverse childhood experiences. They cause irreparable damage, and as Chaurisse exclaims, "You can't put the rain back in the sky" (319).

The last exchange between Dana and her father is heart-wrenching. After she asks him if he loves her, James Witherspoon gives the following declaration: "It's not about loving people… "You have to go home now. I've made my choice, just like you made your choice when you went bothering Ch-Chaurise. You almost took my whole life away from me." Of course, this is an ironic statement because that's exactly what James has done to her by hiding her. Dana responds, "What did you think was going to happen?... Did you think that I could live my entire life tucked away a dirty photograph? "I'm your daughter." James ends the confrontation with, "Everybody knows that now…That's what you wanted. You got it." (339). Dana does not only lose her father because of the secret, but she seems to also lose hope.

The novel ends with Dana clinging to her own daughter in a way that she says that she never wanted to do. Dana shares, “I knelt beside her and hugged her tight, the way my mother used to hug me, the way that I had promised that I would never grip my child. I used to swear that I would never be a desperate mother, that I would always respect the line between Flora and me” (340). When she says, “In so many ways, you can’t choose what you give to your daughter, you just give her what you have,” she corroborates the idea that mothers— can and frequently do— pass along their own trauma for their daughters to carry. In the end, she is resolved that her daughter has a father who is, “…not married to anyone else,” and as far as Dana is concerned that’s progress. Dana also specifies that the child’s father acknowledges and loves her publicly (335). Though Dana is not necessarily carrying the secret any longer, she is still certainly wounded by it. Her last words solidify this impression: “People say, that which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. But they are wrong. What doesn’t kill you, doesn’t kill you. That’s all you get. Sometimes, you just have to hope that’s enough” (340).

Kambili, Adiche’s protagonist, and Dana, Jones’s protagonist, are unlike Walker’s protagonist in that they know the secrets that are dominating their lives. As a young girl, and for most of the work, Celie does not know the secret. Once she learns the truth, readers are able to see an obvious shift in her attitude and behavior, which is a distinct difference between her and Kambili and Dana, who are born connected to their mother’s secrets.

They are taught and expected to conform to the parameters of the secrets which are problematic for both of them. Of course, they are finally able to navigate beyond the secrets, but this is only after the secrecy is disturbed. Kambili’s abusive father dies, and Dana’s bigamist father is exposed. Interestingly, both exposure and death are required for Celie to

emerge as whole. Because Kambili and Dana are not presented through a clear lens of adulthood and maturity, readers can only surmise how all of the secrets that they carry as girls affect the remainder of their lives as is shown with Celie; however, it is certainly indisputable that both Kambili and Dana survive, even though they have been deeply scarred.

Unquestionably, the stories of these three girls shed light on the weight of secrets on the lives of young girls and simultaneously expose how mothers consciously or subconsciously transfer these secrets to their daughters.

Though the situations are different, the novels present girls who struggle with the pain of these similar secrets, and Alice Walker, Chimamanda Adiche, and Tayari Jones all create girls who do not allow the secrets that they carry to kill them; though battered, they grow—which reflects real life experiences and literary scaffolding. Young girls must develop coping mechanisms; it is the only way to survive, as survival is necessary.

Moreover, society needs to emphasize that safe spaces and support for young girls are necessary for their mental health and self-actualization. Such support could prevent cycles of secrecy from destroying wholeness.

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