

## Nurturing Nature: Exploring the Mother Archetype in Sejal Mehta's Narrative on Earth and Evolution

**Dr. Nishel Prem Elias**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
All Saints' College

### Abstract

*The paper explores the portrayal of the mother archetype; both canonical and subversive in Sejal Mehta's short story, The Earth and Evolution Walk into a Bar. The narrative delves into the earth/mother archetype's significance in shaping themes of creation, nurturing, and protection within the story. Earth/mother is depicted as a nurturing force responsible for the creation and sustenance of life, embodying qualities traditionally associated with motherhood. Earth/mother's role as a nurturer is evident in her careful crafting of diverse life forms and ecosystems, symbolising her maternal instinct to provide for her creations. The Earth and Evolution Walk into a Bar offers a creative and subversive take on the mother archetype by humanising and complicating the roles of Earth and Evolution. Through their narrative, the story engages with profound ecological and existential themes, providing an interplay between nurturing, growth, and the often-challenging realities of life on Earth.*

*Through the exploration of the mother archetype and the subversion of the same, the narrative underscores the interconnectedness between humanity and the Earth as our mother, highlighting the importance of nurturing and caring for the natural world.*

**Keywords:** Subversion, Archetype, Canonical, Stereotypes, Apocalyptic

The mother archetype is a universal pattern that appears in the collective unconscious of all humans according to Jung. It represents the concept of a nurturing and caring mother, the power and wisdom of the divine feminine. The archetype is associated with qualities such as Nurturing, Love, Compassion, Protection, Fertility, Creativity, and Abundance. A subversive portrayal of the mother archetype involves challenging and deconstructing traditional, idealized notions of motherhood. Such portrayals can reveal the complexities, contradictions, and darker aspects of maternal figures, often highlighting issues of power, control, and the multifaceted nature of maternal relationships. "The 'mother' has a positive as well as a negative meaning.

Her natural benevolence, her all-sustaining power, and her magic authority are contrasted by her hunger for satisfaction and her unconquerable power, which devours, seduces, and poisons.” (Jung, 47) “The postmodern artist is the ultimate subverter, continuously challenging the established norms and boundaries, be it in the portrayal of motherhood or any other construct. In a postmodern world, the mother is not a fixed identity but a shifting narrative.” (Hutcheon, 148) Sejal Mehta’s short story, *The Earth and Evolution Walk into a Bar*, which appears in an anthology named *Magical Women* (2019), edited by Sukanya Venkataraghavan provides a unique and insightful subversive portrayal of the mother archetype through its personification of Earth and Evolution. “The mother in postmodern literature is a mosaic of contradictions and fragmented identities. She is both creator and destroyer, loving and indifferent, a figure whose multiplicity defies any singular, essentialist definition.” (Hooks, 102) In this postmodern fictional narrative, both Earth and Evolution are characterised by distinct personalities and engage in a conversation that reflects their roles and challenges in nurturing and shaping life. Earth’s conversation with Evolution includes criticism of human actions and their impact on the planet. “Postmodernism is the negation of a single narrative, the refusal of one archetype that fits all. The mother is no longer a symbol of universal nurturing, but a deconstructed figure whose role is subject to interpretation, reinvention, and subversion.” (Lyotard, 220)

Earth is often depicted as the ultimate nurturing mother, providing life and sustenance to all its inhabitants. In Mehta’s story, Earth is personified, making her a relatable and dynamic character. The story presents Mahi - Mother Earth and Sangatarash (Sanga) and evolution as two separate entities involved in an active debate on how the future (mostly apocalyptic) should unfold as far as the earth is concerned.

In the narrative, the mother archetype is introduced in the scene where Sangatarash is waiting for someone. He anticipates that the meeting is not going to be a cordial one. And it is through his thoughts that one understands that the woman he is waiting for is no ordinary woman – but someone with very specific tastes. They were meeting at a place that she liked and had met several times before but the place had changed drastically over the centuries. She perceives human beings as a species with super intelligence by equally disruptive powers. The only things that she likes about human beings and their innovations are beer and tea.

The lady walks into the bar and everyone’s attention is magnetically drawn to her- not just because of her beauty but rather on account of her arresting persona. To ordinary human beings, she appears to be dressed in a hand-woven linen saree in gold and peach colour, embroidered

with tiny flowers. But to Sanga – she appears terrifying and beautiful at the same time. “Her eyes, which were usually pools of gentle rivers, were reminiscent of stormy seas. Her body was like a shifting canvas, at times enveloped by gnarled roots, at others by clusters of rainforest canopies. Mahi.

The Earth” (60 - 61) Though the other smells a beautiful fragrance as she walks past – to him – Sanga – smells “blood, and fire and rotting sewage. He was met by an icy draft that would have frozen his soul had he possessed one. (61)

Mahi does not want to indulge in small talk of any kind rejects his peace offering of the menu and gets directly to the point. He tells her that the “management is a bit worried” and when she presses regarding what he says about the ‘children’. By giving Earth a voice and personality, Mehta subverts the passive, one-dimensional portrayal of the Earth as merely a provider. Instead, Earth becomes an active participant in the dialogue about life and its challenges. This portrayal challenges the static image of creation by highlighting the ongoing, sometimes harsh process of evolution. Evolution as a character represents change, adaptation, and the sometimes brutal reality of natural selection. There is a context in the narrative in which Sanga watches the rain come down which is quite unseasonal. Sanga realises that Mahi had done this on purpose to ruin his expensive suit. Sanga tells Mahi that it is her actions like this; rain, tornadoes, fires, and her playing games with the elements of the earth that have created a ruckus in the management, and to add to that the children. He warns her that she needs to stop. Mahi catches him there and wants to know what exactly the threat is going to be, and the threat is that Mahi would be stripped of all her powers. This interaction highlights the ambivalence and complexity of the mother archetype. Earth is not just a benevolent giver of life but also a being with her challenges and frustrations.

Mahi becomes enraged at Sanga, as he was the head of evolution and he had failed miserably in his responsibility towards the planets. The human beings had evolved into nothing less than monsters – “attacking each other, me and they’re raping babies. BABIES” (63) It is out of disgust that Mahi had started using the children. This critical perspective on humanity adds depth to the archetype that moved away from being stereotyped, showing her as a disappointed and worried mother who has seen her “children” (human beings) cause harm. This subverts the idealised image of an all-forgiving mother by presenting Earth as a figure who recognises and critiques the failures of her offspring. Sanga shows Mahi newspaper reports of incidents reported of kidnappers found with their throats slashed and the child with no memory of what had transpired. An element of fantasy has been added to the narrative thus, fitting it into the

genre of metafiction. Sanga tells Mahi that these kinds of incidents have to stop. But Mahi vehemently says ‘No’ and threatens to sneeze – whereby everything Sanga has worked for all these centuries will cease to exist.

Sanga remembers how Mahi’s sneeze had brought about the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Earth’s conversation with Evolution includes criticism of human actions and their impact on the planet. By using a non-linear pattern of representation, the text breaks away from the solemn and reverent portrayals of these grand concepts. The complex portrayal of Earth as a nurturing yet troubled mother figure encourages a more nuanced understanding of motherhood, moving beyond idealised stereotypes to embrace the real challenges and emotions involved.

The narrative also brings in the apocalyptic vision through the mother archetype. Mahi wonders how her end would be, would it be like the big bang that was used to create her, they go on to talk about how she would reboot – reboot “as atoms. Mahi, as beautiful, free atoms, that would come together to form . . . you.

Because the universe can’t handle too many Mahis. Just one is enough.” (67) says Mahi. Mahi says that she is ready to do it – even though they have strived for four and a half billion years. These visions reflect the dire consequences of human actions on the planet and the potential for catastrophic environmental degradation.

Earth likely expresses concerns about the extensive damage caused by human activities such as pollution, deforestation, and climate change. The apocalyptic statements highlight the ongoing environmental crises, suggesting a future where Earth’s ability to sustain life is severely compromised if current trends continue. The portrayal of Earth’s distress signals an impending ecological disaster. Sanga tries to talk Mahi out of the idea of extinction. This further enrages her. She tells him how she had advocated against the creation of a species with so much intelligence, giving them brain power that will help the way earth functions, and even their superior intelligence ‘giving rise to negative emotions to power, greed, entitlement’. She again tried to talk them out of it when they began to attack each other – but it was the scientist in him who wanted to see how this would pan out. Sanga loses his control and says that he did want to see what worked. “I tried something new...” (68). But Mahi responds that it had failed and it was hurting everything that they built. Mahi tries to make him see reason “Everything has a purpose. We gave every creature all life, the ability to protect itself. Speed, camouflage, roots, flight...” (68) Sanga had worked with Mahi with great delight; their camaraderie was

remarkable, and they had delighted and mourned the mass extinctions. And then they created humans. And now they were at an impasse. Mahi wants to go for a do-over and completely wipe away humans from the earth and Sanga is dead against it. He tries to tell her that he will fix the glitches, but Mahi questions him as to what exactly he is going to change. Mahi refers to the humans building a 600-foot statue and moving 300 crocodiles into an area that is not their natural habitat- which would jeopardize the ecological balance. “These are animals with homing tendencies! They will come back. Do you know what will happen when they return to find their home encroached teeming with humans? Can you live with the consequences of that?” (70)

The conversation touches on the irreversible changes inflicted on Earth’s ecosystems, emphasising the loss of biodiversity and the collapse of natural systems. The idea that some damages are beyond repair suggests a bleak future where the planet’s resilience is diminished, leading to widespread ecological collapse and a stark, uninhabitable environment. The dialogue between Mother Earth and evolution focused on the significant and often detrimental impact of human civilization on natural processes, including urbanization, industrialization, and resource exploitation. This could evoke an apocalyptic scenario where human actions have pushed the planet to its limits, resulting in catastrophic outcomes such as extreme weather events, food and water shortages, and the displacement of populations.

The apocalyptic vision in the narrative serves as a powerful metaphor for the current environmental crisis. Through the personified characters of Earth and Evolution, the text presents a stark warning about the consequences of human actions on the planet. The narrative underscores the urgent need for a profound shift in how humanity interacts with the natural world to avert catastrophic outcomes and ensure a sustainable future. The dialogue between Earth and Evolution touches on the struggles and responsibilities of nurturing life. Earth expresses concern about the damage humans have done, reflecting the burden and pain that come with her role as the provider. The subversive representation of Mahi brings in the destroyer element as well. By giving Earth a voice, the text subverts the passive archetype, transforming her into an active participant in the dialogue about environmental issues.

The narrative challenges the traditional anthropocentric viewpoint that places humans at the center of everything. Mother Earth’s voice itself is a subversion and is a reminder that the environment is not just a resource to be exploited, but a dynamic and complex system that sustains all life on the planet. Her anger is reflected in a drastic change of nature as portrayed in the narrative. “The wind howled and thunder bellowed its dissent. The ocean outside swelled

and lashed out with an enormous wave that crashed on the shore” (71). Sanga tries to calm her down. But he realizes that she has been broken beyond redemption. Thus, the subversion of the archetype of Mother Earth as the creator and provider of life is a phenomenon that has been unfolding for centuries. “She was... a destroyer in disguise. She could build you up and tear you down, and she didn’t care which one she did first.” (Raasch,91)

Throughout history, humans have exploited natural resources without regard for the long-term consequences, resulting in severe environmental degradation. This destruction has rendered our planet less hospitable to the creatures that depend on it for survival, including humans. The subversion of the archetype is rooted in the capitalist system, which values profit over environmental conservation. Industries such as mining, agriculture, and logging have pillaged the land and polluted the air and water, all in the name of economic growth. In the pursuit of profit, corporations have disregarded the sacredness of the natural world, which has led to the current ecological crisis.

Moreover, the patriarchal structure of society has contributed to the erasure of Mother Earth’s role as the creator and provider. Men have been traditionally associated with power and control, while women and nature have been viewed as passive and subservient. This view has resulted in the exploitation and marginalization of women, children, and nature, both of which have been viewed as resources to be used and abused. If modernist texts suggested utopia, progress, and machine-like perfection in narration, then the postmodern texts seemed to come from a dystopian and far-from-perfect future. Narrators salvaged and distressed materials to produce an aesthetic of urban apocalypse along with subversion of existing myths and archetypes. *The Earth and Evolution Walking into a Bar* is an ideal example of a subversive text that breaks the canonical structure and grand narrative of ‘Mother Earth and her Children’.

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