

The Babadook: A Psychodynamic Enquiry

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the underlying psychological themes in the horror film, *The Babadook* (2014). The paper focuses on explaining the “monster,” *Babadook*, through psychological concepts and possible underlying disorders. The paper also deconstructs the nature of horror films, through *The Babadook*, and tries to explain the perceived notion of the supernatural with psychological insights. The present analysis is done through a psychodynamic lens to examine the mother’s struggles after the death of her husband and the consequent effect of her actions on the child. The analysis also highlights the impact of an ‘absent father’ in the child’s life.

Keywords: *horror films, psychodynamic perspective, movie analysis, popular culture*

Introduction

“If it’s in a word or in a look, you can’t get rid of the *Babadook*.”

The Babadook (2014)

On the surface, like almost every horror film, *The Babadook* is about a monster. But the underlying theme of the film is a rather unsettling story of grief, loss and parenting. Amelia is an exhausted overworked widow who has raised her son, Samuel, alone for six years and is faced by immense difficulties. Samuel grows to be obsessed with a “monster under his bed.” He suffers from insomnia, has violent outbursts and experiences seizures. Raising this child alone has been a humungous task for Amelia as her husband had passed away in an accident while they were on their way to the hospital for Samuel’s birth. Having had no time to grieve her husband given that she has a son to raise, Amelia has internalised the grief and loss and has grown to resent the child.

At the core of the film, then, is a troubled mother clouded by trauma who struggles with her equally troubled child whose father has been absent right from the beginning. Unlike the popular and more acceptable image of all the sacrificing self-less mother, Amelia may well be seen as a ‘bad’ mother in the film. The

director, Jennifer Kent explains in an interview with *The Rolling Stone* (Adams, 2014) that, “I’m not a parent but I’m surrounded by friends and family who are, and I see it from the outside ... how parenting seems hard and never-ending.” She thought Amelia would receive “a lot of flak” for her flawed parenting, but the opposite happened. “I think it’s given a lot of women a sense of reassurance to see a real human being up there,” Kent said. “We don’t get to see characters like her that often” (Pirnia, 2017).

Kent also tells *The Film Journal* (2014), “*The Babadook* is a film about a woman waking up from a long, metaphorical sleep and finding that she has the power to protect herself and her son...that’s the most important thing in the film—facing our shadow side.” She further explains,

“I didn’t want to portray Amelia as this crazy woman from the get-go, often, women who are crazy are demonised in films, because we look at them from the outside. I really wanted to experience what it was like to go down that slippery slope from the inside. I wanted to create a woman who was really just struggling, while also pointing out that this monster [exists] within everyone.” (Kent, 2014).

The monster in the movie, metaphorically, may also be seen as a festering wound in the mother-son relationship, which both of them fail to acknowledge. The Babadook is haunted by abject. Amelia's life as a widow and new mother is "quite literally infected" (Buerger, 2016) by death, and motherhood is irrevocably linked with trauma. It is like moving past the elephant in the room, i.e., the symbolic representation of the mother's grief over the father's death. The mother then faces uncertainty and intrapsychic conflict of wanting to protect her son while simultaneously wanting to inflict pain on him given that he was in some way responsible for his father's untimely death. Buerger (2016) delves in detail about the representation of maternal abjection and states, "The Babadook terrifies its audience by making the protagonist's refusal of maternity the locus of her monstrosity and abjection." This leads to a haunting solely because the weight of abjection is increased exponentially as there is a denial of the existence of festering wounds. To remove it from conscious reality and deny its gravity paradoxically increases the intrapsychic split that results in the creation of the Babadook; a monster representing maternal abjection and resentment towards her son.

"Amelia and Sam's nocturnal tormentor is unquestionably a creature of their own making, a collaborative mother/son nightmare born of their difficult relationship" (Stevens, 2014). This doesn't necessarily mean that they are imagining him. Rather, it is better understood as a metaphorical representation that is used as a cinematographic tool to express the "embodiment of not only Amelia's isolation and strain but of her unspoken resentment of her son, and his of her—of their mutual desire, at times, to do away with each other" (Stevens, 2014).

The emerging themes are discussed in detail in the next section.

Themes and Discussion

Despair, Unconscious Hate and Resentment

In the film, we see Amelia longing for love and sexual desire. She has lost her husband prematurely and has been forced into the role of the mother without processing her grief and loss. This is clearly visible in the movie in the scene where Amelia tries to flirt with a man. In another scene, she stares at a couple in the car opposite to hers in the parking lot. There is another suggestive scene where she is interrupted by Sam while masturbating.

She is also seen as a bad mother by other women, including her own sister. At a party, when a woman says that she has done volunteer work with widowed women and it's extremely difficult, Amelia ignores the job at her the first time. But later, when a woman complains about taking care of her kids 24/7 while her husband is earning tons of money, Amelia turns hostile and sarcastically yells, "That's a real tragedy! Not having time to go to the gym anymore? How do you cope? You must have SO much to talk about with those poor disadvantaged women" (The Babadook, 2014). This suggests that Amelia may feel as an outcast in her social group as her peers disregard her struggle and believe her to be difficult. They constantly keep seeing her as the 'crazy one' whose son scares their kids. Her own sister, Carol refuses to babysit Samuel because he scares her daughter with stories of the Babadook that he believes are real.

She is depicted as a lonely woman who is perpetually exhausted, trying to manage her job while coping with her troubled son's ramblings and horrifying behaviour (like climbing atop a swing, bursting firecrackers when angry, talking to invisible monsters and creating as well as carrying weapons to kill the said monster). Even though she tries to take Sam to therapy, she herself may need support. She ends up being enraged with him many times and screams at him for being difficult. She gets extremely disturbed when Sam goes into the basement where all his father's

possessions are kept and gets upset seeing them messed up. In a particularly poignant scene, she even refuses to let Sam celebrate his birthday on the pretext of him being expelled from school. But, the real reason seems to be the day being a painful reminder of her husband's death.

In one of the most important scenes of the entire film, the actual streak of hatred is clearly evident in a violent conversation between Amelia and Sam:

“Amelia: You little pig. Six years old and you're still wetting yourself.

You don't know how many times I wished it was you, not him, that died.

Samuel: I just wanted you to be happy.

A: Sometimes I just want to smash your head against the brick wall,

until your fucking brains pop out.

S: You're not my mother.

A: What did you say?

S: I said you're not my mother!

A: I AM YOUR MOTHER!”

During this heated exchange, Amelia admits that she'd rather choose her husband over the child and wanted the child to die instead. It seems so unlikely to a third person that a mother would say such horrific things to a child, but, it clearly points to Amelia's unconscious grief and resentment that has piled on for too long. She refuses to process it or even acknowledge it because she consciously knows this is not what she's supposed to feel. The resultant feeling of guilt, added to the feeling of loss, increases her despair. Unlike many other movies, this movie is bold enough to bring forth the taboo topic that one can never dislike their child no matter how difficult they are. Even though the audience members are allowed to hate Samuel for being unbearable and making Amelia's life miserable, Amelia is not allowed the same privilege. She only feels guilt for disliking her

son because the social norms make her feel so. She is not allowed space to work through the overall misery, and hence, there occurs a split, causing her resentful shadow side to take the form of the Babadook.

Intrapsychic Split and Dissociative Identity: The Mother, the Monster

Kent herself has hinted towards a monster being inside the mother and plaguing the lives of the two protagonists as Amelia struggles to deal with grief. She finds a convenient outlet for her fears in her son who serves as an unfortunate scapegoat. The further discussion is based on the assumption that the mother and the monster are the same person and the monster is just a symbolic representation of her resentment towards the child. Sawdey (2015) writes about one reason why they could be the same person and goes on to explain that, “[we see] Amelia's own personal transformation into a monster, both in overt ways (manically hunting down Samuel with a kitchen knife) to the subtle (echoing the Babadook's rhyme scheme of "baba-dook-dook-dook", she at one point tells Samuel she's sick of his "talk-talk-talking”).”

Freud, in multiple works has said that psychic split which might culminate into the dissociative identity disorder arises from the repressed unconscious motives and desires. The mother, in the movie, is also depicted as struggling with this severe intra-psychic conflict where she is not supposed to feel in her role. Our society expects a mother to be nothing less than an epitome of nurturance, self-sacrifice and unconditional love. Amelia seriously falls short of such standards. She has two conflicting identities where one wants to protect her son and the other wants to hurt him for killing her husband. The child, despite his naivety and innocence, understands that the mother has some hatred towards him and that is why he extensively prepares ways to save himself from “The Babadook.”

It is also interesting to note that in some scenes, it appears as though the Babadook is

wearing the dead husband's clothes, symbolically signifying that the pain of the past has now taken the shape of the monster. Additionally, in a particular scene, when Amelia's food has shards of glass that cut her tongue and Sam says that the Babadook was behind it, she doesn't seem fazed and her response is emotionally numb. This also signals to the possibility that the mother is the monster.

(Note: Henceforth, the persona archetype of the mother as protective of her son will be referred to as Amelia or the mother and her shadow that tries to harm the kid will be referred to as the Babadook.)

Munchausen Syndrome By-Proxy

If we were to relook at the dynamics between Amelia and Sam as depictive of the case of Munchausen Syndrome By-Proxy (a special type of Somatoform Disorder), there are some potent analytic insights. It is possible that Amelia herself instilled the fear of the Babadook in Sam to generate sympathy for herself. This would have led to significant secondary gains, as it would have shielded Amelia from the judgmental hushed whispers of the people around her who call her a bad mother. This is clearly depicted in a scene where the man Amelia flirted with comes over to her house with flowers to make her feel better because she is nursing her ailing son. Generally, women around Amelia are unsympathetic; they blame her for being ignorant or incompetent in managing an obviously difficult child. Therefore, Sam may possibly be used by Amelia to gain much needed positive attention. By inducing fear in Sam, which is typical of this disorder, Amelia is creating a façade of illness to explain their unstable home condition. Inflicting physical and psychological pain on Sam may be an outcome of Amelia's unconscious death wish for Sam. In one of the scenes, when Sam has a vision of the Babadook and suffers a seizure, Amelia permits medical staff to sedate her son. Even though this theme may not come across as fully developed in the movie, we can still

understand the intra-psyche conflict that motivated Amelia to jeopardise the well-being of the child for her own gains.

Repression and Denial

In the movie, the Babadook makes the storybook called "Mister Babadook" that scares the child and the mother tries to throw it away. But the Babadook puts it back together and it reappears on the doorstep. It is as if the monster within is taunting Amelia that if she keeps denying its existence, it will come back stronger. The added pages in the book depict the mother killing the dog and also murdering the child, which rather clearly may be understood as the manifestation of Amelia's deepest unconscious desire. In a specific scene at the police station, Amelia's hands are tainted with charcoal, which also happens to be the tool used for drawing in the Babadook book. This indicates further the possibility of the mother actually being that monster. The prophecy in the book comes true in the last part of the movie where Amelia is seemingly possessed by the Babadook, she breaks the dogs' neck and attempts to kill Sam. It is like a struggle between the two splits of Amelia's identity, where one is trying to take over the other. During the struggle, Sam fights back and knocks her out in the basement but she tries to strangle him after gaining consciousness. In that moment, when Sam caresses her face innocently, Amelia throws up a black substance that is symbolic of expelling the Babadook from within her. It is depicted that the innocence and love of Sam helps Amelia acknowledge the forgotten feelings of maternal affection, and thus, for the time being, it seems that the identity of the mother has overpowered the monster. But, it is noteworthy that this only becomes possible when, leaving her denial behind, Amelia has accepted the presence of the Babadook.

Resolution of Intrapsychic Conflict through Acceptance

One can only heal the split by accepting its existence. Making the unconscious conscious

is the most important step in the direction of resolving the deep-seated conflicts. Indicating the same, in the closing scene, Amelia is seen feeding a bowl of earthworms to the Babadook, which may be considered symbolic of her acceptance of her grief and resentment. Yet, the Babadook attacking Amelia in the same scene conveys that the acceptance is only the first step towards a long and arduous journey of resolution and she still has a long way to go. It is, however, positive to note that having relinquished her negativity, Amelia is not scared of the Babadook. Rather, she is able to calm the Babadook down and it slowly retreats in the corner with the bowl. This is indicative of Amelia's success in tackling the unconscious conflicts, at least for the time being.

Sam and Amelia are later seen in the yard celebrating Sam's birthday. The moment of celebration is also of utmost importance here as it shows that Amelia can now start to see it as Sam's birthday and not just her husband's death anniversary. She has finally begun to move away from the trauma of the past and look forward to the future with her son with whom she is determined to share a healthy and caring relationship.

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Conclusion

Amelia suffers from a sense of split and a deep intrapsychic conflict between being a good mother and a pained widow who hates her son for taking away her husband. She is a lonely and troubled woman who unconsciously projects her resentment on her son, and in the process, creates a metaphoric monster of a disturbed relationship. The movie depicts her journey of overcoming this monster within by accepting these difficult emotions and embracing the split within her identity. Even though she isn't "cured" or has completely overcome the feelings of loss, she learns to take control of the Babadook by acknowledging its presence. This becomes the first step towards Amelia gaining power over the monster. The film comes full circle as "you can't get rid of the Babadook," becomes a reality. The message conveyed through this analysis is that all the trauma, guilt and pain that we reject takes the form of a split giving rise to a monster that keeps on haunting us till the time we accept and embrace it.