



The Other Mother: Children's Narratives and the Dark Side of the Mother Archetype

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Abstract

*Children's stories are often fraught with problematic adult characters that serve as launch pads for the journey the child hero must undertake in order to find safety, growth, and success in a hostile world. The present paper concerns itself with such problematic adults that come in the shape of mother figures, only to turn the good mother archetype on its head. The paper explores the darker shade of maternal womanhood with its psychological complexities and non-conformity to the nurturing role that is inspired by the very word "mother." It would be pertinent to explore what functions these dark women serve in children's narratives, particularly in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, from where the titular "other mother" comes from. The paper will also explore how such characters inform the relationship between adults and children in stories where the child takes up the role of a protagonist, along with the various shades of motherhood portrayed in such stories, particularly on a darker spectrum beginning from greys and growing blacker.*

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The archetypal motherhood in most societies can be seen as a great pedestal, atop which is placed this great figure of a woman epitomising fertility and consequently nurture, care, and protection. The mother is a potent symbol, often the highest ideal a woman can aspire to embody. In being placed on a pedestal, motherhood may often be associated with the idea of sacrifice for the sake of others. After all, the unselfish mother must always put others first, must exist to bring new life into the world and thereafter, dedicate herself to its care. But, the thing about pedestals is that the figures upon them can often be brought low; the ideal may forever remain out of reach of the merely human.

The Hindi blessing "Dudho nahao, puto phalo" succinctly encapsulates a woman's expected role: being fertile and bearing sons. It is the first half of the blessing that was recently explained to me by a Dogri friend and mother of two daughters, which hit the nail on the head for me. "Dudho Nahao" or "may you bathe in milk" is not about wishing a luxurious life upon a woman, where she may be so affluent as to afford bathing in milk, like in one of those old advertisements for beauty soaps. Rather, the blessing is about fertility and an overflow of milk



in a mother's bosom so that the offspring may luxuriate in it. This happened around the time I had heard a young mother being lectured in public about how she could forget to feed herself, but she must never forget to feed the child. Between the mother and a child, it is considered natural and moral that the child must take precedence. Never mind the fact that we are not going through a famine, and both the mother and the child deserve and can afford proper care as required. Even when the occasion does not necessitate it, the mother is sometimes expected to cultivate a mentality of living and sacrificing for the sake of the child. But the thing about children is that they tend to grow up and grow independent. There may come a time when the child may not be dependent on the mother anymore. A fully-grown bird might want to leave the nest and spread its wings out in the world. What happens when the mother is not ready to acknowledge this independence, or even desire it? Can her role be taken too far when being taught to live for others? The mother figure cannot live for herself and consequently desires to keep the child within her orbit of influence, always. Carl Gustav Jung posits that the archetypal mother has aspects that can be both positive and negative. He also states that, in his personal belief, the influence of the mother figure does not come from herself but rather from "the archetype projected upon her" which allows her authority as well as a "mythological background" (83). He categorises positive motherhood as follows: The qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. (Jung 82)

On the opposite side, when maternal care takes the form of obsessive control and possessiveness, Jung writes, the negative mother archetype becomes akin to "anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (Jung 82). Many mother figures have been present in children's stories that embody the negative side of the mother archetype and become sources of destruction and oppression, especially the figure of the evil stepmother. Some of these sinister evil stepmothers can be found in stories like "Cinderella," "Hansel and Gretel," "Snow White," etc. According to *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of Folktales and Fairytales*, it is suggested by scholars that in some of these tales, especially collected by the Brothers Grimm, the evil mothers were changed into stepmothers in order to preserve the ideals of motherhood to some extent. It claims that in the earlier editions of "Hansel and Gretel" and "Snow White" published in *Children's and Household Tales*, it is the mother who persuades the father to abandon Hansel and Gretel in the forest because of their poverty and lack of food, and it is Snow White's mother that wants her



dead (639). However, for material meant for the consumption of children, it must have been thought prudent that the stepmother replace the natal mother, so as not to suggest the possibility of a malevolent natal mother in a household. In such tales, the evil mothers or Stepmothers are necessary plot devices that enable the stories to launch so that the child protagonist can embark on an adventure and triumph either through their own cleverness, like Hansel and Gretel manage, or via outside help like Snow White and Cinderella.

In Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, the character of the "other mother" or the "beldam" functions as the evil/terrible maternal figure representing the destructive side of the mother archetype that seeks complete control and possession. To launch an adventure story with child protagonists, a troubled familial situation is often used as a plot device so that the child character is forced to take things into her own hands and achieve some sort of insight and growth. This process of personal growth is comparable to Jung's "individuation," which leads to maturity and recognition of the self to form a stable personality. The other mother falls easily into the villain character type suggested by Vladimir Propp in *The Morphology of the Folktale*. The function of such characters traditionally has been to oppose the hero so that a quest can be initiated where the hero may meet challenges and receive rewards. Here, Coraline, who is the child hero, is on a journey that will lead her to a more mature outlook on life in general, and familial bonds in particular.

Neil Gaiman has not depicted parenthood as something ideal to be raised on a pedestal. Coraline's parents are loving but flawed. A lot of their attention goes into their work, which they prefer to do it from home on their computers. Many children in the post-COVID world with parents working from home will identify with that. Consequently, Coraline is left to entertain herself, though they do offer suggestions, like when her father says, "Count all the doors and windows. List everything Blue. Mount an expedition to discover the hot water tank. And leave me alone to work" (Gaiman 7) It is raining outside at this time in the story, and Coraline's mother, who is busy but still wary of the bad weather, has forbidden Coraline from going out in the rain. Coraline is shown to be obliging, as on both these counts, she does as she has been bid to do.

Coraline's parents do not believe in helicoptering and trust her to watch out for herself. There is no cloying dependency, but at the same time, there are issues like the parent's inability to cook the kind of food that Coraline would enjoy. The father enjoys making complicated recipes that Coraline does not find palatable. The mother is shown to be not interested in cooking and is mostly heating premade food. Her inability to cook for Coraline distances her from the



typical motherhood role expected of a nurturing mother often depicted as feeding her family. She is also a working parent, sometimes choosing to work on her computer instead of worrying about entertaining her child while she is bored. Coraline is simply asked to make use of what toys or books she has in her possession. Consequently, the child sometimes feels neglected.

Gaiman, in a way, brings the representation of motherhood from its idealised pedestal into something more fitting for normal humans. The father here can share the role of the feeder instead of food being solely the mother's domain. The mother is allowed to be flawed, not hyper-focused on the child, which does not make her any less loving in things that matter. She ensures that Coraline is well provided for, as in the instance of her shopping for school supplies, has a role in providing her family a safe place to live in, and she is firm with her child when she makes demands of her, which she finds frivolous. Gaiman shows the possibility of there being enough room for the child to grow independent of the parents in certain matters in a positive light.

In contrast, is the sinister other mother, also referred to as the beldam. Sensing Coraline's dissatisfaction with the amount of attention she has been receiving from her parents, she presents herself as the ideal replacement for her real mother. While Coraline's mother's cooking is often bland. "Her mother sometimes made chicken, but it was always out of packets... and it never tasted of anything" (33). The other mother is a consummate cook and provides the child with a wonderful spread "A huge golden-brown, roasted chicken, fried potatoes, tiny green peas... It tasted wonderful" (33). The beldam is also very demonstrative of her attentiveness towards Coraline, hardly taking her eyes off her, asking her to explore her surroundings while assuring her that she would be waiting for her to come back. We'll just wait here for you to come back," said her other father. When Coraline got to the front door, she turned back and looked at them. They were still watching her, waving, and smiling. (37)

The other mother wants to make Coraline realise that while her real parents are distracted by household chores and work; she will be the sole focus of the other parent's attention. Gaiman turns the trope of ideal motherhood on its head by treating food and nourishment as traps to inculcate dependence in the child. The other mother uses food as a lure to ensure Coraline stays with her. She represents the possessive and devouring mother archetype described by Jung. Unlike the real mother, she does not deny Coraline anything. She particularly gets the gloves for Coraline, whose real mother had denied her on account of them not being suitable for school. Even the other father she creates for Coraline is a puppet of her will entertaining the child to show her real parents as comparatively less attentive. She declares, "We're ready to



love you and play with you and feed you and make your life interesting" (70). In return, she would like to take Coraline's eyes and replace them with buttons, as a method to perpetually keep her soul within her supernatural realm where they could play happy families all the time.

While the real mother allows Coraline some distance and independence, the other mother wants her constantly under her thumb. When Coraline expresses her desire to go back to parents, she is punished by being locked up. When the punishment is over, the beldam picks Coraline up like her real mother used to do when she was little: "She picked Coraline up, just as Coraline's real mother had when Coraline was much younger, cradling the half-sleeping child as if she were a baby. The other mother carried Coraline into the kitchen and put her down very gently upon the countertop. Coraline struggled to wake herself up, conscious only for the moment of having been cuddled and loved, and wanting more of it, then realizing where she was and who she was with". (106) The Beldam not only infantilises her by picking her up like a much younger child, but she also takes advantage of Coraline's need for physical reassurance and touch. Coraline is forced to learn the difference between such manipulations and the genuine love her parents showed for her even if they were not so smotheringly demonstrative.

The individuation process for Coraline begins when she learns the difference between the conditional love of the other mother, which demands that she give up her independence and always remain in a childlike state, and the unconditional love that her real parents showed her where they do not smother her but allow her certain responsibilities towards herself. In the process, she is not only required to trick the other mother into releasing her but also to rescue her kidnapped parents. In this way, the bad mother character serves the function of launching a quest for the protagonist and setting up obstacles that allow the child protagonist to emerge as heroes in children's stories.

Coraline's parents are not portrayed as faultless beings with authority who know how to take care of everything. They are people with their struggles and whose relationship with their child is in flux. Here, Coraline gains a new perspective and learns that their love is genuine and supportive of her growth. The other mother, who waits on her hand and foot, is in turn devouring her growth and keeping her as a dependent infant always. Karen Coats writes that children tend to go through a state of transition in life where they are no longer "entangled with the mother" but develop a sense of self, independent from their parents (86). Coraline gains a new perspective on her mother when she realises that she may not be perfect, but she has her best interests at heart.



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