

Being a mother is learning about strengths you didn't know you had, and dealing with fears you didn't know existed.

Linda Wooten

## The Jungian Mother Archetype in the Movie “I Am a Mother”

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**Abstract:** *The movie “I Am a Mother” an Iranian film made in 2012 by Fereydown Jeyrani attempts to depict various issues that the Iranian society of the time faces. On one hand the movie shows how sometimes the hardships and the burden of being a mother stand next to living in hell and on the other hand, how women instinctively crave becoming a mother and fill incomplete without a child. In the following few pages the movie “I Am a Mother” will be analyzed based on Jung’s Psychological theory of the mother archetype. Therefore a description of the theory will be given and the role of a mother, the love she has for her children, the sacrifices she willingly makes for them, and the pain she feels when losing a child as shown in the movie, will be attended to. Therefore this essay will mainly focus on the female characters each of whom has experienced the feeling of being a mother for a period in their lives. Before moving on to the psychoanalysis of the characters, a short introduction to the plot of the movie seems necessary.*

**Key words:** *I Am a Mother, Jung, mother archetype, psychoanalysis*

### Introduction

“I Am a Mother”, is a social drama which depicts the story of a family whose only daughter, Ava, has been raped by Saeed, a close friend of the parents, Nahid and Nader. The film starts in a therapy session in which Simin, Saeed’s wife, is talking to her psychiatrist. She is suffering from severe depression and insomnia which she claims are the results of constant nightmares she has of Ava. What we see in the rest of the movie is a flash back of what has lead Simin to this devastating mental state as she is telling the story to her shrink.

Simin and Nader, Ava’s father, were childhood friends since their fathers were partners in business. As the time passed, Simin developed feelings for Nader which were rejected by him. Even though he did not accept Simin’s love, they did have an intimate relationship with each other which lead to Simin’s becoming pregnant. Nader who was seriously concerned for his reputation asked Simin to have an abortion which she accepted out of love for Nader. The abortion left Simin infertile for the rest of her life and Nader who was thrilled to have gotten

rid of the baby went to University and fell in love with Nahid, Ava's Mother. Nahid and Nader got married but the previous affair with Simin was kept a secret.

Nader, who probably felt ashamed for what he had done to Simin, introduced her to one of his close friends, Saeed, who he deeply trusted and the two got married and moved to France for living. After a While Saeed returned to Iran alone and stayed at Nader's house till he could find a suitable place to live and this made the whole family, especially Ava became even closer to Saeed. Then one night Simin arrived from France because Saeed had told her that he feels lonely and needs her beside him. However what he had really planned in his mind was to drag Simin to Iran so that he could divorce her. He didn't even go to the airport to take her home, he excused himself for being badly drunk and so he sent Nader to get her. The old memories came back as they saw each other after seventeen years and they were enjoying it up to the moment when Nader's cell phone rang. It was Nahid, his wife who had left Nader for some time due to his drinking habits and was waiting for their divorce.

Nahid informed Nader that Ava had been arrested by the police for having been practicing music in a basement with some boys one of whom was Pedram, her boyfriend. Pedram was kept at the police custody that night since Nahid had accused him of being the only guilty person. Ava was very angry with his parents for not helping Pedram and so she turned to Saeed for help. Saeed, who was secretly in love with Ava tried to win her trust even more by helping her. After releasing Pedram, Saeed gave the two of them keys to a friend's apartment and also offered pedram a job as a pianist in his restaurant which he gratefully accepted. Then one night in the apartment when Ava was extremely sad that Pedram had come to the notion that their relationship cannot work, Saeed was there again to support Ava. They were both so drunk and lonely and Saeed raped Ava that night.

The next morning Ava was rushed to hospital for having committed suicide. Everyone assumed that she had done it because of the things that Pedram had told her but Ava insured Pedram that it had nothing to do with him and asked him to help her escape from the hospital. As soon as she got out she asked for the keys to the apartment and went there waiting for Saeed. When he came he begged Ava for forgiveness and confessed his love to her. She didn't say anything and just stayed there till Saeed fell asleep and then she murdered him.

Nahid who now knew about Saeed's feelings for Ava came to the apartment to get her and so she found out about the murder. She asked Ava not to tell anyone how the murder had happened. She then took the blame for what Ava had done and was sent to jail. Simin who had lost Nader to Nahid wanted to take revenge, therefore she asked for the capital punishment. No matter how hard Nader tried to convince her to forgive Nahid, she wouldn't agree. Until one day when Simin had gone to the cemetery to visit Saeed's grave, Ava went there and told her that she was pregnant with Saeed's child and that she killed Saeed for it.

This confession was done at the presence of Simin's lawyer. As a result Nahid was released and Ava was sent to prison for having committed first degree murder.

This turn of events now gave Simin a perfect chance to take revenge from Nader. By the way Nader was the one who had left her childless but he had no problem having a child with another woman. She asked for capital punishment again so that Nader would feel the pain of losing a child as well. Finally she agreed to let Ava go under some conditions. One was that Ava should give her baby to Simin and the other was that Nader should leave Iran and live with her in France. Nahid and Nader accepted her requests even though it was truly hard for them. Ava on the other hand didn't want to let her baby go, but the whole situation put her under so much pressure that she had a miscarriage. Losing that baby meant losing the chance to escape the execution. In the end Ava was hanged when she was only nineteen years old.

## **Discussion**

The movie "I Am a Mother" is the story of three mothers, a mother who gets pregnant by a man she thought would become her husband and loses her chance of ever becoming a mother because of an abortion, a mother who takes her daughter's place in jail and is willing to give up her life for her and a nineteen year old mother who loses the baby that is the result of a rape. For further assessment of the film, the focus of the study will specifically turn towards these three female characters based on Jung's theory of the mother archetype. First the theory will be introduced and then Simin, Nahid, and Ava's personalities, their actions, their choices and how their behavior affects other characters' lives will be analyzed.

### **I. Theory**

Whenever we prepare ourselves to read something about psychoanalysis, we are almost sure that the text is about Freud's theories. That is probably because Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis and his ideas on the unconscious mind and how it influences human behavior through the interaction of the id, ego and super ego became very popular. Carl Jung, one of Freud's younger colleagues who was a Swiss psychiatrist also believed on the relationships between the conscious and unconscious aspects of mind. What was different about his theories was that while Freud claimed a sexual explanation for human behavior, Jung mostly believed the soul to be the basis of all human desires. Not only did he have the Freudian theory in mind, he had also done a great deal of studies in mystical traditions such as Gnosticism, Alchemy, Kabala, Hinduism and Buddhism. All this knowledge made him an expert in symbolism and revealing what goes on in the unconscious.

Just as Freud does, Jung divides the human psyche into three parts but of course with some distinctions. Jung believes the ego to be one of the components

of the human mind which is considered to be the conscious part of it. The next part as introduced by Jung is the personal unconscious that is closely similar to Freud's unconscious. The personal unconscious is the grave yard of all suppressed thoughts and also some unwanted memories which are easily accessible and can be brought back to the conscious mind. One point of difference between Jung and Freud's idea is that Jung does not believe the instincts to fit in this part as Freud does. However the most distinguishing idea of Jung that he is famous for is the theory of the collective unconscious.

The collective unconscious or "psychic inheritance" is a kind of knowledge that all human beings share as a species. Even though this collective unconscious influences all of our behavior and experiences, it remains completely unconscious and we are only aware of it through its influences which are mostly emotional. The collective unconscious is consisted of different types of information called archetypes. The archetypes makes people want to experience things in a certain way just as Freud's instinct does. The difference between Jung's archetype and Freud's instincts is that archetypes are not biological but rather spiritual demands.

However there is a notion in Jungian theory that closely matches Freud's instincts and that is the shadow, one of Jung's archetypes. The shadow is consisted of the sexual desires and other instincts that we have possessed them in our prehuman, animal past. Although the shadow is the storage where the dark side of the ego is kept and all our evil and animal desires come from this part, it is actually neutral. It means that it is innocent; it is neither good nor bad since it just works in accordance to its needs. Some of these needs are hard for a human being to admit to just because they seem animal like and only because they might seem inhumane and brutal from a human perspective. It is for this reason that the shadow becomes the grave yard of those parts of our beliefs and personality that are unwanted and considered bad.

A very good example of a rather tangible archetype is the mother archetype. From the beginning of time human beings were taken care of by a mother or a mother figure who nurtures children. In fact human beings are built in a way that they cannot survive without a mother in their infancy. In other words we are born with an unconscious notion of wanting a mother, seeking and recognizing her. Jung believes that although this built-in ability to recognize a mother is rather abstract, it does project itself through more concrete characters such as the real mother or any other female being that takes care of you and actually symbolizes the archetype.

Archetypal criticism argues that the meaning of any literary work is formed by psychological myths. He believes that all the images, symbols and patterns that make the meaning of a work of literature, are already loaded with meaning for all human kind since they all share a psychic inheritance. Literature, therefore, imitates not the world but rather the "total dream of humankind." Jung called mythology "the textbook of the archetypes" (qtd. in Walker 17). In the same way that we recognize the story patterns and the symbolic significations of a text from the other stories that we have read, we are able to understand and figure out the archetypal symbols and images innately. Therefore the Jungian approach mostly highlights the concept of image and how these images not only help understand the text but also gives us information about the desires and anxieties of humankind.

This movie being about three mothers and how their love for their children affects their lives seems like a perfect film for being analyzed based on Jungian psychological ideas and specifically the mother archetype. Therefore in the following parts of this study the female characters will be taken to consideration and will be psychologically analyzed.

## II. The psychological analysis of some characters

### Simin:

Simin is a woman who has been rejected and abused several times throughout her life and all of this has left a scar on her soul. The fact that Saeed and Simin did not love each other and that everybody knew about it was perfectly depicted through the use of candles as symbols of their love. The night that Simin was arriving from Paris, Saeed lit hundreds of candles and set them around the house. It was a mesmerizing setting to watch for any audience but the surprise came when neither Ava nor Nader took notice of this many candles that were burning all over the big house. It was symbolically shown that this romantic gesture was completely meaningless to the point that it was not recognized at all. Nader for instance was so ignorant of the candles that he lit his cigarette with a lighter and did not use the closely set line of burning candles in front of him on the counter. Even Saeed himself did not care about the candles since when Simin claimed that she was tired and would not come inside; he was not disappointed at all for having done all these preparations that now she would not see.

The pain of not being loved and accepted by the man she was madly in love and even later by her husband was nothing compared to the sorrow she felt when she was forced to have an abortion and give up the baby she shared with the love of her life. The emptiness that Simin fills for not having a child of her own is clearly stated in multiple cases throughout the movie but there are also parts in which although the issue is not

pointed at directly, any audience would be reminded of the fact that Simin is suffering for not having children. One of such cases was at the airport when Nader tells her that she hasn't changed all these year, she sarcastically says, "It's because of having too much fun." No word about lacks in her life is uttered but Nader knows exactly what she is referring to.

Simin's yearning for a child is shown symbolically later in the car when Nader wants to put on some music for her and instead, she asks him to sing. The description that she gives Nader in order for him to remember the song is that it was about a fruit. Fruit has very widely been known as a symbol used for children. The first line of the song was, "The absence of the fruit is killing me." It seems as if Simin took pleasure in reminding Nader of what horrible thing he had done to her. In another occasion when they go to the police station together to get Ava, Nader apologizes to Simin for leaving her alone in the car. But Simin says that she has no problems with that and tells him to go since he is the father. No matter how kindly she sounds when she encourages him to go, the emphasize she puts on the word "father" shows how envious and vengeful she feels toward him for having a child with another woman.

The love of having children which is probably an outcome of the strong instinctual desire of survival through off springs in human beings is an archetype according to Jung. In his theory, Jung claims that there exists a collective unconscious in everybody's unconscious part of psyche which contains information and desires called archetypes that all people share. Not being able to fulfill these desires will surely manifest themselves through some types of mental abnormalities and general unhappiness. The same thing happens to Simin as she loses the chance of ever having a child. The way she behaves as the result of this misfortune leads to the introduction of the main theme of the film which is revenge and how it does not bring solace to people who seek it.

What Simin does to Nader's family is the result of the grudge she holds against him for a long time. She tries to torture him by asking for capital punishment for Nahid, the woman he had chosen over her to marry and have children with. She later also insists on death sentence for Ava, the daughter that she can never have and wished to have with Nader. It was rather clear that she was not really fighting a blood feud for Saeed's murder since it was quite obvious that the two of them were not in love with each other. Even before the murder it is felt that Simin wants to steal Ava from Saeed and Nahid emotionally. The example of such attempt was the night when Nader went to release Ava from the police station, when Simin and Ava were alone in the car she offers Ava cigarettes in order to calm her down and to get closer to her. The mental illness that Simin goes through is an evidence of the negative impacts of vengeance on both sides of the conflict.

**Ava:**

Ava is a nineteen-year old girl who is the only daughter of the family which cannot be considered a typical Iranian family since it lacks devotion to the traditional norms and religious beliefs. Throughout the film in various occasions it is seen that the characters freely have alcoholic drinks even though it is forbidden in Islam and is considered a sin. Even the youngest character of the movie, Ava, drinks alcohol when she is alone in an apartment with Saeed. The fact that Ava calls her parents by their first names is definitely a violation of traditional conventions. It seems that the film intends to introduce the significance of being observant of religious teachings and cultural values as one of the main themes of the story. Although the characters are not shown as evil and horrific people, all their problems seem to be results of their lax behavior.

Ava clearly has issues with her parents and there are surely reasons for that. First taking into consideration the fact that she does not call her parents by the titles Mum and Dad, seems like a good start. There are different reasons why children would switch to first names when addressing their parents according to the experts. Some children do it in order to check their parents' reaction to something that is not a proper behavior, in this way they can predict what will happen if they find out about the other unwelcome things that their children have been doing. In Ava's case it is probably done in order for her to push the family off balance as a reaction to the problems she sees in the family like a strict mum, an alcoholic father, an upcoming divorce and a lover who is not accepted by the parents.

Another dark phenomenon that was introduced as one of the main themes of the movie through the hardships of Ava's life was rape. The concept of rape is a taboo in almost every culture but in Iran and probably all the other Islamic countries this belief is so severe to the extent that most women not only avoid reporting the crime to the police but are also unwilling to share it with a family member. No matter how untraditional Ava's beliefs were, she also decided not to tell anyone about what had been done to her until she found out that she was pregnant. How unfair the rules are to the victims of rape is another theme of the film. In Ava's court session a part of a film was shown to all the people present, to convince the judge that Ava was not a decent girl and that she had willingly slept with Saeed and the whole accusation was a lie to relieve Ava from death penalty. So now not only no accusations were pointed at the rapist, but also the victim had become the criminal and Ava was accused of seduction and unlawful relationship.

As disastrous as her life seemed at this point, when Simin announced that she was willing to forgive Ava only if she gave up the baby to her, she refused. This was

the only chance to put everything nearly back to how it used to be and yet she refused to give up the baby she did not want in the first place and was the fruit of the dirty act of a rape. This is another proof to the existence of human beings' psychic inheritance that is the same in all the mankind and Carl Jung has brought it into attention. The obligation that Ava feels in protecting and taking care of her child is a sign of the collective unconscious that acts as an organizing principle in her mind and makes her act in a certain way. Therefore the mother archetype works strongly in Ava's mind to the point that she would not give up her baby even if it meant getting her own life back.

Ava's unwillingness to give up her unborn baby and later on her miscarriage in the prison paves the way for the movie to introduce another one of its main themes, Capital punishment. Murdering another human being is definitely not something that can easily be forgiven. But the guilt of insisting on capital punishment is nearly the same since another human will be killed. Asking for the execution of a murderer is a right that is given to the family members of the victim by Islam. But the religious teachings also constantly encourage the victim's family to forgive the killer.

The circumstances of this movie were in such a way that makes every audience feel that Ava deserves to be forgiven. What Ava did to Saeed was the result of his own mistake, rape, punishment of which is also death in Islamic rules. So even if Ava hadn't done that, according to the constitutional law Saeed could have faced death sentence. In fact what Ava did wrong was to take action herself instead of leaving it to the judicial system. Generally regarding capital punishment, this movie intends to conclude that forgiveness is the best choice if you are seeking tranquility. Execution does not bring serenity to the victim's family but rather very likely adds to their discomfort.

### **Nahid:**

Nahid can be considered a victim in the story even though she is not completely free of fault. Nahid is a rather strict Mum and the way that she treats her daughter is obviously not suited for a teenager. Trying to control an adolescent's life by commanding what to do and what not to do without considering her passions and desires at all is truly a recipe for disaster. Dealing with teenagers is an unbelievably difficult task and a truly complicated responsibility for the parents. This is why it requires both parents to work in harmony and with a great deal of knowledge in order to lead their teenage children past this critical stage in their lives.

Using wrong parenting skills was among the main factors that contributed to the problems in the life of Nader and Nahid. They are the type of parents who do not

share ideas on what they want for their daughter and how they want her to be raised. Either of the two parents could have been more successful with their daughter on their own way only if they would work in the same direction. Confused parents bring up confused children who cannot realize which is the best path for them.

What makes Nahid a victim is that she is married to an alcoholic man and that in turns is a reason for Nahid's over protective behavior toward Ava. According to a study named "Alcoholism and the Family" done by Robert J. Ackerman alcoholism is a disease that has a great impact on the life of not only the alcoholic member but each of the family members as well. One of the worse things that happens to such a family is emotional disengagement which is a failure in maintaining a positive emotional relationship. And what is even worse is that little by little this emotional detachment gives way to the negative feelings of despair, tension, and anxiety. Some of these women find it really difficult to trust the alcoholic husband and instead take over the responsibilities of two people and work extremely hard to maintain financial security. In the case of Delnavaz family since they do not have any money issues instead of working harder Nahid gives up her job as a lawyer and tries to focus on disciplining Ava and her education since she does not trust Nader in doing that. This is actually what happens in most families with similar problem, the women usually become over-protective of their children and use them for emotional support.

Just imagine being trapped in such a situation where you feel extremely lonely and the only thing that keeps you going is your child and then such a disaster strikes. She was obviously devastated to find out that her daughter had committed a murder. She was willing to protect her daughter to the point of taking her place in the prison and waiting her execution. What could be the driving force of such behavior other than the Jungian mother archetype in action? Nahid like all the mothers in the universe has a collective unconscious which tells her that she should protect her child. She is dealing with a daughter who does not take her advice, who does not want to live with her or even talk to her, a daughter who does not even call her mum; but still it does not make any difference in her unconditional love for her child. Nahid is therefore one of the most innocent characters faced with every parents' nightmare.

### **Conclusion**

In the end what needs to be emphasized here is the importance of the role of mothers in people's lives. According to Jung all of us as human beings share a collective unconscious that shapes our desires and behaviors one of which is the yearning for a mother or a mother substitute to take care of us. If Ava had not been so confused who to accept as the nurturing character, the ending of the movie could have been completely different. Jung believes that someone whose own mother failed to satisfy the demands of the archetype may end up

spending his or her life seeking comfort in others who might not be the best caretakers and this is what happens to Ava.

On the other hand the human beings love of reproduction and having children of their own is another archetype that prevents the species from extinction. This feeling which is a lot stronger in women drives Simin into doing things that she herself cannot bear the consequences. As Jung claims the feelings that are stored in the shadow archetype cannot be labeled as good or bad, they are neutral since they are just there and act as they are taught to do by the collective unconscious. The fear or sorrow of losing a child can make a person so devastated and brutal that the outcome might drive the person to near madness just as how it turned out for Simin.

In general, the film, "I Am a Mother" is the story of human being moving toward their fall and it is only at the time of their defeat that they realize their faults and take a look back. Nader wishes he had never let Saeed live in their house, or that he had not hurt Simin so harshly, Nahid believes that in order to save Ava, She has to stand by Nader and work as a team, Ava starts calling her parents, mum and dad instead of their first names like she previously used to. No matter how much a person regrets the things that he has done in his life, sometimes it is too late and the mistakes cannot be undone. Revenge is the last bullet that hits the falling people and none of the characters are left untouched by its effects.

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