

## Mother Dear: The Motivations of Tina Ansa's Mudear

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Until the 1997 publication of the Oxford Companion of African-American Literature, Tina McElroy Ansa's work had not received the kind of attention it deserves. Instead, she was considered to be one of many contemporary Black, popular fiction novelists preceded by the success of Terry McMillan. In her review of African-American novels, Thulani Davis asserts,

... there is a crop of African American fiction coming of the 90's, written by 40ish folk, that's less interested in race and protest. It speaks in the practiced tongue of white mainstream literature. Melvin Dixon, Marita Golden, Tina McElroy Ansa and [Terry] McMillan show in their work a silent—in some cases maybe unconscious—struggle with assimilation. (26)

While these authors may not have been interested in writing racial protest literature, they should not be categorized as Black writers whose works are "whitewashed" in the interest of assimilation. In particular, Tina McElroy Ansa's fiction is not merely a Black writer's version of "white mainstream literature." Ansa, as Patricia Hill Collins says of African-American writers and musicians, "explores [the] journey toward freedom in ways that are characteristically female" (Black Feminist Thought 113).

In fact, Karla Holloway recognizes the significance of "journey toward freedom" in Ansa's first novel, *Baby of the Family*. Lena, a young Black female, has the ability to see and communicate with spirits. Since her ability is uncommon, she is as separated from her family as she is as close to the spirit world. In her book *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*, Holloway analyzes a scene in which Lena speaks to the spirit of a female slave about her past: "Through this discourse," asserts Holloway, "Lena is assured that she belongs anywhere on earth she wants—even in the spiritual places that house the spirit Rachel" (47). This conversation between Black females—one young and the other old—is empowering to both. Rachel's haunted spirit is finally able to tell her tragic story; as a result of listening, Lena experiences a moment of self-awareness at a time when she is searching for her identity. Not only is she a maturing African American female of the mid- 1900's in the segregated South, she is also struggling with a gift that scares her, her mother, and her entire family.

Ansa's second novel, *Ugly Ways*, expands on the Black woman's journey towards freedom and self-definition. The novel features Esther "Mudear" Lovejoy who physically isolates herself from her small town community of Mulberry, Georgia. Mudear's physical isolation or "the change," as

her family calls it, is further complicated by her emotional isolation from her daughters, Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth, who are left to bear the brunt of the bitter sweet love they feel as a result of their mother's emotional abandonment of them. Readers learn about the relationship between Esther and her family through an amalgamation of memories from her husband, Ernest, and her daughters. However, we learn about Mudear from Mudear who speaks to us from her coffin. She makes it clear that they did not know her; they only have a perception of her. Through Ansa's unconventional narrative technique of Mudear (an abbreviation of mother dear) responding to her daughters' verbal expressions about her in alternating chapters, readers are allowed to see beyond her inexplicable actions.

According to Collins, "The institution of Black motherhood consists of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African-American community and with self" (Black Feminist Thought 176). It is precisely this renegotiation of relationships that Esther "Mudear" Lovejoy attempts to reconcile. Each relationship requires a separate self, and each self informs Esther's many identities: She is an African American woman, wife and mother. Through Ansa's use of memory as a narrative technique, we find that Mudear (re)defines the meaning of each of her identities. Furthermore, Ansa also underlines the significance of Black women's struggle to define themselves through the use of voice. Ansa's creative narrative technique is a statement about the power of language for Black women.

Memory plays a significant role in this novel. We rely on the memories of both Ernest, Mudear's husband, and Betty, Mudear's oldest daughter, to tell the story of how she was treated before "the change"—when she was still a young mother and wife. At that time, Ernest was clearly in charge of his home. He recalls that he slapped Mudear a few times after they were married, but says that "was how things was then...Then a man controlled his household, his wife, his family" (97). Ernest not only abused her physically, but also mentally. During the first year of the marriage, he ordered his wife to take a mayonnaise jar along on a car trip for her to urinate in so they would not have to stop along the road. His "ugly ways" got progressively worse, and by the time Emily, their second daughter, was born, the narrator says "he was no longer ordering her and her life around with sharp rough words, he was making her do what he wanted with just a gesture" (128). At this point in their marriage, Mudear's husband is the ruler and she is living in his space.

Mudear was merely renting space from her husband as opposed to sharing space with him while simultaneously possessing her own. In order to rent his space, she was forced to use her words and her actions to please him. Betty, their oldest daughter remembers that, at times, he would come home in a drunken stupor, fight with Mudear, and order them to "get out," and Mudear and her daughters were allowed re-entry only after she apologized "for whatever Poppa felt she had done to displease him" (emphasis mine, 129). Betty also remembers that her Mother "acquiesced to her father in all matters—money, the children, choices for dinner, or how to line the kitchen trash can in the most efficient way" (126). Notably; neither wife nor husband expresses their feelings with words. While Ernest commands his wife with gestures, Mudear rebels against him by burning his okra every night. Only when Ernest is, not present does she verbally disagree with him (129). Ansa further illustrates the connection between Mudear's lack of power and lack of voice by allowing Ernest and Betty to tell Mudear's story.

Ernest admits that he ill-treated Mudear, but it seemed to him that the more she did, the more he felt she should do. She was "so capable, so able to take care of everything that was thrown,, her way" (97). However, her abilities do not impress him; they intimidate him. Significantly, Ernest admits that her strength "scared him" beginning with the first time they made love. Although she was a virgin, she "came to [it] as if she had been made for it" (97). 'He was appalled at how shameless she was about walking around, in the nude and how she was not afraid of his nakedness: "It was too much for him" (97). Ernest is intimidated by Mudear's "awareness of self as powerful, [or] at least potentially powerful" (Nadelhaft 246). He feels intimidated by her capabilities, and his abuse is clearly a means to control her and to relieve his feelings of inadequacy.

From her, husband and --oldest daughter, we learn how she was treated; however, from Mudear, we learn how she felt about this treatment Mudear did not think that her marriage would be a constant power struggle. On the contrary, she was sure that she and her husband would compliment each others' strengths and weaknesses;

It sound so foolish now, but I truly thought that Ernest and me, our getting married was like a wedding of two forces. We would be joining forces, taking the best of both of us...my strong points joined up with his strong points, his best traits and mine. (107)

Mudear's desire for a perfect marriage, or at least one where her husband respected her, was shattered. Ernest's treatment of his wife was detrimental to her who was, as Ernest described, a "sweet girl" when they were first married. According to Mudear, she "stopped getting any enjoyment out of the food" she prepared, "but I found out afterwards that it wasn't my cooking, it was my life" (105). Mudear's need for a change comes once she realizes that "The things he did to me didn't hurt me as much as realizing that he did 'em 'cause he didn't give a damn" (107).

Through the memories of Ernest, Betty, and Mudear, we learn that "the change"—the point when Mudear ceased to be a devoted wife and a nurturing mother—began when Ernest, against the wishes of Mudear, loaned money to her relatives up north. As a result of the money not being repaid, the electricity and gas were turned off and the two youngest daughters almost died from severe illnesses. Although Mudear had no job, she paid the bill, leaving her husband not only wondering how she paid it, but ashamed that he could not. (She confesses to readers that she had been saving spare change.) This one act sets her free and changes the entire Lovejoy family.

Mudear's change is spiritual. The way she has previously lived—dedicated wife and loving mother—overshadowed that part of her that is Esther, a "sweet girl." Thus, she protects herself and her daughters, who may also find out that a man "don't give a damn," by damming up her sweetness and claiming a new spiritual space. As a result of this decision, Mudear redefines her role as wife and mother. Through her own words, Mudear proudly admits that she intentionally claimed her own space. Mudear recalls, "They [her daughters] were too young to remember how it was before...and how to appreciate how much better things were that cold...day when I was able to be what I am. A woman in my own shoes" (39). Exhausted after enduring a marriage to a man who abused her physically and emotionally, drank heavily, and committed adultery on a regular basis, "the change" ensues.

Mudear's conscious decision to redefine her role as wife is manifested through her use of her voice. Once she decides to remain at home, she tells Ernest "after he came home one night when he come in smelling of pussy and that cheap-ass Evening in Paris...that I didn't give a damn what he did as long as I could live my life the way I wanted to and not have to clean or cook dinner myself or stop taking care of my flowers" (106). For the first time, Mudear uses her voice to control her husband. Through her abrasive declaration that her husband can live as he wants, Mudear implies that she has severed her emotional ties to him. She has made it clear that she will no longer be victim to his abuse, thus rendering him powerless. Furthermore, she is the one who shares this memory, and as she does so, she does not speak of Ernest's response. The absence of his voice, from her story, further illustrates how Mudear uses her voice to claim power.

As Mudear is empowered in her home, she expresses her opinion on a variety of subjects, noting that anytime she expressed her feelings when she was younger, people would get upset: "I realized that most of that was 'cause folks just didn't want to hear nothing from a colored woman about what she thought" (148). Collins discusses the significance of Black women being able to maintain power:

For Black women as a collectivity, emancipation, liberation or empowerment as a group rests on two interrelated goals. One is the goal of self-definition, or the power to name one's own reality. Self-determination, or aiming for the power to decide one's own destiny, is the second fundamental goal. (Black Feminist Thought 37)

Mudear has certainly empowered herself by defining who she is and by deciding her own destiny. As she describes her motives and behavior, Mudear protests against the use of the words "whore," "ho," and "bitch" as used by male rappers and other men—including her husband before the change—"to put women in their place" (76). Mudear refuses to be defined by anyone, especially men.

For Ernest, Mudear's change means an inversion of the male/female roles. Their real conflict was a battle for power and space. After that unforgettable experience when Mudear pays the bills, she is able to treat Ernest as brutally as he once treated her. Ernest, like his wife, remembers ordering her to take a mayonnaise jar "in the woods like a man and pee" when they were on road trips. In an act of bitter irony, Mudear does indeed act "like a man." Betty remembers that before the change, her father was "Bigger, it seemed, stronger, louder" (125). After the change, Mudear, who is a relatively small woman, is bigger, stronger, and louder; she is empowered and is able to assume the roles that her husband—the abuser, the dominating figure of the home—had once proudly claimed. According to Betty, "sometimes, she would walk past her parents' room and feel the floor almost tilt with the sudden contradiction her mother threw at the man: 'Naw, man, don't fold the paper back that way. That's stupid!' her father would not comment" (emphasis mine 127). Notably, when once Mudear silently acquiesced to his commands, he now silently acquiesces to hers. Just as Betty tells of her mother's silence before the change, she also tells of her father's silence. Betty's telling of her father's story shows his significant loss of power: his daughter, a woman, speaks for him. Ernest, a man who was initially a womanizer, feels overwhelmed by his wife and daughters:

At first, he had thought it was just his wife who took over his household. But as he began carefully to notice the patterns of the house, he realized it was not just she but everything with a, vagina in the house who seemed to want to rule....he had just wanted to yell, "Womens taking over my house." (47)

Ernest's desire to yell can be attributed to his desire to reclaim the space he once owned before the change. However, Ernest thinks that shouting would have been a show of weakness, and a sign that Mudear had won. And, indeed, she had. Ernest has no voice, and he has had to accept that he is living in Mudear's space.

Without question, Mudear redefines herself. She creates a space where she can be free to be herself, and not a mother and a wife. Mudear's change gives her the freedom to devote her energy to the cultivation of her beautiful garden:

Collards as big as a small child line the walk to the back door. There's a tangle of mint and lavender by a old painted swing, that has mixed and mated so much that their flowers are variegated shades of purple and lavender and it makes your mouth water to brush it. In the full burst of spring and early summer, the place was a paradise. Besides my separate rose garden, I had bushes scattered all through the garden.... still got begonias and butterfly weed and cannas blooming along with dahlia, ...some kind of herb planted at every crossway....(36).

Clearly, Mudear put significant amount of time and careful consideration into the maintenance of her garden. This garden is representative of the space that she told her daughters to possess: She taught them to "Keep that part of themselves to themselves so nobody could take it and walk on it"(34). This spiritual garden is symbolized by her beautiful flower and vegetable garden —the only place she will leave her house to go and the only place that she will exert energy in caring for. Mudear's garden is a symbol for the spiritual freedom that she possesses and what her daughters will come to possess by the novel's end.

Claiming possession of a spiritual space is important to African-American women; showing their daughters the value of this possession is even more important. In her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Garden," Alice Walker describes her mother who is peaceful while gardening despite being tired from laborious work. From observing her mother, Walker learned the importance of possessing a place of creativity for the well being of the self: "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (243). Notably, Mudear believes that she inherited her love of gardening from her mother—also called Mudear—who "always had a big garden. She grew collard and turnips winter and summer. That's where I get my love for gardening from" (88). Like Mudear, Betty has fond memories of her mother as a gardener. She notes how different her mother appears when she was in her garden:

she made everyone's life miserable in the house. Then at night blossoming and exuding oxygen, coming to life and giving off life in her garden outside. Betty would get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night and stop to gaze out of the window at Mudear sitting on one of her benches brushing the side of her thigh lazily with a huge sprig of lavender and be so mesmerized that she would forget to go back to bed...[she] thought it was part of her charm, part of her beauty (56).

Betty reminds us of what Walker says about her mother, "I noticed that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" (241). In essence, the garden is a symbol of spiritual freedom that modifies what Mudear says about the change: "I decided to stay in body. But to leave in spirit and let my spirit free" (106).

Of Black women's texts, Holloway notes, "What connects language and creativity is that for women, biologically confronted with the possibility of creation, motherhood embraced or denied is unique to her sense of self" (26). Mudear, like Walker's mother, is a creator. She is the mother of three daughters and she is a skillful gardener. What Betty notices, perhaps subconsciously, is that her mother still possesses her nurturing instincts. Mudear describes the collards as being as "big as a child." She also places herself in the role of Eve by noting that "the place was a paradise." Mudear has both embraced motherhood by teaching her daughters what she feels they need to know to be independent women and denied it by withholding emotional nurturing from them. However, since she feels that showing her love for them may be detrimental to their success as independent women, she must displace her nurturing instincts by cultivating her flowers and vegetables. The garden, a serene place enjoyed by all spectators, represents true freedom for Mudear and allows her daughters to see her as a mother.

What is most interesting about this garden is the relation between the garden and the family's memories of Mudear: "People gonna be smelling and marveling at my flowers growing in the back field long after I'm dead and gone"(149). Mudear implies that her influence will never leave the minds of her daughters nor her husband. Annie Ruth, who is disgusted by the very thought of being surrounded by her mother, still feels her mother's omnipresence: "Hell, I got up last night to throw up and I smelled her, felt her in the bathroom. Shit, I feel her hanging around me all time all way out in that godforsaken LA" (253). Much like the smell of cinnamon balls that still linger in the house, the memories of Mudear, the good and the bad, will linger in the minds and hearts of her family. Mudear becomes like an omniscient, omni-present, omnipotent goddess to her family. Her "larger than life presence" is compounded by Ansa's narrative technique in which Mudear is able to hear what her family says about her. Thus, Mudear, even in death, is indispensable and unforgettable: "Does she [Annie Ruth] really think she or any of the girls are ever going to be 'free' of me?" (276).

Mudear suggests that they should be free from control—physical, emotional, and spiritual—of men but not free from her influence. As their mother, her goal was to make her daughters "as free as I could teach them to be and still be free myself" (34). She taught them how not to be trifling, which meant a lazy black woman, but "how to be ladies. How to do the things that women need to know how to do in this world. How to sew and clean and take care of a house" (163). She also teaches them to be financially independent. Gloria Wade-Gayles notes that black mothers "socialize their daughters to be independent, strong and self-confident." (55). Mudear certainly fits Gayles' description of the Black mother.

Betty is an example of the positive side of Mudear's unconventional rearing. As Betty reminisces on the life she shared with her mother, she thoughtfully remembers the influence Mudear had in helping her to decide her career, "Colored women gonna always get their hair done" (130). From her mother's advice, Betty becomes a cosmetologist and eventually opens up two lucrative hair salons. Furthermore, she gained national recognition and financial independence. Betty also remembers what her mother said about men, "A man don't give a damn about you," and she relished in the thought that she would "never as long as she lived and stayed black, as Mudear used to say, wanted to be told to 'get out' and have to do it"(130). Betty is not the only successful

daughter. Both Emily and Annie Ruth are college graduates. Emily is a state archivist, and Annie Ruth is a successful news broadcaster.

Indeed, Mudear reared her daughters in a most unusual manner. She was so dispirited by her own relationship with her husband that she was not concerned with teaching her daughters how to bond with others, especially men who didn't "give a damn about you." For Mudear, relations with others, was unimportant. Collins notes that some Black "mothers may have ensured their daughters' physical survival at the high cost of their emotional destruction" (Fighting 53). Surely, Mudear was not concerned with the emotional well-being of her daughters; to Mudear, emotions are trivial. Her concern was to mold her daughters into women who are independent, strong, and proud:

I didn't cuddle em to death the way some mothers do. I pushed 'em out there to find out what they was best in. That's how you learn things, by getting on out there and living. They found their strengths by the best way anybody could: by living them. (37)

Through Esther's desire to reach and maintain a "place/garden of her own" while simultaneously teaching her daughters how to do the same, she succeeds in alienating her daughters from her. Esther's change—the freedom to be in touch with the spiritual part of the self—caused new problems' at the expense of her daughters' emotional stability.

As a result, the three daughters, so devastated by the relationship they had with Mudear, vow to never have children because they may end up abandoning them like Mudear. Furthermore, none of the women can form a long-term meaningful relationship with a man. Mudear's attempt to be an example her daughters could be proud of has serious ramifications. Betty, the oldest daughter, who possesses fond memories of her mother before the change," is "mad that Mudear's actions had left her and her sisters so vulnerable, so defenseless, open and raw to the town's gossip" (11). Emily is an obsessive-compulsive middle-aged woman' in therapy who aborted a baby because she was afraid to be a "Mudear" like her Mudear. Annie Ruth has had a nervous breakdown and is always on the verge of having another. Furthermore, she is pregnant by one of any number of men and is afraid that she too will become like her Mudear. Betty acknowledges the complexity: of what motivated her mother's actions," but as her daughter, she cannot exonerate her mother: "I remember how it was for you before, but did you have to go and be, like him?" (269).

Like their mother, the three Lovejoy sisters must define their own identity; they too must claim their' own brand of freedom. Mudear is like the medicine forced down the throats of her daughters that consequently causes new ailments or side effects. The women are not unscathed by her actions and these three financially secure, but emotionally distraught women rightfully let her know how they feel about her in the last scene of the novel. Significantly, Annie Ruth, who has no memories of her mother before "the change" and who is a news broadcaster—one who uses her voice for a living—initiates the healing process by confronting the body of her dead mother. Annie Ruth asks her mother (or perhaps she asks herself): "Was being free, like you always said, Mudear, was that the most important thing? Being free...what did it mean? Did it mean you were free to hurt us, your own children, to abandon us? To cut yourself off from the world and put the burden of your survival and ours, too, on us" (268). Here we find that Mudear, although she had good intentions, falls short in her role as a mother. Her love, it seems, was a

selfish love. The rearing of her daughters from her bedroom or lounge chair was convenient for her, but not for her daughters.

As she goes on, Annie Ruth acknowledges the influence of her mother's voice, "After being with you for forty years, we got being 'ranting, raving maniac' down pat. Now, we want to move on" (270). Again, use of the voice proves to be significant to spiritual change. As Mudear did not use her voice before the change to express herself to her controlling, abusive husband, her daughters remained just as silent. They chose to speak about her rather than with her; now, they can only speak to her. Like their mother, their change begins when they use their voices to confront the one who has offended them for so many years. Using their voices empowers them; as a result, they too change and move towards spiritual freedom. Annie Ruth will indeed move on as a daughter, but more significantly, as a mother. We assume that the other two will move on as well.

According to bell hooks, memory "can serve as a catalyst for self-recovery" (40). Through the memories Mudear's daughters have of her, they have learned to "...keep that part of themselves that was just for themselves to themselves so nobody could take it and walk on it" (34). This is the legacy that Mudear left to her daughters, who, without realizing it, begrudgingly take it and prosper from it in some respects. At the novel's end, the women resolve that they will do as their mother always told them: "no matter what card life deals you, keep on living daughters" (78).

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