



The Portrayal of Family Relationship in 'Otherhood' Movie

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Abstract

Every film depicts its unique subject matter and values to the real world. The concept of "Otherhood" illustrates the issue of family estrangement, which is one of the issues that society faces. It represents both the indicators of separation and the audience-observable causes of estrangement. It also depicts a jocasta complex, a reverse Oedipus complex on a parent. Although "Otherhood" contains such weighty subject matter, it is constructed with relatable dialogues and enjoyable yet engrossing sequences for the audience. These two elements are examined in this paper to determine the representation of family estrangement. Thus, this study aims to analyze the portrayal of family relationship in "Otherhood" movie. The authors analyzed its representation using a qualitative approach and applying Stuart Hall's theory, the Representation especially in receptive approach. To support this analysis, the authors collected data from literary sources. The result represents how mothers see their sons' estrangement and how it impacts their identity and mindset as mothers.

Keywords: family estrangement; motherhood; representation; Oedipal

Introduction

A movie is an audiovisual form of communication used to convey a message to a group gathered in a certain place (Effendy, 1986: 134). The authors view that movie is a form of art that can be used as a medium to carry a certain idea and message to its audience. Oftentimes, movie can represent the reality that every individual faces every day. Hence, movie can be relatable and carry different meanings to the audience, as movie can be quite personal to certain audiences. Movie can represent various situations in life, not only happy situations in life but also the sadness and struggle some have to overcome during life. One of the

situations that have been portrayed in a movie includes the portrayal of family relationships.

Family is the closest and one of the most important people in every individual's lives as they can be biologically related to one another – while in other cases, they can also be maritally and adoptively related. Although the last two relationships are not as strong as biological ties, each enumerated relationship has strong emotional components that make the relationship meaningful and ostensibly impenetrable. However, family connections are diverse, with some individuals enjoying loving and supportive relationships with their families while others struggle to do so. The condition of family ties, particularly between parents and their children, can have direct effects on individuals. According to Sigmund Freud, a child must pass through five psychosexual stages to be deemed mentally healthy and sexually mature. The third stage, the oedipal stage, has two terminologies about parental relationships: the Oedipus complex and the Electra complex. Both complexes characterize a child's attraction to the opposite-sex parent and view the same-sex parent as a rival (Zhou, 2021). Additionally, the oedipal stage affects both parents, with one of the complexes involving the mother known as the Jocasta complex. The mother's Jocasta complex causes her to become infatuated with her kid throughout his life.

As stated previously, there are numerous types of family relationships. There are currently instances in which some individuals decide to sever ties with their family; this is known as family estrangement. The definition of family estrangement is emotionally and physically apart from a particular family member and multiple family members at the choice and desire of the other (Agllias, 2017). *Otherhood* is a 2019 film based on the concept of family alienation. *Otherhood* portrayed the narrative of three moms who were accustomed to constantly being close to their boys. Still, when their sons moved into adulthood, they were estranged and preoccupied with being reintegrated into their adult sons' life. Linking the central idea of *Otherhood* back to the oedipal stage and the Jocasta complex, *Otherhood* highlights the media's infrequent attention to the Jocasta complex in society.

There have been other movies that also utilize the oedipal stage and Oedipus complex as their focus, namely *The Graduate* (1967), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Reader* (2008), and *Room* (2015). Although unlike *Otherhood*, these movies focus on the Oedipus complex that a child faces due to the traumatic experiences they encounter with their parents. For instance, *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Reader* (2008) have a similar approach to the Oedipus complex as both movies focus on the love between the protagonists and their motherly figure lovers. Both of the movies also portray absent mothers, which leads the protagonists to look for a partner that provides motherly love to them in which. Aladdin on *Aladdin* (1992) can feel a mother's love and affection from Jasmine (Nadya Nur Afianti, Nur Aini, Khusnul Khuluq, 2019) while Michael on *The Reader* (2008) looks for a mother figure for his partner, which leads him to fall for an older woman named Hanna (Megah, 2019). At the same time,

The Graduate (1967) and Room (2015) focus on the struggle of a son to form bonds with other individuals due to an unfinished oedipal stage and a failed relationship with their fathers. In *The Graduate* (1967), this condition affects Benjamin's love life as he fails to overcome his Oedipus complex where he constantly opposes his father as a way to prove himself as a man while at the same time looking for a mother figure as his partner (Gönen, Z., & Kutay, 2021). Whereas *Room* (2015) focuses on the story of a five-year-old boy named Jack who is confined in a small room with his mother by his father, whom he never met or interacted with throughout his life because his mother forbids him to do so. This lack of interaction blocks Jack from completing his oedipal stage and separates him from his mother (Pajoohandeh, 2021).

On the contrary, *Otherhood* (2019) focuses on the mother's obsession with their sons' lives, who have successfully surpassed their oedipal stage and grew up as mentally healthy and sexually mature individuals. In *Otherhood* (2019), the mothers take various approaches to improve their relationship with their sons. Not only using a dynamic approach, but the mothers also try to reconnect with their sons by putting material and physical levels such as going on an impromptu visit to New York, where their sons currently reside. Furthermore, the mothers barge their way back into their sons' lives as they are obsessed with being included in every milestone of their adult sons' lives. Therefore, this study focuses on how the movie portrays the Jocasta complex that the mothers face and family estrangement.

Every movie produced around the world carries its values and meanings as it represents one particular and more ideas of specific situations that are often inspired by real-life situations. Based on Stuart Hall's explanation of the Representation Theory, three approaches can be taken to represent ideas, including representation in the movie. Such approaches are the reflective approach, intentional approach, and constructionist approach. Though, this study focuses on its first approach, which is the reflective approach. The reflective approach uses the concept that the meaning of a particular idea is created through personal beliefs and experiences that are reflected by reality or culture in society (Aji, 2016). This study uses a reflective approach as this study analyzes how oedipal complex and family relationships, specifically family estrangement, are depicted and overcome on *Otherhood* (2019), in which these two aspects exist in real-life situations and are faced by various individuals around the world.

Jocasta complex is a reverse Oedipus complex that a mother faces toward her son. Jocasta's complex can be defined into two statements, one focusing on an incestuous relationship with her son. In contrast, the other focuses on the non-incestuous relationship with her son. However, the mother tends to dominate her son's life (Medical Dictionary., 2012). Jocasta complex produces the mother's urge to worship and an endless expectation of being constantly around her son. This condition affects the mother and the son, in which the mother develops an unhealthy bond with her son. In contrast, the son can suffer from behavioral and psychological

problems due to an unhealthy relationship (Kundu, 2020).

Kundu also mentions several causes that trigger Jocasta complex. Such causes include the unfulfilled sexual desire of the mother from the husband's part, over concern of the son as he is the only child or if he is the son that is most preferred within the family, the son suffers from oedipal complex and the death of a life partner. These causes lead to the symptoms of Jocasta complex which are having the tendency to dominate the son's life, irresistible desire for permanent physical intimacy, and the expectation to be permanently included in the son's life (Kundu, 2020).

Family estrangement is described as being emotionally and physically distanced from a certain family member and several family members at the choice or request of the other. Usually, this decision is chosen to reduce existing conflicts, anxiety, and tension among family members. Estrangement can be identified with a lack of trust and emotional intimacy, different values and beliefs, and a belief that conflict resolution is unlikely to improve the quality of the relationship. Agllias also stated that family estrangement is an ongoing relational process rather than a singular situation (Agllias, 2017). There are three terms for individuals within the estrangement situation – estranger is the individual who chooses to stop or cut off the relationship, estrangee is the individual who is being cut off from the other's life, and both individuals can be termed as estranged from one another. Third parties can also take part in an estrangement situation. For instance, a divorced parent can alienate a child from the other parent, called third-party alienation. According to a journal article written by Ingrid Arnet Connidis titled Family Estrangement: A Matter of Perspective: Book Review, Connidis stated that estrangement is considered a dynamic process, which cannot be seen as a dyadic or static phenomenon (Connidis, 2017).

Based on a journal written by Kristina M. Scharp on family distancing, estrangement can be noticed through eight signs that vary from emotional to physical signs. Albeit, the noticeable and common signs of estrangement are a lack of quantity and quality communication, deliberately putting physical distance between family members, and refusal to reconcile with one and more family members (K. M. Scharp, 2019). Once estranged, the family members can feel relieved to have cut off the relationship, while the other can feel lonely and even depressed and sad. According to an online article by Susan Adcox for Verywell Family, estrangement can be a struggle for some people, especially during the holidays and special days such as birthdays and anniversaries, as they do not have a place to celebrate or undergo the absence of family members. On top of that, estrangement can also affect an individual's social life as it may be uncomfortable to discuss their estrangement with others.

Method

This study relies primarily on qualitative data for its analysis. The authors supported their analysis with the Representation Theory, notably the reflective approach. The material for the analysis is drawn from the film *Otherhood*, utilizing scenes and phrases that correspond with the depiction of the family unit. In addition, this study drew additional information from literary works that share similar concepts to the film. The emphasis of the study is the evolution of family relationships depicted in the film. Therefore, the authors are interested in evaluating each character's actions and their effects on the movie. There were multiple stages that we completed. First, we delved deeply into the phenomenon of Jocasta complex and family relationships, particularly familial estrangement, to begin the analysis. Next, we gathered analysis data from primary sources and elements of *Otherhood* film. The data were then evaluated utilizing Stuart Hall's representation theory to determine the use of the Jocasta complex and family alienation.

Results

The film "Otherhood" tells the story of three moms who became friends decades ago when their sons met on a playground in Poughkeepsie. Since the beginning of their kids' friendship on the playground, they have grown closer and always had each other's backs during every significant event in their sons' lives and their own. They have been there for one another through every stage of their life, from hospital visits and proms to graduations and even divorce and death. As their sons relocated to New York, they became less close than they once were, but they still maintain an annual custom of catching up on Mother's Day. Before the yearly meeting of the three mothers, the film begins on mother's day and briefly explores the lives of Gillian, Helen, and Carol, whose sons left Poughkeepsie for New York as they became adults and sought their paths. All three are estranged from their sons and wish to reunite with them while leading very different lifestyles. This family separation is strongly portrayed in the film, as not many movies directly portray or use the concept of family estrangement as their central theme.

Discussion

Following their sons' departure, they felt they have become estranged from their sons as they could not be directly involved in their sons' lives again. They mentioned how their sons stop talking to them daily and even on mother's day – a day particularly reserved to show more appreciation for mothers. One of the mothers, Carol, who have been deceiving the other two mothers by acting as if Matt sent her a big vase of flower, finally admits that Matt has not been doing so and she has been sending flowers for herself – which eventually leads the other mothers to confess that their sons also do not even bother to send a mother's day text or even a merely daily check-in text for them.



Figure 1. The figures above portray the irritation of the mothers toward their sons' aloofness toward them on Mother's Day

In this scene, they discuss how they have been estranged from their own sons for years since they moved away to New York. Gillian complains about how Daniel can not call her on mother's day, Helen complains about how Paul stops checking in on her after she married her second husband, and Carol complains about how Matt has never come home after his father died. After complaining about how their sons have estranged them, they continue the discussion by admitting that they have done everything correctly as a parent, as it is proven that their sons have grown up to be

a successfully independent adult. Yet, they despise the fact that their sons do not need them or their involvement anymore in their lives as it makes them lose their sense of purpose in life as mothers. This kind of attachment is a clear example of jocasta complex that they face as each of them feels the need to be heavily involved and around their sons' lives.

Looking more closely into each of the mothers' relationships with their sons, each of them has their struggles and issues that mostly caused the estrangement. Additionally, these struggles and issues are also affected by jocasta complex that is faced by each of the mothers toward their sons. For instance, Carol and Matt have been facing life-long issues that started way back when Matt was still in school and lived in Poughkeepsie. Even after the death of Finn, Carol's husband and Matt's father's death, they have never discussed anything about their unresolved issues that leads to the estrangement after Matt moved to New York. The death of Finn, Carol's life partner also triggers jocasta complex for her.



Figure 2. The scene shows Carol and Matt's arguments toward Carol's micromanaging Matt's life

As Carol decides to visit Matt on mother's day, she starts tending after Matt like the little boy he was as she had been doing prior to Matt's move to New York. She also starts micromanaging and dominating Matt in various daily situations, not only in Matt's daily life but also out of a sudden questioning Matt's job as an art director at a men's magazine. Carol's behavior toward Matt shows how attached Carol has been to her identity as a mother that she starts questioning her son's life choices as if he was still a child. In her eyes, Matt is not an adult that can be responsible for his life as she has been judging Matt throughout her stay in his apartment and immediately looks after him as soon as she arrives in his apartment. This action represents jocasta complex as she constantly shows the urge to show her dominance in Matt's life.



Figure 3. The figures above represent family estrangement between Gillian and Daniel

Family estrangement is also represented during Gillian's visit to her son's house. Instead of giving Gillian a warm greeting for her arrival, Daniel straightly asks his mother if she had a fight with his father which leads her to his house. Gillian responds by saying that she came because she wants to check on him and it is indeed a normal thing to do since he is still her son. Daniel sees her actions as overbearing because he feels that it feels unnecessary for her to drive from Poughkeepsie to New York just to check up on him. This scene represents how family estrangement occurs, as according to Hall's Representation Theory in its reflective approach, the meaning of a certain idea is created through beliefs and experiences that are personal which are reflected by reality or culture in society (Aji, 2016). According to a research found that 27% of adults experience family estrangement that is initiated either by themselves or other members of the family (K. Scharp, 2021) therefore Daniel's estrangement from Gillian is a reflection of family estrangement that takes place in a real-life situation and is faced by people around the world.



Figure 4. The figures above represent family estrangement and Gillian's dependency on Daniel

Daniel about how he did not call her on mother's day, to which Daniel responds by saying he already sent her a mother's day message. His response leads Gillian to a semi-hysterical response by claiming that she birthed him and he should have appreciated her more because according to Gillian, children give meaning to life and Daniel is the main point of her life. Relating to Kundu's statement on jocasta complex, the mother with jocasta complex worships her son. Based on Gillian's actions above clearly shows she tends to worship her son as she sees Daniel as the means that give her life a meaning.



Figure 5. The figures above show Helen's struggle to maintain her relationship with Paul

Similar to Carol and Gillian's situations, Helen also has been struggling to maintain her relationship with Paul and has been estranged since she married her second husband, Frank. In this scene, both Helen and Paul are at lunch, trying to work things out so that their relationship can be fixed. Hence, Paul tries to be honest with Helen because as his mother, he believes that Helen deserves to know what has been going on in his life. However, instead of supporting Paul's life decisions, Helen reacts emotionally and doubts Paul's judgment of his life decisions. Helen screams at Paul about how reckless he is despite him being an adult who can take full responsibility for his decisions. While still furious, Helen also adds how she has been estranged from Paul's adult life and that she is no longer a mother – instead, she is

an other.

Afterward, Helen also struggles to control her emotions as she has a meltdown in her hotel room, thinking how hard it has been ever since her divorce and how Paul estranged her. This scene represents common signs of estrangement according to Scharp, estrangement can be seen from how there is only a lack of quantity and quality communication between Helen and Paul, while Paul also deliberately puts physical distance between Helen and himself (Scharp, 2017, 11). Although in a real-life situation the cause of estrangement varies, it can be seen that each of the estrangements portrayed in *Otherhood* is driven by prior existing unresolved issues. Other than that, the mothers' obsessions and dependency on their sons which is caused by Jocasta complex that they face with their sons also play a huge role in the family conflicts. Lack of quality communication is the core issue throughout the movie as the mothers feel disconnected from their sons because they are unwilling to keep in touch with the mothers. This affects the mothers' emotional state which has been unstable due to their dependency on their sons for their sense of identity and life's purpose as mothers, which they believe they should be included and needed by their sons at all times, every day.

Conclusion

"*Otherhood*" is a movie that represents a topic that is still quite uncommon in society. It brings out family estrangement that is portrayed in a relatable way through the scenes and the dialogues that are contained within the movie. Other than that, *Otherhood* also focuses on other aspects that affect estrangement such as existing issues as well as Jocasta complex that is usually that is faced by the mothers. The movie represents how the mothers perceive estrangement that is done by their sons and how it affects their identity and mentality as mothers, especially on mother's day – a day when they are supposed to be celebrating with their sons. Additionally, their hasty decision to reconnect with their sons in New York is caused by the urge to feel needed by their sons which is widely affected by Jocasta complex. This condition shapes them to depend on and constantly be around their sons which affects not only their lives but also their sons'.

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