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Parental overprotection in Esmeralda Santiago's[1] *Almost a Woman*: Sociocultural and psychosocial perspectives

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Abstract
This article starts from the premise that parental overprotection is a prevalent sociocultural aspect in the Spanish-speaking countries, but less common in the United States. This work analyzes how parental overprotection appears in Esmeralda Santiago's *Almost a Woman* (1998). There are some reasons why Negi—the protagonist of this novel—is overprotected: (a) she is a woman; (b) she lives in a city of a foreign country; and (c) she is the girl of an absent parent. Also, Ulvi—her lover—represents the "escape" from an oppressive existence and the continuation of being an overprotected woman. Therefore, this essay explains Negi's life as an overprotected individual and demonstrates the unfavorable consequences brought upon her, particularly from the psycho-sociocultural viewpoint.

Key words: *Almost a Woman*, Esmeralda Santiago, parental overprotection, psychosocial perspective, sociocultural perspective

Introduction

When I arrived for the first time in the United States, I thought that I could easily adjust myself to the American lifestyle and customs without any problems. However, in time, I realized that the process of acculturation had only just begun. I became conscious of the many differences between my country of origin and the United States (the adoptive one). One of those differences, for instance, is associated with the amount of time that children live in their parents' home. In the United States, as is well known, once a boy or a girl turns eighteen, he or she is supposed to be ready to leave the nest and start a new life in their living place. Unlike in Latin American and the Caribbean countries, youth remain at home for a longer duration in their parents' house or even for their entire life (especially if they never married).

Many reasons may exist behind this scenario. Nonetheless, observing the situation described above leads us to a hypothesis: Parental overprotection is a prevalent sociocultural aspect in those geographical areas of Spanish-speaking countries, but less often in the United States. Keeping this matter in mind, I want to analyze how parental overprotection appears in Esmeralda Santiago's memoir *Almost a Woman* (1998). This study aims to answer the following questions: (a) how Negi's parental overprotection is mainly based on sociocultural conditions; (b) what are Negi's psychosocial consequences of being an overprotected individual; (c) what are the overprotection implications in terms of mother-daughter and father-daughter relations in Negi's life; and (d) how parental overprotection leads Negi to choose an overprotective partner. Therefore, this essay attempts to explain

[1] Esmeralda Santiago is a Puerto Rican writer who currently lives in New York. For more information, see her website www.esmeraldasantiago.com.

Negi's life[2] —the protagonist of this novel— as an overprotected individual, demonstrating the undesirable consequences brought upon her.

Methodology

It is indeed familiar that the term overprotection is related to some negative effects resting on the person in question.[3] For that reason, it is not unusual that this issue has been analyzed mainly from the perspective of psychological and sociological studies. This article presents an interpretation of parental overprotection through a close reading of Santiago's literary text. Such interpretation is possible thanks to applying a method of analysis based on sociocultural and psychosocial perspectives. Findings from different researchers in both disciplines support the arguments shown here.

Results

Before addressing how parental overprotection occurs in *Almost a Woman* (1998) –Santiago's first novel–, it is essential to mention that protection in *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) serves as the preamble of what will be the parental overprotection in Santiago's second work.

According to the American psychology researcher Jerome Kagan, protection is defined as "overconcern when child [is] ill or in danger" (as cited in Thomasgard, 1998, p. 225). The person in a dangerous situation appears in *When I Was Puerto Rican* (Santiago, 1993) just before the last chapter. It happens when Negi comes home a little bit later than usual. When her mother (Mami) asks her about where she was, she replies that in the library. Then her mother expresses,

> "You know I don't want you out after dark. The streets are dangerous. What if something were to happen?"
> "Nothing happened…"
> "Don't you talk back!"
> "I'm not talking…". (p. 251)

Due to the darkness, the rules in the family are restricted. In that sense, the narrative voice—Negi's voice—says,

> When the day became shorter and night came earlier, we were only allowed out to go to school. We couldn't even go to the *bodega* across the street. When the weather was warm, and people sat out on their stoops, Mami insisted we stay inside, unless she could come out to watch us. (pp. 253-54)

Hans Sebald's study *Momism: The Silence Disease of America* (1976) describes this type of mother as one who "prevents the child from confronting hurdles in life and so reduces the child's urge toward independence. Thus, the child cannot become autonomous but remains severely dependent instead" (as cited in Parker, 1983, p. 17). In *Almost a Woman* (Santiago, 1998), just two days after arriving in New York, Negi meets a new girl. When Negi's mother realizes that she met her new friend outside, in the next building, her mom replies furiously, "Who said you could go out to the sidewalk? This isn't Puerto Rico. *Algo te puede pasar* [Something could happen to you]" (p. 5). This last sentence acts as the leading indicator of the maternal overprotection, but also reflects Mami's anxiety. The protagonist thus explains in this way how these remarks reveal her mother's sense of offering protection for her child,

> Something could happen to you" was a variety of dangers outside the locked doors of our apartment. I could be mugged. I could be dragged into any of the dark, abandoned buildings on the way to or from school and be raped and murdered. I could be accosted by gang members into those turf I strayed. I could be seduced by men who preyed on unchaperoned girls too willing to talk to strangers. (p. 5)

Negi's mother's pieces of advice are only examples from a typical Hispanic mother to her daughter in similar circumstances. Those recommendations have the purpose of infusing fear into her, but also,

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[2] Esmeralda's nickname is Negi; its origin is revealed in her previous book *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993). It is because when she was born, she was brunette, so her grandma said that she was a little black. Her relatives started calling her *"Negrita,"* and afterward, by the shortened name "Negi."

[3] About this matter, Barber maintains that "viewed from the perspective of child development, […] overprotection is not benign" (as cited in Ungar, 2009, p. 259).

they imply some overprotection. The mother is afraid. The question here is if those fears are justified. Probably yes, since her worries are attached to an urban life that was entirely unknown for Negi, as she had just arrived in the United States from Macun in rural Puerto Rico.

Also, in *Almost a Woman* (Santiago, 1998) chapter eight, Negi highlights her mother's desire to protect her children from the world's violence. The radio broadcasts, and the television news cause Negi's mom nervous breakdowns and worries every time that her children have to go out: "Mami refused to go to work after news of a riot, and I didn't go to summer school. Our apartment was stifling, but we weren't allowed out" (p. 100).

It is reasonable that parents try to protect children from dangerous conditions, for instance, in the case when it is dark outside. However, here, the protection becomes overprotection when Negi's mother extends the rules to keep her offspring at home even during the extended summer days and under unbearably hot weather inside the house. Undoubtedly, this situation may reflect Mami's insecurities justified by a hyperbolic news media that makes every event as a personal threat.

Then Negi grows up within an atmosphere where only terrible things happen and, of course, it contributes to increasing Negi's fears. For example, she hears that Brooklyn's neighborhood is full of bad people or that Don Julio, Negi's grandmother's friend, was assaulted in the subway, etc.

> Santiago presents Don Julio as a victim of random violence. However, a random act creates an internalization of fear among everyone who suddenly realizes the city's immediate danger. Santiago [and] her family […] experience trauma and becomes a part of her psyche to be afraid. (Joiner, 2004, pp. 8-9)

As a result, Negi develops anxieties:

> The men they beat up; the women, they raped. I couldn't stop thinking about it as I walked to school, or home from the library: every man was a potential rapist, and every dark doorway was a potential hiding place for someone waiting to hurt me. (Santiago, 1993, p. 253)

In *When I Was Puerto Rican* (Santiago, 1993), if Negi was lucky and her mom let her go out alone, she received a big list of recommendations: "'Don't walk on any of the side streets,' she'd warn. 'Keep to the avenues. Don't talk to anyone. Don't accept any rides. If there are too many people milling around a sidewalk, cross the street and walk on the other side'" (p. 254). According to Joiner (2004), "[t]he presence of constant fear in [Negi's] adolescent life represents the greatest emotion that she expresses during her period in the city" (p. 9). Consequently, "that overprotection increases the vulnerable [Negi's] sense of threat" (Hudson & Rapee as cited in Taylor, 2006, p. 22). In Santiago's first novel (1993), the protagonist makes a comparison of her mother's caution in Puerto Rico versus the one in New York. She says, "In Puerto Rico […]. Her caution then seemed to have more to do with keeping us [me and my siblings] from hurting ourselves. Now it is directed at preventing other people from hurting us" (p. 254). Of course, in New York, Negi and her siblings had to be protected from new and strange sociocultural conditions.

Psychiatrist Parker (1983) has studied the relationship between parental overprotection and the development of anxiety. He describes "overprotection as excessive parental involvement in controlling the child's environment to minimize aversive experiences for the child, regardless of whether those situations represent actual threats" (as cited in Taylor, 2006, p. 14).

In *Almost a Woman* (Santiago, 1998), Negi is continuously suffering from the consequences of being an overprotected girl. In his article, "Overprotecting Parenting: Helping Parents Provide Children the Right Amount of Risk and Responsibility," Michael Ungar (2009) states that, parents who fear their offspring's safety, deny opportunities associated with "behaviors that are perceived as having an element of risk or responsibility," such as walking to school alone, riding bicycles on the street, etc. (p. 258). In Santiago's second memoir (1998), maternal overprotection causes children to internalize the idea of those *algos* that could happen to them living in the city, up to the degree of developing some fears that turn out into the conviction that the only safe place to them would be "in their mother's shadow." (p. 64).

Also, Ungar (2009) points out that a parent's caution: (a) denies children the opportunity structures to experience healthy psychosocial development; (b) contributes to patterns of excessive anxiety; and (c) leaves children unprepared for transitions to adulthood and independent living. As I will demonstrate later, indeed, Negi, as an overprotected individual, develops each of these negative psychosocial consequences.

Usually, Negi is not a risk-taker. It is especially hard for her to make decisions that involve discarding some degree of protection. For example, after several opportunities of having a stable partner, Negi decides to be the lover of Ulvi, a Turkish film director. When he breaks up with her because he found out she had many friends, she remembers her relationship with Avery Lee, whom she had met before Ulvi, and who had requested Negi to become his lover. Heartbroken because Ulvi kicks her out from his life, she is sorry that she did not accept Avery Lee's proposal. She says, "Had I said yes, I'd be living in luxury in El Paso, […]. Avery Lee didn't expect more from me than what I gave Ulvi" (Santiago, 1998, p. 297). In short, Negi regrets not having taken the risk of assuming a great life alongside Avery Lee. At that time, she was not ready to jeopardize and make an important life decision whose consequences would be leaving her home and, consequently, her mother's overprotection.

In her study, Carpenter (2008) lists four cases where she distinguishes parental overprotective behavior. Two of them could apply to Negi's mother's conduct: (a) not allowing Negi to do things on her own; and (b) not allowing Negi to make her own decisions (p. 148-49).

One of the passages where Negi clearly explains her limitations due to her mother's overprotection is in *Almost a Woman* (Santiago, 1998) chapter nine. There, Negi convinces herself that her life is not exciting enough to become a good actress. It would be impossible since "every move I made was monitored by Mami" (p. 106). In that sense, Michael Thomasgard (1993) mentions that "an overprotective relationship is characterized by a parent who: 1) is highly supervising and vigilant; 2) has difficulties with separation from the child; 3) discourages independent behavior; and 4) is highly controlling" (p. 68). Therefore, Mami represents the figure of an overprotective parent.

Another example illustrating parental overprotection in Negi's life happens when Otto, a boy whom Negi likes, invites her to a party at his sister's house. When she receives her invitation, she responds that she has to ask for permission from her mother. She is embarrassed that at eighteen, she still needs the authorization to go to a party. Negi foresees her mother's reaction. Indeed, Mami denies her the opportunity to go there alone. Although Negi assures that the party will be at Otto's sister's house, Mami replies,

> "I don't care if you need to see the pope. You can take one of your brothers with you, or one of your sisters. But you're not going that far alone with a man I've never met". No argument could persuade her that I was old enough to take care of myself (Santiago, 1998, p. 182).

In this passage, it is possible to observe Negi's battle to dive into an American culture where supposedly at eighteen years old, people are responsible for their acts and decisions. Still, Negi's mother is not ready to relinquish overprotecting her daughter, especially of those *algos* that could happen when meeting men.

Negi considers her mother's desire to overrule her is pathetic. The protagonist describes the scene when Otto has to face Negi's family when he is about to arrive at her place to take her to the party:

> Don Carlos [Mami's friend] and Don Julio decided to stay home, doubtless at Mami's suggestion. […] They were joined by Hector and Raymond, the oldest boys in the family […]. I dreaded the moment Otto would walk into this pitiful attempt to *protect* my virtue [emphasis added]. (Santiago, 1998, pp. 182-83)

Negi's mother believes that a masculine figure always represents protection for a woman.[4] Then, when Otto and his cousin Gilbert show up, the narrative voice says,

> I wished Otto and Gilbert had picked up Regina [Negi's friend] on the way so that Mami wouldn't envision me alone in a car with two men for so long as a second. But it was too late. Don Carlos, who spoke good English, managed to get a phone number and address for where we'd be. He handed Otto his business card, made him take down our phone number–as if I didn't know it—while Mami made sure I had identification on me. (Santiago, 1998, p. 183)

In Negi's opinion, her mother's behavior is exaggerated and embarrassing. Finally, Negi goes to the party. Later on, Don Carlos and her mom show up there and look for Negi under the excuse that she did not make a call as they had agreed. They also explain that they are worried. Negi then is furious, and when she comes back home in a taxi with them, she claims, "How could you do this? I'm old

[4] Later, that will be one of the principal reasons why Mami insists that Negi gets married.

enough to take care of myself" (Santiago, 1998, p. 188). In response, Don Carlos insists that they did it because Negi forgot to call them to notify them that she was okay. However, Negi says that it would have been enough to make a call to Otto's sister to verify if everything was going well at the party.

Overprotection is affecting Negi's psyche and increasing her fears and insecurities. After she is in the car with Otto and Gilbert on the way to pick Regina up, Negi thinks, "Maybe this was a mistake. These two men I barely knew could drive me somewhere, rape me, throw me off a bridge" (Santiago, 1998, p. 184). Indeed, one of the negative consequences of an overprotected individual is developing feelings of insecurity. Negi fights such thoughts. Her behavior is clear in the passage when she has the opportunity to work as a theater usher. Although she does not need to do an interview, once she is at her workplace, she says, "I was nervous, reluctant to go up, uncertain of where I was. The *algos* that could happen in dim halls of unfamiliar building repeated in my brain, but I silenced them, took a breath, and rose" (Santiago, 1998, p. 107).

Besides, Parker is not wrong when suggests that "parental overprotection is associated with an increased risk of *adult* dysthymia [chronic depression], anxiety disorders, and difficulties with close interpersonal relationships" (as cited in Thomasgard, 1998, p. 225). In *Almost a Woman* (Santiago, 1998), Negi has to learn to make decisions that avoid putting her in extreme situations. She has the challenge of abandoning the mother's womb before the maternal overprotection damages her psychical and emotional health even more. In this regard, Negi observes,

> There were times I left the house for school or work with the intention of never coming back, but I didn't have the courage to run away. Sometimes I stared at the shiny subway tracks, at how easy it would be to throw myself upon them, but the thought of being mangled by tons of moving metal made me step back when the train rumbled near. (p. 210)

Then, she continues,

> The home that had been a refuge from the city's danger was now a prison I longed to escape. […] I was tired of the constant tug between the life I wanted and the life I had. […] I wanted […] [t]o hear one voice, my own, even if it was filled with fear and uncertainty. Even if it were to lead me where I ought not to go. (p. 210)

After this episode, Negi starts narrating her failed relationships with guys like Avery Lee and Jurgen, but it was not until she meets Ulvi that she has her first sexual intercourse. What accounts for the fact that, even when she makes considerable effort to please her mother by marrying a man before losing her virginity, she becomes the lover of Ulvi? The answer is simple. She was ready to start a relationship that leads her to escape her parental overprotection and find the "freedom" and her expected own voice. However, giving to Ulvi her whole body and soul means passing from one way of protection to another. From time to time, Ulvi says to Negi, "'You are poor girl with small mind,' […]. When he noticed I was offended, he explained that he meant not that I was stupid but that I was unsophisticated, because I'd been too *well protected*" [emphasis added] (p. 305). In Ulvi's opinion, Negi is innocent. In response, Negi remarks,

> The circle within his arms was a world in which *I felt protected*, a place where I could admit my ignorance. Yes, I was naïve, but in his arms my innocence was treasured. In his arms, I didn't have to think, didn't have to plan, didn't have to do anything but respond to his caresses [emphasis added]. (p. 276-77)

It is worth mentioning that Ulvi never calls Negi by her name, but by the nickname *"Chiquita,"* [small, little one]. She accepts that, which implies, in a deep sense, how imperative is for her to be protected.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, overprotection is also associated with sociocultural aspects. A sociocultural perspective sustains that "a model of parental overprotection should account for existing societal norms that influence the child's emerging autonomy" (Thomasgard, 1993, p. 78). In that sense, Negi's mother is incapable of adjusting her family rules to the norms required in American society. For instance, when Negi and her friend Alma start making plans to share an apartment, they never thought about requesting permission from their respective mothers. Still, as expected, the authorization was denied. Negi's mother gives her the following arguments:

> "The only way you're leaving my house, […] is as a married woman."
>
> "But I do not want to be married."
>
> "Decent girls don't live alone in the city."
>
> "We won't be living alone. Alma and I will be together, in the same apartment."

> "Still," she spat out, and when I was about to make another point, she helps up her finger in my direction, "just because you're in that school for *blanquitos*," at which point I turned out.
> Alma had the same argument with Titi Ana [her mom], and we had to accept that, according to our mothers, two young women living together were still alone if there was no man to keep an eye on them. (Santiago, 1998, p. 139-40)

At first glance, this is an issue about decency, but also cultural differences. In this case, the differences have to do with American and Puerto Rican societies. Mami's rules represent overprotection in Hispanic families. I support the idea that between American people and the Hispanic one, the latter is more dependable, trying to keep the family united. The previous passage shows that there is something "culturally or contextually in conflict with family and [Puerto Rican] community values" (Ungar, 2009, p. 266), since "American culture generally promotes holding children less and encouraging them to be more independent at an earlier age" (Strecker as cited in Thomasgard, 1993, p. 74).

This cultural variance is vital since, in the case of Negi, she is continually dealing with the conflicts associated with a hybrid cultural identity. In sum, the strife concerns a person of Puerto Rican origins who tries to preserve cultural values while adopting new ones from the American way of life. For instance, the main difference between American education and that of Puerto Ricans is there when Negi reflects on Archie and his friends' comics. They

> live in a world with no parents, made their own decisions about where to go and how to get there without consulting anyone but each other. My world was dominated by adults, their rules written in stone, in Spanish, in Puerto Rico. In my world, no allowance was made for the fact that we were now in the United States, that our language was becoming English, that we were foreigners awash in American culture. (Santiago, 1998, p. 27)

Perhaps what causes her more frustration on her is the realization that living in the United States does not change any of her mother's expectations. For example, on a particular occasion, Negi's mother unexpectedly shows up at her school. That day, she found her with her skirt rolled up and some makeup on her eyelids. Then Mami screams, "Don't think because we're here [in the United States] you can act like those fast-American girls" (p. 29).

Similarly, at the end of chapter thirteen, after Don Carlos and Mami mess up the party, Otto thinks that Negi's parents are good people because they take care of her. She disagrees, assuring him that they treat her as a baby. Then Otto emphasizes that that is good because Negi is not like American girls since they have too much freedom. However, Negi replies, "I want to be free." The maternal overprotection is suffocating her.

Finally, Thomasgard (1998) is correct to argue that most researchers have focused their studies on one parent's or child's behavior. In that sense, "the literature on overprotection is almost solely based on the retrospective accounts of adults looking back on how they themselves were raised" (p. 225). Typically, researchers make connections between overprotective behaviors and "previous unresolved traumas in the parent's life" (Thomasgard, 1993, p. 77). Nevertheless, Arnold J. Sameroff and Robert N Emde analyze parental overprotection as a relationship disorder. This point of view

> has the potential benefit of no longer assigning responsibility or blame for a problem to one individual? Instead behaviors are examined in context. Such an assessment would include: the current status and history of the child's relationship with parenting figures, the individual characteristics and past histories of both parent(s) and child, and socio-cultural supports and stresses for the family. (As cited in Thomasgard, 1993 p. 73)

On the other hand, Thomasgard (1993) adds,

> It is common to elicit a history of a distant, uninvolved spouse when evaluating families in which one parent is overprotective toward the child. Often this distant parent is the father, who has minimal direct interaction with the growing child, leaving the mother to address the issues of separation-individuation. (p. 77)

Family systems theory has indicated that "[o]ften, the non-overprotective parent is 'effectively absent' from the child's world" (p. 74). That is the case of Negi's father. As a result, in cases like those, "the mothers [are] rigidly controlling of the child" (p. 74). The solution, Thomasgard (1993) suggests, is to increase the father's participation in the family. Then, it would be possible to see "a relaxation of maternal control" and improvement of a healthy relationship with the child (p. 74). For his part, Levy

(1966) suggests that overprotected young children will have low self-esteem and less well-developed social competence (as cited in Thomasgard, 1998, p. 226). Although those features are present in Negi's personality, I will leave them out of here for future research.

In sum, in *Almost a Woman* (Santiago, 1998), thanks to Negi's resistance to her mother's commands, and her thoughts of all of the *algos* that could happen, she was not able to leave the mother's womb and start a new life with Ulvi in Florida. However, she was somewhat happy every time she visited Ulvi. On the other hand, why was Negi overprotected? There are many reasons: (a) she is a woman; (b) she lives in a city of a foreign country; and (c) she is the girl of an absent parent. For her, Ulvi represents the "escape" from an oppressive life, but also the continuation of being an overprotected woman. Negi says: "With Ulvi I wasn't Negi, daughter of an absent father, […]. After seven years in the United States, I had become what I stopped being the day I left Puerto Rico. I had become Chiquita –small, little one" (Santiago, 1998, p. 306). Companionship with Ulvi also serves as a desperate attempt to restore Negi's psychic and emotional equilibrium.

Conclusion

Esmeralda Santiago's memoir, *Almost a Woman* (1998), is the perfect study material to demonstrate that there are many sociocultural conditions in Negi's life attached to parental overprotection. Most of them have to do with Negi's mother's expectations regarding her daughter's behavior as a young lady in a foreign country. In other words, Mami does not want Negi to act as an American girl, even though they both live in the United States. In this sense, the difficulty that Negi's mother has in assimilating American culture is evident. Mami reacts like a typical Hispanic mother overprotecting her daughter.

Some of the psychosocial consequences developed by Negi due to parental overprotection are fear, anxiety, trauma, vulnerability, feeling of insecurity, and difficulty to manage interpersonal relationships. Moreover, parental overprotection becomes a relationship disorder between Negi and her mom due to Mami's unsolved traumas. Besides, the fact that Negi's father was an absent parent, contributes to Mami takes rigid control over Negi's life and, therefore, overprotect her.

Last, when Negi decides to stay with Ulvi, she naively pursuits her longed-for freedom. However, having been an overprotected individual leads Negi to expand that same pattern being with her partner.

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