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Defining Motherhood: The Plight of the Non-Traditional Mother in Multi-Ethnic American Women's Literature

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DEFINING MOTHERHOOD: THE PLIGHT OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL
MOTHER IN MULTI-ETHNIC AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
The School of Graduate Studies and Research
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Title: Defining Motherhood: The Plight of the Non-Traditional Mother in Multi-Ethnic American Women's Literature

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This project will focus on the multi-ethnic American mother in the mid-to-late twentieth century and where she fits into contemporary American society. I will be taking a Cultural Feminist/Historical approach to motherhood and the mother figure in multi-ethnic American families. This approach will allow me to use a feminist lens and relevant historical context to consider how the “traditional” mother or “ideal” mother figure has become a model for how mainstream society thinks the mother figure should be. Attention to this model will demonstrate how the non-traditional, ethnic mother breaks this mold the implications and repercussions of her inability to achieve the golden standard. I will use this lens combined with a cultural feminist approach to look at the literary works that I have chosen: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974) and *Tar Baby* (1981); Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982); Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975); Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* (1987).

For the project, I intend to delve into multi-ethnic motherhood to articulate how these mothers challenge and often fail when trying to attain society's model of white, middle class motherhood. Each of the literary mother characters that I explore in this project embodies strength, yet often has the inability to rise above adversity that is created by this model. I will show that although she exemplifies a different “model” of

motherhood, she is set up for failures by a society who places unrealistic expectations on women of color.

The historical contextualization and feminist cultural analysis of the “ideal” mother in society will help me establish and create a framework to answer the following questions: “How does multi-ethnic motherhood challenge the ideals set by American society and do these ideals set her up for failure?” Also, “What influence has the multi-ethnic mother made on the American family, literature, and society in the late twentieth century; and what does this impact say about motherhood in general?”