**A psychological perspective on the positive and negative aspects of maternal love in Mo Yan’s *Big breasts and wide hips***

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**Abstract**

Since its 1996 publication in China, Mo Yan’s *Big breasts and wide hips* has provoked heated debate and garnered great scholarly attention, much of which focuses on the mother protagonist and especially on her being depicted as suffering and self-sacrificing, yet persevering and loving, thus eulogized without any political stance being taken. However, the present paper shows that worship of the mother figure is not one-dimensional, but dialectical. She is depicted as simply an ordinary person deprived of all personal needs and desires and having her own shortcomings, especially as she is highly influenced by the society and ideologies that surround her. In light of the Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann’s ideas on feminine archetypes, I analyze the conservative, unchanging aspects of femininity and motherhood, demonstrating that the mother’s love nourishes and protects, but also castrates, devours, and even kills. The maternal love depicted positively provides stability, security and sustenance for the children but also damages them by making them rely on her and lose themselves. The findings from my analysis of the female characters in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* show that maternal love is shown to be the result of a laudatory female instinct, but that it should be moderated to allow children the opportunity to develop their own consciousness and independence. Maternal love is shown to be a powerful energy with great emotional value, but only when it is successfully assimilated by the child’s consciousness can it enrich the child psychologically and reconcile consciousness and unconsciousness, rationality and irrationality.

**Keywords:** *Big breasts and wide hips*; maternal love; Mo Yan; psychology; mother worship.

# Introduction

Mo Yan’s 1996 *Big breasts and wide hips* has become very popular and the subject of wide-ranging analysis from various perspectives, especially on the selflessness of mother, despite having provoked heated debate and the fierce attention of critics in China (Peng Jingfeng, 1996; Liu Beibei and Li Yihong, 1996; Tao, 1998; Huang, 2010). Many have criticized the eroticism of the title for desecrating the image of motherhood, while others such as Du Lanlan have deemed it an “inaccurate portrayal of modern China’s political landscape”(2016: ).

The central character of the novel is an extraordinarily powerful maternal figure. Chan’s analyzes the shift in chief protagonist from male to female between *Red sorghum* and *Big breasts and wide hips*, pointing out that the female figures in Mo Yan’s latter novel all have powerful personalities, especially the mother, who is “disrespectful of the traditional values imposed upon women, overshadows all the male characters and turns northeast Gaomi into a motherland” (2000: 496). Du Lanlan (2016) argues that, though mothers are portrayed as loving and self-sacrificial in the work, it is simply Mo Yan’s gendered approach to allegorizing China’s twentieth-century traumas and, as such, still contributes to patriarchal ideology. Wright believes that *Big breasts and wide hips* “does homage to the women of modern China” and that the protagonist “is really a mythic mother figure, a modern Mother China” (2016: 101). Min Jiao’s comparative study on motherhood in *Big breasts and wide hips*, Zadie Smith’s *White teeth*, and Amy Tan’s *The kitchen god’s wife* concludes that “cultivating an awareness that motherhood is a social and cultural, rather than biological inscription, is central to female agency, and that a mothering consciousness aligned against patriarchy and colonialism is essential for female empowerment” (2019: 541).

Mo Yan, in the preface of *Big breasts and wide hips*, dedicates the work “[t]o the spirit of my mother” and says that “the novel was actually written for all mothers everywhere” (Mo Yan, 2012). The motherhood theme drives the plot and the image of mother in general is ostensibly a glorified one, especially given that the characters are ordinary people who are “deprived of all human needs and desires, which were regarded as vulgar” (Chan, 2000: 495) and, thus, depicted with their weaknesses and shortcomings.

Lu Xuan’er, as the mother is called before marriage, suffers as a child from feudal patriarchal thinking and endures great pain caused by foot binding, even though she tries to challenge the idea that “girls who don’t bind their feet grow up to be big-footed spinsters that nobody wants” (Mo Yan, 2011: 66). Lu Xuan’er fails to observe the traditional values imposed upon females. She is traumatized so greatly when they “bent the toes back with bamboo strips and wrapped them tightly” that “the pain was like banging her head against the wall” (Mo Yan, 2011: 67). Yet, as one who had bravely withstood such anguish, every time she “talked about having her feet bound, it was with a mixture of blood-and-tears indictment and personal glory” (Mo Yan, 2011: 67).

After marrying into the Shangguan family, the mother suffers from giving birth to eight daughters and, at last, a son, satisfying the family’s demand for a male heir. She endures the humiliation of having affairs with other men to conceive children and, thus, escape the violence of her husband, who is infertile but refuses to acknowledge it, as well as her mother-in-law’s maltreatment. A woman’s primary traditional function is to bear her husband children to carry on the family line and the mother is forced to discard traditional values of marital fidelity or, as Lupke puts it, “to transgress on one taboo in order to avoid another” (2005: 71). Living in a patriarchal world of violence and change, the mother strives to find a way to survive, to “extricate herself from her predicament, between the family’s demand for a male heir and a sterile husband, by having sexual relations with other men to produce an heir” (Liang, 2017: 773). Yet she must assume her responsibilities as a woman of bearing and raising children, finally giving birth to a son, Jintong. The mother is laudable in her tenacious vitality and extraordinary endurance in the face of patriarchal oppression and the rigors of raising so many children, but she fails to challenge women’s oppression in a way that is ultimately negative and even jeopardizes the children she cares and sacrifices herself for.

Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann developed Jung’s ideas on the feminine archetype by identifying two characteristics of it as the elementary and the transformative. The elementary character has a “good” and a “bad” aspect, while being “the foundation of that conservative, stable, and unchanging part of the feminine which predominates in motherhood” (Neumann, 1991: 26). Motherhood and maternal love are of profound archetypal significance in both positive and negative ways. I adopt Neumann’s view of the elementary and transformative characters of the feminine archetype in this paper and what Ayers argues on the positive and negative duality of the archetype of the great mother. I analyze the image of the mother in *Big breasts and wide hips*, proposing that the “good” aspect of motherhood nurtures, nourishes, and protects, while the “bad” aspect castrates, devours, and even kills. The mother is depicted as the giver of life and the family’s protector out of her feminine instinct, in the way Jung explains the archetype of the great mother. Yet she also castrates, devours and kills under the heavy influence of feudal China’s patriarchal preference for sons.

# The great mother as a both life-giving and damaging force

For Jung, the archetype of the great mother is a complex of psychological network that influences every personal emotion. After tracing the “genealogy and symbolism of goddess figures in world culture” (Paglia, 2006: 4), Neumann distinguishes the elementary and transformative characters of Jung’s archetypal female, “which, in their interpenetration, coexistence and antagonism, are an essential part of the Feminine as a whole” (Neumann, 1991: 24). The transformative character relates to the more dynamic elements of the psyche, inclining to motion and change, while the elementary character evinces a powerful conservativism.

Although the elementary character of feminine archetype “almost always has a ‘maternal’ determinant” (Neumann, 1991: 26) that is conservative, stable, and unchanging, it is “intrinsically as ambiguous and relative as transformative character” (Neumann, 1991: 26) and has both nurturing, nourishing and protecting and negative castrating, voracious and lethal sides.

Ayer, based on her observations on the changing of facial features, especially eyes, of the carving of mother goddess carvings through history, emphasizes a duality, proposing that: “The Great Mother, originally a one-sided symbol of fertility, the life-giving forces of nature that ensures the survival of humanity and the family, takes on duality in the process of her evolution. She assumes the power that can damage or kill the very life she is meant to foster” (Ayers, 2003: 118). This great mother figure becomes a symbol for the mystery of birth and death as both the purveyor of both life and death. Ayers compares the mother to the earth, arguing that the “[m]other’s fertility came to symbolize the renewal of life as well as the delivery of the earth from the blight of sterility and death” (Ayers, 2003: 113). The belief arose that growth and life could only take place in between the opposing forces of fecundity and barrenness.

These dualistic ideas of the great mother figure as a force to both ensure individual and familial survival and damage or destroy the very life she is meant to foster mean that maternal love is does not always do good, but sometimes undermines what it intends to protect. As the great mother “takes on duality in the process of her evolution,” it is effected by social factors such as feudal patriarchy. The mother may exercise her powers in her own interest in a way that can damage or kill, however unintentional that might be.

**Tenacious vitality and prodigious fertility as the guarantee of new life**

Mo Yan has said that he was deeply inspired to choose the title *Big breasts and wide hips* by a primitive stone statue of a female with big breasts and wide hips on a slideshow shown to him in class, feeling that such physical features of women are the most beautiful, sacred, solemn, and simple material forms in the universe (Mo Yan, 1995). According to Neumann, big breasts and wide hips are an elementary character of the archetypal female born out of and symbolizing the earth. Ayers says that behind the great mother’s big breasts and wide hips “lay the realization of the complex rhythms of birth and growth, epitomized in the miracle of woman in her bearing of children,” symbolizing fertility (2003: 112). As the producer of life, the great mother figure is glorified around the world in stone carvings and other artwork. Yet to be productive, these mothers must also conquer the forces of death. The glorification of the mother, Lu, is evinced in her tenacious vitality, her power of overcoming barrenness, and her powerful fertility. She struggles and begs for her life through historically turbulent times and the entangled fates of family members. Her fortitude and tenderness make her epitomize the great mother.

Born in turbulent times, Lu endures several threats to her life. She is hidden in a large flour vat when she is just six months’ old to protect her from German invaders killing and emerges barely alive, heavily coated in flour when her aunt and uncle find her the following day. She lives a happy life with her aunt and uncle, but this ends when she marries into the Shangguan family, which is obsessed with producing a male heir. Cruel realities teach her that avoiding marriage and childbearing is not an option for a woman.

Du Lanlan observes that “[t]rapped in the oppressive bonds of the traditional patriarchal family, [Shangguan Lu] is obliged to define her motherhood according to the traditional fertility ethics” (2016: 31). Her tragic life begins when, three years into her marriage, she has failed to bear a child. To escape her mother-in-law’s abuse and husband’s maltreatment, Lu conceives children with other men instead of her sterile husband. However, bearing daughters rather than sons does not end her sufferings. Mo Yan states that “[t]he age-old tradition of a lying-in month was abolished at the house” and “before she even had time to clean up the mess between her legs” (2011: 83). Straight after delivering her fourth daughter, Lu must work in the glare of the midsummer sun on the threshing ground where her husband beats her with a rake. She turns over the grain tassels on the threshing floor to speed up the drying process, her pain-racked body bearing up as best it can while her husband and father-in-law rest in the cool shade (Mo Yan, 2011: 85-86). She thinks of suicide, but resiles for the sake of her daughters.

Just as big breasts and wide hips are seen to indicate a powerful fertility, the mother with such features conceives children by different men to obtain a son, like fertile soil, while enduring the Shangguan family’s wretched maltreatment. After producing seven daughters, the last time she gives birth to twins, one of whom satisfies her need to have a son, through the dystocia she suffers almost kills her.

Eluding death time and again, Lu’s experiences are the best proof for Nietzsche’s statement that “what does not kill me makes me stronger” (*was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker*) (1998: 35). The Japanese invaders behead the Shangguan family’s men, leaving the mother nine children and a mad mother-in-law to take care of on her own. Enduring major Chinese historical events such as the War of Resistance, the Land Reform Movement, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the economic reforms and market economy, mother Lu leads all the children and grandchildren through all the wars, turbulence, famine, and other hardships.

The mother, Lu, accepts that it is her destiny to produce children one after another as a positive aspect of elementary feminine characteristics, giving life to daughters unexpectedly, the seventh and last of them conceived in a gang rape. This elementary characteristic “tends to hold fast to everything that springs from it” (Neumann, 1991: 25) with “bearing and releasing belong to the positive side” of this trait. It explains why the mother accepts all her children, whoever their biological father is, and her grandchildren, including Sima Liang, a boy who is the offspring of her son-in-law, Sima Ku, and one of his concubines and so no biological relation to her.

The archetypally feminine view of life is supposedly characterized by congeniality and inclusiveness. Women’s experience of carrying babies prompts the most primal kind of maternal affection in the respect and care for life. The feminine archetype transcends ethically narrow visions, displaying tolerance and cherishing all life. As Neumann says: “In so far as the Feminine releases what is contained in it to life and light, it is the Great and Good Mother of all life” (1991: 65).

The mother’s tenacious vitality and powerful fertility brings nine children into the world and her selfless maternal love ensures they survive life-threatening encounters and hardships. The daughters of the Shangguan family share the big breasts and wide hips of their mother, an imagined projection of the life source and of boundless vitality. These women are the “soil” of life and the nurturers: the mother feeds the son with her breastmilk, while the daughters trade themselves for food for the family, especially to feed the youngest brother. The continuity of life is the highest value and the sagas of death and sufferings highlight the preciousness and resilience of life, glorifying the feminine.

# The negative impact of female greatness overshadowing men

Du Lanlan points out that while the mother is “powerful, tolerant, and defiant in the face of the cruel realities,” the book’s “male characters are basically portrayed as impotent, fragile and mean” (Du, 2016: 29). This contrast exists between most female and male characters in the work. It is not just the mother, Lu, but also her aunt, Sun, who overshadow most males in the book in valor, tenacity, sense of responsibility, spirit of hard work, and so on. As Chan points out: “Nearly all the men, traditionally considered the driving force of history in a male-oriented society like China, are mocked by the author” (2000: 496). The Shangguan family’s father and son, Big Paw Yu and Jintong, who cannot take his mouth away from women’s nipple, are, like many other men, presented as castrated, worthless creatures.

The father and son in the Shangguan family are “worthless specimens,” though their “ancestors were men of iron and steel” (Mo Yan, 2011:25), and it is Shanguan Lu and also the mother-in-law of the mother who are jointly “the head of the household and the best blacksmith in the family” (Mo Yan, 2011: 73). Compared to Shangguan Lu, the son, Shangguan Shouxi is “very small and one would be hard pressed to spot any resemblance to his burly mother, who often sighed and said ‘if the seed’s no good, fertile soil is wasted’” (Mo Yan, 2011:73).

While “everyone knew [the mother’s aunt] was the head of the household; the fifty acres of land, the two donkeys that worked it, the household chores, and the hiring of workers all fell to [her], who was barely five feet tall and never weighed more than ninety pounds” (Mo Yan, 2011: 67). Her husband, Big Paw Yu, is good for nothing but gambling and bird-hunting. When Big Paw Yu expresses agrees to loosen their niece’s feet binding a little, his wife we are told his wife throws a broom at him, making him flee (Mo Yan, 2011: 67).

Aunty Sun, who saves the mother’s life when she suffers from dystocia with the twins, is the head of the Sun family and once of considerable martial art talents, who could leap over eaves and walk on walls, but had no choice but to marry the stove repairer Sun when fell foul of the law. As a widow, Aunty Sun raises five grandsons, all mute, and always “glare at passers-by, human and animal, the whites of their eyes truly menacing…converting the village into their private hunting ground” (Mo Yan, 2011:28). Aunty Sun has absolute authority over the family and the mute children are utterly obedient to her, when even her cough will stop their misbehavior. However, Aunty Sun is killed by the Japanese soldiers breaking into the Shangguans’ house. Her only surviving grandson, Speechless Sun, then becomes a nightmare for the Shangguan family, raping the third sister, Lingdi and torturing the eldest sister, Laidi, after they get married.

The great qualities of these women ensure the stability and security of the family, “overshadow all the male characters and turn northeast Gaomi into a motherland” (Chan, 2000: 496). However, this at the same time deprives the men and children from developing their own sense of self-worth. While “bearing and releasing belong to the positive side of the elementary character,” Neumann states that “the Great Mother in her function of fixation and not releasing what aspires toward independence and freedom is dangerous, on the other hand” (1991: 65). The mother in *Big breasts and wide hips*, with her love, self-sacrifice and fortitude, leads her children and grandchildren through all the disasters and hardships, but fails to empower them to develop their own consciousnesses and independence.

Following their mother’s example and, more broadly, the demands placed on women by the old Chinese patriarchal system, the daughters tragically devote themselves to their men, leading to their end: the eldest daughter, Laidi, kills her fiancé to elope with another man but ends up being executed; the second daughter, Zhaodi, marries an army officer who dies in war; the third daughter, Lingdi, falls off a cliff and dies of a mental disorder after the Japanese kidnap her lover; the fourth daughter prostitutes herself to save her mother’s and brother’s lives and illness eventually claims her life; the fifth daughter, Pandi, commits suicide; the sixth daughter, Niandi, is killed with her American husband in a bombardment; the seventh daughter sells her body to a criminal for food and dies from overeating; and the blind eighth daughter throws herself into the river to ease the mother’s burden of feeding her offspring.

It is the mother’s unrestrained devotion and excessive indulgence that turns the son, Jintong, into a “weakling, who, even in adulthood, never grows beyond his dependence on mother’s milk, and whose only obsession is his mother’s breasts, other women’s breasts, or, in fact, almost anything that lactates” (Fu Binbin, 2005:85). When Lu realizes this, she says: “I’ve been a fool all these years, but I finally understand that it’s better to let a child die than let him turn into a worthless creature who can’t remove his mouth from a woman’s nipple!” (Mo Yan, 2011: 523)

The elementary character implies for Neumann an indissoluble relationship between mother and child, which is “the beginning of the relation of the archetypal female for the child and likewise determines the relation of the maternal unconscious to the child’s ego and consciousness as long as these two systems are not separated from one another” (Neumann, 1991: 29). The mother’s love carries blindness with it in the novel. The blindness lies in Lu’s lifelong unconstrained self-sacrifice toward her son and his indulgent obsession with breastmilk and later breasts themselves. It also lies in her unfair treatment of her daughters, especially Jintong’s twin, Yunu, compared to Jintong. From the moment she is born, Lu regarded Yunu as a superfluous human being and even leaves her on the *kang* bed-stove while Jintong nestles his little head between her ample breasts. Lu even plays favorites when feeding the twins, giving Yunu her nipple but then goat’s milk instead when Jintong kicks Yunu in the stomach in protest.

As the only male heir, Jintong is the most highly prized member of the Shangguan family. Though he manages to live 14 years in prison without women, he becomes seriously ill when he is released and rejoin his mother. Jintong again loses his sense of self and consciousness becomes again psychologically dependent on his mother and women’s breasts. “The good, personal mother can provide for the stability and creative development of one’s inherited potentials and true self” (Ayers, 2003: 110). However, the mother cannot do this herself and must compromise, so she sends her son, already over 40 years’ old, to a single-breasted woman to be breastfed. The great mother figure is both an archetypal goddess and a goddess of death. Her maternal indulgence turns Jintong into a perpetual child spiritually and, finally, “as much a figure of pathos as anything else” (Lupke, 2005:71).

# Irrational patriarchal ideology as a reason for twisted maternal love

Mo Yan says that the purpose of *Big breasts and wide hips* is “to explore the essence of humanity, to glorify the mother, and to link maternity and earth in a symbolic representation” (Cai, 2002: 159). Though there is no fixed explanation of the essence of humanity, it is not irrational to link it to the character of womanhood since the other two purposes of the book relate to maternity. We have already seen how ambiguous the depiction of motherhood is.

Another manifestation of the negative impact of maternal love is in the symbolic linkage made between it and the earth. The mother is depicted as “the fertile earth, the womb from which all life was born” (Ayers, 2003: 112). However, earth is also the final destination, the graveyard for all life and even is even deadly in itself. At the end of *Big breasts and wide hips*, the only male heir, Jintong, buries his mother’s remains in a damp meadow’s earth on the edge of the swamp. Leading government figures hunt birds for fun only 100 meters away from where Jintong has just buried his mother and where the police subsequently force him to dig her up again. However, identity and social status mean nothing to the earth and a deceased mother and swans and teal shot to death in the swamp are equally devoured by the earth. Once the crowds at the scene dissipate, peace and tranquility are restored, as if nothing had happened. Humans are powerless in the face of the absolute might of the mother earth. As Cao Xueqin, the author of the Chinese classic, *The story of the stone*/*A dream of red mansions*, says: “All that’s left is emptiness and a great void” (1994: 84).

Similarly, Mo Yan describes northeast Gaomi, Shandong “the author’s hometown turned fictional locale” (Fu Binbing, 2005: 85) as “easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly, hardest drinking and hardest loving place in the world” (1993: 4). The characters in *Big breasts and wide hips* are paradoxical, with both good and bad sides, since Mo Yan chooses to create not heroes but ordinary people, mainly poorly educated ones, and blurs the boundary between good and evil. Even the bad aspects of a character are not necessarily determined by their human essence, but maybe due to a lack of awareness or due to the way “things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme.” It is hard for the mother, Lu, an illiterate orphan bereft of parental guidance and protection, to figure out to what extent maternal love helps children develop their own personalities and awareness. The unconscious female instincts evinced in her maternal indulgence of her son’s breast fetish are also socially reinforced by feudal patriarchal ideology of her time. As Lupke says: “Only the birth of the son brings her the sense of fulfillment that in traditional China befits a deserving mother” (2012: 71).

As a brave mother who defies morality to have affairs with different men to conceive children and so to save her own life, Lu nonetheless lacks the ability to consciously challenge this feudal patriarchy. She blindly devotes herself to the needs of her son without considering the role man should play in supporting the family, protecting the vulnerable, and contributing to society. The narrator and other male members of Shangguan family failed to achieve their independence of personality or masculinity. It is as if they have been castrated and are unable to take on the responsibilities of being a husband, father, or even son.

This maternal blindness has not been unusual in China’s history, especially during feudal patriarchal times. If the mother does not achieve awareness or receive sound advice, her loved ones become impotent and worthless. The article “Shortly After the Queen Mother of Zhao Took Over the Regime” in *Records on the warring states period II* records a story about the Queen Mother and her son, Lord Chang’an. Shortly after the Queen Mother takes control of the regime, the state of Qin dispatches troops to invade Zhao. When Zhao asks the state of Qi for help, the latter asks for Lord Chang’an as a collateral hostage. Out of maternal love and protectiveness, the irritated Queen Mother of Zhao refuses this demand. In the face of the deadlock, Chu Long, the Left Master of the Zhao state, states that “[p]arents’ love for their children lies in the fact that they always plan for them properly and thoroughly” (Unknown: 935). He furthermore states that, though the Lord Chang’an has been appointed to a very powerful position, had had a great deal of fertile land conferred upon him, and had been presented with many treasures by the Queen Mother, it would be hard for him to rely on in order to maintain the regime of Zhao after the Queen Mother passed away and without any contribution to the state himself. He thus persuades the Queen Mother to send her son to Qi as a hostage to get help against the Qin invasion. The Queen Mother thinks it reasonable to do so, thus saving Zhao from the Qin attack. It is the mother’s instinct to love her children, but the way she loves them might be blindly harmful to the very one she loves. However deep maternal love is, mothers cannot protect their children forever and such blindness can render impotent and even kill those she loves.

# Conclusion

This paper has shown how the glorification of the mother figure in *Big breasts and wide hips* should be viewed dialectically not unilaterally. Neumann’s ideas on the positive and negative poles of motherhood and Ayer’s duality with regard to the Great Mother as a force for both survival and destruction are evinced in the portrayal of Lu in the novel. The mother’s big breasts and wide hips suggest the potentiality for new life nourished by her tenacious vitality, courage and power in the face of great suffering and grief. However, the unconscious, instinctual aspects of maternal love coupled with society’s ingrained patriarchal ideology means that an unrestrained and superrational mother’s love can redound against her loved ones, even her precious son who never becomes one “who stands up to piss” (Mo Yan, 2011: 523).

The Shangguan family’s daughters never develop an independence and awareness either, devoting themselves to their men. After being married to men from different political backgrounds, they become involved in their men’s conflicts, supporting them in their fight against their sisters, none of whom meet with a natural death.

Maternal love is shown to have a powerful energy and emotional value, but only when it is related to the development of the individual’s consciousness can it enriching people psychologically and realize balanced and reconciled relationships between the conscious and the unconscious, the rationality and the irrational.

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