My Mexican Mother and I: Un Reflejo de Nuestra Relación

I

According to Google, “mother” is a noun used to describe, “a woman in relation to her child or children” and also a verb meaning, “to bring up a child with care and affection.” The word comes from the word, “modor”, in Old English and that originates from the Latin word, “mater,” which means, “nourishing mother.”

For me, “mother” means the woman who has sacrificed herself to raise me, empower me, and hurt me. This definition originates from my own experience with my immigrant mother.

II

I am taking a break from studying and listening to a Spanish news channel while sitting on my couch. The aroma of my favorite meal, arroz con pollo empanizado, fills the air as my mom cooks in the kitchen. The TV channel switches to a group of older men discussing how lazy the new generation of Latina women born in America are. I hear my mom washing her hands over the TV and I think she’s preparing herself to come here. I am right, here we go again.

She begins to speak and says, “especialmente las muchachas que no hacen lo que se les pide.” Especially the young ladies who don’t do as they are told. I ignore her. But she continues, “Estoy agradecida que mi dulce nina no sea asi.” I am thankful my sweet girl isn’t like that. As I look at my mother, I can’t help but feel sick hearing her words that hurt not just me, but her as well.

I say “Mama, no veo ninguna razón porque una mujer o una niña debe de cumplir con roles que “solo pertenecen” a una mujer.” I see no reason for a woman or young girl to fulfill roles that “only belong” for women.
As I stare at her, I began to think: I am aware my mom grew up in a traditional household, but as I see her work nine hour shifts in a plant nursery, wearing a bandana across her head that she can squeeze her sweat out of after a couple of hours, and still coming to a home where she’s supposed to be resting to instead have to cook for my father who will never understand either.

She looks at me with disappointment, as if I were someone else, a stranger in her daughter's body, and says “No puedo creer que pienses que un hombre va poder ser cosas de la casa.” *I can't believe you think a man is capable of doing house work.*

She pauses as the men on the TV laugh loudly. Then she continues, “Una mujer debe de saber su lugar y cuando te cases vas a saber la importancia.” *A woman should know her place and when you get married you’ll know the importance.* I finally just let it go and let her cool down by asking her if she needs help preparing dinner.

III

“The mother-daughter relationship in the Mexican-American culture: The daughter’s perspective” is a dissertation that deals with examining the mother-daughter relationship in Mexican American culture and focuses on the daughter’s perspective. Olga Vera conducted a qualitative study of eight Mexican-American daughters, using interviews to gather data on their experiences and perceptions of their relationships with their mothers. The study aims to examine ways in which cultural values and beliefs influence this relationship and how it impacts the development/identity of the daughters.

Vera explains that every mother-daughter relationship has two sides: the dynamic can be shaped by the attachment that develops between the individuals or by the conflict that arises when the daughter resists the cultural norms associated with her mother to being associated with
a mother who is unappreciated by her culture (34-35). Vera provided an example of this argument, that Frida Kalho showed her “ambivalence toward her mother” by describing her mother as, “both cruel and good” (35). This idea resonates with my personal experience, as my mother has instilled in me the values of her culture: caregiving, being a housewife, and motherhood, which I have followed dutifully even if I disagree with them. My mother has always stressed the importance of traditional gender roles which has contributed to our relationship dynamic. However, this has also led me to form an unhealthy attachment to my mother and has forced me to endure emotional pain, struggling to reconcile my own desires and beliefs with her expectations.

IV

I am staring at my ceiling contemplating my whole life. I just finished watching Lady Bird since it’s the weekend and have nothing else to do for school. The scene where Lady Bird tells her mother that she just wished she liked her and her mother replies with “Of course I love you” and Lady Bird replies with “But do you like me?”

I am interrupted by my mother beginning to make dinner. I am taking this interruption as a sign. I am marching out of my room with sudden determination. I want to ask her if she likes me but do I really want to know her answer? Will she think I’m stupid? Will she be disappointed in me for thinking this? Family is very important to her.

I approach my mother and she is staring at me with a “are you going to say something” look on her face. I am summoning all my courage so I finally ask, “Mami, te puedo preguntar algo?” Mom, can I ask you something?

“Yes but only if you help me cook.”

I ask her nervously, “Te gusto?” Do you like me?
“Como que si me gustas? Eres mi hija.” What do you mean if I like you? You’re my daughter.

“No te estoy preguntando así, contestame si te gusto como persona no… como hija.” I am not asking you like that, answer me if you like me as a person… not like your daughter. She’s just staring at me as if I spoke to her in English. What did I do? Did I mess up? I began feeling guilty.

“Daisy, estoy orgullosa de todos tus logros” Daisy, I am proud of all your accomplishments. I wait for her to say more but I am realizing that is all she had to say. I have to leave before she sees me with tears filling my eyes and I make the situation worse. I thank her for answering my question and make an excuse about forgetting an assignment. I am walking back to my room and I think to myself: Wow, how can she measure her love for me by my accomplishments? Is that all I am to her? Why did I even ask her? I knew she wouldn’t give me the answer I needed to hear. I am in sitting against my room door, on the wood flooring with tears flowing freely down my cheeks.

V

The memoir, A Cup of Water Under My Bed, written by Daisy Hernández included a quote by the author, Minal Hajratwala: “Perhaps only we of the next generation—raised among strangers, eating the fruits of our parents’ risks—can taste the true proportions of bitter to sweet” (8). Due to my mother’s sacrifices, I will continue to have a unique perspective on the world because I have seen her take risks and struggle but I have also enjoyed the benefits of her success. This quote made me think of my own mother’s journey to the United States and what she gained and lost in the process. Like Hernandez, my mother left home country behind, searching for a better life for her family. As a child, I never truly grasped the depth of sacrifice and hardship that came with that decision. But as I have gotten older, I have come to realize the
silent suffering my mother endured all alone. She never once had the luxury of childhood innocence, and the weight of her sacrifices was something she carried with her always. Despite all this, she raised three daughters who have made her tremendously proud and without her sacrifices, it couldn't have been possible.

Reading Hajratwala’s quote helped me understand the importance of holding onto our heritage, even as we are navigating through a new world. It made me appreciate my mother even more, and the courage it took her to risk everything for our family’s future. I may have a different perspective than my mother, but that will never mean her’s is less valid.

VI

I am sitting at my desk staring at math problems that seem to be written in a foreign language. I glance at my phone to see the time; it is 2:30am, but I feel like I have been sitting here for hours, maybe even fifteen, when it’s only been five. The soft white light from my desk lamp, which is on the lowest mode, is giving me a headache. Or maybe it’s because I have not had a meal since I got home from soccer practice. I am feeling guilty that now my thoughts are shifting to food and not studying for the SAT; it is coming up in two weeks. I hear a door close outside my room over the classical music playing on low volume, I’m not even sure if it’s helping at this point. My attention drifts to my door knob turning, and I am now seeing my mother who is in a pale pink nightgown with her eyes still heavy with sleep. In her hands, holding two colorful trays of some of my favorite fruits: grapes, cube sized mangos, sliced melón, and fresas con forma de corazón. Cantaloupe. Heart-shaped strawberries.

I ask her as I stand up to grab the trays, “Mami, porque estas despierta si vas a trabajar en unas horas.” *Mom, why are you awake if you’ll be going into work in a few hours.*
She replies with “escuche tu musica y me acorde que no saliste a cenar hace rato.” I heard your music and I remembered you didn’t come out to eat dinner.

I am filled with a sudden feeling of guilt from seeing her like this.

VII

During high school, my mother would always pack a gray container with fresh grapes and strawberries and an additional pink and purple container on top filled with granola. At the time she was doing this for me, I didn’t think much of it. To me, it was just a routine she had developed. It wasn’t until I graduated that I realized how significant this small gesture was.

I interviewed my mother and asked her why she did it. Her response was very clear and direct as she normally is: “Nada más para asegurarme que comiste, me preocupabas porque comías muy poquito” (Casas Ramirez). I just wanted to make sure you ate, I was worried about how little you ate. At first, the tone she used sounded a bit harsh to me but I chose to see the bigger picture. My mother’s gesture of making me breakfast every morning was her way of showing her love and care for me. My mother has never been a woman of too many words and maybe that was what I needed from her but I, too, had to make the effort to learn her love language.

VIII

Everything Everywhere All At Once is a movie directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. The movie is centered around a Chinese family who immigrated to the United States and owned a laundromat. The movie focuses on time and the multiverse. The overall theme was to accept that life has no inherent meaning and to be present in every moment but other subthemes were the toxic relationship between Evelyn (the mother) and Joy (the daughter) and how immigrant parents affect their children.
In the movie, there was a particular scene where Evelyn reconciles with Joy. Evelyn has just gotten out of the alternative universes she was in and was brought back to hers. They are outside where Joy parked her car and as Joy was ready to leave saying, “I’m tired, I don’t want to hurt anymore.” Evelyn follows her and says a list of all of Joy’s imperfections but ends it with, “I will always…always…want to be here with you” (Everything Everywhere, All At Once). This scene shows the harm done by growing up with immigrant parents, specifically mothers. Joy no longer wanted to be hurt by her mothers actions and words. It also serves as a reminder of how immigrant parents sacrifice a meaningful relationship in their struggle to give their children a “better” life.

On the first viewing (of many), a thought crossed my mind-“I am my mother’s daughter” - just as Joy is a reflection of Evelyn. And as Joy’s the reflection of both her mother’s virtues and flaws, I am the reflection of my mothers. Even when we watched this movie together, she couldn’t understand why I was crying even though we experienced moments where there were constant misunderstandings and a lack of desire to even understand. However, this movie was a reminder to myself that even though I can’t change my past with my mother, I can meet her halfway whenever she is ready to understand how much love we still have for each other aside from our differences.

IX

I am staring at my mother while she is laying on her bed. She made dinner for my father and uncle right after she got home from work. I see and smell that she just finished showering. Her curly brown hair with highlights are dripping water and it smells like her floral scented shampoo.
I say, “Mami tenemos que hablar,” with hesitation. *Mom, we need to talk.* I have been contemplating telling her the news from earlier that I received from the neurologist. I haven’t even told anyone that I had set up the appointment.

“Que paso, hija?” she replies while still looking at her phone. *What happened, daughter?* I can see the candy crush game reflection on her glasses. I quickly tell her to get off her phone because if I didn’t get this news out now then it would never come out.

As she is staring at me, I say “Mami fui al doctor hoy después de la escuela y no me dieron buenas noticias.” *Mom, I went to the doctors today after school and they didn’t tell me good news.*

“Como que fuiste al doctor?” “Que tienes Daisy?” “A que doctor fuiste?” *What do you mean by you went to the doctors? What’s wrong with you? What doctor did you go to?* She asks me all these questions not knowing that I could barely hold myself together. I am lost of words, how can I explain anything to her when I don’t even understand.

“Tengo un tumor, mami,” I finally say. *I have a tumor, mom.* She looks at me with disbelief as I am tearing up.

“Ven aqui,” she says as she signals me to lay down with her. *Come here.* She scratches my head like she used to when I was a kid. It was the only way I could fall asleep. I feel safe right now, I wish I could always feel like this. I know she is doing this because she has no words that will bring me comfort; that is the most comforting part. I cherish these moments knowing that they don’t last forever. I feel myself falling asleep while my lips are salty from my wet tears that are coming down my face.
Works Cited


*Everything Everywhere, All At Once.* Directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinart, Lionsgate, 2022.


*Lady Bird.* Directed by Greta Gerwig, A24, 2017


*ProQuest,*