

A Lacanian Reading of *The Water Cure* (2018) by Sophie Mackintosh

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This research paper aims to analyze Sophie Mackintosh's novel, *The Water Cure* (2018), using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. The study employs close reading to examine the patriarchal structures of society portrayed in the novel and how these structures restrict women's freedom by confining them within certain boundaries imposed by the Symbolic order. It utilizes Lacan's concept of the Mirror stage and the Symbolic stage to explore the characters' sense of self and their relationship with the outside world. The paper also investigates power dynamics within the family and the characters' strategies of navigation and resistance.

Methodology: This study is of qualitative nature using qualitative content analysis as an Approach with a focus on concepts from cultural background. This research work is based on analysis of female characters depicted in Novel *The Water Cure* (2018) by *Sophie Mackintosh*. The technique for selection of Population and Sample is judgmental sampling. The selected population and Sample include the female characters from the selected literary works.

Findings: The analysis reveals that a Lacanian reading of *The Water Cure* (2018) offers a deeper understanding of the novel's themes and characters. It highlights the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures and their impact on women's agency. The examination of the Mirror stage and the Symbolic stage illuminates the characters' construction of self-identity and their complex interactions with the external environment. The study also uncovers the various power dynamics at play within the family and identifies the characters' strategies of negotiation and resistance.

Conclusion: Through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, this paper demonstrates that *The Water Cure* (2018) can be comprehended more profoundly. The novel's exploration of patriarchal structures, the characters' sense of self, and their engagement with power dynamics are enriched by a Lacanian analysis. This research enhances our understanding of the novel's overarching themes and the complexities of the characters' experiences.

Keywords: The Water Cure, Lacanian Reading, The Mirror Stage, The Symbolic Stage.

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Introduction

The Water Cure (2018) is a novel by *Sophie Mackintosh* that explores themes of gender, power, and trauma through the story of three sisters living in a post-apocalyptic world where men are banned. The novel has been critically acclaimed for its exploration of these themes. In this paper, we will explore the novel *The Water Cure (2018)* using Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism which will provide a unique and valuable interpretation of the novel. It will allow us to explore the complexities of the characters and their experiences, and to understand the novel's exploration of gender, power, and trauma in a new and insightful way. This analysis will provide insight into the novel's exploration of the themes mentioned above.

Brief Summary of Novel

The Water Cure (2018) by Sophie Mackintosh is a novel set in a dystopian world that is narrated by three sisters: Grace, Lia, and Sky. The sisters have been raised in isolation on a remote island by their parents, King and Mother, and ideas has been planted in their minds that the outside world is toxic and dangerous, and that men are a threat to their safety. Their parents have subjected them to various rituals, including the so called "the water cure," which involves being submerged in water until they can no longer breathe. This water cure has been projected as something that will protect them from the toxic effects of the outside world and keep them healthy and safe. The novel begins with the disappearance of their father, King. Shortly after his disappearance, three men wash up on the island, and the sisters' lives are forever changed. The arrival of the men is a source of great anxiety for the sisters and their mother, as they fear that the men will bring violence and destruction to their island. The sisters have never had any contact with men before and struggle to understand their feelings towards them. Over time, they begin to develop complex relationships with the men, which leads them to question everything they have been taught.

As the story progresses, the sisters reveal the disturbing details of their upbringing and the abuse they suffered at the hands of their parents. They recount how they were forced to live in isolation, subjected to extreme rituals, and taught to fear men and the outside world. Despite their traumatic experiences, the sisters find strength in their bond with each other and their determination to survive and thrive in a world that is both beautiful and brutal.

The plot of this novel revolves around three sisters who are brought up under strict control of parents particularly their father. This strict control over lives of female children can be observed in Pakistani literature as well as Pakistani society. So, this study, employing Lacanian theory of subjectivity, will provide insights into character's self-development. This analysis of self-development under strict control of parent may prove model for future researcher who plan on researching on Pakistani literature and exploring sense of self particularly related to young women. By exploring the themes mentioned above and explaining the way the sisters develop their sense of Self, this paper will enrich the very small body of criticism that exists regarding this novel.

Literature Review

The literature review has been divided into two main parts. In the first part, literature regarding Lacanian readings of various texts has been explored, while in second part, we are going to review various critical reviews of *The Water Cure (2018)*. The Lacanian theory of psychosexual development has been applied to analyze variety of characters in literature. Keeping in view the limits of this papers we will review only four such studies. Weil (1986) applies Lacanian theory to analyze the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. Weil argues that Lily's struggle to paint the portrait of Mrs. Ramsay reflects her attempt to find a stable sense of self through identification with an idealized other. Weil applies Lacanian Mirror Stage to understand Lily's artistic process, and argues that the child recognizes itself as an autonomous entity by identifying with its own image in the mirror.

In *The Symbolic Father in Steinbeck's East of Eden*, Perkins (1989) applies Lacanian theory to analyze the character of Charles Trask in *East of Eden*. Perkins (1989) argues that Charles' violent behavior can

be seen as a response to his lack of a symbolic father figure, and this lack results in his inability to form a stable sense of identity. Perkins (1989) suggests that Charles' violent behavior can be seen as an attempt to assert his own subjectivity in the absence of a symbolic father figure.

Zheng (2010) in her paper *Revisiting the Mirror Stage: The Construction of Identity in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*, applies Lacanian theory to analyze the character of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Zheng (2010) is of the view that Pecola's desire for blue eyes is rooted in her endeavor to construct a stable sense of self through identification with an idealized other. Zheng (2010) suggests that Pecola's desire for blue eyes can be understood in terms of the Lacanian mirror stage, where the child recognizes itself as an autonomous entity by identifying with its own image in the mirror.

Hegemony, Agency, and the Production of Identity: The Lacanian Subject in Octavia Butler's Kindred, a paper by Melzer (1996) applies Lacanian theory to analyze the character of Dana Franklin in *Kindred*. Melzer (1996) highlights Dana's dilemma when she is forced to confront the dichotomy between her own image of herself and the way others perceive her. Melzer (1996) suggests that Dana's attempts to assert agency in the face of this disparity reflect the Lacanian notion of the symbolic order, where social norms and conventions shape the subject's sense of identity.

Now we turn our focus on the novel *The Water Cure* (2018). The novel explores complex themes of power dynamics, trauma, gender, and identity. It examines how the trauma of abuse can shape a person's worldview. *The Water Cure* (2018) also highlights the dangers of isolation and the importance of community and human connection.

One aspect of the novel that has been commented on in various reviews is the exploration of the effects of trauma on the characters. The sisters have been subjected to various forms of abuse, and the novel depicts their attempts to heal from this trauma. In her review of novel, Zambrano (2019) comments that "Mackintosh has created somewhat of a modern myth about family trauma, stirred with the relationships between women and their bodies" (para. 3).

The theme of power dynamics and control within the family is depicted through character of the father figure, known only as "King," who is the primary authority figure in the family, and his daughters must obey his every command. As Bick (2018) notes: "Mackintosh is interested in the way that people exert control over others... the way that the girls' bodies are treated as currency, something that can be traded to prove loyalty or love" (para. 3). The novel has also been praised for its exploration of the relationships between women. The sisters are close, but their relationships are complex and often fraught with tension due to the tense environment in which they live. As Girdwood (2018) notes: "The sisters are bound to each other through a dangerous combination of resentment and fierce need"(para. 2). The novel has been described as "a twisted fairy tale" (Miller, 2018) and "haunting" (Brookner, 2018), and it has received numerous accolades, including being longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2018.

Overall, the studies reviewed above demonstrate the usefulness of Lacanian theory in literary analysis, particularly in the analysis of characters' struggles to form a stable sense of identity in the face of social circumstances. *The Water Cure* (2018) has been subject to magazine and newspaper reviews, however literary criticism in this regard is almost non-existent. Particularly, there is no research study available that explores the development of sense of self of the three sisters. So, this study will fill this gap and provide readers and researchers with an understanding of construction of self-identity in addition to exploring the themes of patriarchal oppression prevalent in the novel.

Theoretical Framework: Theory of the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order and the Real

Lacanian Theory of subjectivity which comprises on concepts of the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order and the Real is a complex and influential theory in psychoanalysis that explores the development of subjectivity and the role of language and symbols in shaping our understanding of reality. In this theory, Jacques Lacan argues that the human subject is born into a fragmented and chaotic world, and that our

senses of self and identity emerge through a series of symbolic interactions with others and with language.

The Mirror Stage

The Mirror Stage is the first stage of development in Lacanian theory of psychosexual development, where the children recognize themselves in a mirror or other reflective surface and experiences a sense of unity and coherence. Lacan describes this experience as "the jubilant assumption of his specular image" (Lacan, 2006, p. 4), meaning that the child assumes the image in the mirror is their true self. The identification with the mirror image is assumed as Lacan (1977) theorizes that "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (p. 1-2). This experience is crucial for the formation of the ego or self-identity, which Lacan argues is always an illusory construct. As Sheikh (2017) states that "the important thing to understand here is that the emerging ego that is yet to differentiate itself from other objects is in truth an outcome of misrecognitions" (para. 4).

Symbolic Order

The Symbolic Order is the realm of language, culture, and social norms that shape our understanding of reality. According to Lacan, the Symbolic Order is a "matrix of signifiers" that structures our experience and shapes our sense of self (Lacan, 2002, p. 30). It is through our interactions with language and symbols that we come to understand ourselves and our place in the world. The Symbolic Order is subject to change and transformation with the experiences of the world. In the Symbolic Order, Lacan (1977) introduces the concept of Name-of-the-Father which represents an authority in the life an individual. In the case of the sister, their father is that authority. It is not that all subjects submit to this authority, "some may adapt to the social world under the authority, others might rebel against it" (Hadi & Asl, 2022).

The Real

The Real is the domain of the unrepresentable and the unknowable, something which cannot be converted into symbols or language. It is that which exists outside of language and symbols, and which resists all attempts at meaning-making. Lacan argues that the Real is always present, but it can only be glimpsed in moments of rupture or trauma, where the Symbolic Order breaks down and we are confronted with the limits of our understanding. As he writes, "The Real is that which always comes back to the same place, the same event, the same sentence, the same word, but in such a way that it is no longer possible to repeat it" (Lacan, 1998, p. 67).

Methodology

Research Design

This study is of qualitative nature using qualitative content analysis as an Approach with a focus on concepts from cultural background. It aims to utilize Lacan's theories of the mirror stage and the Symbolic Order to analyze the characters and their experiences in the novel. The mirror stage, for example, will be used to understand the sisters' relationships with their bodies and their sense of self. The Symbolic Order will be used to explore the novel's portrayal of gender and power dynamics. Thus, this study presents analysis of the selected concepts from application of Qualitative Approach.

Population and Sample

This research work is based on analysis of female characters depicted in Novel *The Water Cure (2018)* by *Sophie Mackintosh*. The technique for selection of Population and Sample is judgmental sampling. The selected population and Sample include the female characters from the selected literary works.

Instrument of Data Collection

The primary source of the data collected for this study is Novel itself. The selected two primary sources for data of this study include: Lacan's concepts of the Mirror stage, and the Symbolic stage, and *The*

Water Cure (2018) by *Sophie Mackintosh*. The secondary sources for data include: journals articles, definitions, websites and novels.

Technique of Data Analysis

In Lacan's view, the development of a child in relation to their mother, father, and others is the primary basis for comprehending the human experience and its surrounding world, in which language plays a vital role. At the core of Lacan's philosophy lies the tripartite scheme consisting of the real order, the symbolic order, and the imaginary order. The real order, according to Lacan, precedes language acquisition, while the symbolic order denotes the stage during which human beings learn language and other symbolic systems that govern this world. The final stage is the imaginary order, which begins with the symbolic order and persists throughout the rest of an individual's life in parallel with it. The researchers would use these stages for the application upon the novel *The Water Cure (2018)* by *Sophie Mackintosh*.

Analysis and Discussion

The Mirror Stage in The Water Cure (2018)

The Mirror Stage is a concept developed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, which describes the process by which a child develops a sense of self through seeing its own image in a mirror. It is beginning of distinction between self and others. Throughout the novel, the sisters Grace, Lia, and Sky are constantly in search of their true selves, a quest that is evident in the way they interact with each other and their own bodies. The rituals and exercises they are forced to undergo are not only physical but also symbolic, as they are meant to purify and strengthen the sisters' sense of self. Their parents, King and Mother, have a significant impact on the sisters' development and self-perception. Below is given separate analysis of the three sisters, Grace, Lia, and Sky using Lacanian Mirror stage theory.

First, we analyze Grace who has been stunted in her development due to the oppressive environment, she was raised in. Her parents believed that the world outside was dangerous and corrupt, therefore the sisters had been raised in isolation. This isolation has prevented Grace from having the opportunity to experience the mirror stage and recognize herself as a separate individual. Consequently, Grace is unable to establish a clear sense of identity, and she often finds herself becoming dependent on others. Her relationship with her father, in particular, is highly enmeshed, and she struggles to assert herself and establish healthy boundaries. In the novel, Grace reflects on the role her parents played in shaping her sense of self: "My father called us his precious jewels. My mother called us her three little miracles. But they were not reflections of us. They were our first mirrors, the first people we learned to believe in" (p.9). This quote highlights the importance of parental figures in shaping a child's understanding of themselves and the world. The parents act as mirrors, reflecting back to the child their own image and shaping their sense of self. In the case of the sisters, their parents' reflection of them is distorted, shaped by their own fears and anxieties.

Second sister is Lia's who is initially presented as a timid girl, dependent on her sisters and parents. Lia is described as "thin and small and pale" (p. 13) and her parents have "always been worried about her" (p. 14). The fact that Lia's parents have given her a name that means "bearer of good news" (p. 15) suggests that they see her as a messenger or a mediator between the family and the outside world. This indicates that Lia's identity is defined in relation to others and not by herself. According to the Lacanian Mirror Stage theory, the child's ego develops by seeing reflection in a mirror, and they start to identify with the image they see. However, Lia's character is presented as someone who avoids mirrors, and when she sees herself, she feels "unworthy of being seen" (p. 52). This suggests that Lia has not fully developed her ego and has not yet recognized herself as a separate individual, which is a consequence of being raised in isolation. Lia's lack of self-identity is also reflected in her relationships with her sisters. Lia has very close connection with Grace and Sky, and she often speaks for them, saying "we" instead of "I". For instance, Lia says "we always feel like we are on the edge of something" (p. 32). This quote indicates that Lia lacks sense of self and her sense of self is defined by her relationship with her sisters. Moreover, Lia's

dependence on her sisters becomes evident when Grace and Sky disappear and their disappearance makes Lia "catatonic with grief" (p. 88). Her sisters are perfect reflection for her and she attempts to take on their personalities and characteristics. This becomes evident when Lia says, "I tried to be Sky, tried to be Grace, but it wasn't the same" (p. 189). Lia's character is defined by her relationships with her sisters, and she does not have a separate identity. She is endeavoring to establish and understand her sense of self and has come to terms with her own identity.

The third is Sky's character who is presented as someone who has independent and rebellious nature. She is described as having "wild hair" (p. 15) and a "reckless streak" (p. 17). Her rebellious nature makes her take risks by breaking the rules, thereby revealing her desire to assert her own identity and separate herself from her family. As the child's ego develops when they see their reflection in a mirror, in Sky's case, her sense of self seems to be defined by her body and her physical appearance. She frequently engages in self-harm, carving words and patterns into her skin. This can be seen as a way for Sky to assert her own identity and establish a sense of control over her body. Her sister Grace becomes a mirror image for her as she sees herself reflected in Grace and wants to become like her. Sky says, "I always wanted to be Grace... I wanted to look like her, be as smart as her, as brave as her" (p.91). This indicates that Sky's sense of self is defined by her relationship with her sister, rather than being an individual.

Later in the novel, Sky desires to assert her own identity and becomes separate from her family by leaving the island. She changes her name and appearance, cutting her hair short and dyeing it black, thereby rejecting the imposed identity. This can be seen as a way for Sky to create a new identity for herself and break away from the identity that was defined for her on the island. Initially Sky's sees Grace as a Mirror Image, however, her decision to change her name and appearance can be seen as an attempt to create a new, separate identity for herself.

The Mirror Stage, according to Lacan, is characterized by a sense of fragmentation and disintegration of the self. The characters see their image in the mirror as a coherent and unified whole, but this sense of unity is illusory. We can see the three sisters in *The Water Cure* (2018) struggling with similar sense of fragmentation and disintegration, each of them searching for a stable sense of self. The fear of outside world and men in particular is instilled in them, which results in fragmentation and disconnection from the world around them. Lia reflects on this disconnection when she says: "Everything feels hazy, like I'm still in the water. Nothing is quite real" (p. 118). This quote can be interpreted as highlighting Lia's sense of disconnection from the world around her, a feeling of being stuck in a state of limbo, unable to fully engage with reality. The mirror stage theory also provides us the insights to understand the relationship among the sisters as well. They look at each other to confirm their own sense of self and at the same time they are constantly in competition with each other, vying for their father's approval and affection. This competition is rooted in their need to be recognized by the other and to have their sense of self affirmed. They are constantly looking to each other to confirm their existence and to validate their sense of self.

The Symbolic Stage in The Water Cure (2018)

The Lacanian Symbolic Order is a concept that refers to the system of language and culture that shapes our understanding of the world and our place in it. It is the realm of meaning and representation, where the subject is formed and defined by the laws and rules of society. The symbolic order determines our place in society and our position in relation to other people, as Libbrecht (2001) puts it "the symbolic is intimately linked with the notions of law, pact, social and kinship structures" (p. 198). In *The Water Cure* (2018), the Symbolic Order can be applied to understand the novel's portrayal of gender and power dynamics.

The Water Cure (2018) depicts a highly patriarchal society in which women are taught to see themselves as inferior and to submit to the authority of men. The way in which the sisters are treated by the father, reflects the highly patriarchal nature of society. Their father is the ultimate authority in their lives who controls every aspect of their lives; from the way they dress to the way they think, and he uses violence to enforce his authority. The symbolic patriarchal values have been so much internalized by the sisters that

they submit themselves to unjust and harsh treatment of their father. They have come to accept that men are superior and that they must submit to their authority. The novel also portrays the struggle of sisters to find their own voices and identities within the patriarchal society they live in. They are constantly searching for their own sense of self, but they are constrained by the rules and laws of the Symbolic Order. They are trapped in the imposed identities of symbolic order, and they are unable to break free from these constraints.

Grace's character is initially presented as someone who is very quiet and reserved. She is often seen reading books, and showing interest in language and storytelling. This is an indication of her longing to acquire language and engage with the symbolic order. As per Lacanian ideas, the acquisition of language is essential for the development of the ego. The child learns to identify with a particular signifier, particularly their name, which helps to see themselves as a separate entity. The symbolic signifier that Grace identifies with, is her name. The activity of storytelling can be seen as a way of engaging with symbolic order and a way to develop a sense of self through the narratives. As the novel progresses, we can see Grace undergoing a transformation; she becomes assertive and starts challenging the beliefs and values that were incorporated into her by her parents. This is her way of developing her sense of self and ego. When Grace says to her mother, "I don't want to be told what to do anymore. I don't want to be limited by what you think I should be" (p. 153), we can see this as an indication of Grace starting to assert her own identity and reject the identity that defined for her by her parents. Her transformation from quiet and reserved individual to an assertive individual is an indication of developing ego and sense of self.

Among the sisters, Lia's initial portrayal is that of an obedient person, who follows the rules set by the parents. In the novel we see her performing rituals and following strict routine set by the parents, thereby showing her submission to the role assigned to her by her parents which can be interpreted as an indication of her submission to the Symbolic Order. We can say that she is developing her sense of self through the actions she performs. Unlike Grace, Lia is least interested in language and storytelling, which we can interpret as indication of her submission to the Symbolic Order imposed by the parents. Later in the novel, however we also find Lia undergoing a transformation. Like Grace, she also becomes assertive and starts to question the beliefs, values and practices of her parents. This can be seen as an indication of her developing ego and sense of self. When Lia says to her mother "I don't believe you anymore" (p. 189), we can interpret this as an indication of Lia beginning to assert her own identity and reject the identity that was defined for her by her parents in terms of the Symbolic Order. Furthermore, Lia's relationship with her sisters can also be seen as a way for her to engage with the symbolic order. Lia's obedience and adherence to rituals can be seen as a way for her to engage with the symbolic order and develop a sense of self through the actions she performs. While she may not be as actively engaged with language and storytelling as her sisters are, her presence in their narratives suggests that she is a part of their shared symbolic order. Her transformation throughout the novel also indicates her developing ego and sense of self.

Sky's character is also presented as someone who is very engaged with language and storytelling. She often creates her own narratives and engages in imaginative play, which can be seen as a way for her to engage with the symbolic order and develop a sense of self through the stories she tells. Sky is often presented as a leader in these narratives, which suggests that she is an active participant in the symbolic order of her sisters. It can also be seen as an indication of her actively engaging with the symbolic order and developing her ego through the narratives she creates. The sisters' creation of narratives can be interpreted as a way for them to share a symbolic order and develop their own senses of self through their shared narratives.

Like Grace and Lia, Sky's character also undergoes a transformation in the novel. She develops into an independent individual and starts to question the beliefs and values of her parents. This can be interpreted as an indication of her developing ego and sense of self. In one scene, Sky says to her father, "I don't need you anymore" (p. 212). This quotation can be seen as an indication of Sky's rejection of the identity defined by her parents and assertion of her own identity. Her father often tells her stories and presents

himself as a figure of authority and knowledge. Sky's rejection of her father's authority can be seen as her way to assert her own identity and develop her own sense of self in opposition to the authority figures in her life, thus challenging imposed Symbolic Order.

From a Lacanian perspective, the relationship between character of the mother and the father can also be understood in terms of Symbolic order. The mother is heavily controlled by her husband in terms of her body, her behavior, and her thoughts through the symbolic systems imposed upon her by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Her husband, the father of girls, is in controlling position where he makes all the decisions, giving no voice or agency either to girls or the mother. This reflects that the patriarchal societies can control and manipulate women, even in the private sphere of their home, and how it can make them complicit in the oppression of their own children and themselves. The father's actions can be seen as a privileged power granted to men by patriarchal societies, and they can exercise this privilege to oppress and control individuals. The exercise of power can become an end in itself, rather than a means to a just and equitable society. He is willing to sacrifice his family's well-being and freedom for his own beliefs, ideals and sense of protection.

Conclusion

To conclude our discussion, we can say that the mirror stage is an important stage of development where the child recognizes itself as a separate being by looking at the mirror images. In *The Water Cure (2018)* the only mirror images that the sisters have is either of their parents or themselves. Since the girls have been raised in isolation, it has its' consequences. In the case of Grace, she is unable to establish a clear sense of self because of this, while Lia avoids the mirrors because she feels herself unworthy of being seen. Lia is unable to recognize herself as a separate individual and her sense of self is defined by her relationship with her sisters and this is reflected from the fact that she often uses pronoun "we" instead of "I". For Lia, her sisters are perfect reflections and she wants to be like them. Sky is no different from her sisters as initially she also idealizes Grace, later however she leaves the island, changes her name and adopts a new identity rejecting the identity imposed upon her. The sisters are in search of stable sense of self and they are constantly looking towards each other to confirm their existence and to validate their sense of self.

Lacanian theory of Symbolic Order helps us to understand the portrayal of gender and power dynamics in *The Water Cure (2018)*. The highly patriarchal nature of society in which the sisters live and its role in shaping their understanding of themselves and their place in the world can be understood through the Lacanian theory of Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order allows oppression of women and lets men suppress women they way want to. Additionally, it allows us to see how the sisters are struggling to find their own voices and identities within this oppressive system. The analysis of the novel reveals that the sisters are trapped in the imposed identities of symbolic order, and they are unable to break free from these constrains. All the sisters undergo a transformation, and we see their developing ego and sense of self. Grace tries to become independent by engaging with language and developing her sense of self through storytelling, asserting her independent sense of self. Lia is initially shown as someone who has accepted her role in the Symbolic Order, however later in the novel we also see her trying to assert her own identity by rejecting the imposed identity. Sky, who is very engaged in language and storytelling, also rejects the father as figure of authority and challenges the imposed symbolic order. The relationship of mother and father reflects that the Symbolic Order in a patriarchal society assigns dominant position to men while women are supposed to be in submissive position.

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