

Facets of Mother Archetype: A Jungian Reading of Jessie Greengrass's *The High House*

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Abstract:

In the present paper, Carl Gustav Jung's theory of the mother archetype, as elaborated in his essay *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype* (1938), is applied to Jessie Greengrass's *The High House* (2021) through the figures of Francesca, Caro, Sally and the house itself. Set in a coastal community that has been devastated by catastrophic flood caused by climate change. The novel can be read as a climate fiction but its deeper structure seems to be archetypal.

The novel portrays motherhood in various forms, extending beyond biological motherhood to incorporate the themes of care, protection, nourishment, sacrifice, responsibility and survival.

Through characters like Francesca, Caro, Sally, and the house itself, Greengrass explores both the nurturing and restrictive sides of maternal figure. Therefore, the present paper argues that the Mother Archetype provides a significant framework for understanding *The High House*, allowing Greengrass to give a unique depth, significance and emotional impact to her climate narrative by connecting ecological catastrophe with themes of care, survival, responsibility, and the preservation of life.

Keywords: Archetype; Motherhood; Ecological Catastrophe; Survival; Care; Responsibility

The term *archetype* derives from the Greek *archetypon*, a combination of *arche*, meaning "first", "original", or "beginning", and *typos*, meaning "type", "model", "pattern", or "impression". Thus, etymologically, *archetype* refers to an original or primary model from which other forms may be derived. The term was later adapted into Latin as *archetypum* and came to signify a pattern, model, or original form. In literary studies, M.H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2018), defines archetypes as "...narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes, and images that recur in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even in social rituals" (18). According to Oxford Reference, "archetype (in Jungian theory) is a primitive mental image inherited from the earliest human ancestors, and supposed to be present in the collective unconscious". In this sense, archetypes are eternal and universal patterns that form the foundation of the collective human experience, transcending specific eras or cultures and enduring since the beginning of recorded history. Long before the term was coined, ancient civilizations experience archetypes through storytelling. The concept has a long intellectual history, appearing in the philosophical writings of Plato, who used the term to describe ideal forms that exist beyond the material world. It wasn't until the twentieth century that the idea of the archetype was systematically applied to the study of human psychology and literature, primarily through the works of Carl Gustav Jung.

In Literature, archetypes serve as universal patterns that helps readers in identifying and understanding characters and events. Archetypes such as Mother, Hero, Sage, Warrior, Lover, Orphan, Rebel, Innocent, Explorer, Magician, Creator etc are being used by most of the writers across the Globe in their writings like Vladimir Nabokov, Ursula K. Le Guin, J.R.R. Tolkien, Agatha Christie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Nair, Amish Tripathi and more. It holds a significant power as they connect personal experiences to the collective experiences. A person may encounter a mother, guide, dark and threatening force in their daily lives but within psyche it carries a deeper symbolic meaning. The archetype of Mother appears in goddess figures, such as Isis, Demeter, and the Virgin Mary, representing both nurturing and destructive qualities of nature and femininity. Thus, mother figure represents a nurturing and protection but also signify control and engulfment.

Carl Gustav Jung introduced the term “archetype” into modern psychology, redirected attention about archetypes from metaphysical universals to psychological frameworks. He referred to archetypes as “primordial images” and located them within what he termed the “collective unconscious”. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1968), he states that :

A more or less superficial layer of the unconscious is undoubtedly personal. I call it the personal unconscious. But this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us. (287)

Jung further explains that the contents of this deeper layer are what he calls archetypes. He states that, “the contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as archetypes” (Jung 287). Thus, archetypes are not acquired through an individual's personal experience but belong to the inherited and universal structure of the collective unconscious. Jung further describes the recurring nature of these patterns:

From the unconscious there emanate determining influences which, independently of tradition, guarantee in every single individual a similarity and even a sameness of experience, and also of the way it is represented imaginatively. One of the main proofs of this is the almost universal parallelism between mythological motifs, which, on account of their quality as primordial images, I have called archetypes. (58)

This suggests that archetypes function as primordial patterns underlying recurring human experiences and their imaginative representations. They may appear in different cultural, mythological, literary, and symbolic forms, while retaining an underlying psychological pattern. In this way, the archetype is not a fixed image or character but an inherited psychic structure through which recurring experiences are expressed and understood. Jung therefore redefines the idea of archetype from a merely recurring literary or mythological pattern to a psychological phenomenon rooted in the collective unconscious.

As already mentioned, that most of the writers makes an abundant use of myths and archetypes in their writings, so, is the case of Jessie Greengrass, a British climate fiction writer, who in her novel *The High House* (2021) explores the psychological and moral challenges arising from climate collapse, as experienced by a small group of survivors. The story centers on Caro, who, after the death of her father and her stepmother Francesca, becomes responsible for her

younger half-brother Pauly. As Francesca had planned, Caro and Pauly move to a secluded coastal property, The High House, which has been prepared as a sanctuary against environmental collapse where Sally, a local girl hired as a caretaker for Pauly and Grandy, Sally's aged grandfather already waiting for them.

In the novel, environmental shifts and political inaction gradually destroys ordinary life. The crisis does not arrive as a single dramatic occurrence, instead, it creeps in through unpredictable seasons, increasing water levels, and the subtle breakdown of public systems. When the main events of the novel take place, what used to warn about as 'the future' has already become present in which the characters must live. The novel moves between past and present, showing both the world before and the changed world after breakdown. The house becomes both the shelter and boundaries; it keeps the sea and worst chaos at a distance but it also put limitations on the characters world. The novel also pays close attention to emotion - grief for those who are gone and, fear about what remains and remorse for being one of the few who loves in. Caro summarizes this weight when she says, "All those who might have lived instead of us are gone, or they are starving, while we stay on here at the high house, pulling potatoes from soft earth" (Greengrass 43).

The mother archetype has been explored in various literary and cultural context, representing its capacity to adopt multiple forms beyond biological motherhood. Researchers like Arzu Yetim and Medine Sivri, in their comparative study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Christa Wolf's *Medea*. They analyzes Sethe and Medea by applying Jung's ideas of "loving mother" and "terrible mother", focusing on their nurturing and destructive sides (33-58). In the same way, William David Love Jr's reading of Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* uses Jungian framework to examines the novel's surrogate mothers and the different forms of femininity, representing that maternal identity can extend beyond biological maternity. Sara Nunez de la Fuente's also uses a Jungian approach of Gustavo Martin Garzo's *The Door of Birds*, focusing on the destructive side of the Great Mother archetype. Wahaj Unnisa Warda applies the concept of the Great Mother to characters in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and Collen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* emphasizing the controlling nature of motherhood. These studies highlight that the mother archetype can represent nurturing, protection, sacrifice, control and destruction and it isn't restricted to biological motherhood.

In Jessie's *The High House*, the idea of mother archetype is so deeply embedded that it becomes imperative for understanding the novel to analyze it from the perspective of mother archetype. It has both positive and negative sides, offering insight into how characters handle psychological and moral dilemmas. The mother archetype embodies nurturing, protection and life-giving force but it can also appear as controlling or destructive, what Jung famously articulates as "the loving and the terrible mother" (Jung, *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype* 334). According to Jung, the positive qualities associated with the mother archetype include "maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility". (333), and on the negative side, the archetype, "may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate". (334)

In *The High House*, this archetype is not carried by a single figure but is distributed across Francesca, Caro, Sally, and even the house itself. Together, they demonstrate how motherhood in a time of crisis is both life-giving and painfully heavy. Francesca is the primary mother figure. She is Pauly's biological mother and Caro's stepmother, yet her role as a mother transcends mere biology. As a scientist, she is

convinced that serious environmental change is coming and she acts on this belief by preparing high house. She quietly fills the house with supplies, tools and system that will help her children and few others to survive when ordinary structures failed. After Francesca's death, Caro discovers the stored item and felt the depth of her stepmother's love, "I stayed for a long time, staring at them- the boxes of felt-tip pens, the reams of paper, chalks, playing cards, boxes of Lego—and in the silent barn I felt love come off the shelves like heat" (Greengrass 178). This image perfectly captures what Jung identifies as the positive aspect of the mother archetype: "all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility" (Jung, *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype* 333). Here Francesca's love is seen not through her physical presence but through her planning and preparation, she becomes a caring figure, whose attention and care are built into the very space her children built in. Jung writes in *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype* (1968), "the mother is the first world of the child and the last world of the adult. We are all wrapped as her children in the mantle of this great Isis". (345)

This is literally true for Pauly, as the *The High House*, prepared by Francesca, is his entire world, the only world he has ever known. In Jungian terms, Francesca embodies both the nurturing and darker dimensions of the mother archetype. Her maternal instincts sustain and protect those within her care; however, this protection is necessarily selective. By choosing to preserve a smaller group, she creates an implicit boundary between those who can be sheltered and those who must remain outside it. Jung's discussion of the mother as representative of the family or clan is useful here, as he observes in *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype* (1968), "The mother as representative of the family (or clan) causes either violent resistances or complete indifference to anything that comes under the head of family, community, society, convention, and the like". (342) As a result, Francesca's maternal protection involves a necessary act of exclusion. *The High House* becomes a space of survival for some individuals precisely because it does not extend its shelter to everyone.

Caro becomes an alternate expression of mother archetype, after Francesca and Caro's father departs, she became the primary caretaker of Pauly. She feeds him, look after him and organize her life around his needs. However, she did not choose this role but it has been imposed by circumstances. Sometimes she acknowledges the burden of this responsibility and admits her unwillingness, when she reflects, "I fitted my life to Pauly's because he needed me – or because I needed him, the way he looked me full in the face and smiled, the excuse he gave me: that I could not possibly be anywhere else, because I was here" (Greengrass 42). Jung's concept of the mother-complex in *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype* (1968) helps in understanding the burden incorporated in Caro's experience of motherhood, "It is just this massive weight of meaning that ties us to the mother and chains her to her child, to the physical and mental detriment of both". (Jung 344). Caro's experience reflects this conflict between maternal care and the loss of personal freedom. Her responsibility for Pauly provides him with the care and stability he needs, but at the same time, it binds her life to his needs. Her statement that she "fitted" her life to Pauly's suggests that motherhood has become not simply an act of affection but a condition around which her own existence must be arranged. Thus, Caro represents a form of motherhood in which nurture and sacrifice become inseparable. Sally shares this burden and can be seen as co-mother. Although she is not related to Pauly by blood but she plays a significant role in raising him and manages the house. Jung writes that the mother archetype does not attach exclusively to biological mothers but can be carried by "any woman with whom a relationship exists, for example a nurse or governess", any figure who assumes the sustaining, caring function that the archetype requires. (Jung 333) When Caro struggles to cope, it is often Sally who steps in. Caro remembers how after a period

of withdrawal and grief, Sally becomes Pauly's main comfort. He creeps into the makeshift bed she has made in the corridor, "arms and legs spread out into a cross, face turned away from me, towards the wall. His right hand, fingers curling, rested against my shoulder". (Greengrass 141)

This image - the child's hand resting against the body of the woman who is not his mother - is the mother archetype in its most elemental physical form. Sally becomes the warmth, bodily presence, and reliable shelter associated with Jung's positive mother archetype, "the love that means homecoming, shelter, and the long silence from which everything begins and in which everything ends". (Jung 343) Sally's maternal love expresses itself not through grand gestures or world-making preparation but through something far quieter and far more difficult to sustain- the simple, daily, bodily fact of being there. She embodies the quality of the long silence, the reliable presence, the warmth that asks nothing and withholds nothing.

Finally, the high house functions as a maternal symbol. *The High House* (2021) is portrayed as a well-prepared refuge, a space deliberately designed to support life and protect its characters from the harsh realities of the outside world. Francesca's prior arrangements transform the house into a site of shelter and provision: the barn is filled with food, clothing, medical supplies, and tools; systems for water, power, and heating are established; and the garden is tended to yield crops annually. Therefore, the house is not just a place to live, but deliberately created environment where life can be maintained. As Caro observes, "All those who might have lived instead of us are gone, or they are starving, while we stay on here at the high house, pulling potatoes from soft earth" (Greengrass 43). The difference between those outside, who are either "gone" or "starving," and those inside the high house, who remain, defines it as a secure area for survival. However, Caro's own sense of safety is closely tied to the duty of keeping this protected life going: "I did nothing, in the end, but stay safe at the high house and ride things out" (Greengrass 26). In this way, the house acts as a maternal matrix, supporting life while at the same time placing the burden of preservation upon those who inhabit it. Jung's description of the mother archetype offers a useful framework in understanding this symbolic role as he asserts "the structure is something given, the precondition that is found to be present in every case. And this is the mother, the matrix- the form into which all experience is poured". (Jung 352).

The high house serves a similar function, become the form within which the characters experience survival, care, fear, and loss. It is also associated with maternal qualities. Jung describes as, "the mysterious root of all growth and change; the love that means homecoming, shelter". (Jung 343) The house offers exactly this feeling of safety and ongoing support, enabling Caro, Sally, and Pauly to keep up with their daily lives even as the world around them deteriorates. However, Jung's mother is not only nurturing, she is, "intimately known and yet strange like Nature, lovingly tender and yet cruel like fate, joyous and untiring giver of life" (Jung, *The Psychological Aspect of the Mother Archetype* 343). The High House reflects this ambivalence of care and distance. It offers the characters sustenance, warmth, security, and a sense of belonging but this protection is maintained by separating them from the world outside. Sally's realization from that, "we only had enough for ourselves" (Greengrass 227) highlights the ethical cost of this isolation, while her later observation of the submerged landscape, "all the land, those places I had known my whole life, was underneath the water. The village was underneath the water" (Greengrass 262), reveals what lies beyond the house's protective limits. The high house thus becomes both womb and boundary, a maternal matrix that sustains life while simultaneously isolating its inhabitants from the dying world outside.

Conclusion

The study reveals how deeply Jessie Greengrass's novel is shaped by ideas of care, protection, nourishment, sacrifice, and responsibility. Through the characters of Francesca, Caro, Sally, and the High House itself, the novel portrays motherhood as a complex and multifaceted archetypal pattern rather than a role that is confined to biological motherhood. Greengrass creates a story that is both personal and mythic. It further reveals that its characters are not merely surviving a physical disaster but also going through psychological patterns that influence their identities and decisions. Francesca's efforts and sacrifices establish a maternal instinct aimed at preserving life in the face of ecological catastrophe. Caro's experiences reveal the emotional burden, guilt, and a sense of responsibility that accompany the act of caring for another. Sally broadens the mother archetype beyond biological by showing how maternal care can be expressed through daily acts of support, comfort and protection, highlighting that such care can arise from lived relationships and ongoing responsibility. *The High House* (2021) further expands this archetype by acting as a safe and containing space, reflecting Jung's idea of the mother as a "matrix" into which experience is poured. Through these different manifestations, the novel portrays the motherhood as both a source of security and a source of burden, capable of sustaining life while at the same time, demanding sacrifice and creating boundaries.

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