Female Gothic and The Reimagining of Motherhood: A Coraline(s) Analysis

Nauli Angeline Marpaung
Universitas Padjadjaran,
nauli21001@mail.unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the motherhood gender issue presented in Coraline's novel by Neil Gaiman (2002) and its film adaptation, directed by Henry Selick (2009). It primarily revolves around the portrayal of motherhood in the works, along with the portrayal of characters, family issues, and gender roles. The paper looks up into the portrayal of motherhood in both novel and film adaption, examining how the horror of Female Gothic and fantasy elements are used to reimagine motherhood and unsettle traditional gender roles. The paper will take a feminist literary criticism approach and make use of essential theoretical frameworks such feminist motherhood theory and the Female Gothic. Through the analysis of the two versions of Coraline, I found the portrayal of motherhood through narrative and visual. The findings of the research reveal that both the Coraline book and the movie, through the media's elements, challenge stereotypes and ideas of maternal sacrifice and compassion by portraying motherhood as a complex experience. Coraline offers perspective on Female Gothic and motherhood that confronts traditional gender expectations and contributes to a broader view about the representation of motherhood in popular culture.

Keywords: Coraline, motherhood, female gothic, gender role.

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of motherhood has long been a prominent theme in literature and cinema, often reflecting societal expectations, fears, and desires surrounding this fundamental role. When combined with the gothic genre, characterized by its dark and mysterious elements, a captivating platform emerges for reimagining traditional notions of motherhood. The Female Gothic, in particular, offers a lens

through which the complexities of motherhood are examined and subverted. One captivating work that offers a compelling reimagining of motherhood within the realm of the female gothic is Coraline, both in its original novel form, written by Neil Gaiman, and its film adaptation directed by Henry Selick.

To comprehend the significance of the Female Gothic in Coraline, it is important to understand the concept of the Female Gothic. Despite years of research and analysis, there is still no exact for Female Gothic. Traditionally, however, the Female Gothic has been associated with works written by women, who often employed the genre to challenge patriarchal norms and explore the complexities of women's lives. Moers (1976) states in her essay, "What I mean by Female Gothic is easily defined : the work that women have done in the literary mode..." (p. 214). A similar yet different perspective was taken from Davidson (2009), as she highlighted the female protagonist as what defines Female Gothic. Nonetheless it is important to remember that the author's gender is not the only factor in defining the Female Gothic. As Wallace and Smith (2009 : 3) write that "...the centre of the Female Gothic an ambivalence over female identity, above all the conflict with the archaic all-powerful mother, often figured as a spectral presence and/or as the Gothic house itself." It is in line with Coraline's elements as it revolves around mother figures and its setting.

The presence of Female Gothic elements within Coraline cannot be denied, regardless of the gender of the author. The novel follows the story of a curious young girl named Coraline Jones. With both of her parents, she just moved into an uncanny -pink coloured-house in which she and her parents shared the house with 2 neighbours. Under the rainy days, the adventurous Coraline wanted to explore around. Her parents –the mother specifically– forbid her to go outside the house since rain means wet and mud. Being not able to accompany Coraline due to their garden catalogues they were currently working on, they then suggested their daughter to explore their new -150 years old- house instead. Not having any better option, Coraline did what she was told to do, looking around at the house. Coraline, the curious and determined young girl she is, discovered a hidden door in the drawing room. At first, it was just a door that led her into a brick wall. But Coraline never expected that the little hidden door would lead her to a parallel world, mirroring her own reality but in a much better way yet the fact that there are so many unsettling differences. She encountered both of her "other" parents, except that their eyes are made up from black buttons. Coraline was just an ordinary girl after all, everything she wanted was there; better

parents, delicious foods, a comfortable bedroom, and amazing things that she never saw and experienced before. Although her neighbours had already warned Coraline in an implicit way, the young Coraline took it with ease. As she delves deeper into this other world, Coraline confronts a haunting reflection of motherhood, one that challenges conventional expectations and confronts her with dark journey.

The film adaptation, released in 2009, has not much significant differences. With some adjustments in the storyline, it still shows the journey of Coraline that led her to meet her other mother. Coraline was adapted into a visually stunning stop-motion animated film directed by Henry Selick. The film brings Gaiman's imaginative tale to life with attention to detail, capturing the eerie atmosphere and gothic elements of the story.

The choice of Coraline as the subject of this analysis stems from the desire to examine the ways in which the gothic genre can challenge and subvert conventional notions of motherhood. Spivak's excerpt suggests that in societies, both matrilineal and patrilineal, the legal possession of a child is tied to the property rights of the man who is considered the biological father. This maintains a power dynamic where men retain ownership over the offspring produced by women's bodies, even if the notion of women being better caregivers is propagated. As quoted, "….that women are much more capable of taking care of children, might be seen as a reactionary gesture in benevolent disguise…. The man retains legal property rights over the product of a woman's body." (p. 244)

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the portrayal of motherhood in the context of the female gothic, it is essential to explore the existing study of literature that has examined this theme. Moers explores the concept of the Female Gothic and its correlation with the figure of a mother. She examines how the Gothic tradition uses the concept of motherhood to unsettle and challenge social norms and expectations. While Moers does not specifically discuss Gaiman's Coraline in her essay, her analysis of the Gothic tradition and its treatment of motherhood provides a valuable framework. One thing that caught my attention is that Moers mentioned about birth several times (p. 220-222). I think it is also correlated with the other mother's attempt to make Coraline give up her eyes and replace them with sewn black buttons. With that, Coraline will truly be her own.

Over the years, academic study of Coraline as a literary work has received considerable attention, especially in the area of novel studies. This study has spent a significant amount of time studying the complex dynamics between Coraline and her mother, with a focus on the maternal figure. With a focus on the relationship's many facets,

scholars have approached this topic from a variety of angles. Chang-Kredl (2015) examines the representation of maternal figures in Neil Gaiman's novel "Coraline" through the lens of the maternal subject and the role of the childcare educator.

Kinayang (2019) discussed and compared the parenting style between Coraline's two mothers–the real mother and the other mother. In order to analyze the parenting style, she provides an overview of both mothers' characterization. Kinayang provides evidence on both characters' dialogue and how they act to amplify the characterization. Then she categorizes the parenting styles into three. The real mother possesses authoritative and neglectful parenting. The other mother on the other hand possesses authoritative parenting.

Furthermore, while Kinayang covers both mothers, a recent research on Coraline by Bilkhu (2022) focuses on the other mother and how Neil Gaiman as the author utilizes four elements to create the other mother as a monster. Bilkhu discusses the concept of the monstrous bodies in literature and popular culture, drawing on psychoanalytic theory and feminist perspectives to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis. She dives deeper into the characteristics and behaviors of the other mother, highlighting her manipulative nature and desire for control with the four elements; Freud's notion of the uncanny, the use of food, the father figure, and the illustration of the other mother. The paper explores how these traits challenge traditional notions of motherhood and disrupt societal expectations of maternal love and nurturing.

Looking from the previous research that has been done, all of them mainly focus on the other mother antagonist character traits as the monstrous one. Despite they have discussed the mother figure(s), there is still a gap in the analysis of Coraline's portrayal of motherhood through the Female Gothic lens. Studies that have already been done have mainly concentrated on character analysis or psychoanalysis, overlooking the larger implications and potential for reimagining motherhood in Coraline as part of the Female Gothic tradition. Within the specific context of Coraline's novel and film, I will expand upon this existing scholarship by also focusing on the visual and narrative choices employed to convey the reimagining of motherhood in a gothic setting.

METHOD

To undertake a comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of motherhood in Coraline from the perspective of the Female Gothic, this study incorporates an array of theoretical frameworks and

contemporary theories on motherhood and the Female Gothic. Additionally, relevant scholarly journals addressing similar themes provide a solid foundation for this research. Both the novel and the film adaptation of Coraline were diligently examined to develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept of motherhood. I analyse through observations and detailed notes made, with a particular focus on the narrative structure, scenes, and visual representation. By analysing both mediums, this study aims to see the portrayal of motherhood within the realm of the Female Gothic in Coraline.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The reimagining of motherhood through the Female Gothic lens in the Coraline novel unveils complex portrayal of maternal figures that challenges traditional stereotypes. Through various narrative elements, Gaiman builds a narrative that explores the darker and more unsettling aspects of motherhood.

One significant aspect of the reimagining of motherhood is the subversion of the traditional obedient mother. Oh (2009) in her study proposed when a woman bears children, that is the moment she becomes a mother. "This care of children that is central to motherhood…" (p.3), including those stereotypical mother's responsibility on house chores. In the Coraline novel, the maternal figures, both the real mother and the other mother, are presented with their flaws.

The real mother is a working parent depicted as a busy and preoccupied character, often distracted by her work and seemingly oblivious to Coraline's needs. She appears distant and detached, unable to provide the emotional support and attention that Coraline desires.

> 'No,' said Coraline. 'I don't want to do those things. I want to explore.'
> 'I don't really mind what you do,' said Coraline's mother, 'as long as you don't make a mess.' (p.15)
>
> 'What shall I do?' asked Coraline.
> 'When do you go back to school?' asked her mother.
> 'Next week,' said Coraline.
> 'What shall I do?' repeated Coraline.
> 'Draw something.' Her mother passed her a sheet of paper and a ballpoint pen. (p. 21-22)

The novel's part above I provide as illustrative instances that effectively demonstrate Coraline's real mother's response to her

within Gaiman's narrative. Gaiman's intentional stylistic approach of employing brevity and straightforwardness in describing her actions serves to emphasize the apparent emotional detachment exhibited by the character towards her own daughter. This departure from the conventional portrayal of mothers as nurturing and protective challenges the idealized notions of maternal figures.

The maternal figure is distorted in the other mother, on the other hand. She initially presents herself as the idealized representation of a devoted mother, attending to Coraline's wants and appearing to provide a blissful life. (p. 29, 38-39). However, as the narrative progresses, the other mother's true nature is revealed. In exchange for the illusion of maternal perfection, she becomes possessive, manipulative, and controlling, demanding Coraline's whole love and obedience. It started when Coraline talked back to the other mother. "'There we are,' she said. 'This is for you, Coraline. For your own good. Because I love you. To teach you manners." (p.60-61). This portrayal of the other mother as a dark and monstrous entity highlights the Female Gothic tradition's examination of maternal figures with evil intentions and highlights the dangers of possessive and manipulative mother. The Female Gothic lens in Coraline also examines the anxieties and fears associated with motherhood. "The daughter-narrators' and mothers' victimization is the cause of the anxieties, fears, and shame," (Hade, 2022 : 9)

Neil Gaiman also offers a narrative that subverts traditional maternal archetypes and delves into the complexities and challenges of the maternal experience. Through various narrative choices, Gaiman explores themes such as agency, sacrifice, and the blurred boundaries between love and control.

Throughout the story, Coraline's interactions with both her real mother and the other mother highlight the significance of individual agency in shaping one's own path and resisting oppressive maternal influences. Coraline's encounters with the other mother reveal the dangers of maternal figures who seek to possess and control their children. The other mother presents Coraline with a seemingly perfect world, tailored to fulfill her desires. However, this dream-come-true requires a condition: Coraline must give up on her eyes and have them replaced with black buttons (p.39). This demand is a stark reminder of the other mother's intention to take away Coraline of herself and personal boundaries.

Additionally, Coraline's interactions with her actual mother emphasize the value of agency. While the real mother may at first seem distant, Coraline's actions and decisions are what lead to the development of their relationship. Coraline asks her real mother for

attention and emotional support, but she also understands that she needs to stand up for herself and come up with her own solutions to the problems she encounters. And as a matter of fact, Coraline encourages herself to fight the other mother in order to save both of her real parents.

By portraying Coraline as an active agent in her own story, the novel challenges the notion that mothers are solely responsible for shaping their children's lives (Chang-Kredl, 2015 : 359). It underscores the importance of individual agency and self-determination, even within the maternal relationship. Coraline's journey becomes a testament to the power of personal choice and the ability to resist maternal control, showcasing the complexities and nuances of agency within the context of motherhood.

The blurred boundaries between love and control are also examined through the Female Gothic lens in the Coraline novel. The other mother's obsession with Coraline's love and attention is depicted as a twisted manifestation of maternal affection. The novel exposes the dark side of possessive and controlling motherhood, highlighting the potential harm that can arise when love becomes entangled with control.

> It was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother's button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more. A tolerated pet, whose behavior was no longer amusing. (p.78)

Bilkhu (2022 : 26) notes that Coraline takes on the role of the other mother's money or "gold" in this relationship, or, to put it another way, as a means of self-definition. This exploration challenges the idealized notions of selfless love and exposes the complex power dynamics that can exist within mother-daughter relationships.

Furthermore, the narrative choices in the Coraline novel contribute to the reimagining of motherhood within the Female Gothic tradition. The vivid descriptions of the other mother's transformation into a monstrous entity reflect the distortion and corruption of maternal figures. This visual portrayal enhances the eerie and unsettling atmosphere, emphasizing the subversion of conventional maternal archetypes.

> Only her skin was white as paper.
> Only she was taller and thinner.
> Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark-red fingernails were curved and sharp
> Her eyes were big black buttons. (p.28)

The Coraline film, directed by Henry Selick, presents a visually stunning reimagining of motherhood through the Female Gothic lens. The film adeptly employs visual elements and scene choices to convey the complex and unsettling nature of maternal figures, offering a fresh perspective on the traditional archetypes while avoiding deep character analysis and psychoanalysis.

One striking aspect of the film's portrayal of motherhood is the visual contrast between the real world and the Other World. In the real world, the mother is depicted with realistic proportions, showcasing a sense of familiarity maternal presence. However, in the other world, the mother figure is transformed into a taller and more glamorous version of herself, with exaggerated features and an otherworldly elegance. This visual contrast accentuates the uncanny and unsettling nature of the other mother's maternal facade, emphasizing the departure from conventional maternal norms.

In order to reimagine motherhood within the Female Gothic framework, color is also crucial. The color scheme in the real world is muted and earthy, reflecting mundane and regular aspects of her relationship with her mother in the real world. In contrast, the screen in the Other World is dominated by vivid and saturated colors, giving the impression of enchantment and allure. The other mother presents herself as a more colorful and seductive version of the real mother, which reinforces the idea of the other mother's maternal seduction.

Source: Coraline (2009)   Source: Coraline (2009)

The visual representation of the other mother's physical transformation plays a significant role in reimagining motherhood. As the film progresses, the other mother's true form is gradually revealed, showcasing her grotesque and monstrous nature. Through meticulous visual effects, the film portrays the other mother's transformation into a spidery creature with elongated limbs and sharp claws. This visual symbolizes the distortion and corruption of motherhood, underscoring the film's exploration of the darker aspects of maternal figures within the Female Gothic tradition.

Furthermore, the use of visual motifs and symbolism contributes to the reimagining of motherhood in the Coraline film. One such motif is the recurring imagery of buttons, particularly in relation to the other mother's eyes. The black buttons sewn onto the other mother's face serve as a visual representation of her identity and

symbolizing the loss of humanity and the detachment from genuine emotions. In addition, the black buttons on Coraline's doll signal that the other mother always keep her eyes on Coraline.

In my conclusion, Coraline presents a visually captivating Female Gothic reimagining of motherhood. The movie and the novel explores the complexities and unsettling qualities of maternal figures through the use of narrative choices, visual contrasts, color symbolism, physical transformations, and motifs. The movie creates a narrative that asks viewers to critically consider societal norms and motherhood-related stereotypes by using visual cues and scene selections. This exploration of the Female Gothic genre is both visually arresting and thought-provoking.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Coraline both novel and film managed to portrayed motherhood, challenging the traditional notion along with the gender roles. Through the Female Gothic's lenses, it can be revealed how not only the other mother, but the real mother also has important part in reimagining the motherhood. Coraline as the main character -and daughter- also presents as essential role. In essence, Coraline's exploration of motherhood within the Female Gothic tradition serves as a reminder that maternal figures are not immune to flaws, and that the maternal experience is far from one-dimensional. I think the future research can also compare how motherhood portrayed in both mediums. I would like to close my paper with a quotation from Hoeveler (2017), "The supernatural on the edges of these tales sometimes functions as an enabling force." (p. 105)

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