Childism and Maternal Dysfunction in Tatsushi Ōmori's "Mother" (2020)

Gamze Hakverdi, Linköping University, Sweden

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
Tatsushi Ōmori's *Mother* (2020) vividly portrays the harrowing realities of childism through a profoundly dysfunctional maternal relationship. The film centers on Akiko and her son Shuhei, showcasing how childism manifests in their tumultuous family dynamic. Akiko's manipulative and neglectful behavior starkly represents childism, exploiting and mistreating Shuhei to serve her own needs while disregarding his fundamental rights and emotional well-being. Despite enduring constant manipulation and neglect, Shuhei's loyalty to his abusive mother underscores the complex nature of familial bonds affected by childism. Inspired by a true story, the film documents Shuhei's struggle with maternal dysfunction and the lack of protective measures for vulnerable children, which impede his development and identity formation. His quest for a sense of self amid relentless abuse provides a poignant commentary on the broader impacts of childism. While the film primarily focuses on personal family dynamics, it implicitly critiques societal neglect and the failure to protect vulnerable children. This paper will discuss how *Mother* serves as a powerful portrayal of systemic child discrimination, urging a reevaluation of societal attitudes toward children's rights and well-being.

Keywords: Childism, Maternal Dysfunction, Tatsushi Ōmori, *Mother,* Japanese Cinema

Introduction: Ethics of Care

Tatsushi Ōmori's *Mother* (2020), available on the Netflix streaming platform to reach a global audience, offers an unsettling exploration of a dysfunctional mother-son relationship in the backdrop of modern Japanese society. The film follows Akiko and her son, Shuhei, in his childhood and adolescent years. Akiko is a manipulative and neglectful mother, and Shuhei becomes her primary source of control and survival. Akiko involves Shuhei in her dysfunctional world—using him to extract money from her lovers and relatives while completely disregarding his education, future, and emotional well-being. Shuhei, in turn, is caught in a profound psychological bind. Despite being the victim of his mother's manipulation, he remains fiercely loyal to her, unable to break free from the emotional dependency that ties them together even when he is older. As Shuhei grows older, Akiko manipulates him into increasingly dangerous situations, including an involvement in the crime that shatters the remnants of his childhood innocence. The film's narrative is steeped in emotional tension, highlighting the devastating impact of Akiko's manipulative and neglectful mothering on Shuhei's development.

Based on true events, *Mother* is both an intimate portrayal of familial dysfunction and a more extensive critique of society's failure to protect vulnerable children. It challenges viewers to reflect on the complexities of parental bonds and the devastating consequences of societal indifference to the suffering of children. In one pivotal scene, after forcing her son to commit the murder of his grandparents for money, Akiko responds to the interrogation officer about Shuhei: "I can raise him however I want. I am his mother, after all. I gave birth to him. He is my flesh and blood. Why is that a problem? He is my son". This question posed by Akiko — *Why is that a problem?* can be addressed in many ways within the film's narrative, but I will approach it through the lens of the "ethics of care". This question raises a more profound inquiry into where maternal rights over a child begin and where they end. Does giving birth or sharing biological ties justify every act of a mother towards her child?

As the film, based on true events, illustrates in the presence of maternal dysfunctionality, maternal rights over a child can quickly turn into childism —a violation of the child's right to be cared for. Nel Noddings (2013, pp. 59-78) offers a framework for understanding this through the "ethics of care" which posits that caring is a reciprocal relationship. The *one-caring* conveys attentiveness, empathy, and a commitment to the well-being of the *cared-for*. However, this relationship only becomes fully realized when the *cared-for* acknowledges and accepts the care offered, creating a mutual bond based on trust and understanding. In the case of *Mother*, Akiko's actions fundamentally violate these principles. Her treatment of Shuhei is transactional and manipulative, devoid of the empathy and attentiveness that define ethical care. Noddings argues that caring relationships require emotional engrossment and responsibility on both sides, with the *one-caring* recognizing and responding to the needs of the *cared-for*. Akiko's refusal to acknowledge Shuhei's emotional needs or developmental rights and her exploitation of him for her gain represents a profound dysfunctionality in the caregiving dynamic. Her declaration that she can raise Shuhei however she wishes reflects a distorted understanding of maternal rights, one that prioritizes herself over Shuhei's well-being, thus leading to childism—a disregard for the child's rights and autonomy.

Noddings emphasizes that care involves not only physical provision but also an emotional and ethical commitment to the flourishing of the *cared-for*. In contrast, Akiko's approach to motherhood is marked by self-interest and neglect, reducing Shuhei to an instrument of her survival rather than nurturing his potential. Shuhei remains loyal to his mother despite her

neglectfulness. As Noddings touches on, even when the *one-caring* fails to fulfill their responsibilities, the *cared-for* may still maintain the connection, which Noddings calls "ethical heroism.": "When caring is not felt in the cared-for, but its absence is felt, the cared-for may still, by an act of ethical heroism, respond and thus contribute to the caring relation" (Noddings, 2013, p. 78). Shuhei, in his devotion to his mother, embodies this position, clinging to the remnants of their bond despite the emotional harm it causes him. His loyalty, however, is not the result of reciprocal care but a reflection of his emotional entrapment, illustrating how, in the absence of proper care, the *cared-for* can become trapped in a cycle of dependence and manipulation.

Motherhood starts with a physical act, yet it is inherently connected with ethics of care, as defined in Nel Noddings' account. As Noddings emphasizes, mothers guided by care ethics remain aware of the broader network of care surrounding them. The concept of the "web of care" in care ethics highlights the importance of making decisions that minimize harm to anyone within this interconnected system (Noddings, 2010, pp. 73-74). Akiko, on the other hand, exhibits no characteristics of the ethics of care. She shows no compassion or responsibility toward her son, Shuhei, her second child, Fuyuka, or anyone else in the film, including her own parents, whom she manipulates Shuhei into murdering for money. Akiko represents the epitome of maternal dysfunction in terms of care ethics, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and exploitation that causes deep and lasting harm to everyone involved.

Maternal Dysfunctionality and Childism

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller, in the Preface of her influential book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, talks about her childhood, stating that: "I was amazed to discover that I had been an abused child, that from the very beginning of my life, I had no choice but to comply totally with the needs and feelings of my mother and to ignore my own" (1990, p. xii). Miller reveals that the knowledge she shares in her writings arises from reconnecting with her own silenced inner child, complemented by her formal education and psychoanalytic training. After years of suppressing the truth about her childhood, Miller came to realize, through spontaneous painting, that she had been abused by her mother—a pedagogue who inflicted emotional terror upon her. Her father and others failed to notice or intervene in this abuse, and Miller reflects on how different her life might have been "if just one person had recognized it and come to her defense" (1990, p. xii-xiii). She states, "That person could have helped me to recognize my mother's cruelty for what it was instead of accepting it for decades, to my great detriment, as something normal and necessary" (1990, p. xiii). Alice Miller defines this person who courageously stands up for children and protects them from adults' abuse of power as an "enlightened witness" (1990, p. xiii). She notes that although individuals like this are still rare in our society, with its "hostility toward children", their numbers are steadily growing (1990, p. xiii).

What Miller defines as "hostility toward children" is conceptualized by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl as "childism". Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012) introduces the concept of childism as a specific form of prejudice against children, similar to racism and sexism:

> The word *childism* could similarly guide us to an understanding of various behaviors and acts against children as instances of stereotyping children and childhood. We could recognize the many social and political arrangements that are detrimental to children or that fail to meet their needs— the many anti-child trends in every aspect of our society, from legal structures to cultural productions—as instances of adult behavior toward

> children that is rationalized or justified by a prejudice. *Childism* could help identify related issues, child imprisonment, child exploitation and abuse, substandard schooling, high infant mortality rates, fetal alcohol syndrome, the reckless prescription of antipsychotic drugs to children, child pornography, and all other behaviors or policies that are not in the best interests of children. The behavior of adults who are childist—most of whom are *parents*—harms directly or indirectly the huge human population under the age of eighteen, which is now close to a third of the population worldwide, and in some places more than half. (2012, p. 7)

This quote from Young-Bruehl highlights two critical aspects of childism. First, it encompasses both explicit and implicit behaviors, ranging from the stereotyping of children at the cognitive level to outright child abuse at the behavioral level. Second, childism is embedded not only in individual actions but also in broader societal, legal, and cultural frameworks that systematically neglect or harm children. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl highlights that childist attitudes often arise from the most unexpected people—*parents*, who are typically seen as primary caregivers.

Mothers, being generally idealized figures, "sometimes neglect, abuse and even murder their own children. Such incidences generate feelings of disgust, horror, and severe judgment. Mothers like this are thought to be abominations, pathological, violations of the very definition of *mother*" (Lachance-Adams, 2014, pp. 27- 28). These dysfunctionalities, whether stemming from psychological, economic, or a combination of various factors, create a harmful, unsettling, and even dangerous environment for the child. In other words, the primary caregiving system, which is meant to protect the child, becomes a source of harm and threat. The film's pressing question arrives at this point: *"Who is responsible for the children in case of parental or maternal dysfunctionality?"* Children exposed to dysfunctional caregivers are at risk of neglect, emotional harm, and physical danger. In these circumstances, the concept of responsibility extends beyond the immediate family and becomes a societal issue, urging communities, institutions, and individuals to recognize and address the needs of vulnerable children. Children in these environments need not only passive observation but proactive support and protection to prevent them from enduring harm or potentially being driven into situations where they might harm others. As Miller argues, enlightened witnesses serve as critical protectors for at-risk children. However, this role should not be considered exclusive to professionals; it must be a shared social responsibility requiring collective commitment with a heightened awareness of childism.

Rethinking Responsibility and Care

Lachance-Adams contends that while mothers, like anyone, are capable of committing heinous acts, the impact is particularly shocking when these crimes are directed at their own children —those who depend on them for survival and trust. Balancing self-care and other-care is complex; not every mother can achieve this, and maternal love, like any love, has limits and sometimes fails (Lachance-Adams, 2014, pp. 190-191). She discusses a case from USA, Oregon, Angela McAnulty, who murdered her 15-year-old daughter, Jeanette Maples. Based on this case, Lachance-Adams points out:

> McAnulty's abuse of her daughter is undeniably horrific, and she should be held responsible for what she did. However, when we remove the assumption that mothers *alone* are responsible for the well-being of their children, we must challenge the prosecutor's argument that only her mother could have saved her. Many other people

> could have saved Jeanette Maples: her father, her stepfather, her step-grandmother, state officials in Oregon and California, teachers and peers at Jeanette's school. Every one of these people had some indication that the girl could be in trouble. (2014, p. 192)

As Lachance-Adams emphasizes: "Indeed, it takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to allow one to be so severely abused" (2014, p. 192). Here, the question we should collectively respond to is not why the mother killed her children. We should collectively respond, as Lachance-Adams asks, "How did *we* let this happen in our community?"

In the case of maternal or parental dysfunctionality, society in its entirety must assume the ethical responsibility of care for the child/ren. This responsibility goes beyond the scope of social service agencies, government policies, or child protection programs alone. While many societies have these institutions in place, the core issue lies in the need for a care-centered foundation within the fabric of society. For these institutions to truly fulfill their purpose, the principles of care ethics must be deeply embedded in the social structure itself, beyond mere institutional presence. As Nel Noddings asserts, "The primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring. Parents, police, social workers, teachers, preachers, neighbors, coaches, older siblings must all embrace this primary aim. It functions as end, means, and criterion for judging suggested means" (2013, p. 172). Noddings highlights that this ethical *ideal* shapes the overall climate, providing a framework to assess acceptable practices across all aspects of life. Ethical concerns arise universally, making it essential that nurturing this ideal is a shared responsibility across society, not confined to just a few institutions (2013, pp. 172-173).

In *Mother*, we see a stark contrast to this ideal. Akiko's family, including her parents and the random men in her life, appear to play peripheral or dysfunctional roles. Social workers like Aya try to intervene—offering a school for Shuhei and attempting to find stability for the family—but their well-intended efforts are undermined by Akiko's refusal to engage with the help provided. The film illustrates how individual interventions are insufficient in the face of severe familial dysfunction. Noddings' assertion that nurturing the ethical *ideal* demands the collective involvement of all societal sectors holds here. Without a widespread network of care, even the most well-intentioned individuals are unable to address the deeply rooted issues of neglect and abuse effectively. "The ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone." (Gilligan, 1982, p. 62). *Mother* critiques the breakdown of this web of connection, showing how personal and institutional neglect leaves individuals like Shuhei abandoned to tragic outcomes. Through its portrayal of maternal dysfunction and social neglect, the film serves as a powerful call for a more collective, robust approach to caregiving—one that addresses not only the personal responsibilities of parents like Akiko but also the societal systems that allow such dysfunction to persist.

Conclusion

Tatsushi Ōmori's *Mother* serves as a stark critique of both maternal dysfunction and societal neglect, revealing how personal failures in caregiving are intertwined with the broader systemic issue of childism. Akiko's abusive and exploitative treatment of her son Shuhei demonstrates the devastating consequences of an absence of care ethics. At the same time, the film also exposes society's failure to intervene and protect vulnerable children. Ultimately, *Mother* calls for reevaluating our collective responsibility in nurturing and safeguarding children.

Alice Miller's concept of "enlightened witnesses" underscores the importance of moving beyond mere observation; active intervention is crucial to breaking cycles of abuse and neglect. Nel Noddings and Carol Gilligan further stress that caregiving should be a collective responsibility embedded deeply within society to ensure no child is left unsupported. Ros Coward echoes this sentiment, stating, "Children are the place where the best of humanity is expressed" (1997, p. 115). Safeguarding and fostering children must be a shared responsibility across society, ensuring that every child has the chance to grow and flourish in an environment that upholds their rights, well-being, and intrinsic worth.

References

Coward, R. (1997). The heaven and hell of mothering: mothering and ambivalence in the mass media. In W. Hollway & B. Featherstone (Eds.), *Mothering and Ambivalence* (pp. 111–118). London and New York: Routledge.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Lachance-Adams, S. (2014). *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers & What a "Good" Mother Would Do: The Ethics of Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Miller, A. (1990). *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (R. Ward, Trans.). USA: Basic Books.

Noddings, N. (2010). *The Maternal Factor Two Paths to Morality*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.

Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics Moral Education*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.

Ōmori, T. (Director). (2020). *Mother*. [Movie]. Star Sands. https://www.netflix.com/

Young-Bruehl, E. (2012). *Childism Confronting Prejudice Against Children*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Contact email: gamzehakverdi@gmail.com