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Film Analysis #1

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Motherhood: Monstrous or Divine

Why did 'mother' become a 'murderer?' The fact that the pronunciation of 'mother' and 'murder' is similar is not a coincidence in the film *Mother*. The film *Mother*, directed by Bong Joon ho in 2009, eccentrically portrays motherhood. This film is about Mother trying to prove that her son, Dojun is innocent. Her love towards Dojun is absolute. Mother, in the film *Mother*, is not even given a name. She is always called 'Mother,' and is never by her name, thus remain unknown. This is because her core identification is built as 'Dojun's Mother.' Most of the motherhood-themed films portray the scarification of a devoted and divine mother. However, in this film, it portrays the dark side of this 'divine love.' **Bong Joon Ho intentionally causes discomfort; this film *Mother* ruins the original idea of sacred love; it reveals the power of motherhood as a monstrous concept.**

The oddity behind Mother's devoted love is first depicted throughout the plot development. The exposition of the plot shows Dojun, 28-year son with the mental capacity of a child living with an over-protective mother in a setting of an unnamed, small village. It is shown at the beginning of the film that Dojun's mother is a dedicated one. The incompetency of Dojun causes Mother to show love with utmost care, and it shows that Dojun has not gain the independency as an adult from his mother. The rising action starts from this inciting incident, the death of Ah Jung, a high school girl in the small village. In this case, Dojun gets arrested as a suspect, which approaches Mother as an extremely serious crisis. Mother denies the situation that her son is being accused of being a murderer and desperately investigates by herself to find who she thinks a 'real murderer' is. She searches everywhere in the town to get

a clue to prove that her son is innocent from the case. Her unconditional trust and her lonely, eager investigation give an implication of Mother's divine love. She is able to sacrifice, and willing to do everything for her son. Nevertheless, as the plot heads towards the climax, Mother's love is no longer shown as dedication but reveals a sense of grotesqueness. From Mother's investigation, she suspects an old man to be the 'real murderer' of the murder case and visits the old man's house to carry out her search. Despite her certainty, the film builds up tension as the old man turns out to be the only witness and confirms Dojun is the real murderer of the incident. The film arrives at the climax where Mother, extremely raged by the old man telling the truth Mother continued to deny, kills him with a spanner. Mother then burns off the old man's house in order to erase the evidence, in case it could be unfavourable towards her son. This moment is a disclosure of the hideous facade of maternal love that has been hidden. The film then proceeds to the falling action, where Jongpal, another disabled man of the town gets caught as a suspect of the case. The film concludes with Mother dancing in complicated emotion of guilt. The plot first depicts Mother's love as if it is divine and devoted, but throughout the expansion of the film, it opens up the monstrosity inside behind.

This sense of monstrosity behind the dedication is also represented through the usage of color 'red.' Red is one of the most powerful of all colours. In one way, it symbolises passion and desire, but on the other hand, it could symbolise violence and danger. In contrast to the cool, calming colors used as a background for the film, red is used as a color to represent the duplicity of Mother's love, divine and monstrous. When Mother visits the old man's house to find evidence that he is the real murderer, she wears reddish colored clothes which is conspicuous by contrast with blueish color of the house. Before Mother visits the lawyer to ask for defence of his son, she puts on red lipstick in centre of the background with blue sky and green field. In this sense, red is used to symbolize desire. Her earnest devotions to Dojun is revealed by red, and it emphasises how desperate Mother is. Contrarily, red is also

used as a symbol for 'danger.' As Mother hits the old man's head with the spanner, the red blood splatters on her face. The scene is then filled with red as she burns the old man's house to cover up what she has done. The violent murder Mother has committed is shown with red, which implies danger and brutal love. Thus, red as a portrayal of motherhood indicates both divine love and danger.

Along with the duality of Mother, the concept of 'unstable memory' as a motif further emphasize mother's monstrous love. The concept of 'memory' is repetitious in the film. Mother has the ability to manipulate Dojun's memory, which gives a creepy sense about her influence towards her son. This motif of 'memory manipulated by the mother' starts when Dojun is a child. Dojun loses the ability to memorize clearly, in other words becoming mentally disabled, due to his mother giving him pesticides to drink. Mother took away Dojun's ability to memorize by trying suicide with her son. Later on, when Dojun gets arrested, Mother demands her son to massage the temple, beside his eyes, to memorize some evidence that could prove that he is not the murderer. According to Mother, the 'cursed temple' is a way of Dojun bringing back his memory. Her forcing him to get his memory back is also another way of altering the ability to recall. As a result of that massage, Dojun eventually recovers a memory, which however is not related to the incident. He instead remembers Mother giving him pesticide when he was five. Mother gets shocked that he remembered it and creeps out with guilt. What she then tries to do is put acupuncture on him. 'Acupuncture' is a tool to erase bad memories and forget every negative factors in mind. The symbolism of 'pesticide,' 'cursed temple' and 'acupuncture' all work in concert to reveal that Mother is entirely in charge of Dojun's memories. This motif of mother controlling Do Jun's 'memory' is also a portrayal of how monstrous she is, as she controls every aspect of her son.

Mother's possession of Dojun eventually makes him grow into a monster, which is emphasized by the imagery of Dojun's hidden face. In the film, shots of Dojun's side face

are frequently used. Whenever Dojun has meal with Mother, Dojun faces the wall on the left; the scene only portrays his left face. In the visiting room of jail, Dojun sits tilted facing the wall instead of facing front, where Mother sits. Thus camera only shows the right side of Dojun throughout the visiting scene. When Mother tries to communicate with Dojun, he then turns his body to confront his mother directly. However, he covers his face by putting on one hand on his face; he only reveals his right face. When he slowly takes his hand off of his face, his bruises and scar due to the fight in jail are revealed. In contrast to the unscathed side of the face he has been showing, the hidden face is terribly messed up. This is the part where it becomes clear that monster is indwelling inside Dojun. On the surface, Dojun looks completely fine and innocent, but he has been hiding the dark trait inside. This imagery is also displayed in the flashback of old man remembering the scene of Dojun's murder; his face is blurred, making it not recognizable. The whole murder scene barely shows the silhouette of Dojun throwing a heavy rock to kill Ahjung. This imagery that evokes ambiguity that hides a part of Do Jun's face is to emphasize the hidden monster inside him. He looks like he knows nothing, but he is a man who could kill a high school girl without hesitation. This could be analyzed that the monstrous love from the mother has actually created a monster. He has always been completely manufactured by Mother, which in turn made him a monster.

The hideousness of Mother's abnormal love reaches its extreme by the prominent 'dance.' The film opens and ends with the 'dance' of Mother. At the opening of the movie, Mother stands alone in the broad field, where only withered weeds abound. She first looks around as if she is scared or being chased by something, and slowly unravels the awkward dance. She dances with blank eyes as if she is out of her mind, and her face is empty as if all emotions are paralyzed. She often gestures as if she is crying, but soon smiles with her eyes covered. These awkward and weird movements are also reminiscent of a mad woman. This dance also overlaps with the last scene of the movie. In the last scene, Mother is on a tour bus

with a group of middle-aged women. Right after she gives acupuncture on her thighs that make her 'forget everything,' all of the noise stops, and the film becomes silent for a moment. This is also a symbolic representation of the paralysation of all senses, which includes the basic moral standards. Then, she joins the group of dancing women. Mother's frantic gestures that shake like lunatic people make her look like a woman that lost her mind. This is further developed by the shadow from the sunset covers Mother's face making it hard even to recognize her. In *Mother*, the dance expresses deep emotions and thoughts that cannot be expressed in language. Her pathetic and sorrowful dance, which continues from the beginning to the end of the movie, is her own words that cannot be said. Her perception of reality that she cannot escape from the current tragic situation and agony is expressed as awkward dance moves as if she were venting her innermost thoughts one by one. According to the standards of ethics and morality as a human being, she should confess and atone for the murder she has committed. However, she could not, because doing it would admit the murder her son Dojun has done. She has to become a monster herself for her son.

As can be seen in the closing scene of *Mother* of Mother's frantic dance, the reckless love of motherhood is both divine and grotesque. *Mother* has this unique gaze towards motherhood. Motherhood has always been represented by a holy love that should be sacred. It is only a patriarchal interpretation of motherhood and the idea is left limited. However, film *Mother* casts doubt to this original idea; it shows an entirely different view towards the divine love, and the unusual trait of the film is amplified even more; Mother is not just a life-giving being, but could become one who keeps her child in an eternal immature prison, taking vitality for growth, locking in mother's arms.

Works Cited

Mother. Directed by Bong Joon Ho, performances by Hye Ja Kim, Won Bin, Jin Goo, and Woo Hee Cheon, CJ entertainment, 2009.