

Spectral Motherhood: Unveiling the Maternal Discourses in the Curse of La Llorona

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Abstract

Motherhood- the state of being a mother, as the literal meaning suggests. But it is the birth of a mother, bearing new expressions, emotions, and responsibilities, filled with a different kind of ecstasy. The Curse of La Llorona directed by Michael Chaves, based on the Latin American folklore of La Llorona, depicts the story of two mothers. Different experiences, life stories, sufferings, and emotions, but the maternal instincts and love towards their offspring are the same for both mothers. This research paper aims to shed light on the maternal discourses in the film, The Curse of La Llorona. Maternal discourses play a significant role in the narrative, reflecting themes of motherhood, loss, and protection. Motherhood has three different roles in the film, from the perspective of Anna, La Llorona, and Patricia. One of them is portrayed as a protector, who is trying to protect her children from the monovalent spirit of La Llorona, the second one as a tragic figure and the other one as a mother who overcame her trauma and believes that her fate must not happen to others. Delving into the depth of motherhood, this paper tries to explain maternal figures and discourses in the film, Curse of La Llorona.

Keywords: Motherhood, Myth, Curse of La Llorona, Folklore, Hollywood

The theme of motherhood has been a recurring one in literature, often serving as a rich source of emotional depth, conflict, and character development. Motherhood is a complex and multifaceted experience that encompasses a wide range of emotions, roles, and responsibilities. It is often considered one of the most profound and transformative experiences in a person's life, marked by love, sacrifice, nurturing, and growth. In literature, mothers can be anything, who can epitomize a nurturing mother, the wise mother, or the sacrificial mother, which resonates with readers on a primal level. Many literary works depict mothers making sacrifices for their children's well-being. *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, portrays a mother, who sacrifices her dignity and ultimately her life to provide for her daughter. Motherhood can

catalyze character development, allowing characters to explore their identities, values, and relationships. Becoming a mother or grappling with maternal responsibilities can lead to profound personal growth or inner conflicts. This theme revolves around many subtopics, including conflicts between mother and children, complex relationships, selflessness, sacrifices, grief, and loss. In the novel, *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, the character of Sophie Zawistowska, faces an impossible decision that tests the limits of maternal love and sacrifice, highlighting the profound moral dilemmas inherent in motherhood. *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold is about a mother, who struggles with the grief and loss of her daughter, while the protagonist watches over her family from the afterlife. The theme of motherhood is portrayed and explored in literature, reflecting its complexities, challenges, and profound significance in human experience.

Similar to literature, motherhood has served a major role in Hollywood movies, for many years, exploring relationships, and different ways to evoke emotions and create new narratives. Mothers are often portrayed as self-sacrificing, protective, nurturing, and loving. This theme often emphasizes the unconditional love a mother has for her child, even at great personal cost. Films like *Erin Brockovich* (2000) and *Room* (2015) showcase, the strength and determination of two mothers who overcome fiery obstacles. Motherhood intersects with a wide range of other thematic elements in films, including love, loss, sacrifice, redemption, and forgiveness. From the nurturing maternal figure to the overbearing "helicopter mom," films often explore various archetypes and stereotypes associated with motherhood. These portrayals can range from idealized depictions of maternal perfection to more nuanced portrayals that acknowledge the complexities and flaws of motherhood. Delving into the complexities of motherhood, *Lady Bird* (2017) and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), depict flawed and imperfect maternal figures. Normally having a proclivity, to depict mothers as selfless, nurturing, and all-sacrificing figures who prioritize the well-being of their children above all else, Hollywood often reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations surrounding motherhood, presenting an unrealistic standard for maternal behaviour. Films like *Mary Poppins* (1964) and *Sound of Music* (1965), are examples of the classic nurturing motherhood, which creates stereotypical notions about how a mother should be. Films like *Terms of Endearment*, and *Mamma Mia!* Motherhood, *Kramer vs. Kramer* offers a glimpse into the diverse ways in which Hollywood has explored the theme of motherhood, touching the topics ranging from sacrifice and strength to love and identity. The portrayal of mothers in various films is different and unique in its way.

The gothic horror films are the borderline between, the real and imaginative world. It can be used to criticize social norms, explore psychological depths, and provoke thought on existential themes. Filmmakers used ghosts, risen corpses, zombies, wild creatures, demigods, cursed gods, monsters and demons, psychopaths, and even simple shadows and insects like bees and ants to create an effect of trepidation in the audience and to make them watch the films, even if the elements used in it are not real and unhappening. Still, they can make the audience's heart rise in fear of the non-existent things, images, and elements. Filmmakers of Hollywood cinema often used myths like goblins, zombies, aliens, vampires, bigfoot, etc to make the spectators believe in such things. Furthermore, they made the audience believe that the ghosts only appear at night to attack people, they always fly and their foot never touches the ground, they will walk like a spider on the ceiling, they are bloodthirsty, and so on. These myths about ghosts make the spectators doubt themselves and their actual beliefs about their knowledge of the same. In horror films or gothic horror thrillers, mothers are portrayed as fiercely protective of their children, willing to face any danger to keep them safe. They will be an obstacle to any danger before reaching their children, willing to sacrifice their own lives. Gothic mothers can also be portrayed as victims of circumstance or vulnerable to external threats, both physical and psychological. Their vulnerabilities add to the tension and suspense within the narrative. Gothic films frequently explore the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding maternal figures. Mothers may display conflicting emotions, such as love and hatred, protection and neglect, blurring the lines between nurturing and destructive tendencies. Dark themes such as revenge, curses, and psychological turmoil are explored along with the use of gothic environments like old mansions, houses, abandoned buildings, or eerie landscapes, incorporating supernatural and paranormal activities, like black magic making the audience stick to their seats in anticipation. Gothic horror uses powerful maternal figures to explore themes of control, manipulation, and the blurred lines between protection and harm. They often subvert traditional notions of maternal love and depict mothers who wield power in unsettling and sometimes terrifying ways.

The Babadook, *A Quiet Place*, and *The Curse of La Llorona* deals with mothers, who battle supernatural or external threats to protect their families, especially their children. Motherhood in horror films serves as a potent vehicle for exploring deep-seated fears, primal instincts, and the darker aspects of human nature, making it a compelling and often chilling theme in the genre. Films such as *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *Suspiria* (2018) by Guillermo del Toro and Luca Guadagnino are examples of modern gothic horror films. Whereas, *Crimson Peak*, features

Jessica Chastain as Lucille Sharpe, a haunting figure who exerts a powerful, controlling influence over her family. Lucille's character embodies the Gothic trope of the malevolent matriarch, driven by secrets and ambition. The film, *The Witch* (2015), is focused on religious paranoia and familial breakdown, the matriarch, Katherine, wields significant influence over her family in this atmospheric horror film. Her desperation and fear drive much of the film's tension. From the early expressionist films to the modern explications of gothic films have left an enduring mark on the world of cinema, by bewitching the spectators with their evocative effects.

The movie, *The Curse of La Llorona* is a horror thriller released in the year 2019, is based on the Latin American folklore of La Llorona, starring Linda Cardellini, Raymond Cruz, and Patricia Velasquez, and follows a mother in 1973 Los Angeles who must save her children from a malevolent spirit trying to steal them. The film explores the themes of guilt, redemption, and the consequences of jumping into a decision before thinking twice. The film portrays three mothers who love their children with their lives. But the sole differences that one killed her children out of anger towards her husband and ended up in unending grief, while the other one is ready to sacrifice anything to protect her children, from anyone, even if it's a ghost. The last one survives her trauma and becomes desperate to protect others from suffering the same fate as her children. The film was produced by James Wan through his Atomic Monster banner, directed by Michael Chaves, in his feature directorial debut, and written by Mikki Daughtry and Tobias Iaconis, portrays maternal grief and agony.

The maternal discourses in the film, explore the themes of guilt, redemption, protection, sacrifice, and cultural context, diving into the depth of emotions. The myth of *La Llorona*, being a lost spirit yearning for her dead children is the main magnetism of the film, highlighting the theme of motherhood. The film portrays the primal instinct of mothers to protect their children at all costs. In the film, except for Maria-La Llorona- the other mothers are protective of their children. The portrayal of motherhood in the film involves themes of sacrifice and unconditional love. The determination of the mother, to keep her children safe drives the narrative forward and underscores the powerful bond between a mother and her offspring. Even if, Anna is portrayed as the protagonist of the film and the main mother figure, Patricia and La Llorona also play a major role in bringing out the discourses of motherhood.

Anna- the protagonist- is a recently widowed social worker and mother of two children, Chris and Sam, who is dedicated to her job and her family, striving to provide a stable and loving environment for her children despite the absence of their father. Anna oaths to shield her

children from an unknown fear of La Llorona. Anna demonstrates resourcefulness and resilience in confronting the supernatural threat. Whenever her children were in trouble, or in the clutches of La Llorona, she would run off to them, to protect them from the devil. Anna was a person, who refused to believe in ghosts and supernatural things. But when she encountered that something out of the ordinary was behind her children, her maternal instincts worked instantly and made her believe in such things. Despite facing terrifying encounters with the vengeful spirit, Anna remains steadfast in her resolve to protect her children. Throughout the film, Anna is shown as a protective figure, who embodies strength, determination, and a fierce protective instinct as she fights against La Llorona's relentless pursuit, demonstrating the lengths a mother will go to safeguard her family. Anna as a mother, is imbued with emotional depth, as she grapples with feelings of fear, guilt, and determination. She is haunted by the trauma of losing her husband and struggles with the responsibility of raising her children alone while also facing the supernatural threat posed by La Llorona. Despite her fears and vulnerabilities, Anna draws strength from her love for her children and her unwavering commitment to keeping them safe.

On the other hand, La Llorona, who was once a human being- Maria- who had her family and children is shown thriving for the love of her lost children. Upon the betrayal of her husband, she became enraged and killed her children out of wrath and self-loathing, that she was never enough for her husband. After realizing the enormity of her actions, she drowns herself to death in the same stream, she drowned her children to death. Becoming a ghost, she wandered into the earth in search of her lost offspring, crying out in anguish, consumed by grief and guilt. As a mother, La Llorona reflects themes of maternal love, loss, and remorse. Despite her heinous act, she is depicted as a figure tormented by the consequences of her actions, forever haunted by the memory of her children and the inability to find redemption. Her cries, echoing through the night, are said to be in still fear in those who hear them, serving as a cautionary tale against the dangers of unchecked emotions and the consequences of forsaking one's maternal responsibilities. The portrayal of La Llorona highlights the profound impact of maternal actions and the enduring consequences of past sins. She is depicted as a cautionary figure warning against the dangers of neglecting or harming one's children. Her story serves as a reminder of the importance of maternal love and the devastating effects of its absence or betrayal. Her legend continues to resonate across cultures, serving as a haunting reminder of the consequences of maternal betrayal and the depths of a mother's grief.

The film, overall portrays how motherhood differs between Anna and La Llorona, along with the eerie settings and gothic atmosphere, evoking fear in the audience. Analyzing motherhood in the film, one cannot forget the role of another mother, Patricia Alvarez, who failed to protect her children, even if she tried to. Patricia as a mother, tragically loses her two sons to La Llorona's curse. Consumed by grief and guilt, she becomes desperate to protect others from suffering the same fate as her children. Initially, she blames Anna for her loss and even, hopes that Sam and Chris should be in the hands of La Llorona, like her children. Even if she tried to make it happen, the mother in her didn't allow her to do so. Despite her initial distrust of Anna, she eventually forms an alliance with her in their shared quest to defeat La Llorona. They devise a plan to break the curse and put an end to the spirit's reign of terror, with the help of a former priest Rafael Olvera. The character of Patricia highlights the devastating impact of loss and there silence required to overcome trauma. As a mother who has experienced the ultimate tragedy, she serves as a cautionary tale while also offering hope for redemption and closure.

The three mothers, in *The Curse of La Llorona*, represent different facets of motherhood, including love, loss, protection, and the consequences of maternal actions. Their interactions and struggles contribute to the thematic richness of the film, offering insights into the complexities of maternal instincts and relationships in the face of supernatural terror. There are often, where, one can witness maternal instincts, strength, resilience, sacrifice, and love. Mothers are said to be the untold superheroes in real life, who avoid every expense to make their offspring live a luxurious life, and who avoid their dreams to make their children's dreams come true. Motherhood often involves making sacrifices for the well-being and happiness of one's children. Mothers may sacrifice their time, energy, and personal desires to meet the needs of their children and ensure their happiness and success. Some of them even ignore the fact that they are a person of their own and they do have their tastes and wishes. To make the wishes of their children come true, they can go to any extent and do anything. On the other hand, there are mothers, who look after their own life and their children, without forgetting their own needs. Some of them deal with their job, family, and their children, managing everything, indeed like a superhero. Motherhood can be called, a journey of self discovery and personal growth for women, as they navigate the challenges and joys of raising children while also exploring their own identities, desires, and aspirations. It's a journey marked by profound connections, enduring bonds, and the unbreakable ties between a mother and her children.

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