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Maternal Ambivalence and the Death Mother Archetype

I first came across the term *Death Mother Archetype* many years ago, and it has stayed with me ever since. Coined by Jungian analyst Marion Woodman, the term captures a powerful psychological force: one that operates both within individuals and across cultures. Woodman describes this archetype as wielding a "*cold, fierce, violent and corrosive power*" (Sieff, 2009, p. 178). Drawing on the myth of Medusa, she writes:

"*When Death Mother's gaze is directed at us, it penetrates both psyche and body, turning us into stone. It kills hope. It cuts us dead. We collapse. Our life-energy drains from us and we sink into chthonic darkness*."
- *Sieff, 2009, p. 178*

In my work as a relational psychotherapist in Pakistan for over fifteen years, I've often witnessed the profound difficulty clients face in naming or even acknowledging the pain of having had a rejecting mother. The moment this topic arises, it is almost immediately met with guilt:

"*But she had a really hard time herself*."
"*She was being tortured by her husband and mother-in-law. What else could she do*?"
"*She had no life of her own. She did everything she could for me*."

The psyche splits. One part begins to grieve, to process the pain, the abandonment, the neglect while another rushes in to protect and defend the mother, to preserve the ideal.

The *Death Mother* is the shadow side of the *Great Mother Archetype*. The *Great Mother Archetype* is the image of the warm, nurturing, unconditionally loving mother. While this image is comforting, it also sets up a collective fantasy: that mothers should be perfect, endlessly giving, and self-sacrificing. In reality, mothers are human. They carry their own trauma histories, limitations, and shadow material.

But culturally, there is little room to talk about this. Particularly in collectivist societies like ours, mothers are often sanctified. Questioning them or naming the harm they have caused can feel like a betrayal. And yet, silence often preserves suffering.

According to Woodman, encountering the Death Mother in childhood is devastating. The very figure who is meant to protect and nurture becomes the source of rejection. The child begins to believe, at a bodily level, that they are unlovable, defective, or even fundamentally unwanted. This somatic imprint of shame and rejection can shape how they move through the world: with frozen bodies, collapsed boundaries, and a constant fear of abandonment.

"If my own mother could not love me, I must be deeply flawed."

This internal narrative can persist well into adulthood, often unconsciously, and influence every relationship.

In a society where family and community belonging hold so much value, it becomes even harder to confront the wounds we carry from our earliest relationships. The desire to maintain relational ties, even harmful ones, can overshadow our own emotional truth.

But when this pain remains unacknowledged, it doesn't disappear. Instead, it seeps into our relationships, our parenting and our inner worlds. In this way, the *Death Mother* is not just a personal wound it becomes intergenerational.

I have worked with clients who, with great courage, chose to confront these early experiences. The process is slow and painful, but deeply transformative. In the safety of the therapeutic relationship, they begin to touch parts of themselves that were long buried: parts that hold rage, grief, longing, and despair.

One client told me:

"I am extremely angry at my mother. I was abused, and when I told her, she said, 'What can I do? It's in the past.'"

As she processed her anger, grief emerged. Then came a surprising insight: her mother too had been silenced, frozen, unloved: perhaps a carrier of the Death Mother's legacy. Slowly, a broader intergenerational pattern began to reveal itself.

This does not excuse harm, but it offers context. Understanding does not erase the wound, but it can stop us from unconsciously passing it on.

The intention here is not to vilify mothers, but to challenge the pedestal on which they are often placed. Women are expected to be perfect caregivers, self-sacrificing daughters, daughters-in-law, wives and now also accomplished professionals with vibrant social lives. The pressure is enormous, and the support is scarce.

Our cultural scripts leave very little space for women to ask themselves: *Who am I beyond my roles? What do I want for myself?* And even less space exists for daughters to say: *My mother hurt me.*

In our culture, where parents are revered with a god-like status, speaking this truth is radical. But healing begins by making room for ambivalence. In recognizing that love and harm can coexist and by giving ourselves permission to break the cycle.