

Mother-Daughter Relationship in Elizabeth Strout's *Amy and Isabelle*

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Abstract

Elizabeth Strout's born in Portland and brought up in small towns in Maine and New Hampshire is a renowned American novelist. Strout's first novel, *Amy and Isabelle* (1998) is a far-reaching tale of sundering of a mother and daughter. The novel was adapted into a movie starring Elisabeth Shue. *Amy and Isabelle* is a heart breaking story of a mother and daughter who live in the town of Shirley Falls, Maine. The principal characters of the novel are Amy, a sixteen year old, and her single mother Isabelle, a secretary at the local mill. *Amy and Isabelle* is an expressive, firmly attentive first novel, outlining the strong relationship of a mother and her teenage daughter. Strout exhibits remarkable balance, and an unprecedented capacity to render complex feelings with lucidity and a thoughtful insight. The present paper examines how a mother's protection towards her child begins from her womb and ends only when she reaches her tomb.

Key words: Mother-daughter complex feelings, protection, transition.

Mothers consider themselves as the creator and the caretaker of their children. They pay more attention to their daughter than their sons. There is a psychological reason for this attitude of over protecting the girl baby than the other gender. A mother's experiences of her past and the path she has crossed make a deep impact her mind. The mistakes that she has committed, crosses her mind whenever her daughter tries to explore something by herself. That is the reason behind all the mothers' restriction of their daughters.

After the death of Isabelle's mother, she undertakes a journey with Amy to the place named Shirley Falls. Isabelle requires a job to save her daughter and her own life. She hopes that Shirley Falls will be a rainbow to their colourless life. As a single mother, Isabelle finds her meaning of life in Amy. She tells an untrue story that her husband and parents were dead to the inhabitants of the town and renting the old Carne house on Route 22. Isabelle Goodrow gets work in Avery Clark's mill. She hesitates to make friends since she does not want to divulge her dark secrets to anyone. She does not have enemies either:

Since then she has been a muted presence in the town, living in a small rented house, raising her daughter Amy, operating out of an already dated belief system—that if a woman behaves decorously and presents herself pleasantly, she may

attract the affection of a good man and be saved from the bleakness of an independent life. (Anshaw 11)

Isabelle works diligently and raises herself as a personal secretary to Avery Clark. Isabelle's dark secrets make her think achingly about her daughter's life. Whenever Amy asks about her father Isabelle conceals the truth and tells that her father died soon after her birth. Isabelle conscientiously shuns Amy from knowing about her marital life. When life was going smooth for the mother and daughter, there comes an intruder Thomas Robertson, who is appointed as a mathematics teacher. He is short, strong, and has vigorous strength. Amy covets the company of Robertson. They begin to meet every day after the classes. The absence of male member in the life of Amy is the reason that she immediately gets enticed to Robertson. Robertson makes use of Amy's naivety and starts developing a relationship with her. He makes Amy to feel: "No one, it seemed, had even been this happy to see her, unless when she was very small and her mother had sometimes taken her to the mill; then the women would lean toward her and someone like Fat Bev would say, "How's my precious girl?" (92).

The state of Stacy, Amy's close friend who is pregnant by a lawless relationship and the flash news in channels and newspaper which informs that in Hennecock, a twelve-year-old girl Debby Kay Dorne is kidnapped from the house leaves Isabelle aghast. Isabelle empathizes for the girl Debby and her parents. The news increases the agitation and anxiety of Isabelle. So Isabelle reaches her house earlier and finds the house locked, she searches for Amy in the bedroom and bathroom, but in vain. Isabelle remembers the news of the young girl named Debby and how the farm dog recovered the girl's body in the field. So, Isabelle imagines and fears that her daughter is kidnapped by someone. Out of a rage and anxiety Isabelle thinks that her daughter would be kidnapped or be attacked by a ghost. Amy comes home and cheats Isabelle that she had some work. Isabelle demands Amy to know the truth. Isabelle's love towards her daughter makes her eyes wet and cheeks pink. Amy fools her mother and does not give importance to the parental fear and care.

The intimacy of Amy and Mr. Robertson in the car is seen by Avery Clark and he informs this to Isabelle. The relationship with Robertson makes Amy to feel about her mother. She wants her mother to be:

... a different mother. She wanted a mother who was pretty, who greeted people warmly. She wanted a mother who looked like mothers in television ads, who mopped large glistening kitchen floors, kissed husbands returning from work, lived in houses with other houses nearby and neighbors running in and out-she did not want the mother stuck out here in the woods in this little place. (96)

Isabelle endures the pain inside her heart without questioning her daughter about her conduct. Amy does not have any perturbation about her mother's silence. She has her own worries to deal with and she hopes to meet Robertson to know why he is ignoring her. Silence revolves around them, and Mr. Robertson breaks the silence by letting her know that he is married and his wife has left him after knowing their relationship. The anxiety of Isabelle is that her daughter should keep herself safe from the devilish society. Isabelle thinks of sending her daughter to live with her cousin, Cindy Rae. But Isabelle drops the plan since she should give a valid reason for sending Amy. Isabelle cannot even imagine what Avery has informed her. She does not believe that her daughter will behave in such a way:

Still, Isabelle didn't get it right away. She didn't get the whole thing right away. In her mind something terrible had happened to Amy *that day*. Isabelle did not comprehend the full implication of what must have happened in that day before, or even thought of what still happens in the days to come; she was filled with the queasiness of the moment. (158)

At last Isabelle fixes her mind to ask Amy. Isabelle raises questions but Amy maintains silence. Isabelle loses her temper and raises her voice: "When a man drives a girl out into the woods and makes her-when he makes her do certain things" (158). Amy could not answer for her mother's question. Though after certain age, a mother accepts her daughter as her friend, she will never disclose the dark secrets of her life. Two things stop her from sharing this to her offspring; one is the fear of spoiling her own image in the daughter's mind and the second is, there is a greater chance of the daughter to respond, in a negative way. She may question that why she is not allowed to take her liberty, when the mother had take it.

Isabelle in a calm nod points out that a man like Robertson is a trouble. "He doesn't care for you. That kind of man never does. He says he cares for you because he wants what he wants" (161). No theory on pragmatism can destroy the passion flows during the adolescence. Amy turns her face suddenly and says loudly that he is good. Amy shouts at her mother that she did not know anything except *Readers Digest* and that she never went to movies. Isabelle cannot bear things from Amy "You have no idea what it has been like raising a child on my own" (162). And she claims that Amy's birth is given by an illegal relationship with Jack Cunningham, Isabelle's father's friend. Isabelle develops a surreptitious relationship with Jack Cunningham and she becomes pregnant. Jack leaves Isabelle and refuses to take the responsibility. Isabelle's dream of becoming a teacher gets shattered by her desire for low pleasure. Evelyn Cunningham knows everything but accepts to live with Jack Cunningham. After the death of Jack Cunningham, along with her children she moves to California and continues the roofing business that Jack was doing. The breaking of the secret silenced the house Isabelle and Amy.

Isabelle warns Robertson to leave town on the next day. Isabelle is too furious and she is even ready to kill him. "You have taken a very, very innocent girl and put your handprint on her forever" (167). Amy informs all about her mother to Robertson. He mocks at Isabelle and she leaves the house of Robertson with rage. Isabelle reaches home and with full of force and anguish, she cuts off Amy's hair. Isabelle wants to cut off her own hair, to cut bedspread and cloth. She wants her to be dead and her daughter to be dead. Later, Isabelle feels sorry for her behavior towards her daughter:

The hot day passed. When she glanced at her daughter across the tired office room (the girl sitting hunched over the adding machine, her skinny neck, white as paper, seeming so long), Isabelle's eyes would fill with abrupt hot tears and she would want to run across the room and throw her arms around the girl's neck, to press the pale face against her own, and say, Amy, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Amy. (180)

Isabelle writes to Evelyn Cunningham and receives a letter from Evelyn Cunningham apologising for her late reply. Evelyn Cunningham invites Isabelle and Amy for the baptism of her daughter Catherine's baby who lives in New England, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Amy

who has thought that she has no relations eagerly waits to see her sister and brother. It is the nature of the human mind to explore everything practically. Though people tend to read and listen to the experienced people's tale of success and failures, they never stop their quest until they themselves try it. Even the mother of mankind, God's own creation Eve is not exempted from this tendency. No fearful word of God came to her mind when she ate the forbidden fruit. The desire for self-experience, cannot allow anyone to follow the already experienced people's precepts and principles. Amy and Isabelle reach the place where Evelyn Cunningham's family visits for baptism. Isabelle suddenly remembers about Amy and Robertson's behavior in the car and the terrific hair cut. Now she begins to feel that the girl is leaving forever:

For years Isabelle would remember that moment and wish she had spoken, had told the girl she loved her and always would, because for Isabelle, as she pulled out onto the highway, it began to feel more and more that it was Amy who was blasting off, Amy who was leaving forever, that Isabelle was only there now to pilot the ship, deliver the girl into the lap of her family, of siblings, of relatives who were hers, not Isabelle's. (304)

Isabelle does not leave Amy in the hands of any relatives or a friend's house even at the times of struggle. But for ever she leaves Amy, her lovely daughter in the hands of her father's family. Isabelle gives prime importance to safety rather than her love towards her daughter and the separation. Isabelle's day passes without Amy. Avery Clark dies of a heart attack. Isabelle marries a kind pharmacist and leaves him after a short time. The self satisfies only when it does all by itself. It allows bonding but it cannot be bound by anything. A woman learns and relearns. She has constant hope that someone will understand her and she will get her desired life. That is why she again and again trusts a man after man and finally realises that she alone can help herself.

Amy's memories are un-erasable in Isabelle's life even though she moves to different places. Her moments are surrounded with silence and she constantly repeats the word Amy in her daily prayers. A mother fails to see her daughter as an individual and connects her always with her life. She strongly believes that she is the guardian angel for her daughter and interferes in all her matters. Though everything in the world has been changing, a mother's heart is forever the same. Centuries may roll, but nothing can change a mother's role. A mother is always possessive towards her daughter and this she will not express openly. One cannot comprehend this nature of a mother. Deep down in her heart, she considers her daughter as her own possession. Without her own knowledge, she controls her daughter in all the ways. Isabelle at the end understands the transition of her daughter is a natural propensity and thus, frees herself and her daughter simultaneously.

Works Cited

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