

# Extreme Characters and Perverse Relationships in a Realistic Context

## Taking Bong Joon-Ho's Film *'Mother'* as an Example

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### ABSTRACT

Based on the film *Mother* directed by Korean director Bong Joon-ho, the study critically analyzes the extreme and paranoid characteristics of the leading role Hye-ja, who is willing to commit crimes to save her mentally handicapped son from prison; this has sparked an intense discussion and public examination of the social underclass suffering from the hardships of life. Under the backdrop of the lack of patriarchal patriarchy in Korea, the study also aims to reflect the perverse symbiotic relationship between the mother, Hye-ja, and her son, Do-joon.

**Keywords:** *Mother, Extremes, Crime, Mother-child relationship, Symbiosis.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the mother has long been an enduring object of representation in film and television. For the mainstream group, most directors have focused their attention on the traditional image of the mother who acts out both the miniature of ordinary women and the demonstration of the universal virtues, such as resilience, simplicity, and kindness. However, a desperate mother struggling on the margins of society becomes vivid in the film *Mother*.

The film describes a story of a single mother who makes her living by conducting unlicensed acupuncture treatments and running a small pharmacy. One day, her son Do-joon with a mental handicap was tricked by the incompetent authorities into signing a confession and was imprisoned as a murderer after a schoolgirl Moon Ah-jung was discovered dead on the rooftop. In order to clarify her son's innocence, Hye-ja set out on an isolated quest to find the truth. However, she was shocked when a junk collector revealed that he had witnessed Do-joon inadvertently kill the girl. In her desperation and madness, Hye-ja finally bludgeoned the old scavenger with a wrench and set fire to his house. Different from the conventional movies representing the spiritual and beloved motherhood, Hye-ja is not a delicate and artistic personification. Without the usual glorification, this film upheld a restrained attitude toward the extreme and complex aspects of the personality of the mother. In this

article, the characteristics of the mother and the mother-son relationship between Hye-ja and Do-joon will be thoroughly examined.

### 2. ALTERNATIVE MOTHERHOOD IN THE FACE OF CRAZY PARANOIA

As one of the distinguished filmmakers in Korea, Bong Joon-ho is known for challenging the so-called genre models and advocating for cultural reflection. For the purpose of exploring humanity, the film *Mother* portrayed a woman who transformed from a noble mother striving to redress her son's grievances to an insane paranoiac desperately struggling to cover up for her criminal son after touching on his core. It is clear that this is not a genre-defying hymn to great motherhood [1], which emphasizes on mother's natural provision of hope and support, but rather a subversion of the traditional Korean maternal genre, rendering the film as seductive as a muddy, wet swamp.

The absurdity and madness of the mother can be attributable to the circumstances in which she lives. In Korea, where the status of housewives is generally low, Hye-ja struggles to make ends meet with her relatively low salary after her husband abandons the family. In desperate poverty, the mother tried to commit a murder-suicide on herself and Do-joon using insecticide. However, with this failure suicide, Hye-ja was brought to the realization that the legacy of her son's perceived

foolishness was a legacy of the incident. The insane act of "mutilating a child in his childhood" is a perfect match for Hye-ja [2].

Hye-ja also internalized the influence of the unstable factors in the surroundings into her abnormal mental state, manifesting a frantic desire for absolute dominion and surveillance over her son. For example, Hye-ja would always watch her son whatever he was doing, check repeatedly that his environment was safe enough, and make sure his son had taken the pills. Hye-ja's self-righteous motherly love is so irrational that it turns into terrifying surveillance. The son is tired of being with his mother but unable to get rid of her, so when he is sentenced to prison, he appears to unwittingly yell out to his mother the words he has been holding in his heart -- I never want to see you again. At this time, this insane mother sentenced her child from the invisible cage of receiving daily close surveillance to a real prison.

The otherness of this mother is also reflected in the paranoia of her character, which refers to an obsession with being highly prejudiced toward one side. According to Professor Zhou Yong, "Characterization should always maintain the character's initiative." In this film, the driving force actuates the initiative of Hye-ja is her paranoia. Even for a regular doctor, it should be prudent to treat an intellectually disabled patient with the closest attention in a special department in a hospital. Nevertheless, Hye-ja not only performs illegal acupuncture treatments on her son for more than ten years but also prepares him what she calls a "manly medicine". It becomes clear later in the film that the so-called treatment is ineffective, judging whether from the sexual impotence of her son or from cognitive inability to recall the scenes of the murdering day and prove his innocence.

Furthermore, the mother's paranoia also permeated the educational endeavor of Do-joon as she tells his son to retaliate against any vicious or unconscious offense. If the mother hadn't raised Do-joon in such a neurotic manner, he might have laughed off the night when Ah-jung called him a fool instead of throwing a stone at her, which led to the murder. The paranoia even becomes a force that drives Hye-ja to investigate the case herself and prove her son's innocence, which in fact, is what her paranoia thinks to be the truth. Therefore, apart from the phone of Ah-jung, Hye-ja hasn't found any valid clues, and she merely delves into the negative information or comment on the victim [3] until Jong-bae is mistakenly arrested for being considered the real murderer. All the above-mentioned facts demonstrate that Hye-ja is distinct from the usual mothers as being insane, paranoid, and otherworldly.

For many years, under the patriarchal system in Korea, the mother is forced to stand on the balance between the law and human kindness in order to save her son. She shatters the traditional image of a mother and

amplifies her paranoia and madness in extreme social circumstances. Through the portrayal of the mother, director Bong Joon-ho examines the plight of the isolated underclass and also questions the inaction of public power in Korea.

### **3. CRIME AND ATONEMENT IN ANTI-TYPE MOTHERS**

The conflicts experienced by the characters in the film are often the main attraction for the audience, and the characterization, fate, and complicated mental state of the character are also vividly presented. Hye-ja is depicted as a person who is constantly struggling to reconcile crime and redemption.

Although Do-joon didn't die in the pesticide incident, Hye-ja is negatively and profoundly affected by the indelible guilt from her criminal act of poisoning her son, which rationalizes her later paranoid behavior. Accordingly, when her mentally handicapped son is taken away by the police and identified as a murderer, the mother does not hesitate to prove her son's innocence because she shoulders the responsibility to devote unconditional favoritism to not only compensating for what she owes her son but also atoning for her sins. So she begged the police to reopen the investigation by treating him with a seafood buffet in the hope that he would defend her son and even sneaked into the home of gangster Jin-tae to find the so-called physical evidence, a golf club with lipstick marks. The mother is undoubtedly an obvious victim of the whims of an impatient, unsympathetic society and the underprivileged groups suffering the oppression of the Korean authority.

Following Ah-jung's mobile phone, Hye-ja discovers that Ah-jung entered the abandoned building to trade sex for food with a junk collector. By using the excuse of voluntary acupuncture, Hye-ja arrives at the old man's house and accidentally knows that the old scavenger has seen Do-joon throw a giant rock at Ah-jung. Out of breath and screaming in denial, the mother raises a spanner and smashes it into the old scavenger just as he confesses to reporting the incident to the police. After she sets the whole house on fire with trembling hands, the only witness to the case disappears in flames. As the killer of the only witness, the mother falls back into crime with her highly motivated desire to redeem herself. This time, instead of atoning for her crime, the mother places one of the acupuncture needles in the point that erases bad memories during the bus trip, which symbolizes complete denial and forgetfulness from the crime. In Hye-ja, the deepest part of human nature can be explored where the superimposition of warmth and evil as well as the alternating confrontation between atonement and crime compose the complete maternal love [1].

Due to the expensive production cost, filmmakers will usually replicate and duplicate successful film patterns in order to secure cost recovery while keeping some extent of novelty and innovation. However, in Bong Joon-ho's film, the portrayal of the mother is a bold break from the so-called Hollywood system of embedded feedback loops that ensure the successful replication of storylines and techniques [4]. Instead of representing a figure of restrained and polite mother common in traditional films, the film ends with the mother making a decision to oblivion over atonement, which goes against justice in the general sense. The boldness of the typical anti-genre character illustrates that the director uses his personal style to manifest the grievances of the Korean underclass.

Although the character Do-joon is not the main subject of analysis, he acts as the chief culprit of the mother's repeated struggle between crime and atonement. It all begins with the mother's attempt to commit suicide with her son, the consequences of which make Do-joon have a mental deficiency. The most striking feature of the character is his constant desire to be independent and different. For example, when the police in prison scornfully tease that Do-joon doesn't look like a murderer, he retorts that he can learn to be dangerous and aggressive. It can be acknowledged that rather than a feisty and childish reaction, Do-joon subconsciously desires to escape from being considered a disresponsible and weak man. On the dark night of the murder, Do-joon has considered whether to seek outside aid; however, he chose to end the accident in his own way by hanging the injured girl like a garment high in the air, which seems to represent a startling poster child to declare his act of independence. Tormented by her own guilt, his mother, Hye-ja, becomes a stumbling block hampering Do-joon's development as an able-bodied individual. She regards her son as an appendage and even lavishes an excessive and suffocating love on him, which not only leaves her struggling with her own guilt and atonement but also renders him to be of little self-esteem. In this perpetual sense of oppression, the mother successfully transforms Do-joon into a complete social outcast, an object of power and revenge, and a spiritually unweaned person.

#### **4. SAD MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS AND THE SOCIAL MANIFESTATIONS OF REALITY**

##### ***4.1. The Perverse Symbiosis Between Mother And Son Without Distinction***

A symbiotic relationship refers to the situation where two organisms live in such a close and mutually beneficial relationship of interdependence that it is difficult to separate them. If separated, both parties would suffer greatly, fall apart, or die. However, the

symbiosis relationship between mother Hye-ja and son Do-joon is rather perverse and twisted.

This relationship is, first and foremost, physiologically abnormal in nature. Margaret S. Mahler was a Hungarian pathological psychologist and psychoanalyst who introduced the concept of symbiotic relationships between human beings [5]. She believes that newborns are normally in a state of integration with their mothers throughout the first five months of life, with the two being merged into one entirety [5]. A gradual differentiation towards separation and the formation of the awareness of self occurs around the age of half a year. Any setback at this stage can lead to a stagnation of development and a crisis in numerous relationships in adulthood. Judging from the above, the relationship between Hye-ja and her son is a monstrous symbiosis as they fail to be thoroughly separated. To illustrate, the mother decides to die with her son as she feels they are still a whole entirety deep down in her heart. This morbid relationship continued with long-adult Do-joon instinctively taking off his coat and sleeping with Hye-ja even when he came home drunk in the middle of the night. Hye-ja is used to prying into her son's privacy with abandon and arranging everything for him in advance.

Furthermore, this abnormal symbiotic relationship is also anchored in their aberrant mental state and shared memories. Although Do-joon is positioned as a cognitively disabled person in the film, it can be speculated that he can be capable of possessing a normal intellect. He can converse normally when Hye-ja inquires about the details of the crime, and he even confesses to hanging Ah-jung's body on the roof in the hope that someone would see it soon and rescue her. Also, when he hands Hye-ja the acupuncture box she left at the murder scene, the unspoken gaze between mother and son is more likely to be a hint suggesting their twisted symbiotic relationship embodied in their shared experiences. The mother covers up her son's manslaughter by killing the witness herself, while her son undoubtedly disposes of the evidence of her killing by picking up the dropped acupuncture box, which has been reduced to ashes. The two are, in fact, inherently complicit with each other, being aware of each other's killings yet ultimately keeping their mouths shut.

In this perverse symbiotic relationship, their mutual dependence on each other has long been irrevocable. Despite Do-joon's unwillingness and reluctance to obey, he chooses to be his mother's accomplice and to be a mentally handicapped child, thereby maintaining this monstrous relationship.

#### **4.2. Reflections On The Aberrant Mother-Child Relationship In The Real World**

Bong Joon-Ho's concern and depiction of this abnormal mother-son relationship are not just for the sake of attracting the audience's attention but a call for the awakening of the social consciousness. With a sociology background, he is keenly aware of the existence of such perverse symbiosis between parents and children in real life, which has led to a number of vicious incidents. This abnormal mother-son relationship of 'one survives, one dies' is not an artistic expression in the cinema but rather a common occurrence in society as art imitates life. For instance, a 31-year-old housewife committed suicide with two children by jumping off a building in 2017. In the same year in Beijing, a mother attempted to jump and compel her daughter to accompany her even though her child shouted she didn't want to die. Therefore, the mother in Bong Joon-ho's film has emerged as a dagger stabbed precisely into this sensational social news.

The abnormal mother-child relationship is usually revealed by the mother's distorted desire to have an incompetent child who can overcome her innermost fears of separation from her child [6]. All of her spiritual sustenance is tied up with her child; otherwise, she cannot survive. The child, in turn, acts as a carrier in this perverse relationship, matching the mother's thoughts and piously and willingly giving up his soul. Therefore, it is worth reflecting on how to shift away from this abnormal symbiotic relationship so that both mother and child can acquire a sense of autonomy, independence, and individuality. First and foremost, all mothers should understand and accept the fact that the children are not an appendage but ultimately independent individuals in terms of emotional awareness and physical well-being, so they are no longer obliged to live life the way mothers want it. It is rather detrimental if mothers subconsciously avoid the moment of separation, either emotionally cry or rationally inform their child of the benefits of a monstrous coexistence due to inner hardship and desolation, or even verbally threaten the children. The children are confronted with not only a deformed mother-child relationship but also the loss of the right to form an independent personality, which demonstrates extreme pathological selfishness. Furthermore, children should be guided by their parents to develop the ability to establish independent judgement and personality, and to establish a healthy conversation with their mothers, rather than a morbid fusion of dependence on everything. The ultimate essence of growing up is being genuine to oneself and embracing a sense of responsibility.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

*Mother*, an innovation created by Bong Joon-ho in the realm of film, substitutes the excessive mythic

attributes in certain narrative films with an artistic documentary [7]. The film is no longer designed for resolving all the contradictions and conflicts happening in real life but as a realistic representation of people's existing state in Korea, especially those of the lower class. It has revealed the brutal social events and exposed the audience to the reality of suffering and sorrow.

In order to draw a thorough conclusion, this paper intends to analyze the movie from four different perspectives. Concerning the characters of the leading figures, in the absence of patriarchal governance in Korea, most mothers choose to remain silent as they are treated as the representatives of the lower strata in the social stratification. But this movie exhibits a mother who is brave enough to fight against the state apparatus and the social hierarchy in a desperate situation. The harsh portrayal of the extreme paranoia and insanity bears significant ramifications for enhancing the theme of women's empowerment in Korea [6].

In terms of filmmaking, the aim of the study is to distinguish whether the director's own contribution through plot arrangement and characterization shaping or the value of the formulaic success of a certain genre has improved the quality of the film's narrative. The film is not a commercial success in the sense that it is a Hollywood-style replication of genre storylines and characters which satisfies audiences' appetites, as in the case of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Harry Potter* series. Rather, it is the director's bold attempt to construct an abnormal mother and a non-cliched crime and atonement scenario that makes a remarkable contribution to the narrative's excellence.

From an academic point of view, the relevant references or commentaries on the distorted mother-son relationship are still insufficient. Therefore, as a result of this research, the perverse symbiotic relationship that exists in both the physical and mental states of the protagonists will hopefully provide some modest reference value for those who wish to analyze the same direction in the future.

With regards to the social value in this film, it is obvious that people are not supposed to take a black-and-white stance [8]. The mother is not a perfect human being but a mortal one with both virtue and vice in her mind. At the same time, it also leads the audience to reflect on the abnormal symbiotic relationship that exists in real life, which effectively disseminates the social value and sense of responsibility in the film.

Throughout the film, there is no intentional murder with a grudge, but rather a paranoid mother accidentally commits a crime attempting to protect her bloodline. Instead of the criminal police and lawyers who are supposed to be an indispensable part of the Korean film system, the involved characters are all bare-handed persons, including an innocent schoolgirl, Ah-jung, who

dies tragically, and Jong-bae, who is imprisoned in the place of Do-joon because of the lack of parents' protection. The mother-son bond is so perverted that both of the protagonists are mentally and physically complicit in each other's crimes and ultimately beg to be forgotten.

Consequently, the film strikes a balance between exposing the social reality of the mother-son connection and arousing the audience's emotional resonance. In *Mother*, the director has managed to place the mother, Hye-ja, in a moral dilemma of love and law while remaining silent and uninvolved. So Bong Joon-ho undoubtedly delivers his usual incisive critique of the paradoxes in Korean films while at the same time leaving with a lasting reflection on how can films convey societal concerns in an appropriate manner.

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