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The Devouring Mother in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

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Abstract

While the mother archetype traditionally symbolizes nurturing, care, and unconditional love, its negative aspect, the devouring mother, embodies traits of control, manipulation, and suffocation. Drawing on Jung's theories, and his concept of the collective unconscious and symbolic archetypes, particularly the mother archetype, through close textual analysis and theoretical insights, this paper explores the dual nature of the mother archetype and its psychological implications in Gillian Flynn's novel "*Sharp Objects*, 2006". The paper analyzes the character of Adora Crellin as an embodiment of the devouring mother archetype. Through Adora's behaviors of possessiveness and emotional abuse towards her daughters, Camille, Marian, and Amma. The paper illustrates the detrimental effects of a suffocating maternal influence on individual autonomy and psychological well-being shedding light on themes of dual maternal influence, traumas, and complex mother-daughter relationship. Through this psychological approach, the paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on maternal psychology and its impact on human development.

Keywords: Devouring Mother, Jungian archetypes, Gillian Flynn, Mother Archetype, *Sharp Objects*.

1.Introduction

Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, proposed the concept of archetypes as universal, symbolic patterns that exist in the collective unconscious of humanity. One of the archetypes is the mother archetype, which represents the primordial image of motherhood and maternal nurturing. In Jungian psychology, the mother archetype embodies both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, it symbolizes nurturing, care, protection, unconditional love, the mystical authority associated with women, profound wisdom, and spiritual strength. It represents the source of sustenance and emotional support, providing a sense of security and comfort. These traits contribute to well-being, add value, promote progress, and enhance productivity (Oran, 2021).

However, the mother archetype also encompasses darker, more complex aspects such as darkness, destruction, seduction, and toxicity. These elements, like destiny, are powerful and unavoidable. Jung described the negative aspect of the mother archetype as the "devouring mother," "On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (Jung, 1969, p.82), which embodies traits of possessiveness, control, manipulation, and engulfment. This negative manifestation of the mother archetype can be destructive and suffocating. The devouring mother may seek to maintain dominance and control over her children, often at the expense of their emotional well-being and autonomy. These characters often evoke feelings of fear, suffocation, and entrapment, reflecting the darker aspects of maternal influence. A devouring mother tends to rely too much on her children and focuses entirely on taking care of them. This kind of mother feels compelled to have children, and being a mother becomes their whole identity. The mother's sense of self is tightly bound to her role as a caregiver, causing her intense fear of losing those she cares for. This fear may drive her to become overly controlling. Additionally, she grapples with anxieties about being abandoned and often leans towards codependent behaviors (Heimkreiter, 2022). However, "It becomes nearly hard for the audience to refrain from making generalizations about parenting given the presence of a mother who frequently works exclusively for her children and another mother who consistently fails at her attempts for a variety of reasons". (Qassim & Azeez, 2023, p.48) because motherhood as

any other thing in the world represents a coin with two faces, one is good and the other is evil.

Jung believed that the unconscious mind consists of two layers: the personal and the collective. The personal unconscious contains suppressed individual experiences, while the collective unconscious is the deepest part of the mind shared by all humans. It holds ancient, instinctual structures with mysterious contents. Within the collective unconscious are Jungian archetypes, which are universal patterns of memories, instincts, and experiences. Among the most discussed archetypes are the shadow and the mother. The shadow represents the inherent 'dark side' of personality, connected to the deepest recesses of the unconscious. It encompasses our hidden desires, weaknesses, and areas of shame that we try to conceal (Murrow, 2020). Hence the paper focuses on these two Jungian archetypes since the devouring mother represents the shadow of the mother archetype.

Gillian Flynn (1971), like many others, began her writing career with murder mysteries. Throughout her literary works, Flynn often explores themes involving women and family dynamics. As a female author, she goes beyond just storytelling for entertainment. Flynn openly discusses and critiques taboos surrounding women, offering unique perspectives in her narratives (Tamir, 2021). In her novel "Sharp Objects," Adora Crellin embodies the devouring mother archetype, exerting control and manipulation over her daughters, Camille Marian, and Amma. Adora's behavior reflects the negative aspects of the mother archetype, as she exhibits possessiveness, and emotional abuse. Analyzing Adora's character through the lens of Jungian archetype theory provides insights into the complexities of maternal influence and the psychological impact of a suffocating and devouring mother figure on her daughters.

2.Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the psychoanalytic theories of Carl Jung, particularly his concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes. Jungian psychology provides a theoretical lens through which to explore the complex dynamics of the mother archetype and its manifestations, including the devouring mother, as depicted in Gillian Flynn's novel *Sharp Objects*.

3.Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the dual nature of the mother archetype and its psychological implications, focusing on the character of Adora Crellin in Gillian Flynn's novel *Sharp Objects*. Qualitative research is chosen for its ability to delve deeply into complex phenomena and understand subjective experiences.

The primary data source for this study is the novel *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn. Through close textual analysis, specific passages and scenes involving Adora Crellin's interactions with her daughters, Camille Marian and Amma, are examined. These passages are selected based on their relevance to the themes of maternal influence, control, and psychological impact.

Data analysis involves a systematic examination of the selected passages to identify patterns, themes, and nuances related to the devouring mother archetype. This process includes coding the text for key concepts, such as possessiveness, emotional abuse, and suffocation, guided by Jungian mother archetype.

4.Exploring Adora's Role as a Devouring Mother Archetype in *Sharp Objects*

Sharp Objects narrates the tale of Adora, a controlling and mentally unstable mother, and the suffering endured by her daughters, Camille, Amma, and their deceased sister Marian, due to their mother's actions. The novel opens with Camille Preaker, a young female journalist, who returns to her hometown of Wind Gap to investigate the murders of two young girls. However, this task is challenging for Camille because she has traumatic memories associated with Wind Gap, and she has barely spoken to her mother, Adora Crellin, in eight years. To succeed in Wind Gap and uncover the truth behind the murders, Camille must confront her past and find the strength to face her inner demons. She struggles with sleep disturbances and avoids returning to Wind Gap to evade memories of her traumatic experiences, including the death of her sister. Coping with her emotional pain, Camille resorts to self-harm, often using sharp objects like razor blades. At the end of the novel, it's discovered that Amma, the youngest daughter in the Crellin family, is responsible for the murders. This revelation is surprising because Amma, who has suffered at the hands of her own mother, has turned to violence herself (Monfared & Heravi, 2022).

Adora Crellin embodies the archetype of the devouring mother, a wealthy woman of aristocratic background from the Southern region. Afflicted with Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MBP) (Qodariyah et al., 2017), a psychological ailment is explained by a nurse at the pediatric ward describing the condition following the death of Adora's daughter, Marian, saying “

The caregiver, usually the mother, almost always the mother, makes her child ill to get attention for herself. You got Munchausen; you make yourself sick to get attention. You got MBP, you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mommy you are. Brothers Grimm, see what I mean? Like something, a wicked fairy queen would do. I'm surprised you haven't heard of it (Flynn, 2006, p.173).

Adora's dark shadow as a mother has left deep scars on her three daughters, with each responding in their own unique ways based on their personalities and circumstances. Despite their individual reactions, they are all ultimately harmed by their mother's actions. Firstly, Adora's favored daughter, Marian, was the first to be affected by her mother's manipulative behavior. Adora would shower Marian with attention, care, and love, but only when the child was sick. She poisons her daughter with medicine intentionally to keep her sick. Her obsession with Marian's illness was evident through her documentation in a diary, where she recorded every detail of Marian's condition and her interactions with doctors. Adora reveled in the praise she received from medical professionals, considering herself an exemplary mother saying that she “was an angel, and that every child should have a mother like me” (Flynn, 2006, p.183). However, the nurse at the hospital noticed Adora's unnatural behavior towards Marian, indicating that her affection was not genuine:

Mother shows no interest in Marian when she is well, in fact, seems to punish her. Mother holds child only when she is sick or crying. I and several other nurses, who for political reasons choose not to sign their names to my statement, believe strongly the child, as well as her sister, should be removed from the home for further observation (Flynn, 2006, pp.72-73).

Adora's diary entry following Marian's death reveals her intense fixation on her daughter and the tragedy itself: "Marian is dead. I couldn't stop. I've lost 12 pounds and am skin and bones. Everyone's been incredibly kind." (Flynn, 2006, p.183). This entry asserts Adora's unhealthy preoccupation with Marian's illness and death.

The second victim is the protagonist Camille who is away opposite to Marian, she is stubborn, and aware of her mother's bad influence on her and her sisters. She refuses to end up like her sister, "I remember being a kid, rejecting all those tablets and medicines, and losing her by doing so." (Flynn, 2006, p.147). Camille recalls rejecting medications as a child, fearing she might lose herself like Marian did. Through Camille's perspective, readers witness the harmful effects of Adora's destructive mothering. Camille recounts events of Marian's illness and her mother's excessive attention towards her, that is contrasted with Adora's neglect and emotional distance towards Camille herself. This neglect seems to have shaped Camille's upbringing and her mental well-being, fueling her resentment towards her mother and contributing to their strained relationship. Adora admits that:

I've decided today to stop caring for Camille and focus on Marian. Camille has never become a good patient—being sick only makes her angry and spiteful. She doesn't like me to touch her. I've never heard of such a thing. She has Joya's spite. I hate her. Marian is such a doll when she's ill, she dotes on me terribly and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears (Flynn, 2006, p.183).

Adora's clear admission to hate her own child reflects the tense mother-daughter relationship and Adora's own mental struggles. Camille, on the other hand, suffers greatly from childhood trauma, especially from the loss of her sister Marian at the hands of their mother. The narrative reveals Camille's failure to process her trauma; she is haunted by her past, and her pain is visibly etched onto her body. She resorts to self-harm, admitting, "I am a cutter [...] Also a snipper, a slicer, a carver, a jabber [...] I have a purpose. My skin, you see, screams" (Flynn, 2006, p.48). She uses her mother's steak knife to get pain. Describing her first experience with cutting at the age of thirteen, she carved the word "wicked" into her skin and found that cutting provided relief "like a child along red imaginary line. Cleaning myself. Digging in deeper. Cleaning myself [...] Wicked. Relief" (Flynn, 2006, p.48). Camille embodies words literally, with the words on her body becoming her main narrative, a means of expressing the trauma she cannot articulate. Her troubled relationship with her mother is the root of her trauma and self-harm. When Adora sees Camille's scarred body during a shopping trip for a party dress, she says "Oh, dear God... Look what you've done to yourself... I hope

you just loved it. I hope you can stand yourself." (Flynn, 2006, p.94). So, instead of showing sympathy, she reacts with resentment and anger.

Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, an American feminist critic, delve into the notion of the "good mother" versus the "bad mother." They focus on what they term the new momism, which essentially boils down to what they call intensive mothering. This involves a constant cycle of scrutiny: we watch ourselves, others watch us, and we watch others watching us. (2004) It's a constant struggle for mothers to live up to societal standards of good parenting. However, if a mother is perceived as falling short, she faces harsh judgment, often resulting in intervention from authorities (Ladd -Taylor & Umansky, 1998).

The relationship between Adora and Camille can be shortened by this quote: "I blame my mother. A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort." (Flynn, 2006, p.189) Here, Camille directly holds Adora responsible for the fear and trauma she has endured. Through this, Flynn critiques the stereotype of women as the source of their children's suffering. Camille's traumatic experiences stem from Adora's maternal actions. Despite Adora's meticulous care for her child's health, it paradoxically inflicts lasting damage on Camille's childhood memory (Tamir& Elfira, 2021).

The third victim is Adora's youngest daughter, Emma, portrayed as the most compliant and favored child. While Adora treats Camille with coldness and cruelty, she lavishes Amma with love and affection. As the story unfolds, the narrative unveils the underlying motivations for this disparate treatment. Unlike Camille who rebels against her mother's authority, Amma complies with her mother's wishes, even allowing her to administer medication that makes her ill. Amma not only tolerates this mistreatment but also relishes in the attention and care she receives from her mother.

Amma alternates between the personas of a vulnerable child and a merciless murderer, portraying an innocent angel within the confines of her home, while transforming into a sinister devil when out in the streets. Amma willingly assumes the role of a little doll for her mother, as evidenced by her statement: "I wear this for Adora. When I'm home, I'm her little doll" (Flynn, 2006, p.34). Amma thrives on the attention she receives from her mother, finding satisfaction in it. However, "such childish things" are "left at home" (Flynn, 2006, p.61), Amma undergoes a significant transformation not just in her appearance and demeanor, but she also transitions into a dangerous individual

when she is away from home. In public, Amma changes from a doll-like figure in a sundress to someone wearing a miniskirt, platform sandals, and a tube top. Furthermore, she swaps the dollhouse she plays with at home for a lifestyle involving alcohol, sex, and association with a gang.

Adora's excessive preoccupation with her daughter results in her creating a duplicate of herself in Emma, who in turn becomes fixated on her mother. This reciprocal obsession causes Emma to experience intense emotions. It is evident that Amma's motivation for committing these gruesome murders is jealousy; she envied the attention her mother was giving to these girls. However, the abuse Amma endured at the hands of her mother has transformed into a deep-seated anger and propensity for violence. Consequently, Amma transforms into a merciless murderer and develops an obsession with killing. As she extracts the teeth from her victims, Amma uses them to adorn the marble floor of her dollhouse. The dollhouse itself transcends being a mere child's game for Amma. It serves as an exact replica of the Crellin household, mirroring its design and color scheme, and holds the dark secrets of familial suffering and trauma (Jaber, 2022). While Camille conversing with her sister, she refers to the dollhouse as Amma's fancy, and observes that her words flowed gently from her mouth but "the phrase was definitely my mother's. Her little doll, learning to speak just like Adora" (Flynn, 2006, p. 35) The dollhouse shows the child in Amma, yet it also reveals a dark and malevolent side of the thirteen-year-old girl that mirrors her mother's shadow.

The recurring theme of dolls in the narrative isn't solely tied to Amma; rather, it consistently portrays Adora as a doll-like figure. This motif reflects the construction of femininity within the story and underscores the tension between motherhood and childhood. Adora, the mother, is depicted as childlike in her mannerisms and appearance. She is described as resembling "a girl's very best doll, the kind you don't play with," (Flynn, 2006, p. 21) which both infantilizes her and underscores her fixation on children. While she cherishes her image as a perfect lady and hostess, her primary preoccupation lies in her role as a mother. Notably, this portrayal of Adora as a doll echoes Amma's fascination with the dollhouse.

Adora embodies the shadow aspect of the mother archetype, yet she is also depicted as traumatized due to experiencing violence and aggression from her own mother, Joya. Camille, her daughter, recounts how Joya subjected Adora

to strict rules similar to those imposed on workers: no drinking, smoking, cursing, with mandatory church service. Adora's dark traits can be attributed to the neglect, destruction, and harsh treatment she endured from her caregiver, which stifled any positive emotions throughout her life. The relationship between a caregiver and an infant significantly shapes their interactions with others; a neglected child may develop feelings of resentment and mistreatment towards others. This phenomenon, termed repressed or displaced aggression, can manifest as psychological and physical abuse, control, and exploitation directed towards others, as the original abuse is redirected onto new targets (Fejer & Abduelredheh, 2021).

According to Bandura, a renowned American psychologist, children acquire aggressive behaviors by means of attention, retention, and motivation as well as through the imitation of their parents and friends (Bandura, 1977). So, Camille and Emma's aggressive behaviors are acquired because of their mother. Adora, on the other hand, exhibits aggression and frustration due to the absence of certain neurotic needs such as affection and warmth from her mother, Joya. Adora has endured her mother's violent actions, which have resulted in emotional difficulties such as anxiety, and depression. In her personal diaries, she vividly describes the treatment she receives from her mother:

When I was a little girl, my mother took me into the North Woods and left me, ... She didn't say a word to me, in fact. Just told me to get in the car. I was barefoot. When we got there, she took me by the hand and very efficiently pulled me along the trail, then off the trail, then dropped my hand and told me not to follow her. I was eight, just a small thing. My feet were ripped into strips by the time I got home, and she just looked up at me from the evening paper and went to her room ... When a child knows that young that her mother doesn't care for her, bad things happen (Flynn, 2006, p. 180).

In brief, *Sharp Objects* delves into the intricate realm of motherhood and the entrapment of female characters within cycles of violence and their own traumatic family history. By utilizing the mystery surrounding the story of the deceased girls, the story explores the profound psychological aspects of motherhood and the repetitive nature of unresolved childhood trauma perpetuated by the consuming mother figure. This exploration highlights the

persistent yet futile attempts made by these characters to break free from the cycle of violence and trauma perpetuated by the devouring mother.

Conclusions

In Jungian psychology, the devouring mother archetype symbolizes the darker aspects of motherhood. She is characterized by excessive control, manipulation, and emotional suffocation. This archetype embodies the shadow side of motherhood, where maternal instincts become distorted and destructive. She may appear nurturing on the surface, but her love is possessive and stifling, often resulting in psychological harm to her children.

In *Sharp Objects*, Adora embodies the devouring mother archetype, exerting control over her daughters through manipulation and emotional abuse. Adora's influence on her three daughters is indeed profound. Each daughter responded to Adora's behavior differently, yet her overbearing and manipulative nature casts a shadow over all of them. The first daughter, Camille, has a particularly toxic relationship with her mother. Adora's constant criticism, emotional manipulation, and abuse have left Camille scarred both emotionally and psychologically. However, being a strong, stubborn, and aware girl makes her respond differently unlike her sisters, she refuses to submit to her mother and translates her anger and fear to self-harm, unhealthy coping mechanisms as a result of her mother's influence. The second deceased daughter Marian has a complex relationship with her mother. Adora's overprotectiveness and obsession with maintaining an image of perfection contributed to Marian's fragile health and subsequent death. Marian's response to her mother's dominance is quite passive. She was an obedient and harmless child, her inability to rebel against her mother, costs her life. Moreover, Adora's inability to accept Marian's illness and her death further illustrates her damaging influence on her children. Finally, Amma, the youngest daughter, initially appears to be the most sheltered from Adora's harmful influence. However, it becomes evident that Amma has internalized many of her mother's toxic behaviors. She is a manipulative, wicked girl, she copies her mother's actions and thrives for attention and control, mirroring Adora's traits. This fake obedience leads her to have a dual life outside as she manipulates her mother in return and pretends to be a naïve doll in her mother's presence. So, her mother's obsession with her leads her to be obsessed with her mother's attention and develop a destructive jealousy that leads her consequently to be a merciless murderer.

Adora's influence on her daughters perpetuates a cycle of dysfunction within the family. Her need for control and perfectionism suppresses their individuality and emotional growth. By exploring Adora's character through the lens of the devouring mother archetype and the concept of the shadow, we gain insight into the complex dynamics of mother-daughter relationships, the lasting impact of maternal influence on the psyche, and how her actions shape their personalities, relationships, and ultimately, their fates in the story.

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الأم الملتهمة في رواية (أشياء حادة) لجيليان فلين

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المستخلص

بينما يرمز نموذج الأم تقليديا إلى التنشئة والرعاية والحب غير المشروط ، فإن جانبه السلبي ، الأم الملتهمة ، يجسد سمات السيطرة والتلاعب والخنق. بالاعتماد على نظريات يونغ و مفهومه لنماذج اللاواعي والرمزية الجماعية، ولا سيما نموذج الأم ومن خلال التحليل النصي الدقيق والرؤى النظرية، يستكشف هذا البحث الطبيعة المزدوجة لنموذج الأم وأثاره النفسية في رواية جيليان فلين "الأشياء الحادة، 2006". كما وتحلل هذه الدراسة شخصية أدورا كريلين باعتبارها تجسيدا لنموذج الأم الملتهمة من خلال سلوكيات أدورا المتمثلة في التملك والإساءة العاطفية تجاه بناتها ، كميل و ماريان وأما. توضح الدراسة الآثار الضارة لتأثير الأمهات الخانق على الاستقلالية الفردية والرفاهية النفسية كما و تلقي الضوء على موضوعات التأثير المزدوج للأم. الصدمات النفسية والعلاقة المعقدة بين الأم وابنتها. من خلال نهج النظرية النفسية ، يهدف البحث إلى المساهمة في تحليل اوسع عن سيكولوجية الامومة وتأثيرها على التنمية البشرية.

الكلمات الدالة : الأم الملتهمة، نماذج يانغ، جيليان فلين، نموذج الأم، أشياء حادة.