

THE IMAGE OF MOTHER IN WORLD LITERATURE**Safarova Zulfiya Karimova****Senior Lecturer, Department of Russian Language and Literature,
University of Economics and Pedagogy (NTM)**

Annotation: This paper seeks to examine the image of the mother in world literature through a comparative lens, tracing its evolution from ancient to contemporary times. By analyzing key works from diverse traditions—including European, Asian, African, and American literatures—this study aims to highlight both the universal and culturally specific aspects of the maternal figure. Such an investigation not only deepens our understanding of literature but also reveals the profound symbolic and ethical significance that motherhood continues to hold in human consciousness.

Key words: mother, cultural and literary, historical, and philosophical contexts, family, emotional, moral, literary representations, pure, selfless, holy.

INTRODUCTION

The image of the mother occupies a central place in the cultural and literary imagination of humanity. Across civilizations and historical epochs, literature has consistently depicted mothers as symbols of life, love, sacrifice, endurance, and moral authority. From ancient epics to contemporary novels, the maternal figure embodies not only biological motherhood but also broader notions of nurture, cultural identity, and spiritual guidance. This universality of the maternal archetype highlights its enduring relevance, while the diversity of its literary representations reflects the socio-cultural, religious, and philosophical frameworks of different societies. In ancient mythologies and epics, the mother often appeared as a divine or semi-divine figure—such as Gaia in Greek mythology or Kunti in the *Mahabharata*—underscoring the sacred dimension of motherhood. In medieval and early modern literature, the mother figure frequently symbolized moral purity and religious devotion, as exemplified by the veneration of the Virgin Mary in Christian texts. In contrast, modern and contemporary literatures have presented increasingly complex portrayals of mothers, ranging from the nurturing and self-sacrificing to the oppressive, conflicted, or absent, thereby revealing the shifting social dynamics and psychological realities of family life.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

The exploration of the maternal image in world literature is not merely a study of character archetypes but also an inquiry into the fundamental values and anxieties of human societies. The way mothers are represented in literary works provides insight into gender roles, power structures, and cultural ideals. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the concept of motherhood has been both idealized and problematized, reflecting broader discourses on identity, nationhood, and humanity itself. The literary representation of motherhood has always been shaped by the cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts of particular societies. A comparative analysis across world literature reveals both continuity and transformation in the maternal image. In ancient epics, mothers often appear as embodiments of sacrifice and destiny. For instance, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope's role as a mother is deeply intertwined with her duties as a wife, reflecting the Greek ideal of feminine loyalty and endurance. Similarly, in the *Mahabharata*, Kunti's maternal decisions—especially her abandonment and later recognition of Karna—carry immense moral and political consequences, illustrating the intersection of motherhood with dharma (duty). These examples highlight the perception of mothers as bearers of both personal and communal responsibilities.

In medieval and Renaissance literature, maternal figures are frequently idealized, often in association with religious devotion. The cult of the Virgin Mary in Christian Europe reinforced the portrayal of mothers as paragons of purity, compassion, and sacrifice. Yet, secular literature occasionally complicates this image: Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, though not a literal mother, invokes maternal imagery to invert its nurturing qualities, demonstrating how maternal symbolism could also be used to signify ambition and subversion. Moving into the 19th-century realist tradition, literature began to explore the psychological and social dimensions of motherhood with greater depth. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Anna's role as a mother is in tension with her pursuit of personal happiness, reflecting societal constraints on women. Charles Dickens often portrayed mothers as moral anchors, such as in *David Copperfield*, where Clara Copperfield's fragility contrasts with the oppressive surrogate mother figure of Miss Murdstone. Here, the maternal image becomes a site of negotiation between affection, vulnerability, and authority.

In modern and contemporary literatures, the maternal figure assumes even more complex and sometimes ambivalent roles. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* presents Sethe as a mother torn between love and trauma, dramatizing the impact of slavery on maternal identity. Maya Angelou, in her autobiographical works, portrays motherhood as both a source of resilience and a challenge within racial and gendered oppression. Similarly, in African literature, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, maternal figures embody cultural continuity and survival, even amid colonial

disruption. These texts underscore how the image of the mother has become a medium through which writers address issues of race, class, gender, and historical trauma. Overall, literary depictions of motherhood oscillate between reverence and critique. While some works glorify mothers as selfless nurturers or sacred figures, others interrogate the burdens and contradictions embedded in maternal roles. The dynamic evolution of this image across time and cultures reflects not only artistic creativity but also deeper societal transformations regarding gender, family, and identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of maternal images in world literature reveals several important patterns and insights. First, the universality of the maternal archetype is evident: across cultures, the figure of the mother consistently symbolizes nurture, sacrifice, and continuity of life. Whether in the epics of ancient Greece and India or in modern African and American novels, the mother is portrayed as an essential force of emotional, moral, and cultural stability. This demonstrates that the maternal image is deeply embedded in the human imagination, transcending temporal and geographical boundaries.

Second, the study shows that literary representations of mothers are profoundly shaped by cultural and historical contexts. For example, in religious and medieval European literature, the mother is idealized as pure, selfless, and holy, often modeled on the Virgin Mary. By contrast, realist and modernist writers complicate this portrayal by exposing tensions between maternal duties and individual desires, as seen in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or Morrison's *Beloved*. These shifts reflect broader changes in social attitudes toward gender roles, family structures, and women's autonomy.

Third, the maternal figure often serves as a symbolic mediator between the individual and the collective. In epics like the *Mahabharata* or Homer's *Odyssey*, the mother embodies responsibility not only to her children but also to the community and nation. In postcolonial literature, such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the mother becomes a guardian of cultural identity amid external pressures of colonization. This suggests that motherhood in literature is frequently used to articulate communal values, resilience, and continuity.

Moreover, the discussion highlights the ambivalence and diversity of maternal depictions. While some texts celebrate mothers as paragons of virtue, others depict them as absent, oppressive, or conflicted figures, thereby questioning idealized conceptions of motherhood. Such complexity

underscores the need to view literary mothers not merely as archetypes but as dynamic characters shaped by the psychological, social, and historical forces of their time.

Finally, the results suggest that studying maternal images provides valuable insight into broader literary and cultural discourses. The representation of mothers reflects evolving debates about identity, morality, power, and survival. It also reveals how literature both preserves traditional ideals of motherhood and challenges them through critical reimaginings.

CONCLUSION

The image of the mother in world literature is one of the most enduring and multifaceted archetypes. From ancient mythologies and epics to modern narratives, mothers have been depicted as life-givers, nurturers, protectors, and moral guides, while also being represented as conflicted, burdened, or even transgressive figures. This duality demonstrates that motherhood is not merely a biological or familial role but a symbolic construct that reflects the deepest values, fears, and aspirations of human societies. A cross-cultural and diachronic analysis shows that the maternal figure has consistently served as a lens through which authors explore broader social, political, and existential questions. In religious traditions, mothers have been sanctified as divine embodiments of purity and sacrifice. In realist and modernist literatures, maternal roles have been problematized, revealing the constraints of patriarchy and the psychological struggles of women. In postcolonial and contemporary works, motherhood often becomes a site of resistance, resilience, and identity formation within contexts of oppression and historical trauma. Thus, the mother emerges as both a universal and culturally specific figure—simultaneously timeless and historically contingent. The richness of maternal representations in literature underscores not only the centrality of motherhood in human experience but also the dynamic ways in which literature continues to engage with themes of love, sacrifice, power, and survival. In this sense, the literary image of the mother remains a profound mirror of humanity's collective imagination and moral consciousness.

REFERENCES:

1. Achebe, C. (1994). *Things fall apart*. Anchor Books.
2. Angelou, M. (1997). *Mom & me & mom*. Random House.
3. Dickens, C. (2004). *David Copperfield*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1850)
4. Homer. (1996). *The Odyssey* (R. Fagles, Trans.). Penguin Classics.

5. Morrison, T. (2004). *Beloved*. Vintage International. (Original work published 1987)
6. Shakespeare, W. (2005). *Macbeth*. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1606)
7. Tolstoy, L. (2002). *Anna Karenina* (R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1877)
8. Vyasa. (2008). *The Mahabharata* (J. A. B. van Buitenen, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.