

Redefining Maternal Archetypes through Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary fiction redefines motherhood. It analyzes working mothers who pursue careers alongside raising children, challenging the traditional stay-at-home archetype. By exploring these portrayals, the paper argues that fiction empowers women by offering a wider range of motherhood experiences.

Keywords: Maternal archetype, self-sacrificing, self-identity, redefinition, rediscovery

An archetype is a universal symbol or pattern that appears across cultures, stories, and even dreams. It represents a fundamental human experience or idea. A maternal archetype is a specific type of archetype that focuses on motherhood and the nurturing qualities associated with it. From a literary perspective, maternal archetypes are recurring character types that embody specific ideas about motherhood. These established patterns can be positive, negative, or a complex blend.

Some of the most common maternal archetypes include the Selfless Mother, Career Woman, and Perfect Mother etc. For example, Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice', who is obsessed with marrying off her daughters well, prioritizing appearances and social standing over genuine happiness clearly represents the 'Perfect Mother' archetype. Similarly, Atiyeh in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini represents the 'Selfless Mother' archetype as she sacrifices everything for her children, even facing immense hardship. The mother figure in a text or general is usually the character that is a source of emotional, mental, and even physical protection for the characters around them. The idealized and culturally recognized notions surrounding a mother require her to be self-sacrificial, nurturing, responsive, and empathetic. She is expected to be selfless and always forgiving. Based on these notions, maternal archetypes can be of many types, like the 'Nurturer', the 'Martyr' etc. But these maternal personas exist on the other side of the spectrum as well, where they reflect diverging characteristics such as being neglectful, insensitive, and selfish. This characterization is also prevalent in literary texts and multiple mediums of art. This paper sheds light on one such maternal archetype, the 'Martyr' or the ideal self-sacrificing mother who is ready to give up

everything, including herself and her identity, to keep her family happy. The paper examines the redefinition of this traditional archetype through a nuanced depiction and comparison of the works, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie' and *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng, are both acclaimed authors, known for their impactful novels that delve into complex social and cultural themes. *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tells the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who leaves for the United States to attend university. The novel follows her experiences navigating life as an immigrant in America, grappling with issues of race and identity.

Meanwhile, flashbacks reveal her passionate relationship with Obinze, a classmate back in Nigeria. Their plans to reunite in America are disrupted by university closures and visa troubles. Obinze ends up in London as an undocumented immigrant, while Ifemelu builds a life for herself in the US.

The story explores themes of love, loss, societal expectations, and the immigrant experience. It also delves into the complexities of race, with Ifemelu encountering new facets of racial identity in America.

As the narrative unfolds, Ifemelu eventually decides to return to Nigeria. The circumvention of the traditional maternal archetype is evident through various incidents and actions of the characters throughout the story.

Firstly, Ifemelu's choice to prioritize her education and personal growth, choosing not to have children while in America. This defied the social expectations placed on her, especially as she comes from a Nigerian background, where motherhood is often used to determine a woman's worth. Ifemelu's mother is a classic example of the traditional sacrificing mother figure. Being a devoutly religious woman, she prioritizes her faith and societal expectations over her desires, which include enduring a strained marriage and putting her family's needs first.

Upon moving to the US, Ifemelu experiences the harsh realities of immigrant life, including financial struggles and racial discrimination. Her journey is marked by a quest for self-identity, rather than adherence to traditional roles. Her relationships in America highlight various racial and cultural dynamics also underscores this fact.

Another example of women succumbing to societal pressure is Obinze's wife, whom he married to get a green card. They have a son; nevertheless, their marriage is devoid of love, and the narrative implies that societal pressure, rather than genuine desire, may have influenced their decision to have a child and contributed to their ongoing strained relationship.

Adichie presents motherhood as a complex choice, not a preordained path. Characters like Ifemelu demonstrates that a woman's fulfillment can come from education, career, and personal exploration, not just from being a mother.

Thus *Americanah* redefines the self-sacrificing maternal archetype by juxtaposing traditional maternal figures like Ifemelu's mum with Ifemelu's journey toward self-empowerment and independence. Through Ifemelu's story, Adichie challenges the expectation that women must prioritize family and societal norms over their personal fulfillment, offering a more nuanced and modern portrayal of womanhood and motherhood.

In Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, the seemingly perfect suburban life in Shaker Heights, Ohio, gets upended by the arrival of two outsiders: Mia Warren, an enigmatic artist, and her teenage daughter Pearl. They rent a house from Elena Richardson, a pillar of the community, and their presence disrupts the comfortable lives of the Richardson family.

The narrative starts with the Richardson house burning down, with suspicion falling on Elena's youngest daughter, Izzy. The story then jumps back a year to reveal the events leading up to the fire. Elena, known for her uptight personality, clashes with Mia's free-spirited approach to life. Pearl develops a friendship with Moody, Elena's son, exposing the cracks in the seemingly perfect Richardson family.

Secrets and hidden pasts come to light. Elena becomes obsessed with uncovering Mia's secrets, while Mia's past as a surrogate mother throws their lives into further turmoil. A custody battle ignites over a Chinese-American baby, raising questions about race, privilege, and motherhood. The conflict exposes the hypocrisy and hidden prejudices within the seemingly idyllic community.

The novel explores motherhood through various lenses. Elena embodies the traditional, controlling mother, while Mia prioritizes her freedom and individuality. The custody battle forces readers to question what defines a 'good' mother. Both Elena and Mia, two mothers with completely different views on how to be a good mother to their children, accurately represent both the traditional and the redefined versions of the maternal archetype.

Elena Richardson represents the traditional archetype. She prioritizes her children's achievements and social standing sacrificing her desires. Her controlling nature and emphasis on appearances paint a picture of motherhood defined by external validation.

While Mia, on the other hand, challenges this notion. She prioritizes her own freedom and artistic pursuits. While she may not be the picture-perfect ‘sacrificing’ mother, she challenges the idea that a woman must suppress her individuality for her children.

The custody battle highlights the limitations of the traditional archetype. Both Elena and Mia believe they are acting in the best interests of the child, but their motivations are rooted in their agendas. It raises questions about whether self-sacrifice truly equates to good mothering.

The novel explores motherhood beyond just biology. The custody battle forces a reevaluation of who can be a good mother. Is it the biological mother, the one who provides stability, or someone else entirely?

Little Fires Everywhere thus offers a nuanced perspective on motherhood, moving away from the self-sacrificing stereotype. It makes the reader ponder about the complexities of mothering and the importance of individual choices in defining what it means to be a good mother.

Both *Americanah* and *Little Fires Everywhere* challenge the traditional image of the self-sacrificing mother, but they do so in contrasting ways. In *Americanah*, the stereotype is directly challenged when Ifemelu prioritizes education and career, consciously choosing to not have children in America, thus defying various social expectations whereas, in *Little Fires Everywhere*, the traditional ideal is present but challenged. Elena Richardson embodies the archetype, sacrificing her desires for her children’s achievements. However, the novel critiques this approach, showing its limitations. *Americanah* also portrays alternative motherhood models like Ifemelu’s Aunty Uju, Ifemelu’s independent aunt is shown as a strong, successful woman who doesn’t prioritize motherhood. Additionally, Obinze’s wife becomes a mother despite a loveless marriage, suggesting societal pressure, not genuine desire while, ‘*Little Fires Everywhere*’ presents a spectrum where we see one of the protagonists Mia Warren prioritizing her individuality, challenging the self-sacrificing ideal. The custody battle further explores motherhood beyond biology, suggesting a child can have multiple nurturing figures.

While the maternal archetype is not explicitly explored, *Americanah* celebrates the importance of women defining their own identities and paths to happiness, including prioritizing goals beyond motherhood.

On the other hand, *Little Fires Everywhere*, advocates for a more nuanced view. It critiques the limitations of the self-sacrificing ideal but also acknowledges the importance of stability and emotional connection for children.

In conclusion, both novels push back against the traditional maternal archetype. *Americanah* offers a more individualistic perspective, while *Little Fires Everywhere* exposes the limitations of the stereotype and suggests a more flexible understanding of motherhood.

Contemporary fiction plays a vital role in redefining our understanding of motherhood. By challenging the traditional 'sacrificial mother' archetype, it showcases a more nuanced and diverse landscape of maternal experiences. Works like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* illustrate how working mothers can prioritize both career goals and family life, disrupting the notion that motherhood demands complete selflessness or self-sacrifice. Furthermore, by featuring mothers from various backgrounds, these narratives celebrate the beauty and complexity of a role often portrayed as monolithic in the past.

This redefinition in fiction significantly impacts our understanding of motherhood in the real world. It allows readers to connect with characters who face similar challenges and complexities, fostering empathy and validation. Moreover, it challenges societal expectations that often burden mothers with guilt and pressure to conform to a single ideal. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of motherhood, contemporary fiction paves the way for a future where both mothers and children can thrive within a more supportive and inclusive environment.

The redefinition of maternal archetypes in contemporary fiction will likely have a lasting impact on future portrayals of motherhood in various media. Audiences are now more receptive to stories that showcase the complexities and diversity of motherhood, moving away from the singular ideal of the past. This allows writers and filmmakers to explore a wider range of maternal experiences, fostering a more inclusive and realistic representation of mothers in fiction and beyond.

This redefinition is also connected to the broader conversation about gender roles and expectations in contemporary society. By challenging the notion that mothers must sacrifice their ambitions and identities, these narratives contribute to a shift in societal expectations. They encourage a more balanced approach to parenting, where both mothers and fathers can share the responsibility of child-rearing while pursuing their personal goals.

In conclusion, the redefinition of maternal archetypes in contemporary fiction is not just about changing how we view mothers in stories; it's about changing how we view motherhood in real life. By celebrating diversity, challenging unrealistic expectations, and showcasing the

multifaceted nature of motherhood, contemporary fiction empowers mothers and paves the way for a future where both mothers and children can thrive within a supportive and inclusive environment. It allows us to redefine motherhood not as a sacrifice, but as a journey of love, growth, and self-discovery that can coexist with ambition, fulfillment, and a multitude of other roles a woman may choose to embrace.

Conclusion

The redefinition of the 'self-sacrificing' maternal archetype is explored in these novels, not just from a literary perspective, but also from a social, economic, and cultural perspective as well.

Shifting gender roles and increasing economic pressures force mothers to confront the limitations of self-sacrifice. Can a mother prioritize her career while still fulfilling the societal expectation to devote herself entirely to her children? The financial constraints faced by characters like Ifemelu in *Americanah* make this a particularly pressing question. These novels suggest that economic realities redefine what it means to sacrifice for one's children. Furthermore, the pressure to conform to the self-sacrificing ideal can have a detrimental impact on mental health. *Americanah* and *Little Fires Everywhere* explore the emotional toll of this archetype, highlighting the feelings of guilt and inadequacy that can arise when mothers struggle to meet their demands. The narratives raise the question of whether there are alternative ways to prioritize children's well-being without sacrificing a mother's mental health.

The novels also touch on racial and cultural nuances surrounding this archetype. Mothers of color, like those portrayed in *Americanah*, may face even greater societal pressure to conform to the self-sacrificing ideal. Additionally, cultural expectations of motherhood can vary significantly. By exploring these complexities, the narratives demonstrate that the pressure to self-sacrifice is not a universal experience, but rather one shaped by race and cultural background.

Thus, *Americanah* and *Little Fires Everywhere* delve deeper than just portraying the self-sacrificing mother figure. They explore the societal and economic realities that challenge this archetype in the modern world. The novels raise questions about balancing careers with motherhood in a world of shifting gender roles and financial pressures. They also explore alternative approaches to raising children without sacrificing a mother's well-being. Furthermore, the narratives highlight how race and culture can influence these expectations, suggesting that the pressure to self-sacrifice isn't universal. Finally, both novels acknowledge

the impact of absent fathers, prompting a discussion about how a more involved fatherhood could redefine motherhood itself. These novels ultimately expose the complexities of motherhood today and the challenges women face in navigating societal expectations. *Americanah* and *Little Fires Everywhere* aren't alone in deconstructing the self sacrificing mother figure. Contemporary literature offers a rich tapestry of maternal archetypes that go beyond traditional expectations.

Other examples include, 'Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine' by Gail Honeyman, *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, etc which explore maternal archetypes like 'The Perfect Mother', 'The Career Woman', etc. These are just a few names among the countless other works across genres that challenge traditional maternal archetypes and offer a more multifaceted view of motherhood .By thus deconstructing traditional maternal archetypes, contemporary literature redefines motherhood, impacting both present and future generations.

References

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