



---

## THE PORTRAYAL OF MAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN DARREN ARONOFSKY'S MOVIE *MOTHER!*

Parvathy Rajeev  
MA English, Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous

---

### I

The relationship between man and nature is a constant theme that has often been explored in literary and cultural studies. Starting with the optimistic, romantic portrayal of the harmony between man and nature, to grim warnings that was intended to act as eye openers for the negative consequences of the exploitation of Mother Earth to satisfy the human greed, written, oral and visual narratives have tried to capture the changing contours of the balance of relationships between man and nature. The message of all these narratives constantly refer to the need to build a healthy relationship with nature; to go back to sustainable development and use of natural resources because, as Gandhiji states, the earth has enough resources to fulfill everyone's need but not everyone's greed.

The interdisciplinary school of ecocriticism which is an emerging field of literary studies brings awareness about how the nature and the natural world are imagined through literary or cultural texts. Under ecocriticism, books, movies, music and even advertisements that show the man-nature relationships are studied and explored. The relationship between man and nature is not just interdependent but also interrelated; man can never survive without nature. Literary texts, be it written or visual have constantly addressed the concern for the kind of disruptive relationship between man and nature owing to the callous, indifferent attitude with which human beings continue to exploit nature. The concept of imagining an apocalyptic and post apocalyptic vision of what would happen to life on earth in future, if the human kind continues to wreck Mother Earth and misuse the resources of nature is one of the techniques used in these texts to ask the human beings to slow down, think and look before leaping into the laps of civilizations that are only crazy about technological advancements.

Beginning with the scriptural story of Noah and his Ark that describes the end of a corrupt original civilization and its replacement with a remade world, the Hindu scriptures of Matsyapurana where the matsya avatar of lord Vishnu predicts an all destructive deluge, to books and movies even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the themes of apocalypse and post apocalypse have been explored through religious, cultural and literary texts. Coming to the specific genre of movies, the concept of destruction of earth due to different kinds of potential threats have been explored from a time as early as 1930s through movies like *Deluge*, *The End of the World or Things to Come*. The anxiety of the end of this world has lingered in the minds of generations, passed down to the future through different methods but nothing powerful enough to stop the mankind from eating into the heart of Mother Earth. The destruction continues. After the 1950s, we see a shift arising, especially in the American films, where the reasons for the end of the world also disguised the fears of a particular civilization, say for example, the American film *Kiss Me Deadly* acts as a metaphor for the paranoia and nuclear fears of the Cold War and the consequent fears that were engrained in the psyche of the Americans. Underlying all the shifts and the innovations in storylines and plots used, the basic idea remains the same: The Earth will come to an end because of the growing conflicts between man and nature and the never ending destruction caused under the pretence of various claims, starting with making life a “little better and advanced than before” which we term as the rise of civilization.

Under this context, with the rise of ecocritical theories, it would be interesting to analyze the portrayal of the man-nature relationship and the perspective on apocalypse and post-apocalypse. Though there are many movies that explore these tropes, this paper specifically looks at the 2017 movie *Mother!* which is a simultaneous blend of past, present and the future of the life on earth.

## II

Darren Aronofsky, who is particularly noted for his work *Black Swan*, is very well known for the use of psychologically intriguing thoughts and themes in his movies. The movie *Mother!* which has been open to multiple interpretations continue to make us think and re examine our relationship with nature.

The very first scene of the movie introduces the viewer to a woman who wakes up calling out for her husband. The viewer is left to his own judgement to interpret every single action that happens until the last scene in the movie. The characters are left unnamed and generic names like “Him”, “Mother”, “Man”, “Woman” and so on are used to identify them.

The movie can be divided into three parts. The first part of the story weaves in the Genesis from the Old Testament. Though there is no direct mention or a clear cut action that points to the use of the myth, the mis-en-scene created using camera angles and lighting and the dialogues delivered by the characters automatically make the viewers remember the Genesis. After the first scene, the woman who is the “Mother” walks out to the verandah of a house which is set in a very scenic, isolated yet beautifully lush and green land. Senior American film critics like David Ehrlich interprets the house and its surroundings as possible representations of Earth and the environment. The first person shot is used to show the Mother lovingly looking at what she sees and later on finding Him, her husband, who is a writer considering his wife as the muse for all his literary works. The arrival of the Man who has a bruise on the area of his ribs, the subsequent entry of the Woman and their two sons, and the murder of one son by the other over a property quarrel, which can be read as the murder of Abel by Cain, makes the usage of the myth of Genesis clear. The minute the Man enters the house, Mother’s health keeps deteriorating and after the murder takes place in the house, a bloody vent appears on the floor of the house symbolic of the beginning of destruction of Earth by the human beings. From the dialogues spoken by Him to Man and the scenes showing the Mother carefully organizing every single detail of the house, which has a beating heart, the viewer again comes to the possible interpretation of Mother Earth, carefully creating a habitable environment to support life. The heart also stands for the vitality of Earth.

The second part of the movie picturizes the Man and the Woman leaving after the death of their son and Mother being left alone. The viewers also witness a violent sexual scene between Him and the Mother which leads to her getting pregnant with new “life”. The new life heals the damage done during the stay of the Man and Woman and Mother’s health which was affected during their stay also improves. Critics like Zack Sharf, Jamie Righetti, Eric Kohn and David Ehrlich who writes for the website IndieWire, explains this as the union between God and Earth giving rise to the son of God, who has the capability to make things right. In an interview given by Aronofsky to Anne Thompson on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017, he validated the above interpretation as what he had expected: it was the union between the God of the Old Testament and Earth that leads to the birth of the messiah.

The third part of the movie can be demarcated by the scene where a heavily pregnant Mother states, “I’ll go prepare for the apocalypse”. Him, who was unable to write anything worthwhile, suddenly writes a book right after the sexual union with Mother which takes him to the pinnacles of fame. That very personal dinner party that Mother organizes for her and Him is

crashed in by Man, Woman and a lot many unknown people just like a previous time when a lot of people had invaded into their home right after the funeral of the murdered son and created havoc before being asked to leave by Mother herself. But this time, things take a horrific turn. In a montage of shots, the viewer watches the flood described in the Genesis depicted through the newly constructed sink in the house being destroyed and water slowly gushing all over the house. This is followed by battles, bloodsheds, violent invasions, people massacring each other, stealing things from the house, forcefully claiming ownership over the property, fervently indulging in religious prayers, fighting over their beliefs; in short, every kind of exploitation that man has committed on earth is depicted through a montage that stretches up to 25 minutes. Mother goes into labour pain but has to suffer a lot in the hands of these invaders before she could give birth to her son in the study which again represents the process of creation.

Throughout the story Him is represented as someone who constantly experiments and is never satisfied with whatever he creates. Him takes the newly born son, among the people despite Mother's disapproval, in order to hear what the people have to say. What follows shocks the viewers. These people murder the baby and eat him up symbolically representing the death of Christ and even the belief in moral values. When Mother furiously fights them, they beat her up. An ecofeministic reading arises here, where Mother Earth is seen to be tormented, kicked and tortured for trying to protect the "life" that she had nurtured within. This is also when the beating heart in the basement of the life gets burnt down 99% and is almost about to become ashes. This entire episode relates to what Vandana Shiva talks about in her book, *Earth Democracy*-culture thefts, natural resource privatization, violence against women and nature, and planetary death. This also shows that environmental concern is something that has transcended the boundaries of nations and is constantly addressed in different ways throughout the world.

The climax of the story brings in the apocalyptic and post- apocalyptic vision where Mother, who is extremely furious with both Him and the invaders who ruined her home and killed her son, decides to blow up the whole place using the oil resources she had found in the underground cellar (Miller). The oil resources can stand for the natural resources of earth and the fact that an American movie depicts the world being burnt down by oil, can refer to the cultural anxiety of Americans and their never ending desire for oil resources. Mother sets fire to the oil despite Him's requests not to do so, and as a result, all the people are instantly murdered. The last speck of life remains within Mother but Him is left unharmed even though he was standing right in front of her when she set the fire. Previously, subjective camera

technique was used to show Him as the God during the scene when one of the sons was being murdered. The fight happens and while Mother is rendered helpless and looks around, she suddenly spots a calm Him looking down from the topmost floor of the house in a godly manner. The ending of the movie clarifies the fact that Him is the God. He carries Mother in his arms while she asks Him why she was tortured so much and pleads with him to let her go. Mother expresses her grief of having given Him everything that she had but he chose to give it all away to people who were disrespectful, greedy and inconsiderate to all her emotions. Him then declares that he can never give up the act of creation. He says, “Me? I am I. You? You were home” and goes on to ask her to give the remaining amount of love that is left in her heart to him. She agrees and he takes her heart out and relieves her of her pain. It is then that the viewers see the heart within the Mother for the first time and realizes that the beating heart shown in the walls of hers was hers and the home represented her. Him crafts the heart again and the last scene of the movie completes a whole circle, with the viewers watching the same first scene being repeated again. The only difference is that this time, it is a new woman, which could signify an entirely new planet with new creation. There is a mention about a fire that destroyed the house entirely before Mother rebuilt it from scratch. Now, we also see another woman doing the same re-emphasizing the fact that when humans go out of control, then end is bound to happen for the sake of a new beginning. To change the course of history would be in our hands so that for once, God would be satisfied with his creation (Miller).

### III

The story uses the allegory of the Genesis to talk about the past. The ecocritical reading of the movie depicts a very troubled man-nature relationship where humankind just intrudes into realms of nature without even considering about Mother Nature to fulfill his greed. Humans are portrayed as evil, selfish, cunning and exploitative in nature because of which their end would be inevitable. The movie gives a powerful message to all the humans on earth to mend their ways if they want life to continue on earth. Interestingly, Aronofsky subverts the myth of Genesis, where Eve was the one who actually plucked the forbidden apple ruining things for human kind, by making the Man shatter the crystal glass which is symbolic of the forbidden fruit in the movie. The movie has eco feminist elements as well where the entire human race is held culpable for the painful end of Mother Earth. Through Him and the Mother acting as a muse for his writings, another man-nature relationship is explored where the nature has always been the muse for poets like the Romantics and the Transcendentalists. On the one hand nature is the muse, and on the other hand she is exploited and torn to bits to fulfill the greed of

civilization. The movie also refers to the selfishness of creative process which is explored through the larger framework of God being a creator.

*Mother!* uses Surrealism, the dreamscape technique that was popular before Realism became prominent in the 1970s and weaves in mythical elements to show the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic vision of what can be one of the possible outcomes of the present equation of man and nature. To sum up, the movie does exactly what is written in *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm,

“Most ecocritical works share a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits...either we change our ways or face the global catastrophe... exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong ways to apocalypse.”

### References:

Aldrich, Robert, *Kiss Me Deadly*, 1955

Aronofsky's, Darren. *Mother!*, 2017

Fiest, Felix. E, *Deluge*, 1933

Gance, Abel, *End of the World*, 1931

Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm editors, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 1996

Menzies, William Cameron, *Things to Come*, 1936

Miller, Julie, *Mother! Ending: What does it all mean?*  
[www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/09/mother-movie-meaning-explained](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/09/mother-movie-meaning-explained). Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2019