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MOTHER - DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN THE SHORT STORIES OF EUDORA WELTY

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ABSTRACT

Eudora Alice Welty, an American short story writer and novelist describes the life and culture of South American who were not much influenced by modernity. She has depicted in her short stories the real life filled with a variety of emotions. One can find her characters in one's neighbourhood. She opine that the culture of north is different from that of the south and juxtaposes this in a subtle way through some of her characters. Her characters shape their lives in obedience to the ancient laws of birth and death. Sometimes they pursue a private vision heroically. She believes strongly that women have more commitment and responsibility than men. They were ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of the same. Her characters and themes are universal in their nature. The present paper deals with the *Mother - Daughter Relationship* in her stories. She depicts the matriarchal order in her *Delta Wedding*. Her mother characters play an important role in shaping the family life, being conventional and, minded. At the same time she contrasts it with loving, obedient, and caring, dutiful daughters with those of defying, rebellious, suffocated due to over protective mothers, who ruined their lives. Though she characterized them objectively they are very much realistic. On the whole, it appears that Eudora Welty upholds convention.

Key words: Mother - Daughter Relationship, realistic, modernity, conventional, traditional

In her short stories, Eudora Welty depicts a world filled with life representing natural emotions being sensitive and sensual, rationalistic and ethical. Her characters shape their lives in obedience to the ancient laws of birth and death. Sometimes they pursue a private vision heroically. Referring to the male and the female, Simon de Beauvoir says: "We are accustomed to thinking of these two human destinies as characteristically sexual." Traditionally, the woman's place is in the home. She is the mother who gives us life and with it our morality. As such, Welty's novels and short stories present mostly the matriarchal order. In her short novels *Delta Wedding* (1946), *Losing Battles* (1970) and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972), she represents an agrarian society, i.e., plantation life. While the male members spend most of their time outside, the mothers play an important role in shaping the family life. The mother in Welty's fiction represents the ancient order of a powerful mother, especially in *Delta Wedding*. Her fiction not only reveals how the matriarchal order expresses itself in the human and natural fertility but also the activity of the plantation. Everywhere one encounters the work and ceremonies of women in agrarian society. Cooking and feeding occupy most of their time. Through

her mother characters, Welty tries to teach the human bond, particularly the obligation of men to nurture women and children. Margaret Mead in her *Male and Female* discusses human fatherhood as a social invention. As she says, "the basic biological unit is mother and child while the basic unit of society is the family, which rests upon the learned nurturing behaviour of men. Such behaviour is tenuous and fragile and can disappear easily under social conditions that do not teach effectively."

Welty depicts effectively the matriarchal order clearly in her short novels "Delta Wedding", "The Optimist's Daughter" and short stories "Why I Live At The P.O" and "The Winds." Welty depicts most of her mother characters conventional and traditional minded. In *Delta Wedding*, Welty presents the matriarchal order established in a subtle and indirect way of depicting the frame of the wedding of seventeen year old Dabney, an adolescent daughter of Ellen (mother). Ellen being "the mother of them all"-(10) (Fairchilds), is frequently overloaded with work, commitments and responsibility. She desperately tries to find some time to work in her garden in order to prevent it from becoming a wilderness. In spite of the fact that "she never actually had time to sit down and fill her eyes with people and hear what they said, in any civilized way." (DW, 221) Ellen comes across a strange girl in the woods. The girl is extremely beautiful and Ellen is attracted to her beauty at once. When she comes to know that George the male Fairchild has encountered the girl and made love to her, Ellen gets upset because immediately she thinks of her own daughter Dabney who is about the same age. Her motherly feelings surge up within her and finally encompass the whole family. "She had feared for the whole family, somehow, at a time like this (being their mother, and the atmosphere heavy with the wedding and the festivities hanging over their heads) when this girl that was at first so ambiguous, and so lovely even to her all dull and tired - when she touched at their life, ran through the woods." (DW, 80) She is shocked at the behaviour of her brother-in-law, George, for she loves and admires him. Her feminine instinct makes her feel that a beautiful and lonely girl is liable to a man's approach, even by an admirable person like George. When Ellen heard about the girl's accidental death on railroad tracks, once again her feminine sensibility is stirred. She describes it as a vision of fate.

Ellen is portrayed as an ideal mother who is loving, caring and protective, good at home-making. Sometimes the sheltered and protected upbringing causes a negative impact. This is evident from the character of Dabney, the daughter of Ellen. Dabney of seventeen years is getting married to Troy of thirty four years, below their social status. Nobody in the family is enthusiastic about their marriage but nobody speaks out. Dabney is very well aware of this fact but doesn't care for it. On the contrary she feels proud of her disagreement. Marriage for Dabney seems to be a way to get away from the conventional type of living and to have a "solid house" (DW, 90) of her own. She doesn't marry out of sheer desire to be protected. There is a strain of rebellion in her which must have triggered off her decision to marry Troy. She likes the idea of her father's disagreement with her choice of a husband. As the narrator says, "It would kill her father" (DW,33). With this knowledge, Dabney feels triumphant. It may be interpreted as a slight revenge on her father as well as established patriarchal authority. Dabney doesn't want to have any link with the past. When she is gifted a night-light by her aunts at her wedding, she breaks it while carrying home. It has a symbolic significance. It suggests loss, even death. The night-light belonged to her aunt Mashula who waited for her husband to return from the Civil War "till the lightning one early morning stamped her picture on the window-pane." (DW, 45) It also connects past and present which Dabney tries to cut off. The broken night-light will never illuminate her married life with Troy. But later Dabney realizes that she has lost something irreparable. Though she wants to escape from time in the past to something that is breakable, she is not sure of the future. John Edward Hardy describes it as the "themes of protection and disaster inextricably bound up together from the first." Dabney's character is portrayed as the one who wishes to escape from the restricted routine life. It seems she doesn't understand the importance of love and care in one's life. She doesn't understand the anxiety of her mother who always tries to protect her.

The Optimist's Daughter (1972), Welty depicts the mother-daughter relationship through the reminiscences of a middle-aged woman, Laurel Me Kelva the daughter of deceased mother Becky. Though Welty doesn't give an account of the direct confrontations of these two, it is through the memories of the grown up daughter the mother's character is established. Laurel recalls the days when her mother was alive and her relationship with her father Me Kelva, a Judge. Laurel's mother suffered from eye disease. She lost her

eye-sight gradually and eventually lost it completely. According to Laurel, her father could not accept his wife's illness and therefore, "he apparently needed guidance in order to see the tragic." (OD, 145) The comfort and hope he bestowed upon his wife is contrasted with the actual state of Becky's physical and mental condition. The narrator doesn't hesitate to tell about the misunderstandings between the couple. She says, "It was betrayal on betrayal" (OD, 150) because Me Kelva caused Becky's desperation by not acknowledging her desperation. Becky died lonely without speaking a word and "keeping everything to herself, in exile and humiliation." (OD, 151)

In this story, Laurel's longing for her mother's affection is depicted. Laurel is more attached to her mother, who is traditional-minded. She desperately feels the need to tell her dead mother about Fay's (Me Kelva's second wife) attempt to shake her husband on the night of his death. Laurel's urge to tell her mother is emphasized by the repetition of "mother (OD,132) though she realizes the fact immediately, it illustrates how intensely she feels to be comforted in her mother's arms like a little girl. When she goes into her mother's sewing room, she experiences the "fire light and warmth - that was what her memory gave." (OD, 133) The narrator's memories of her childhood suggest that she had a caring mother. She remembers the cooperative nature of her parents. She narrates that her father had a privacy in the form of a desk with a key while her mother's "privacy was keyless." (OD, 134) She also remembers her mother's concern and care for all her letters. Becky kept all her letters. Laurel realizes that her mother had stored things according to their time and place.

It is not always possible to generalize that mother-daughter relationship is smooth. Laurel who is widowed and powerless could not save her mother from illness but she is severely hurt when her dying mother says, "you could have saved your mother's life. But you stood by and wouldn't intervene I despair for you." (OD, 15) Here, the mother is portrayed as insensitive and she literally curses her daughter on her death-bed as she is not up to her expectations in doing the impossible.

Laurel reminisces about her mother in West Virginia are triggered by her looking at some of the old photographs of her parents taken at Becky's name. She looks at the snapshots "created" by her mother because seeing and remembering are intertwined. As a matter of co-incidence, we recall Eudora Welty's own snapshot album *One Time, One Place*, where she states these interrelations in more general context. "If exposure is essential, still more so is the reflection. Insight doesn't happen often on the child of the moment take a lucky snapshot but come in its own time and more slowly and from nowhere but within." The kind of reflections Welty emphasizes is pertinent to Laurel's attitude towards her past. Remembering her past as well as her mother's, Laurel manages to see things more clearly. She inherits boldness from her mother. The mother is the one "who might have done that dare to stand up against a mob." (OD, 80) Being the daughter of such a daring mother, Laurel rediscovers her strength by remembering the difficult times in her life. Though Laurel's mother has already been dead for almost 12 years, she has been alive just because of the peculiarity of mother-daughter relationship. Though Becky is not an active protagonist, she is the most influential mother of Laurel the protagonist.

Considering the attitudes of the daughters' in Welty's short stories, we can classify them into two categories. Firstly, the mother-daughter relationship as existed in the traditional order i.e., obedient, respecting elders, yielding to the interests of elders, the daughter having no choice of her own. Secondly, the daughters who are exposed to the changing society in which they seek self-identity and go against their mothers' intentions and most of the time ruined themselves. As Alicia Ostriker says, "we can expect the subject of the mother-daughter relation to be central in women's writings and to reflect the ambivalence of the daughter who must both identify with and reject the mother."

In "Why I Live at the P.O", (1941) the narrator is a sensitive eccentric young girl portrayed in an interesting family situation in the house. Her family consists of Mama, Papa-Daddy, Sister Stella- Rondo and Uncle Rondo'. In this story the mother is depicted as powerful but shows partiality. Her bias deeply worries the protagonist-narrator. In this story, Stella-Rondo, the narrator's sister is portrayed as the spoil-sport of the family. She unnecessarily interferes in others' matters and is able to influence her parents.

When Stella-Rondo returns having left her husband with a two-year old adopted child, the narrator suspects her adoption. But her mother (Mama) instantly believes what is told by Stella. Stella-Rondo often tries

to hurt the narrator. Once she tells her-father that the narrator doesn't understand why he grows beard. He misunderstands her and says sarcastically; "So the post mistress fails to understand why I don't cut off my beard. Which job I got you through my influence with the govt. Bird's nest -is that what you call it?" (CS, 47) Though she is about to convince her father by saying "I didn't say any such of a thing..... Meanwhile with an authoritative voice, "Stop right there", says Mama, looking at me"(CS,47) makes her shut her mouth. Being angry she goes away. At that time, the motherly instinct may be noticed in Mama when she says, "Call her back or she will starve to death."(CS, 47) On another occasion when the narrator expresses doubt about the child, the mother always tries to snub the narrator. It is evident from her words: "Hence I thought we were going to have a pleasant Fourth of July and you start right out not believing a word your own baby sister tells you?" (CS, 50) When the narrator expresses her doubt regarding the normalcy of the child, when it is proved that it's normal, the mother becomes furious and asks the narrator to apologize to her younger sister for no fault of her. "You ought to be thoroughly ashamed! Run upstairs this instant and apologize to Stella-Rondo and Shirley T. (the adopted child)." (CS, 51) The mother insists on the narrator to apologize to Stella for talking bad about her. This dialogue suggests that all the members of the narrator's family including the mother try to humiliate the narrator. Being fed up with the insults and humility she experiences from the family members, the daughter finally leaves the house and goes in search of an independent and happy life. Even the mother stands there without showing any protest. In this story, the mother-daughter relationship is presented from a different angle. The mother's dominating and partial nature is evident. This prolonged oppression resulted in changing the protagonist to become a rebellion. "The Winds" (1943) is another story dealing with the same theme. Josie, the main character often dreams of the life of young boys and girls who visit Lover's Lane to enjoy themselves. Josie, the daughter lives in a family of love and affection. But her mind dangles between adolescence and maturity, between the experiences of childhood and youth. In this story the mother is depicted as one who is always vigilant on her adolescent girl, Josie. She carefully observes her movements. Though both parents take care of their children, Mama says, "You take him, and I will take the girl" (CS, 210) with a little push, she divided the children. Her mother understands what Josie thinks of and is getting attracted to. Josie feels suffocated and unhappy at her parents' love. In fact, she is drawn to Cornelia - a young girl, whom she calls a "big girl." Josie wants to change her life but always her parents, especially her mother, stands in her way.

"She was looking for the big girl who lived in the double - house across the street...."

"Josie come back."

"I see Cornelia. I see Cornelia in the equinox there in her high heeled shoes."

"How many times have I told you that you need not concern yourself with Cornelia!" The way her mother said her name was not diminished now.

"I see Cornelia. She's on the outside, Mama, outside in the storm and she is in the equinox." But her mother would not answer. (CS, 211)

From this it may be said that the more the girl is prevented from thinking of Cornelia by her parents, the more she thinks of the possible way to meet her, showing the human tendency to taste the forbidden fruit. So the mother in "The Winds" is always in anxiety to protect her daughter from a dangerous situation.

Quite contrary to this family, Cornelia, another young girl in the same story, is projected as the most neglected daughter by her parents. Perhaps this lack of love must have made her face the equinoctial storm. Being neglected by her parents the young girl, Cornelia lives in loneliness and yearns for the love of Josie. But Josie's parents warn and prevent her from being attracted by anything which is not acceptable in the society. Though it is clear that mothers are dominant in the two stories, "Why I Live At The P.O" and "The Winds," the mother in the former story doesn't prevent her daughter from choosing absolute freedom whereas in the latter, the girl's freedom is arrested.

Welty's contemporary Flannery O' Connor also deals with this theme in her fiction. In O' Connor's fiction, the mother is projected as a dominant figure. In most of her stories mother is depicted either as a widow or a divorcee. Her dominating nature obviously makes the daughter lonely, as in the story "Good Country People" in which O Connor writes about a family consisting of two members, a mother and daughter. O Connor's two stories "Good Country People" and "A Circle In The Fire" depict the dominant mothers and the

suffering daughters. In the former story Joy Hulga is forced by her divorced mother, Mrs. Hopewell, to behave in the "normal ways" i.e., courting men and to be like a "social butterfly" which she protests. In the latter story the mother, Mrs. Cope, is a lonely farm lady who doesn't understand the feelings of her twelve years old daughter, Sally Virginia and dominates her, making her lonely.

Unlike in Flannery O' Connor, some of Welty's mothers are caring and soothing, like Ellen Fairchild in *Delta Wedding* and Josie's mother in "The Winds." Most of the daughters in Welty's fiction identify themselves with their mothers and are dutiful at least until their parents die. In "June Recital" and "The Wanderers," we see dutiful daughters in Miss Eckhart and Virgie Rainey. In "June Recital" Miss Eckhart is introduced as a piano teacher who comes from an alien land and settles in Morgana with her mother. The mother's role is not stated explicitly but Miss Eckhart being a dutiful daughter takes care of her. She takes a room with Snowdie Mac Lain and sets up a studio and gives piano lessons to the young boys and girls of the town. Her life becomes boring and frustrating as her disciples are careless, undisciplined and without talent. She is forced to continue her job because there is no other way to feed her old mother. Virgie Rainey is the only exceptional pupil she has. She is gifted with a sweet voice. She often remarks that "Virgie Rainey danke schoen" (CS, 290) with the decrease in her popularity, Miss Eckhart faces economic problem. Morgana people speak in different ways about Miss Eckhart's treatment of her mother. People said the old mother had been in pain for years and nobody was told. What kind of pains they did not say. But they said that during the war, when Miss Eckhart lost pupils and they did not have very much to eat. She would give her mother paregoric to make sure she slept all night and not wake the street with noise or complaint for fear still more pupils would be taken away. Some people said Miss Eckhart killed her mother with Opium. (CS, 307) Her mother, who is the only human being to share her pains and sorrows, dies. Eckhart becomes lonely and totally dejected. What she thinks precious and meaningful once upon a time now becomes meaningless and lost. In spite of Morgana peoples' criticism, she fulfils her duty as a daughter by taking care of her till she dies.

"The Wanderers" (1949) describes the search of all wanderers for the golden apples. "The Wanderers" unifies the collection *The Golden Apples* with a return to Katie Rainey who tells the story of the actual wanderer, King Mac Lain in "Shower of Gold." In that story Virgie is referred to as a baby but in "The Wanderers" she is the main character. She appears as a woman in her forties with more maturity among the wanderers. She is mentioned again in the second story "June Recital" as a piano student and gifted pupil of Miss Eckhart. Her independent and individualistic outlook are stated when she was a girl.

Katie Rainey, the mother of Virgie Rainey is said to be a powerful woman. Katie Rainey's character and her views are stated in "Shower of Gold." (1949) Welty depicts Katie from the traditional point of view. She knows her female characters from the feminine point of view. But Katie's relation with her daughter is different. Virgie being independent from her childhood doesn't act according to her expectations. She marries a sailor and leaves Morgana. After twenty years of gap, she returns to Morgana as an isolated and shattered woman. Virgie's disobedient nature has driven away Katie's love and concern for her. As such, she never gives a chance to Virgie to tell her sad story of hurt or sorrow of disappointment and shame. Katie never gives a chance to Virgie to share her sorrow or to rest on her shoulder to get relieved of her sorrow. The mother has no sympathy for the disobedient and individualistic daughter. The narrator in "The Wanderers" says that Katie weeps not for the daughter, but for son and husband who are dead. "No body," the narrator says, "was allowed weeping over hurts in her house unless it was Mrs. Rainey herself, first for son and husband both her men were gone." (CS, 452)

Virgie being a dutiful daughter looks after her mother in spite of her sour feelings. Having lived like a free bird for some years, she has to lead a different life with her mother. She has to work in order to feed her old mother, like her piano teacher. When Virgie returns home from work, the mother recites duties. She does dutifully. When her mother dies, Peridita Mayo speaks at the funeral in praise of her mother: "your Mama was too fine for you. Virgie too fine." (CS, 435) It seems she voices what the community thinks of her.

Generally, in Welty's stories, the daughters who long for freedom from parental love get freedom after their parents' death. Virgie is freed after her mother's death. After her death she has decided to leave Morgana when someone asks, "you staying on in Morgana?", she answers: "Going away in the morning." The narrator adds that "Virgie said nothing more, she had decided to leave when she heard herself say, so -

decided by ear." (CS, 450)When Snowdie is duped by King Mac Lain, she gives birth to twins. Unlike some of the other mother characters of Welty, Snowdie with her traditional background tries to establish an ideal home with her children and waits for King's return.

Welty's mother characters are traditional- minded and protect their daughters from male assaults. They shower their love and concern on their daughters. She also depicts the daughters' characters that defy their mothers order, wisdom and go in search of identity and remain as wanderers, mostly as failures.

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