

O mother, where art
thou?: parental
absence in literatures
of conflict



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Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* and Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* both present the larger conflicts of a country through the voice of a single protagonist. The violence plaguing the lands of both Northern Ireland and South Africa in the late 1900's situate the reader in the reality of each country, and through fictional characters, the authors portray the effects of conflict on the individual. In *Mother to Mother*, Magona recreates the circumstances that black South Africans grew up in, highlighting how the education system, separation from original community, and likelihood of teenage parenthood come together to inevitably create a brew for violence. Mandisa's pregnancy at a young age puts a huge strain on her relationship with her traditional, religious family as well as teenage boyfriend, China, as they are forced into a loveless marriage. The subsequent abandonment of her and her child by China plays a huge role in Mxolisi's upbringing, and this lack of parental presence, albeit only one part of the problem, directly leads to Mxolisi's active engagement with the violent youth that occupy the townships. Similarly in *Cal*, the reader notices how familial dynamics can come together to negatively influence a child. Cal's mother having died when he was only eight, and his ensuing strained relationship with his father take huge tolls on Cal's psyche, making him isolated and emotionally detached from not only his father, but also society at large. Lacking any strong parental guidance, Cal, just like Mxolisi, is easily influenced by his friends and his surroundings, and eventually starts committing crimes for the IRA. If either character had both parents in their lives, things might have been different, but their tragic childhoods and the absence of proper parental direction causes a ripple effect in each young man's life, ultimately leading them down a path of violence.

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The familial trauma that took place at a young age in both Cal and Mxolisi's life is easily discernable to the reader, and are huge factors in each boys' psychological development. For example, following the sudden departure of China from Mandisa and Mxolisi's life, and the murder of his two childhood friends by the police, Mxolisi stays silent for nearly two years, " and when he did speak again, it was to ask me a question to which I had no answer...Uph'owam utata? Where is my own father? (Magona 159). Growing up in the face of heavy police brutality and not knowing life with his father shape Mxolisi's view of the world, causing him to become taciturn as well as a rebellious spirit. Mandisa recognizes how these variables came together to create " a long, hard road" for her son, one that stretched " long, lean, mean, and empty" (Magona 3, 203). Elaborating on the origins of his detached, disaffected state, she goes on to explain " he had already seen his tomorrows; in the defeated stoop of his father's shoulders" (Magona 203). Living within the apartheid system, he sees his future painted before his very own eyes through the lives of his parents. Mxolisi, just like the " three- and four-year-olds as well as older children, roaming the streets of Guguletu with nothing to do all day long" (Magona 199), all lack a central authority figure in their daily lives and therefore have no one around to urge them to succeed school or stay out of trouble. In an article entitled " Community of the Careless," Anthony Barker sustains that " Deprived of their natural guides, children of migrants grow through an insecure, uncertain childhood to an adult life whose sole preoccupation may be to escape the system. There must be a harvest of aggression, with the weeds of violence growing rank within it" (qtd. in UNICEF 51). The novel reveals how absentee parenthood, which Mandisa and by extension all other adults in the townships must

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endure as working parents in the Apartheid system, is linked directly to raising the “ monsters [their] children have become” (Magona 2). Although Mandisa in no way excuses her son’s murderous actions, her narrative seeks to highlight the ways in which Mxolisi’s upbringing inevitably led him astray, and made Amy Diehl’s murder possible.

Magona illustrates in *Mother to Mother* just how the Apartheid regime separated parents from their children through the enforced migratory labor systems. The novel represents how, posed with significant challenges, life in the townships breeds familial disorganization. She herself notes in an interview with Kari Miller, “ Children need both parents. We don’t have that. We have single parents...Today you just have a generation of men who don’t have role models, whose parents were never together” (Miller 4). As both parents had to work far away from the townships in order to sustain a living, the familial structure became disrupted, and children were often left unattended, which in turn had a devastating effect on their individual well-being. In a report by UNICEF studying the impact of Apartheid, it states, “ parents, whether living together under the intense pressures of survival in the townships or separated for most of the time by the requirements of migratory labour system, have problems relating to each other in a way that binds them together as a unit of mutual support, both as partners and as parents” (UNICEF 50-51). Within the novel, Mandisa is well-aware of how her work prevents her from being a hands-on mother, and is wracked with guilt when seeing the negative effects of it on her children. She expresses “ as a mother, I’m supposed to have authority over my children, over the running of my house. Never mind that I’m never there.. The children do pretty much

as they please. And get away with it too” (Magona 9). The children essentially raise themselves in an environment lacking discipline and stability, and although they do have an authority figure in Dwadwa, who “ is good to...all three children,” Mandisa knows that, given his traumatic early childhood, “ it is not his fault that Mxolisi is so disobedient” (Magona 71). Devoid of a patriarchal figure as a child, in combination with Mandisa’s daytime absence, Mxolisi’s peers become his only source of reference, and coupled with the pervading violence in the townships, contribute to his downfall.

Likewise, Cal’s surroundings and home life also lead to his somewhat willing involvement in the Northern Ireland violence. Haunted by his mother’s death, he lives alone with his father, Shamie, trying to cope as Catholics in an all Protestant neighborhood during The Troubles. The novel uses flashbacks to illustrate how his mother’s passing haunts him still in the present. Cal loses the little sense of self-love that his mother engendered within him during his first eight years of life; however, he remains unable to communicate these issues with his father, as they are both depressed. Although they do care for each other, they do not openly display love, and their relationship becomes even more awkward and reserved after Cal’s decision to quit the abattoir. While working with his father would have brought them closer together, Cal’s association of the slaughtered animals with human blood and violence, specifically his own participation in the killing of Robert Morton, prohibits him from taking the job. As a result of Crilly replacing him, Shamie repeatedly criticizes Cal for his choice, snapping “ It sticks in my throat that he got the job that you gave up because you

hadn't a strong enough stomach. Now he's got money to burn and you're running about borrowing fags. Not to mention the embarrassment it caused me" (MacLaverty 18). Both harboring the pain from the deaths in their family, and each dealing with their own psychological struggle, the tension between Cal and Shamie is made clear from the start of the novel. The absence of one parent and adverse pressure from the other causes Cal immense mental torment and ultimately leads him to be railroaded into helping the IRA. For example, Shamie's preoccupation to have "the right on his side" leads him to encourage Cal to join Crilly's gang, as he accepts a gun from the IRA only because "He knew the old man felt safe with his notion and Cal did not want to disillusion him" (MacLaverty 29). With this unethical parental guidance, Cal's role in the Troubles violence grows larger, as does his inner turmoil. He again laments his mother in the novel, wondering "if the reason he loved her so much was because she had died before he reached adolescence. He could not remember ever fighting with her or being beaten by her. From the age of fourteen onwards he had constantly been at war with his father" (MacLaverty 33). Were his mother still alive, the reader can presume that Cal would not be in the situation he is in with the IRA, but her traumatic death when he was a child, linked with the guilt he feels to appease his father, further complicates his moral dilemma. As stated in *Blood, Shit and Tears*, Cal's familial relationships are tangled by his connection of "his love for his mother to his rivalry with his father" (Mahon 81). Due to their inability to talk about her with one another, their father and son dynamic becomes convoluted with contention and resentment. Cal, having no sense of a strong, familial upbringing, easily

succumbs to his environment and the people around him, and commits crimes that he did not really intend to do, just like Mxolisi.

In both *Cal* and *Mother to Mother*, parental roles play an important part in the development of the characters. The absence of a parent has a direct link on the psyche of children, and thus affects their decision-making process as an adult. Both Cal and Mxolisi are characters haunted by their lack of a parental figure, and their subsequent involvement in crimes seems to be a psychological result of this childhood tragedy. Each novel also suggests the connection of peer relationships with the tendency to go along with a crowd, and commit violent acts. Nevertheless, it is a mixture of both Mxolisi and Cal's early life, essentially war-torn environment, but most importantly parental guidance, or lack thereof, which causes both characters to succumb into a larger, violent conflict.