

Interplay of Alienation and Maternal Power and Influence in Maxim Gorky's *Mother*

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Abstract

This research paper aims to analyse two important motifs connected with alienation and mother's role in Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*, published in 1906. Against the background of revolutionary pre-revolutionary Russia, the novel describes the fate of the working-class mother Pelagueya Nilovna, who becomes politically awakened through the activities of her son. This paper aims to examine how Gorky employs the realistic motif of the mother-son relation as an ideological positive which indicates the potential for socially conditioned alienation to be redeemed and transformed by the experience of maternal love in service of the formation of revolutionary conscience. The paper also tries to contend that Gorky's novel outlines maternal influence as the push to societal transformation and break free from the alienation of the working class in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Keywords: Alienation, social, struggle, working class, revolution, maternal love etc.

Introduction

Alienation, displacement, and the yearning for authentic connections have always been recurring themes in literature, which reflect the complex nature of human relationships and their search for belongingness. Such themes explore both the emotional and psychological impact of feeling displaced, exterminated, or segregated from one's surroundings, and the deep desire for genuine connections. Characters in literature often experience being alienated when they try to find understanding within their social or cultural relationships. Alienation can arise from various elements, such as difference in opinions, values, experiences, or the inability to conform to the societal norms. This sense of alienation generates a deep longing for genuine connections and a place where they can truly belong.

Mother is regarded as the most extraordinary novel of Gorky, recounting real-life happenings during 1902 May Day demonstration in Sormovo, Gorky's native town which is now named as Gorky. It is believed that Gorky's distant relative, Anna Zalomova, inspired the mother of *Mother*, for it was "Anna Zalomova, the mother of Piotr Zalomov," who followed "her son into revolutionary activity after his arrest by the tsarist police" (Mikolchak, 531-2). The critic also believes that Gorky visited Anna's family when the former was a child, thus Gorky felt a personal connection with the story of his novel, *Mother*.

This novel was the first of its kind, written by a Russian author, who writes sympathetically of such characters as tramps and thieves, emphasising their daily struggles against

overwhelming odds and fight against oppression of state in Russia. The novel illustrates the life of a female Russian factory worker characterised by “hard labour, poverty, hunger, and sickness” whose husband, who is a bully, dies soon leaving her to raise her only son, Pavel, who would repeat his father’s life (Mikolchak, 531-2).

The lady in *Mother* is not a simple vulnerable character but an inspirer whose duty is not confined to bringing up the children or performing the household chores, rather she is a brave warrior in the battlefield. Nilovna, the courageous mother never goes back to her ordinary life once she joins the revolution. She never hesitates to continue her efforts in spreading the revolutionary speech of her son among the common people. When her son told her that she can be arrested, she has no fear. She states that if it is so, she doesn’t mind. It depicts a woman’s attempt to break away from her male mates. The novel has been named *Mother* because of the strong character of this mother only.

When the novel begins, Pelagueya is only a simple lady as rest of the working women of Russia who work hard in factories throughout the day and adjust with their brutal husbands at night. For 20 years, she also spent a pathetic life with her husband Mikhail Vlassov, who was a bad-tempered misogynist, who would drunk and beat her up only to throw out of their house at night and whose passing away didn’t even sadden anyone. One day Pavel comes having drunk and his mother is extremely sad. She tells him about his father and says, “It was for the first time he had been drunk. The alcohol made his body weak, but it couldn’t destroy his alertness, and that query lurked in to his brain: “Am I Drunk? Am I Drunk?”” (Gorky; 21) This question by his mother tormented him, and he became emotional after watching tears in his mother’s eyes.

He desired to cry, and in order to suppress this desire he showed himself as to be drunk than he actually was. The mother touched his flying hair, and said slowly, “Why did you do it? You oughtn’t to have done it.” (Gorky; 21). He felt sick and after a severe attack of nausea his mother took him to bed. She put a wet towel over his head and forehead. He became normal a little, but still he was feeling intoxicated; his eyelids drowsy; he felt abnormal taste in his mouth; he peeped through his eyes on his mother’s face, and contemplated: “It seems it’s too early for me. Others drink and nothing happens –and I feel sick.” (Gorky; 22).

Later when she found her son indulged in reading some books, she could not understand it. When she asked what he was reading, he replied that he read forbidden books to get the real situation of the workingmen, “I am reading forbidden books. They are forbidden to be read because they tell the truth about our- about workingmen’s life” (Gorky; 25). She asked why he took that danger to him. He raised his head, looked at her, and said in a low and calm voice: “I want to know the truth” (Gorky; 25). He reminded his mother her position as well as the sufferings she faced in life. He claimed that she knew no joys. She listened and shook her head sorrowfully in a mechanical way, feeling as if something new and unknown was going to happen to her. She was happy at heart but didn’t know that her own son understood her situation so well. She wanted to warn him, “My dear what can you do? People will crush you.

You will perish, my son!” (Gorky; 26). But it was a pleasant feeling for her to listen to his thoughts and ideas.

With his words, Pelagueya Nilovna also began to undergo a change. She was not aware that her role in the society was also changing with the passage of time. Being the mother of the most intelligent and well-spoken leader of the revolutionists, she was expected to be supportive even if not an active member in the movement. Yet during the early period of her discovery, one can notice her resistance to the revolutionary ideology. It can also be because she was already an old woman whose set of values and beliefs had already been decided. Only a miracle could have possibly changed it. And, that miracle was her love for her son. She accepted whole heartily the ideology her son loved not because she was forced to, but because gradually she, too, had learned the philosophy her son wanted to share with the world. Her active co-operation also made the movement impactful. She treated other workers like her own son and assumed as if she were the mother of all. She started loving all of them as her own kids.

The development of the character of Nilovna seemed to imply that women should also take up active roles in the struggle for their beliefs. Gorky has tried to show that not only the men but women, too, despite their age, should contribute to the success of the movements. The mother became active in the movement after the arrest of Pavel when he was distributing forbidden literature in the factory. The mother understood that she could be useful to her son, and assured to manage it all by herself.

Nilovna can also be heard in her argument with the commanders assuring the activists’ rights in opposing the regime’s atrocity. “Yes, our children are our judges. They visit just punishment upon us for abandoning them on such a road. When the policeman threatens her, his words buzzed around her without touching her.” (Humed; 78) Nilovna’s will is unassailable. She is very determined in her mission.

The themes of alienation and maternal influence in Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* have been the subject of significant scholarly attention. The literature review will examine key contributions to the understanding of these themes within the novel and identify areas where further research is needed.

Literature Review

There are many scholarly works that have been written on the theme of alienation as exemplified through Gorky’s novel, and this has been done most commonly in connection with Marxist theory and social reality of pre-revolutionary Russia.

A detailed examination of alienation in Freeborn’s (1982) view of Gorky’s works, which declares that *Mother* marks a change in that periodical’s portrayal of the subject. Freeborn does not entirely agree with this interpretation of Gorky’s works as portraying alienation as a hopeless position; in his view, *Mother* is different from Gorky’s previous works as alienation is portrayed as something which can be overcome through organisation and political enlightenment.

Barratt (1988) pays particular attention to labour alienation by analysing how Gorky portrays factory work and relation between the workers as well as the management in *Mother* in light of estranged labour theory as advocated by Marx. Barratt shows that even in narrational portrayals of the grimy facet of industrial society we find social commentary, and at the same time progression of focus toward psychological and emotional aspects of the proletariat's life.

Analysing the publication by Tova Yedlin (1999) devoted to Gorky's political thought allows one to trace how the author's outlook on alienation developed. According to Yedlin, the figure of *Mother* is an effort by Gorky to bring his earlier, more personalistic ideas of alienation into line with his newly developing socialist outlook.

Of particular interest in this conceptual constellation is the question of the way in which maternal influence can affect revolutionary consciousness.

Such aspects of the novel as the participation of women in the transformation of the main character have been considered through different lenses, while the most attention is paid to the figure of Pelagueya Nilovna and her relationship with her son Pavel.

Clark's (2000) analysis can be termed as a postmodern critique of *Mother* and the author is of the opinion that Nilovna, the female protagonist in the play contradicts the conventional Russian literary mother. In Clark's opinion, by portraying the mother who becomes politically activated, Gorky offers maternal love as hope for the change.

Looking at the power relationship between the female and male subject, Kuzmic (2014) focuses on Turgenev's *Mother* in relation to the discourse of revolutionary literature of Russia. According to Kuzmic, Gorky's novel, overturns the existing theme of inter-generational rebellion by portraying a mother figure that embodies her son's revolutionary spirit and even surpasses him.

Heldt (1987) in fact performs a comparative study of the maternal characters in the Russian literature including the Nilovna in "*Mother*. According to Heldt this portrayal of motherhood as source of revolutionary consciousness in Gorky's *Mother* is a shift from the pre-existing trend.

The Essence of Alienation and Motherhood

As with alienation, maternal influence seems to be a topic that has received a fair amount of consideration individually, yet compared with the combined analysis of both topics, much less attention has been paid to their interaction with one another.

Mathewson (1975) briefly explains this point. When the day of political activism comes, Nilovna transforms herself into a political entity entirely inspired by maternal impulse... Nonetheless, what Mathewson's analysis lacks is the examination of motherhood in the context of the novel while his main interest is the political aspect of the novel.

In *Mother*, Borrás (1982) offers a closer analysis of the operation of maternal love as an antidote to alienation. In his opinion, Gorky depicts mothering as a work that retains its

‘species-being’ character unlike industrial work and hence presents an unalienated model of social practice.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into the themes of alienation and maternal influence in *Mother* there remains room for a more comprehensive analysis of how these themes intersect and reinforce each other throughout the novel. Additionally, there is a need for further exploration of how Gorky’s treatment of these themes reflects and responds to the social and political context of early 20th-century Russia.

This research paper has also tried to address these gaps by offering a detailed analysis of the relationship between alienation and maternal influence in *Mother* situating this analysis within the broader context of Gorky’s literary oeuvre and the social conditions of pre-revolutionary Russia.

Presentation of Alienation in *Mother*

In the novel *Mother* Gorky describes alienation in all its aspects, not only as the Marxist concept of labour alienation but also as social and psychological isolation. The novel opens with vivid descriptions of the factory town, emphasising the dehumanising effects of industrial labour. “Day in, day out, the factory whistle shrieked tremulously and imperiously. And in obedience to its summons came sullen people roused before sleep had refreshed their muscles out of their little grey houses like frightened cockroaches” (Gorky; 01).

This imagery gives the picture of the isolation that is apparent in the life of the workers as depicted in the novel. This is evident in the description of the workers as being like ‘frightened cockroaches’ and the factory whistle as an authoritative figure to underscore the powerlessness of the workers.

Gorky deepens the idea of labour alienation through the character of Pavel Vlasov, Nilovna’s son. Pavel’s initial political awakening is sparked by his recognition of the workers’ estrangement from their labour. “We are the people who construct the entire society, including churches and factories, but we do not own anything in return Our entire adult lives, we work and work, giving all our strength and health, and all that remains for us is poverty and sickness” (Gorky; 27).

This is reminiscent of Marx’s idea of alienated labour where the workers are disconnected from the objects of their labour, the process of production, their own humanity, and other people (Marx, 1844/1959). Nevertheless, Gorky’s portrayal of the theme of alienation is not limited to the societal relation in the workplace. It also deals with the topic of isolation, with focus on Nilovna. At the beginning of the story, she is isolated not only from broader society but also from her own son.

It can be seen that there developed a rather frail and elastic barrier of mutual apprehension in her and of half-contemptuous compassion in him (Gorky; 05). This detached relation between

the mother and the son can thus be seen as a reflection of the class societies' estrangement of the working class.

Mothers and the Path to Political Consciousness

The process of the change of the main character, Nilovna from a weak and scared woman to an active participant of the revolution is the main emotional and ideological component of the novel. Initially, Nilovna's maternal instincts manifest fear and concern for her son's safety. "Her heart was filled with despair and the feeling that something terrible would happen was growing in her" (Gorky; 11).

But as she continues with Pavel's activities, she gradually changes her maternal love to love for the society. This evolution is evident in a pivotal scene where Nilovna distributes revolutionary leaflets at the factory. "She felt that everyone was looking at her but she did not dare to turn her eyes away... 'For my son and his comrades!' she thought with great pride" (Gorky; 185). Here, Nilovna's actions are still driven by maternal love but this love has extended to include Pavel's friends and by extension all the working class.

Gorky's depiction of the maternal influence as a trigger for political consciousness is therefore subversive of the conventional dichotomy between the political and the maternal. However, he portrays the motherly love as a social force which is able to overcome self-interest, and becomes a driving force of the social conscience (Clark, 2000).

The Relationship between the Mother and the Son as a Revolutionary Symbol

The progressive interaction between Nilovna and Pavel symbolises a microcosm of the individual and the masses in the revolution. At the outset of the novel, they are strangers, two people who have virtually no way of understanding each other. This is similar to the first stage of the working class in relation to the revolutionary ideas. As Pavel becomes more involved in the revolutionary activities, he takes on the role of a teacher to his mother.

As it was, little by little, Pavel guided his mother to an understanding of his truth, and her heart was filled with pride and thankfulness to her son. Little by little he led his mother to the understanding of his truth, and her heart was full of satisfaction and the feeling of her importance towards her son. This dynamic corresponds to the function of avant-garde revolutionaries in the process of 'enlightening' the less politically conscious working class. But Gorky reverses this hierarchy in the course of the novel. Nilovna even becomes more devoted to the cause than her son, which corresponds to the notion that the revolution has to be made by the people (Kuzmic, 2014).

The mother-son relationship also stands for the affective aspect of the revolutionary process. Gorky presents revolution not just as a political act but as an expression of love. "It was her love, the love of a mother that had made her see life as she did, for it was out of love that she sought the happiness of the beloved and thus came to know the truth of life" (Gorky; 300).

Thus, with the help of the theme of maternal love connected with the idea of revolution, Gorky points to the necessity of personal changes and the importance of love and care for people as the basis for real social changes.

The subject of maternal love as a way of overcoming the alienation.

In *Mother* Gorky describes maternal love as the strongest force that can fight against isolation of the working people. This can be seen not only in the development of Nilovna as a character but also in her relations with other characters of the text. For instance, Nilovna's maternal care extends to young revolutionaries like Sashenka and Natasha, providing them with emotional support that helps mitigate their sense of isolation. "The mother heard the soft voice, turned to look at the girl's face, and it seemed to her that her own daughter had returned to her" (Gorky; 215). These maternal relationships give the revolutionaries a sense of family that is lacking in the alienated society of the capitalist system.

In addition, Gorky states that the instincts that are associated with motherhood, when abstracted and broadened to include the whole of mankind, can provide the foundation for a society in which human beings are not alienated from one another. This is exemplified in Nilovna's final speech before her arrest. "You are all children of one mother – the great, invincible idea of the brotherhood of the workers of all countries!" (Gorky; 510).

Thus, by linking the revolutionary movement to the idea of the universal mother, Gorky offers a vision of society which is free from alienation and where human relationships will be defined by concern for each other (Heldt, 1987).

Conclusion

Thus, this paper intended to discuss the interconnections between the concepts of alienation and the mother figure in Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*. Gorky's portrayal of the road goes further than the Marxist rhetoric of estranged labour to the more universal and profound cynicism of the working people of pre-revolutionary Russia. Still within this framework of generalised alienation, it is maternal love which is endowed with the power to cultivate revolutionary consciousness and ignore the divisions created by class oppression.

For the purposes of this article, the character of Pelagueya Nilovna is an excellent example of such a possibility. The transformation of the main character from a frightened, solitary woman into an involved revolutionary fighting for the Bolsheviks' cause shows how maternal love may develop into social justice concerns. In that way, by associating the motherhood with revolutionary involvement, Gorky breaks with conventional gender expectations and offers a more complex vision of the societal transformation.

The character of Nilovna's relationship with her and Pavel also symbolises the general revolutionary struggle. At first, the film mirrors the social roles and conflicts between the generations and the classes but it presents a union in the end. Thus, to return to the relation portrayed by Gorky, the realistic envisioning of the social change seems to be possible only if it stems from emotional relationships and, therefore, care.

Moreover, the novel by Gorky idealises 'maternal love' as the genuine model of non-alienated social relationships. Gorky aspiring to substitute 'the unkind, alienating world of industrial dehumanisation', with the concept of motherhood, applies it to the whole society, constructing its ideal of care and solidarity.

It is beneficial to consider how *Mother* can be more thoroughly understood by bringing attention to these overlaid themes of alienation and maternal power in 1984. That is how one can see that Gorky in his works deals with these topics in quite a historical manner that so to say, corresponds and responds to Russian social/political conditions of early twentieth century, however, still carries undeniable relevance to today's discourses of social progressivism and anthropo-sociology of human relations in society/world.

More specifically, future research might expand the analysis of Gorky's legacy of ideas about motherhood and revolution in Russian and Soviet literature that came after. All in all, *Mother* portrays the progressive consciousness and potential of maternal love as a force which is opposed to social isolation. In the way of connecting the deeply personal and the undoubtedly political, the sentimental and the potentially ideological, Gorky gives us a story of socialism at its most elemental, the family unit.

The novel *Mother* tries to point out that women need not complement but to supplement men. The female encountered here is totally new with new thoughts and doctrine. Gorky witnessed the socio-political turbulence that took place in his time and splendidly traced the initial steps that lead to the rebirth of a new woman.

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