

Reading the Gospel of Bakes *Daughters' Representations of*

BY DANNABANG KUWABONG

It is through mother-daughter bonding that Africaribbean women develop a feminist consciousness of struggle against the multiple oppressions that Black women face.

Dans cet article, l'auteure explore les représentations positives des mères afro-antillaises dans la poésie de Lorna Goodison et de Claire Harris et comment ces représentations nous aident à comprendre sur quoi sont articulées les relations mères-filles à l'intérieur des paradigmes de la littérature afro-antillaise.

Caribbean women's writing deals with a multiplicity of issues that include the struggle against sexism, mother-daughter relationships, and female bonding (see Mordecai and Wilson). As Laura Niesen de Abruna summarized, Caribbean

women's writing "focuse[s] on [the] emotional interdependence of mothers and daughters, granddaughters and grandmothers, friends and sisters" (259). Rhonda Cobham and Merle Hodge write:

Their perspectives ... repeatedly ... [show] a sense of sisterly solidarity with mother figures, whose strengths and frailties assume new significance for daughters now faced with the challenge of raising children and/or achieving artistic recognition. (6)

The mother-daughter relationship, therefore, is central to the development of identity and voice among Africaribbean women. It is through mother-daughter bonding that Africaribbean women develop a collaborative feminist consciousness of struggle against the multiple oppressions that Black women face. The centrality of mother-daughter bonding in the lives of Africaribbean women is thus one of the most traversed territories by Africaribbean women poets in their search for voice and space to articulate their individual and collective personhoods (see Abruna). In this article, I explore the positive representations of Africaribbean mothers by Lorna Goodison and Claire Harris in their poetry, and how these representations help us to understand the articulation of mother-daughter relationship within Africaribbean literary paradigms.

As Vivien Nice in *Mothers and Daughters* argues, Afrisporic daughters generally see their relationship with

their mothers in very positive and empowering ways. Gloria Joseph has also written that in spite of Afrisporic mothers' inability to provide their daughters with the physical image of the ideal mother, Afrisporic daughters love and admire their mothers to no measure. Alice Walker states that

It is not my child who tells me: I have no femaleness white women must affirm ... purged my face from history and herstory.... We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, *sisters really*, against whatever denies us all that we are. (75)

The mother-daughter relationship read this way then tells us that Afrisporic daughters aim for complete identification with the mother from which Euro-American daughters try to escape (Rich 235-6). This desire for identification with one's mother becomes the nurturing ground for resistance to a system which has persistently been used to construct, interpret, devalue, and victimize Afrisporic womanhood. In this case, Afrisporic daughters link up with their oppressed mothers to seek sites of collective survival. The representation of mothers in the poetry of Harris and Goodison is contextualized within the historical acts of trying to achieve a balance between survival and a transcendence over psycho-social and economic limitations. As Nice has pointed out, any discussion of the role of mother-daughter relationship "as central to the development of gender identities ... cannot exist in a social vacuum" (110). In a similar vein, Janice Lee Liddell contends that Africaribbean women accord the mother-daughter relationship a centrality because of the pivotal image of the mother in the consciousness of Africaribbean children, and much more so, among daughters. She writes that "the image of the mother" is that of "giver and nurturer of life; teacher and instiller of values and mores" (321).

Thus, whether in Africa, or among diasporic Africans, as Jane Bryce-Okunlola rightly contends, motherhood, and by extension the mother-daughter relationship, is a site of struggle. In this struggle, mothers and daughters make use of the privileges accorded motherhood to counterbalance the restrictions imposed on women by males. Consequently, daughters in Afrisporic societies receive from their mothers the survival spirits of "self-reliance, independence, assertiveness, and strength ... which are passed on to Black girls at a very early age" (Nice 68).

These arguments, however, tend to be limiting in the

Mothers in the Poetry of Claire Harris and Lorna Goodison

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figure in Afrisporic literatures, and its effects on Africaribbean femininity. The matriarch's reputed power and dominance over men, Senior contends, are nullified in the light of the reality of Africaribbean gender and socio-economic relations. Senior writes that while younger women "nowadays voluntarily choose single parenthood and household headship, for the older women there is usually no choice; the role is foisted on them by circumstances" (102). Senior's research yields the fact that on the whole these female households are "poor, black, uneducated and in the worst paid and lowest status jobs. It is these women who are truly working miracles, in ensuring at least the survival, and sometimes the advancement, of their families" (102).

While on one hand, Senior's research on motherhood concludes that "childbearing is one of the few areas in the lives of Caribbean women that is not surrounded by ambivalence. There is an almost universal impulse to mothering ..." (66); on the other hand, Senior discovers that motherhood is also an oppressive expectation to some. For instance, Africaribbean women may actually be socially pressured to become mothers early, even when they may otherwise would have loved to pursue a career, as Harris' mother, in a poem tells the young Harris. What is worthy of note at this juncture is Goodison's and Harris' graduation from daughterly positionalities that enable them to positively depict their mothers in order to construct authoritative foundations on which to articulate

way they overromanticize and essentialize Afrisporic motherhood. Thus, Liddell and Worsham all argue for a more objective and critical examination of the mother-daughter relationship that goes beyond these strong positive representations of Afrisporic mothers by overgrateful daughters. This, they argue persuasively, will lead us toward a praxis of exploring the often ambivalent nature of those relationships (Nice).

This position is strengthened by Olive Senior's sociological research into the pervasive myth of Africaribbean matriarchy, the genesis of the positive mother

their own individual identities as creative writers—an activity that is associated with mothering.

Marianne Hirsch explicates the feelings that influence the way Afrisporic daughters shape the portraits of their mothers. These feelings are governed by a "tremendously powerful need to present to the public a positive image of black womanhood" (417). This tendency to publicly celebrate "maternal presence and influence" (416), Hirsch argues, results in

portrayals of strong and powerful mothers, on the one hand, combined with the relative absence of fathers, on the other, [which] makes this [a] uniquely female tradition ... in which to explore issues of maternal presence and absence, speech and silence. (416)

In Goodison's *Tamarind Season* (1977), and *I Am Becoming My Mother* (1986), the category of issues problematically referred to as woman's issues—daughterhood, motherhood, heterosexual relationships, patriarchy, and her personal doubts about her vocation as a poet—help define her relationship to her mother. These issues, far from being contentious borders between mother and daughter, rather are the bonds that unite them umbilically in a family of sisters, mothers, grandmothers, granddaughters, and daughters. These issues do not know class or generational boundaries. As a daughter, Goodison identifies with her mother through these issues since she too, like her mother, will experience these biological and social constructs of her womanhood. In addition to these corporeal realities that engage Goodison's treatment of the mother-daughter relationship, she explores similarities and historical linkages between her subordinate position as a woman in Caribbean society today, and the historical silencing and colonization of her African great-grandmother in *I Am Becoming My Mother*. She cannot separate her own desire to break the cages of silence caused by patriarchy and racism from the struggles of her foremothers that have nurtured and tutored her. Just as women in most societies were, and are still today subordinated and oppressed by patriarchal structures, so was her great-grandmother:

They forbade great grandmother
guinea woman presence
they washed away her scent
.....

controlled the child's antelope walk
and called her uprisings rebellions. (39)

Paradoxically, these attempts at erasure only prove further that no amount of indoctrination, denial, and renaming of Africaribbean women by patriarchal Europe can stop an uprising of African femininity in Africaribbean women through the ghosts of their African foremothers.

Subsequently, Goodison establishes an empowering uterine relationship with her great-grandmother. This prepares the framework for the positive view she has of her mother. In re-establishing the validity of her African identity through the uterus Goodison, like Harris, seeks a spiritual, racial, and gender re-energization of the self. Her act is a political statement of defiance against racism and patriarchy. It reestablishes her great-grandmother, and therefore, all Africaribbean mothers and daughters in prominence in the process of social and racial reconstruction:

But, great grandmother
I see your features blood dark
appearing
in the children of each new
breeding
the high yellow brown
is darkening down.
Listen, children
it's great grandmother's turn. (40)

Thus, Goodison's spirited acceptance of the uprising of the great-grandmother's blood/age/spirit in her legitimizes and gives a moral agency to her recovery rhetoric.

Goodison's celebration of the great-grandmother's ghostly presence in spite of centuries of negation, is symbolic of and gives credence to what Carole Boyce Davies calls Black women's "uprising textualities" (80). Davies' term suggests a re-reading of female texts produced by women in places like the Caribbean and Africa. These societies, which she describes as neo-colonial and patriarchal in structures, are far different from the settler, post-colonial societies in the outposts such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. As a consequence, she argues that female texts from these neo-colonial societies, even if they critique empire and patriarchy, nevertheless are still absent in the formulations of post-coloniality. This implies that they are also absent from canonical formulations of mother-daughter relationships. Davies concludes that their work should be seen more as uprising textualities, rather than as post-colonial texts.

Goodison's celebration of her great-grandmother's ghostly presence as a source of inspiration, differs slightly from Harris' protagonist's desire in *Drawing Down a Daughter* to repudiate the mistakes of her child's grandmother. I must sound some caution here though. The pregnant woman does not reject the mother as a good mother, and indeed dreams and yearns for an eternal connection between her and her dead mother. It is the

mother's silence in the face of intolerable suffering and provocation from socio-economic and gender inequities that the daughter seeks to avoid. The pregnant heroine in *Drawing Down a Daughter*, remembers the silent struggles of her mother to raise them, and uses this remembering as a lesson in survival for her own daughter to be:

Girl i'm not going to make your grandmother's
mistakes no no
i'm going to make a whole
new bunch of my own
the most we can hope
kid is primal mesh
occasionally take it from me daughterhood expert (32)

The woman in this poem has experienced what it means to be a daughter to a woman who suffered a lot in silence. What Harris' speaker is conveying to her daughter-to-be is that every daughter is related to the mother umbilically, but every daughter must seek out her own space, and world in which to create an individuality, a separate personhood. The woman refers to herself as a daughterhood expert because she took lessons from her mother on the quality of dreams and reality. In the "gospel of bakes" where the daughter, who is soon to be mother, learns from her mother the art of making bakes, floats, acra, pilau, "callaloo with crab and salt pork barefoot rice rich black cake cassava pone" (44), she is accused of being a dreamer by an outsider. The mother responds by saying that the interlocutor should let the daughter "dream while she can" (46). The mother understands the need for the daughter to have dreams, dreams of a better life than hers. This is the same message the pregnant woman is conveying to her unborn daughter.

Harris demonstrates the positive, nourishing, and validating relationship between mother and daughter in a genetic cycle and circle of past (grandmother), present (daughter), future (unborn daughter/granddaughter). So, even where the daughter's "bakes" do not come out round, the mother is there to help. The art of baking a perfectly rounded cake (against all odds), is a metaphor for negotiating the intricacies of life dominated by patriarchy. The cake, a porous amalgam of different ingredients that comes to perfection after passing through fire, is analogous to the multiple oppressions that create the personhood of the Africaribbean woman—a personhood that is not categorizable, but is constantly negotiating new sites of resistance to oppression. In this negotiation, mother and daughter need each other: "together they cover her bakes with a wet cloth / when the oven is ready her mother will test the heat / sprinkling water on a thin sheet" (47). Throughout the session, the mother instructs the daughter on how to do things to satisfy her father and society's expectations of what the ideal woman, based on Euro-American ideologies, should be—a good manager of the household. She nonetheless allows the child some room for creativity. It is this leverage that will later provide the

daughter with her ability to survive imaginatively—against all odds.

The Africaribbean daughter's concept of the ideal mother is further ritualized in Goodison's *I Am Becoming My Mother* and in Harris' *The Conception of Winter*, where they engage extended metaphors to eulogize Africaribbean motherhood and demonstrate a spirit of gratitude from daughters to mothers. For instance, in *I Am Becoming My Mother*, Goodison explores the implications of motherhood/womanhood in the Caribbean including: what it is to be of mixed race and a female, what motherhood means in her context, and what a warrior-poet who is female can do? In "For My Mother ..." (*Tamarind Season; I Am Becoming My Mother*) then, Goodison rejects the construct of the Africaribbean woman as a happy, smiling, but no-nonsense powerful matriarch. As I have indicated earlier on, this stereotypical objectification of the Africaribbean woman, be it in North America or in the Caribbean, has been deliberately constructed as a site for silencing, abusing, and oppressing "Afrisporic" women (Collins). In "For My Mother ..." then, Goodison situates the mother between the mammy and the matriarch. Her interpretation of motherhood may not strictly have been constructed by slavetocracy, but it nevertheless is situated within patriarchy and the peculiarities of Africaribbean history, dipped in the experience of slavery, colonialism, and neo-globalist European and North American cultural neo-imperialism.

This implies that even when the Africaribbean daughter's postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist consciousness and ideology occasionally set her against her mother's apparent accommodationist conservatism, there is still a great pull to define the mother positively. This is the case in both Harris' and Goodison's maternal narratives in which they, as daughters, appear to be defining "[themselves] in opposition to and not in imitation of the maternal figure" (417), when in reality what they are doing is exposing and rejecting the circumstances under which their mothers struggled to bring them up. This way, the mother is seen more as heroic victim than as willing martyr and, therefore, to be empathized with. Goodison writes:

When I came to know my mother many years later,
I knew her as the figure
who sat at the first thing I learned to read: "SINGER,"
and she breast-fed
my brother while she sewed; and she taught us to read
while she sewed and
she sat in judgement over all our disputes as she
sewed.
She could work miracles, she would make a garment
from a square of cloth
in a span that defied time. Or feed twenty people on
a stew made from
fallen-from-the-head cabbage leaves and a carrot and
a cho-cho and a palmful
of meat.

And she rose early and sent us clean into the world
and she went to bed in
the dark, for my father came in always last.
(*I Am Becoming My Mother* 47–48)

The mother image portrayed here, if not that of a superwoman, is definitely a configuration of an all-resourceful, never-weary, society-automated Africaribbean woman, who performs the role of a super mother as the long lines, and the staccato repetitiveness suggest. However, in objectifying and celebrating the mother in such hyperbole, Goodison veers toward desexing, dehumanizing, and desocializing the mother, and transforming her into that indefatigable and emotionless machine that Nichols problematizes. Nichols rejects this type of romantic over-representation of Africaribbean women. She sees it as an interiorization of the stereotype of the "long-suffering black woman" who is so strong that she can carry whatever is heaped upon her" (284), and advocates its rejection. Fortunately, Goodison saves the mother from death by stereotype as the mother shows human emotion and sheds tears because she loved her "wayward husband." She breaks down in tears and cries "For her hands grown coarse with raising nine children / for her body for twenty years permanently fat / ... / and for the pain she bore with the eyes of a queen" (*I Am Becoming My Mother* 48).

Similarly in Harris's celebration of her mother in "A Grammar of the Heart" in *The Conception of Winter*, we find the same type of eulogy. In Harris's poem the same strangulating silence of the mother that Goodison talks about. The mother's suffering begins at age eight when she loses brothers and sisters. From then on Harris writes:

deathbeds have become her womb from her first
husband's at twenty she birthed grief in black veils
and in honey then her father died she drew from
the hollow of that death the modern bread winner
and so fashionable she laughed often was young
her mother died she shed the daughter became wife
once more and finally ... [she] ravelling and ravel-
ling her silence
Thus she turned away from us all
retired to her own womb. (54–55)

The mother's days are of course not all filled with suffering. Nonetheless, her internal struggles, never vocalized, are devastating to the children. But as the poem testifies, the mother's silence does not indicate a lack of love and nurturing relationship between the poet-daughter and the silent mother. Indeed, as the poem goes on to show, the mother's silence is a sacrifice to enable her daughters and other children to have speech.

The mother's silence makes it impossible for the children to know her pain and empathize with her. But the silence paradoxically enables the daughter in her frustration, to enter into the mother's world of resistance to the violence of words, to patriarchy. In that womb of silence

it is revealed to the daughter that the mother's silence is not the absence of words, but a strategy of resistance against the violent words of the father. In the mother's silence, the power of the word is held at bay, frustrated, and denied of any authority. It is here the daughter epiphanically realizes that the mother's silence enables her on several occasions to win battles against the storming verbosity of the father: "young and laughing I remember how silence / rewarded you my father storming round / your silence then giving in" (66). Also, the death of the mother, which is a bigger silence, does not indicate a break in mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, the dead mother is closest to both daughter and granddaughter now that she has become an ancestral spirit in the Africaribbean pantheon. As a spirit, she is able to communicate much more effectively to her progeny via dreams and visions in an exclusive female sphere of human relations.

In an incantatory and ritualized mode and mood, Harris, much like Goodison, also chants a litany of numerous activities that the mother engages in order to satisfy her children, and fulfill the role society has prescribed for her class and racial location within a Caribbean culturescape:

To sketch
 one who discarded
 words with words

 she was a woman who thought herself unwatched
 her heart secret around the first grief she
 moved through life as if she wasn't there (54-55)

In spite of all the positives that Harris etches on the mother's tombstone, she nevertheless states that she could not be like her, and does not even wish to be like her. Such a resistance also means a refusal to make permanent choices in life. For example, the daughter rejects the mother's request to choose from a rainbow of ribbons for her parted hair. This refusal to choose is symbolic of the daughter's liberated consciousness that sees that the choice of any permanent position blocks off other possibilities and individuality:

My mother her fingers part my hair
 make four neat plaits that dovetail on each side
 become one that is crossed and pinned

She holds out a rainbow of ribbons says
 choose one ribbons hanging from her fingers
 like paths how can I choose when any choice
 means a giving up ...
 (*Travelling to Find a Remedy* 37)

The daughter's decision here is not to be confused with Rich's idea of "matrophobia." Rather, the hair is a metaphor which Harris uses, not only to insist on the overlapping differences and similarities between mother and daughter, but also as a site to critique the stereotypes that

her foremothers have been forced to accept from society in relation to Africaribbean female beauty. So, even though society insists she resembles her mother and should strive to be like her, the daughter rejects the proposition. Her position is a fulfillment of and living out the mother's instructions to her. The mother has instilled in her daughter a philosophy that negates any desire in the daughter to want to be in the same lowly, backbreaking position. Thus, she teaches the daughter: "a woman must have a profession / that way you aren't dependent on any man" (59) and "once she said a woman's choice limited / must be quick and sure" (64). We should not rush to conclude that this is an example of mother-hating merely because the speaker refuses to be like her generic Africaribbean mother and spends "hours before the mirror / training my mouth to be different" (31), learning newer ways of refusing the mother's alternative gift of the chalice of silent suffering. The memory of "the mother still remains as the central frame in the discovery of selfhood" (Rahim 280).

Similar then to Goodison's great-grandmother's uprising ghost who manifests her presence in the great-granddaughter's rebellious spirit, Harris's protagonist's mother's ghost in *Drawing Down a Daughter* is ever present, and therefore, with the unborn daughter. "I find her my mother waiting at the window in grey and lilac flowers I remember from childhood ..." (7). Later in the poem there is the description of the unbreakable connection/bond between mother, daughter, granddaughter. The daughter in *The Conception of Winter* who laments the death of her mother is herself about to become a mother. In becoming a mother, she is, as Goodison puts it, becoming her mother: (1) she is giving birth to herself in her daughter; (2) biological, she most resembles her own mother now in the art of reproduction and continuity; and (3) she now comprehends the motherhood/daughterhood jinx. As Rich testifies, "the experience of giving birth stirs deep reverberation of her mother in a daughter; women often dream of their mothers during pregnancy and labor" (221). That is why in that early section of the poem the pregnant woman dreams of her self by dreaming of the mother. Similarly, in dreaming of herself, she also dreams of her daughter. There is therefore a three generational bond existing in the body of the woman:

... dreaming the mother
 dreaming myself dreaming
 the mother dream
 potent as love
 or hate
 helpless as daughter

still and all for this your birthgift Child who
 opens me (*Drawing Down a Daughter* 8)

From the above, we cannot afford to be oblivious to both Harris' and Goodison's acute awareness of their mothers' bodies as sites of multiple mutilations and scars

of silences and oppression. Both poets end on a note that correlates to Nichols's stand against the suffocating discourse of SWTDTUBW—See *What They Done to Us Black Women*. While recognizing the history of slavery and racial oppression of Afrisporic females in the Caribbean, Nichols' position is based on the "danger of reducing the black woman's condition to that of 'sufferer,' whether at the hands of white society or at the hands of black men" (285), as such reductionist poetics completely deny the women any agency.

Based on this, I want to suggest that both Goodison's and Harris' identity poetics is ideologically both pro-motherhood and pro-self-creation. Indeed, what they practice together is "matersumegoism," where mater=mother, sum=am, and ego=I. "Matersumegoism" encapsulates all the multiple nuances of what it is for an Africaribbean daughter to "become her mother." To become one's mother, Edward Baugh writes, is to assume cumulative, repetitious, contradictory, and progressive "identifications or bonding[s] with the mother, with [the] female" heritage of suffering, resistance, and transcendence over fixities. This identification "translates into a revelatory consciousness that paradoxically engenders the individuation so crucial to post-modern and post-colonial identity polemics" (2). In *I Am Becoming My Mother*, and *Drawing Down a Daughter* both Goodison and Harris then assume the spirits of their mothers as daughters, as women, as wives, as mothers, in the life cycle. Furthermore, Baugh has pointed out that to become one's mother implies two identities: (1) constructing a self-identity within the limits of a patriarchally constructed gender role for women; (2) taking after the mother, assuming the mother's roles and identities in a mimetic kind of way. What Baugh fails to include in his perceptive reading is the eternal process of female bonding that mothering engenders through the mother-daughter relationship. A bonding that Harris finds problematic but nevertheless nourishing in *Drawing Down a Daughter*.

In celebrating their mothers, therefore, Goodison and Harris set the tone for a revisionist historical narrative that recovers and redeems all those Africaribbean women who were/are vilified by patriarchal historiographers, but who in Black women's memory stand tall as liberators. In *I Am Becoming My Mother*, and in both *The Conception of Winter* and *Drawing Down a Daughter*, therefore, both Goodison and Harris engage a recovery poetic of mother representation which is not situated in any abstract word play, or from the comforts of a middle/upper-class location, but through umbilical reunification to their hardworking Africaribbean mothers. Harris and Goodison demonstrate the positive nurturing bonds that exist between Africaribbean mothers and daughters, bonds that unite their different strategies of resistance against oppression of Africaribbean women. These bonds are realistic and not developed from a romantic idealization of the mothers. This creates the good working relationship of love and mutual understanding between daughters and

mothers as articulated in the poems. The daughters, who are now adults and mothers themselves now, pass on to the new generation of daughters the lessons of survival in a hostile world they learnt from their mothers:

... O Girl all you can do is best
you ain't God all you can do is best
and you don't learn to swim by
swimming against the current all you learn
so is how to drown (77)

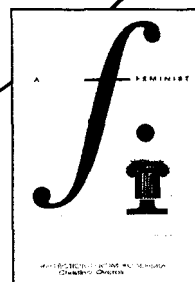
In concluding, I want to suggest that Goodison and Harris in celebrating their mothers, have joined the chorus of other Africaribbean women poets such as Audre Lorde, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Jamaica Kincaid, Erna Brodber, Dionne Brand, Cynthia James, and many others, in their creation of revisionist historical and cultural narratives to reclaim and redeem all Africaribbean mothers. The mothers who are celebrated here by Goodison and Harris are icons in Africaribbean female liberation. These mothers are ordinary hardworking women thrust into the responsibilities of raising their daughters. The daughters celebrate that spirit of resistance and survival which their mothers passed on to them and which by their act of celebration, they as daughters, are passing on to the next generation of Africaribbean daughters. In their writing, both Goodison and Harris celebrate and contribute to the feminist ideal of matriarchy which had defined their foremothers struggles against dehumanization in slavery, colonialism, and racism, and are ensuring the survival of themselves and their daughters. In this, Goodison and Harris join other Africaribbean daughters who see and represent their mothers and themselves as unique individuals within a historical and cultural continuity and community of pan-African women.

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- DISCOVER** assessment tools and techniques
- VISIT** exhibit booths and discover new products and services
- NETWORK** with speakers and colleagues
- ORGANIZE** your own round-table discussion

REGISTRATION FEES (TAXES INCLUDED)

Full registration by	
Friday, 7 December 1998	\$190
Full registration	\$230
Full-time student (1 or 3 days)	\$ 80
Daily registration	\$ 96

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