



REPRESENTATION OF FAMILY THROUGH FOOD METAPHOR IN BAO

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Abstract: Food, as a metaphor, tends to bring families and relationships closer together. According to Chinese culture, "bao" means treasure as well as security and protection. Bao is a 2018 Oscar-winning animated short film about a Chinese Canadian mother who suffers from empty nest syndrome and is given a second chance at motherhood when a dumpling comes alive. Empty nest syndrome refers to the feeling of grief that parents experience when their child moves out of the home. This paper is an attempt to read the archetype of the mother as a caregiver, as someone who loves their child a little too deeply, and how family is represented through the food metaphor of bao. The element of anthropomorphism placed on the dumpling that comes out alive is essentially an allegorical dream that happens to the empty-nester mother in the film.

Index Terms - empty nest syndrome, archetypal criticism, anthropomorphism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bao is a 2018 animated short film written and directed by Domee Shi, the first female short film director in Pixar. The peaks and valleys of the parent-child relationships are brought out through the Chinese immigrant community in Canada, where a middle-aged Chinese Canadian woman, the protagonist, is given a second chance at motherhood. The story is set in Toronto, Canada, where the woman is seen to be cooking meals for her husband who is about to leave for work. He rushes and leaves after having the bao and the woman is brought into her own world. It is with a shock that she realizes that one of her bao has come out alive and she immediately turns into a mother and eventually raises the dumpling as her own child. In the course of time, bao as a child grows and she turns out to be an overprotective mother. She is represented as a mother, who doesn't want her child to have its own individuality. And as the child goes into adulthood, the gap between the child and the mother increases. Later when the bao comes home with his new fiancée and tries to leave with her, the mother protests. Amid the struggle, the mother furiously swallows the bao. But upon realizing what she has done, the woman breaks down crying. The next scene reveals that all of it was just an allegorical dream of how the mother is suffering from empty-nest syndrome. Her son had left home with her fiancée in the same way the bao was about to leave the mother. She is seen lying in the bed and is interrupted by the father along with their son, who has now returned. The father urges the son to go have a conversation with her but she initially ignores him. He goes near her to the bedside and offers a snack that he once refused on the bus ride that they took. With them sharing an emotional moment, the mother-child reconciliation happens. And in the end, the family along with his fiancée is seen to be sitting together enjoying making bao.

The Chinese-born Canadian animator, director, and screenwriter, Domee Shi has worked for Pixar as a storyboard artist for the movies Inside Out (2015), Incredibles 2 (2018), and Toy Story (2019) and by directing Bao (2018) and Turning Red (2022) she became the first woman to direct a short film and a feature film respectively for Pixar. The film won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film at the 91st Academy Awards. And with all of these achievements, Domee Shi has helped to break Pixar's stigma of being a "boy's club" and the animation industry itself being male-dominated. The movie Turning Red also deals with a similar theme about an overprotective mother and 13-year-old daughter. Shi's movies always had these matriarchal figures, whether it is in Bao or Turning Red, to depict how she has developed these characters from her own childhood experiences. The short film Bao was also her own childhood experience, which indicates how she was brought up in Toronto and identifies herself with the "overprotected little steamed bun" of her Chinese mother. Being the only child, they made sure she was safe and protected. There were no dialogues included in the short film which took away the language barrier and made it into a universal aspect of life for people from all communities and cultural backgrounds. Shi recalls how her mother would hold her close and say "oh I wish I could put you back in my stomach so I knew exactly where you were at all times." The primal feeling of the mother just wanting to love the child so much that she's willing to do anything for it is being depicted through this short film. But the overprotectiveness that the mother portrays is nothing but a reflection of her fears and anxieties. Such mother figures always see the world as a cruel place with all the hidden evils and harm waiting for their children. And thereby the mothers are made to think that the only way to protect the children is by keeping them close to her. It is only with a confrontation of her maternal instincts and understanding that the child has grown into an adult and has to be let go.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle has already talked about the concept of metaphor in his book "On the Art of Poetry", where he explained the concept as "the application of one thing of a name belonging to another thing". That is when something is explained

by analogy with another thing, it becomes a metaphor; verbal expressions like “thought is food” and “ideas are food” brings in the analogy between thoughts or ideas with food to convey the message. Therefore, in this film, bao becomes a food metaphor to show the mother’s life and loneliness that was brought in by his son leaving the home and starting his own life. Here, according to Shi, the bao is a Chinese version of the gingerbread man. Considering the element of anthropomorphism on the bao, the term can be described as a rhetorical figure used to refer to a situation in which something of a non-human is given attributes of human form or shape. Even though it is a type of personification, it is different in the sense that, personification is the use of figurative language, an attribution of human qualities or emotions to inanimate objects, or as an abstract concept creating a better picture in the mind of the reader. Anthropomorphism makes the human characteristics attributed much more relatable and understandable to the human audience. The use of anthropomorphized characters is seen all around the world in storytelling traditions and fables that are told to children. Here, the element of anthropomorphism is applied to food which is the bao.

Food as an essential part of our lives not only helps in survival and sustenance but also represents culture, tradition and invokes familial emotions. When Chinese food history is considered, it is said to have started way long back at the beginning of modern civilizations and has managed to survive and evolve to what it is today. The food and cuisine of a country help in carrying its heritage along the way of becoming. In this short film, food has been used as a metaphor to represent the family, identity, and culture of the Chinese Canadian family. The mother is a homemaker who is seen constantly making dishes symbolizing Chinese culture and the togetherness of the family members. She is presented as a mother who takes much pride in her cooking and makes it a way to build a strong relationship with her son. She makes food for her son all the time and cooks for him when he gets angry at her for invading his privacy, she sees it as a way to make her son happy and reconcile with him. They are also seen together going shopping to buy the raw materials for the authentic dishes that she makes. The visual appeal of the food that she makes also indicates how proud she is as a mother and as a person who understands the importance of carrying down their cultural identity and culinary traditions even though they are residing in a different country. She stays true to herself in everything that she does, being a mother and a caretaker.

The element of the archetype that is present in the short film is the archetype of the overprotective mother. According to Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychoanalyst, the term ‘archetype’ denotes the primordial images and the psychic residue of repeated patterns of experience which exists in our collective unconscious and is considered universal to the human race. They are expressed in character types, patterns of actions, and themes that recur throughout a wide variety of works of literature, myths, religions, and dreams. Archetypal criticism evolved as a product of two related disciplines, social anthropology, and psychoanalysis. It is considered as a type of critical theory that interprets a text by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes. It emerges from Maud Baudkin's work Archetypal Patterns in Poetry which deals with myth criticism and it was the publication of James G. Frazer's The Golden Bough that resulted in a widespread interest in individual and collective myths. Frazer's identification of shared practices between the primitive Greek religions with that of Christianity as a modern religion created waves in the field of philosophy and literature and led to revised readings of culture and literature. Carl Gustav Jung on the contrary centered his analysis on the unconscious, specifically the collective or racial unconscious. Even though Jung began as a disciple to Sigmund Freud, his interpretations radically departed from that of his predecessor, as his emphasis was not on the individual unconscious but on the collective unconscious. It is regarded as a repository of all the racial memories and primordial images and is shared by all humans. He believed that with his theory of collective unconscious, human beings are all connected through a set of shared experiences. In addition to this, Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, Philip Wheelwright, and G. Wilson Knight have also contributed to the theory of archetypal criticism.

The archetype of a mother was introduced by Carl Jung in The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious along with the archetypes like rebirth, trickster, and spirit. The mother archetype is always found in different variations such as that of a personal mother, a grandmother, a stepmother, a nurse, a governess, and so on. The archetype refers to the idea of fertility and fruitfulness which in turn indicates the life-giving and nurturing aspect of femininity. These can be found not only in a mother but also in a maternal figure in a person's life or even a motherly instinct within one's personality. That is whether they have a child or not, they tend to exhibit these personality traits of motherhood which has a strong impact on the development of their child. Such characteristics can also be taken into account to refer to the relationships that they have with their mothers.

There are the archetypes of the good mother and the terrible mother, in which the former shows the positive aspects of the Earth mother and the latter the negative aspects of the Earth mother. The positive aspects are selfless love and care with sacrificing themselves for their children. Such mothers tend to put their child's needs before theirs. She can be a representative of an ideal mother figure, not only to her children but to the whole. But on the other hand, the negative aspects are brought in with the characteristics of asserting control over the children, being demanding and authoritative over them. They only care about themselves and consider their children to be something that should be kept under their control. They can be absent and ignorant or emotionally manipulative and physically abusive. They devour the child to an extent that the child feels drained in the presence of their mother. A child's relationship with the mother is of greater importance as it provides for the development of the child into an adult and how the adult builds a relationship with others. For example, an emotionally neglected child would grow into an adult who is afraid of relationships and might have abandonment issues.

By giving this short film an archetypal reading, the archetype will be an overprotective mother who doesn't want her child to have an individuality of his own. The mother is seen to be reliving her experience of being a mother when one of her bao comes out alive. The main focus of the short film is placed on the mother that the suffocation that the son experiences is not addressed. The mother is portrayed as excessively controlling and concerned about the safety and well-being of the child. While this archetype of an overprotective mother is seen as a negative thing, it has to be understood that the maternal instincts of protecting her children will be there within herself unless and until she confronts it and let go of it. It is important to note that such an overprotectiveness that is being exhibited by the mother would be a precautionary measure taken to protect her children. Such behaviour is not only limited to mothers but as well as to the caregivers of the children. The mother in this short film cannot be exactly considered as a terrible or devouring mother, it can be understood when we embark upon the journey of the allegorical dream that she has. Looking into the details, there are portraits of the family hanging on the wall which indicates that it is a single child and has grown into an adult. The sighs and the sadness on her face reveal how lonely she is at her home and how she has to push herself over time. The story is presented in such a way that the mother is focused for her loneliness and overprotectiveness that comes along as the child grows up. It should be read in such a way that the mother is not a negative character that doesn't want her son to have his own

individuality but as a mother with her maternal instincts of having to protect their child from all the evils and harm that surround them. It is subtly portrayed through the bao falling down and having a disfigurement to his head and where the mother picks him up and feeds him so that it is rectified. There are also incidents like the dog biting and taking him away where the mother gives a bath and cleans him up. It is all out of love that the mother does things for him. But as he grows up, he becomes rebellious and out of control. To the mother's shock, he brings in his fiancée and tries to leave with her.

The mother from the very beginning is portrayed as someone who likes to carry down her culture and tradition through her food and cuisine. She doesn't let him go play football with the boys or doesn't want him to leave with the fiancée. She doesn't want him to leave her side and be an individual of his own. She suffers from empty nest syndrome all along and is made to swallow the bao when he tries to leave. It is with a reconciliation upon his return and a confrontation of her maternal instincts that she accepts him and his fiancée. And in the end, the son and the mother are amazed at the fiancée's bao-making skills. Even though she is presented as an overprotective mother, she is a mother who had to go through a lot of loneliness as a homemaker and had to suffer from empty nest syndrome. Her intentions were only to protect her child from the evils but turned out that the child felt suffocated and restricted which makes him more rebellious.

The archetype of an overprotective mother is a common theme in both media as well as literature. The overprotectiveness portrayed by the mother is a reflection of her fears and anxieties which stems as a part of the desire to protect and keep her child safe. The term bao itself has a Chinese meaning of something precious or something to be protected. Thus, the representation of family through food metaphor is a significant aspect of the short film which together brings in the element of mother-son relationship, Chinese culture and tradition along with their cuisine. The archetype of the overprotective mother that she has turned into should be considered as a part of the child growing up and becoming an independent adult. The mother's love is supposed to transcend the maternal instincts so that she gets to learn and accept who her son is. It is with such an ending that she accepts him and his fiancée into their family. Ultimately this paper goes into an archetypal study of the mother and how food plays an important role in depicting familial relationships.

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