

## Roles, Conflicts, and Attachments: Motherhood in Selected Malaysian Poems

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### Abstract

Motherhood is often perceived as a unique and transformative journey, intricately linked to mothers, children, families and society. The roles expected of mothers have not changed much despite the ever-evolving societal dynamics. Asian mothers, especially in modern Malaysia are expected to juggle work and household chores and attend to the needs of their loved ones including their children, spouses, and extended family members. More often than not, this results in tremendous amounts of struggles, stress, trauma, and long-term psychological impacts on mothers because failing to perform maternal duties is never an option. Correspondingly, this study explores Malaysian poetry that depicts the intricacies of motherhood and its various aspects. Role theory, which conceptualises daily activities as performing roles that are socially constructed classifications, is applied in the analysis of six Malaysian poems, written by both female and male poets of different age groups. The representations of role playing and role taking as employed within role theory is utilised to uncover the ways in which mothers develop their concept of self accordingly. Findings highlight how poetry can unravel the connecting flow of multiple roles in motherhood that leads to conflicts, yet still result in attachment between the mother and child. The analysis reveals that a mother's role is actually paradoxical in nature and the

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multiple roles, conflicts, and attachments merge together within motherhood; these entities cannot function on their own as they are all interconnected in the relationship. Both positive and negative emotions have been found to play a crucial part in leading to various types of attachments between mothers and children, which can be loving, bittersweet, or traumatic. This research has found Malaysian poetry unravels the different representations of motherhood in Malaysia whose experience is more than what meets the eye.

**Keywords**

Motherhood in poetry, role theory, filial attachment, Malaysian literature in English, conflicts in relationships

**Introduction**

Motherhood resonates with home; it is a private and safe place in which raising and caring for children takes place. Most of the time, a woman's identity becomes magnified once motherhood takes place (Williamson et al. 101-117). Unlike men and fatherhood, in most societies, motherhood is often tied to the ideal definition of a woman, with or without a child, due to the emphasis on the roles of caring, raising, and nurturing children placed solely upon a woman (Rich). While motherhood can take many different forms, it involves a selfless act of love where nothing is expected in return for raising a child in the best possible way. The role of mothers can also come in the form of a stepmother, grandmother, aunt, nanny, and older sister – any female figure carrying out the role of caregiver and nurturer in a loving and compassionate manner.

Scholars have noted that women have been known to struggle with motherhood, as multiple and conflicting roles are carried out when mothering (Lorén et al.) It is a confirmed belief in society for a mother to be totally in tune with her child in terms of knowing its needs and wants, be an expert and knowledgeable person in managing and raising her child, do her best in selecting and carrying out activities that enhance her child's cognitive abilities, sacrifice her time, body, needs, finances, and work commitments while raising her child, and carry out all other mothering duties in an attentive manner (Schmidt et al.). In other words, stepping into motherhood brings along stress, loss of identity, lack of support, and helplessness. The experience of motherhood is also conceptualised as ambivalence due to its complexity and personal experience (Almond). Arguably, motherhood encompasses a spectrum of behaviour in a mother, as the emotional and psychological impact experienced result from not just the biological aspect of being a mother, but also from the profound effect of

societal pressure. As such, motherhood does not involve a linear experience as presumed by society as a plethora of emotions resulting from the ups and downs that actually consume both mothers and children. The sociocultural influence on the psychological and emotional impact in motherhood has been crucial, which affects mothers' individual growth, confidence, self-esteem, and relationship in a complex manner (Almond). It is also within the sociocultural aspect of society that plays a pivotal role in altering a woman's identity where both pleasant and unpleasant experiences for mothers and their children can be uncovered. Motherhood with its complexity, prevents mothers from openly discussing their struggles as society expects mothers to perform their duties effortlessly and failing to do so will set them in a negative spotlight; it is a taboo to discuss the ambivalent nature of motherhood openly (Almond).

Regardless of having given birth to a child, mothers are expected to practise quality parenting and establish good relationships with their children and also carry out other roles at home, work, and society (Di Battista et al.). Intensive mothering in motherhood requires a mother to multi-task and carry multiple roles exclusively for the overall well-being of her children, disregarding the involvement of a father as per society's set standard (Constantinou et al. 4-6). In the same light of the aforementioned studies, this phenomenon is also evident in Malaysia where mothers are required to multi-task, carry out multiple roles as per the society's standards, and be primarily responsible for the children's well-being (Yoong 63-91). It seems universal in how mothers are carrying multiple roles in ensuring their children's well-being because society expects them to do so in a balanced and effective manner. Based on these observations, this study examines motherhood from the Malaysian perspective.

In Malaysia, the age-old gender gap remains omnipresent; women are still prescribed to be the main caregivers for the children and in some cases, continue to experience discrimination; and men are regarded as the main decision makers (Suleman). Past studies often reflect on motherhood, demonstrating how most mothers are overworked and lacking rest, resulting in immense pressure and conflicts (Schmidt et al.). Nevertheless, mothers continue to assume multiple roles, while still developing various relationships within the familial setting. One study draws on the relationship developed by the role a mother plays in the child's life and the findings revealed that attachment is the first interpersonal relationship for children and that the relationship between the parent and child determines the child's self-worth, character, and values (Song et al.). It is interesting to note that the attachment between a mother and child becomes one that is reciprocal and positive in nature. A family develops well when there is a good filial

relationship, and a mother-child attachment affects children's intra-personally in the way they process their emotions and their self-images.

As dire as the observation may be, some individuals have turned to literature as a site for coping. Poetry on motherhood can radicalise mothers as the words expressed pore on their rights, efforts, life altering changes experienced, stigmas attached, societal pressures and judgements endured, sacrifices made, and struggles overcome; motherhood becomes symbolic in poems. Therefore, based on the representation found, poems on motherhood can serve as a guide to struggling mothers, allowing them to feel seen and heard, leading them to being consoled on the fact that motherhood, despite the struggles, can give beautiful and rewarding experiences. This study looks to shed light on poems that are true in nature on motherhood which can change the negative perceptions on the struggles that entail motherhood, thus providing the portrayal of motherhood in a different light. It serves to enlighten mothers and people in general to accept the complex emotions involved in motherhood which may further lead to relaxed expectations placed upon mothers and motherhood by a more humane society and culture. Undoubtedly, one can definitely comprehend the complexity behind motherhood in a Malaysian context and the part Malaysian poems can play in creating awareness about the multiple roles in motherhood. To address the existing gap of understanding, this study will delve into 6 different poems on motherhood by Malaysian poets. They are: Malachi Edwin Vethamani's *For Mother on Father's Day* (2022), Joe Chan's *God's Right Hand Man* (2020), Wong Phui Nam's *Stepmother* (2017), Shirley Lim Geok-Lin's *My Mother Wasn't* (2017), Bernice Chauly's *Forgiveness* (2017), and Azalia Suhaimi's *Supermum* (2020).

### **Motherhood in literature**

A mother is a revered universal figure and a core identity in a female (Aksehir and Şaşman-Kaylı 139-150). In literature, both in poetry and novels, motherhood has been depicted to explore themes encompassing love, identity, sacrifice, and human conditions across various cultures, periods, and genres. Literature enables sharing of emotions and experiences that are multifaceted in relation to being a mother (O'Reilly). Poetry enables narrations on issues that are taboo to be discussed, such as that of the struggles in motherhood. Poetry enables confessions to be less private, making the sharing of issues in motherhood much easier (Beamish 79-94). One study explains that poetry allows others to feel what the poet has felt and the sharing of emotions on topics deemed taboo while also enabling poetic inquiry on topics needing emotional comprehension (Bennett and Koelsch).

In Malaysia, the widespread introduction of literature within the national curriculum paved the way for millennial poets who began engaging in spoken word poetry on myriads of issues along with their preference in sharing poems over social media platforms (Jeyam). Works that draw attention to issues related to domestic violence, gender roles, and discrimination faced by women become more significant in present-day Malaysia (Salmi Razali et al. 151-158; Amin et al. 246-264; and Ramakrishnan et al.). Nevertheless, scholarly articles or works dealing with motherhood in the Malaysian context do not exist in abundance, and most of the works are primarily race-based. Hashim and Idrus examine the roles of motherhood in relation to familial disharmony. Analyzing the roles of parenthood, particularly mothers, in the family in three popular contemporary Malay novels — *Duri* (Thorns, 2020), *Kerana Hati Telah Berjanji* (Promise of Our Hearts, 2019), and *Pengantin Satu Malam* (One-Night Bride, 2020) — the research has revealed that children are perpetually bound by duty to their mothers, even though familial love serves as both a saving grace and a bone of contention regarding their marital status. Meanwhile, Hashim and Yusof observe that, as a result of strict rules imposed on daughters in Malay culture, these often prove detrimental to daughter-mother relationships, as reflected in the novels of Adibah Amin and Khadijah Hashim. Hence, there is a need to break free from the strict traditions that may cause suffocation, resentment, and emotional immaturity in mother-daughter relationships. Also, within the Malay context, Fateha and Ramlan emphasise that mothers can be studied from the perspective of a monster. When analyzing the monstrosity of motherhood in the *Tale of Si Tanggang*, it was found that while monstrosity is a clear reflection of female anxiety, it also serves as a means for women to regain power and a sense of agency when confronted with harsh life circumstances.

Studies also explore motherhood in other racial groups. When examined within the Malaysian Indian context, Selvakannu highlights the struggles and plights of single Indian mothers, a group least represented in literary works in Malaysia, as they navigate the complexities of diasporic experiences in Northern Ireland and Malaysia. In the same vein of diaspora and motherhood, Saxena studies the significant roles of the mother figure in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*. By placing a mother figure at the centre of the story and highlighting her ability to impact a family saga, it helps decentralise the power and focus from the inherently male-dominated nationalist historiography of Malaya. Besides that, when examined from the Malaysian-Chinese perspective, Ng proposes that the representation of mothers in the poetry of Malaysian poet Shirley Lim is often filled with hatred and resentment, as their obligation to the solidified patriarchal world frequently leads to prolonged victimisation.

Existing literature reveals that scholarly studies related to mothers in the Malaysian context are primarily ethnic-specific. Hence, there is a need to further examine how mothers are represented in literary works, particularly poetry that

depicts the roles and struggles of mothers of different races in a multiracial nation like Malaysia. Not only does this study fill the research gap left by previous scholars, but it also highlights how mothers, despite their cultural and ethical differences, face a similar dilemma, which fosters a stronger sense of national unity.

### **The paradoxical nature of motherhood**

For the purpose of this study, the chosen poems are written by poets who represent both older and younger generations, as well as varying perspectives towards motherhood. The poems also have an inclusion of Malaysian cultures, languages, identities, and values to represent a clear Malaysian context.

When discussing the paradoxical nature of motherhood, roles, conflicts, and attachment in relation to motherhood are often intertwined. For example, once a woman is identified as a mother, her observable behaviours such as that of raising, nurturing, and caring for children become predictable in the context of her daily maternal life. Given that a mother is a social status and mothers perform roles that are maternal in characteristics in the family, the analysis of motherhood can be interpreted through the application of role theory. Role theory connects roles with social statuses held by individuals in society (Biddle). The role theory conceptualises gender-based roles that are traditional, such as that of a mother and father, as the individual is expected to behave as per social expectations in raising and caring for children (Schneider and Bos 173-213). A society is governed by set rules that expect gender-based behaviours as per the roles assumed, and this practise ensures order and accepted normalcy in daily life – a fundamental concept of role theory. The role theory will not only provide insights into the multiple roles but also other significant aspects of motherhood as revealed in the selected texts.

The multiple roles expected of mothers would naturally lead to the emergence of conflicts. It is important to examine these conflicts that emerge in mothers, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, which allow us to better understand the complexity that entails motherhood. Interpersonal conflict refers to struggles that take place involving two or more people due to differing views and it is natural for this type of conflict to take place during interaction between individuals (Angelo 22-28; and Majer et al.). As motherhood is an experience filled with massive impacts on women in a short period of time in which they face physical, emotional, social, and psychological changes, they experience negative feelings and emotions towards their own family members, children, spouses, colleagues, and friends (Stone). As much as a mother is expected to be a 'good mother', it is common for mothers to experience interpersonal conflicts towards their own children and family members due to the stressful demands of motherhood (Stone). Thus, it is necessary to examine the representation of interpersonal conflicts that are revealed through the selected poems.

Comparatively, intrapersonal struggles take place within the individuals due to conflicting thoughts on their goals, values, or roles that impact their emotional well-being (Golovey et al. 132-146). As there is an ideology of intensive mothering in order to be a good mother, failure in performing the expected roles will lead mothers to be negatively labelled by society despite their sense of guilt in wanting their needs and wants met (Williamson et al. 101-117). One study further reiterates the same finding by revealing how mothers experience guilt by sacrificing their needs and well-being in an attempt to attend to the needs of their children and family as per the image of 'good mothers'; mental health concerns develop due to their intrapersonal conflicts (Simpson et al.). As such, the significance of intrapersonal conflicts is also crucial in examining how mothers are represented in the selected texts.

The various presentations of motherhood, the conflicts, both internal and external will eventually lead to various forms of attachments as found in the selected poems. Whether the attachment is solid and loving, bittersweet or even traumatic, this study seeks to highlight the fact that attachments can vary from positive, negative, or neutral depending on the experience between the mother and child.

### **Multiple roles of mothers**

The poems selected for this study delve into the varying roles each mother plays. Whether it is a mother who is selfless in her sacrifices, or one who is capable of wearing multiple hats at once, or one who upholds her assumed role as a nurturer, each poet is able to showcase the representation of motherhood as one that encompasses various roles and responsibilities. The examination of these six poems reveals several roles assumed by mothers; nurturers, providers, planners, and managers. It is also important to note that there are times when these roles overlap as the poems engage with diverse ways in which the mothers depicted are able to multitask.

In Malachi Edwin Vethamani's *For Mother on Father's Day* (2022), a mother is presented as one who is capable of assuming the roles of both parents in the absence of a fatherly figure. The lines not only clearly depict how the mother has been shouldering the responsibilities of both a mother and a father, she is able to raise her children and look after the family without denying them the love they deserve.

*Mum has been both mother and father,  
They agreed.  
Mum's done all that  
Dad should have, and even more.  
(Vethamani)*

While it is challenging to assume the roles of both parents, the mother portrayed here has earned the ‘acknowledgement’ from the children, solidifying her role as a mother who has gone above and beyond what is expected. Hence, credit is given to the mother who has proven her worth through her abilities to definitely multitask and assume multiple roles in managing the family, planning and providing for the needs of her family. The word ‘both’ indicates more than one and the line “mum has been both, mother and father” clearly reflects how a mother has done more than what she is expected of and carried on juggling the responsibilities of another individual, her spouse. The line “Mum’s done all that, Dad should have, and even more” speaks of how the motherhood represented here, is one where the mother has no qualms in carrying out a father’s duties. The words *Dad should have* clearly state that dad had his responsibilities, but mum fulfilled them all because she had to. In this sense, the mother represented here assumes the role of both, provider and nurturer, providing for the family as the sole breadwinner while still assuming her responsibilities as the sole nurturer.

Another poem that demonstrates the multiple roles assumed by a mother is Joe Chan’s *God’s Right Hand Man* where the mother is portrayed as someone who multitasks as the manager, planner and provider of the family. This poem speaks of how mother’s cooking and chores reflect her responsibilities and sacrifices for her family’s well-being. Through the title, readers are given the impression that the term ‘right hand man’ refers to an individual whom one can trust and depend upon the most. The reference made to God further connotes an impression that the mother as a right-hand man is one who is not only reliable and dependable, but is also one who is given an elevated position, worthy to aid a higher being. The mother in this poem is seen to perform her duties daily without complaining, providing for her family so that her children can live comfortably, as described in the following lines:

When she wakes up every morning,  
To sweep and mop the home,  
And to prepare breakfast....  
(Chan, lines 9-11)

For she sacrifices,  
Her time that cannot she rewind,  
For the comfort of home,  
And food in our stomachs.  
When weekends come,  
She awakens at 7,  
And to the morning market she goes to.  
She’ll buy the weekly groceries after,



With the money she has got....

(Chan, lines 15-23)

The words *every morning* demonstrate the routine that the mother performs without complaining, even in sickness or pain as she takes it upon herself to be the main person responsible for the well-being of her children, family, and home. Her relentless spirit and dedication to perform her chores daily not only gives us insights into how comfortable she is in assuming her society-prescribed roles, but also her determination in ensuring she performs her role as the manager who coordinates everything in the household. In addition to that, the words *sweep, mop, prepare breakfast* creates the impression that she is also assuming the role as provider and planner of the household and as someone who works towards keeping the house in order.

Similarly, Wong Phui Nam's *Stepmother* speaks of the role assumed by the poet's stepmother who is able to play multiple roles. Despite being the stepmother, this poem creates an impression of how this mother is able to play the role as a nurturer who provides care for her stepchildren.

[O]r that your children, your stepchildren,  
all of us,

even the unkind ones would be back here to save you  
from a lonely going.

(Wong, lines 13-18)

Lines 13 through 18 describe the death of the stepmother and how some of the unkind stepchildren she cared for, still choose to attend her funeral so that she gets a proper sending off. The words *stepchildren, unkind ones, save you, and lonely going* reiterate the significance of the stepmother who assumes the role in place of the birth mother. The act of attending their stepmother's funeral becomes symbolic in demonstrating the impact her role as a nurturer on the lives of the children, who are able to perform the last rites, despite their differences. What this further indicates is that motherhood in this sense is tied to the nurturing role assumed, as opposed to the stereotypical negative connotations often tied to the representation of a stepmother. As the mother is able to uphold her role as a nurturer in society despite the lack of blood ties, the children too, are able to acknowledge their part in performing the rites in the funeral in adherence to the filial piety she deserves.

Similar instances of roles assumed by mothers are further exemplified in the Shirley Lim Geok-Lin's *My Mother Wasn't*, Bernice Chauly's *Forgiveness* and Azalia Suhaimi's *Supermum* where each mother assumes at the very least, one role, be it a nurturer, a provider, a planner, or a manager.

### **When conflicts and mothers collide**

Nevertheless, having to meet the expectations placed upon them, mothers may find themselves getting entangled with conflicts as they navigate the complexity

of motherhood. Conflicts that may arise can be both interpersonal, taking place between a mother and child, or intrapersonal as the mother vacillates between various choices and decisions tied to her role.

A poem that vividly conveys the presence of conflicts is Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's *My Mother Wasn't*. Depicting the hatred and anger a daughter has towards her mother due to abandonment, this poem gives us a vivid depiction of the conflicts that may arise within the role of motherhood. Told from the child's viewpoint, the poem delves into the unresolved conflict due to the mother's abandonment. While the mother may have assumed the roles as expected within society for a brief time, the child struggles to understand how she could have caused her mother to abandon her, arriving at the resolution that her mother can never be forgiven.

In my dream my mother comes to me, saying,  
   I have forgiven you.  
   I am angry - who gives you  
 the right to forgive me? I don't want forgiveness.  
           Take back your love you give without asking,  
           without a price to it. Take back your forgiveness.  
           No one who gives away her daughter has a right  
   to love her.  
           I will not forgive you till I have made you pay  
   the full debt of your abandonment.

(Lim, lines 24-35)

Lines 24 through 35 showcase the daughter's rejection of the mother's opinion, leading to the daughter lashing out at the mother by refusing to accept her mother's forgiveness or love. Words such as *angry*,...*who gives you the right*, ...*I don't want forgiveness*,...*Take back your love*,...*Take back your forgiveness*,...*I will not forgive you*,...*pay the full debt of your abandonment* exude pure hatred, dislike, and disagreement towards the mother. The child cannot fathom how the mother has the right to forgive a daughter who is innocent as it was the mother that abandoned the child. From the child's point of view, it can be understood very clearly that the child finds the mother lacking in traditional moral values and maternal instincts. The interpersonal conflict which stems from the abandonment by the mother, perpetuates the child's resentment, resulting in the child's steadfastness in holding on to the belief that the mother has lost all her rights to love and forgive her child; the mother will not be accepted as a mother by the child.

On the contrary, Bernice Chauly's *Forgiveness* delves into another demonstration of an interpersonal conflict between mother and daughter as the latter watches the former's struggles with ageing and ailing from cancer.

Let go Mother  
 it is time to greet  
 the self that still remains  
 that which life has maimed  
 in death, will recover.

(Chauly, lines 101-105)

Told again from the daughter's perspective, the lines, *and the coma that has taken you, ... And now, you are this - with bare speech*, indicate the mother's struggles in staying alive and how these struggles render the daughter helpless as she is unable to do anything to ease her mother's pain. The daughter laments the fact that she cannot engage with her mother or understand her suffering as it is something the mother endures on her own. The repetition *I want you back, ... I want you all back*, speaks of how the daughter is aware of the mother's struggles and wishes that the mother did not experience such sufferings, demonstrating the interpersonal conflict whereby the daughter seems to struggle with the mother's deteriorating health. Where the mother once served as a nurturer, the daughter is now forced to watch her mother become incapacitated by the illness that has engulfed her system. Watching her mother deteriorate due to cancer, words such as *I want you back, let go Mother, and in death, will recover* further showcases the daughter's acceptance of the mother no longer able to provide the same comfort as before. In accepting the mother's fate, the daughter inadvertently reconciles with her mother.

While the examples above demonstrate the interpersonal conflicts between the mother and child, one cannot shy away from the internal struggles a mother encounters with her own self. In *Supermum*, Azalia Suhaimi presents readers with a mother's intrapersonal conflict in her struggles to live up to the expectations of being a "supermum":

You will cry,  
 you will scream,  
 you will doubt yourself,  
 you will break.  
 You may occasionally break down,  
 you may break the rules....

(Suhaimi, lines 6-11)

Words such as *cry, scream, doubt, break, and break down* depict the meanings of struggles and conflicts a mother goes through as she navigates her way through the roles she assumes. The depiction of these struggles conjures the idea that a mother may struggle to come to terms with the responsibilities and duties she takes upon herself in providing for her family. This can be further supported by the phrase *and find yourself losing your patience another night* where the mother struggles to maintain her composure when tending to the family's needs. This gives us a

clearer indication that a mother – while assuming the role as a nurturer, provider, manager or even planner – may also face internal conflicts as she strives to maintain a balance between the mother and her “self”. The line, *you just don’t want to play* in itself shows how the mother is not able to be her happy self with her children and family. It showcases the idea that there are times where mothers simply cannot be in a constant state of performing their expected duties. What this further implies is that, mothers, as much as the title of the poem argues, are “supermums”, are also subjected to fatigue, exhaustion, and sheer burnout. Nevertheless, these supermums are not expected by society to reveal such weaknesses, thus emphasising on the constant internal struggles that overpower them.

The examples above, along with the other poems further illustrate the unspoken struggles and conflicts that engulf the roles of motherhood one assumes. These struggles, both internal and external may or may not be resolved, but if left unattended can fester and develop into something far worse.

### **Understanding attachments surrounding motherhood**

By understanding how roles and conflicts impact motherhood through the selected poems, it is not easy for us to understand the different types of attachment surrounding motherhood. Nevertheless, what emerges is the idea that the attachment a child has to a mother can be both positive and negative. A positive attachment is one that translates into a strong sense of awareness children are able to develop as they observe the role(s) the mother shoulders in their lives. On the other hand, a negative attachment can be one that converts into attachment that is either bittersweet or downright traumatic.

Vethamani’s *For Mother on Father’s Day* is a good example of how solid and loving attachment is formed since the poem speaks of how single mothers juggle parenting all by themselves, ensuring that their children get the best of everything to succeed in their lives. The gratitude and affection that is demonstrated in the poem create an impression for readers that the child is not only thankful for the mother’s sacrifices, but ultimately attached to the significant impact the mother has had in his life. A similar type of positive attachment is discernible in *Forgiveness* by Bernice Chauly. It reveals the positive attachment from a child’s point of view as the child now navigates the mother’s duty in becoming the nurturer for her ageing and sick mother. This poem serves as a stark reminder of how roles become reversed, with the adult child providing love, care, and attachment to the deteriorating mother. Even though the roles have been reversed, the attachment between the mother and child is still the same loving attachment, due to the way in which the child was raised. The child is now able to convey the same amount of affection and care as she was given, further strengthening the bond between the mother and child. The strong bond between the mother and child is also evidently conveyed through the representation of the

mother as “God’s right-hand man” in Joe Chan’s *God’s Right Hand Man*. The child is able to acknowledge the magnitude of devotion the mother has towards ensuring she performs the duties and responsibilities of a mother, going above and beyond. All in all, these three poems vividly demonstrate the strong attachment between the mother and children, and in doing so, serve to pay significant homage to their roles.

On the other hand, some attachments formed between a mother and her child are not always clear as a bittersweet attachment can also be formed as highlighted in the poem *Stepmother* by Wong Phui Nam. Here, the complexities of a different form of motherhood pave the path towards a bittersweet form of attachment. While society upholds the status of a mother, this poem provides us a different perspective on the role of a stepmother. Though fairytales may have created the stereotypical representation of an evil stepmother, this poem depicts the stepmother as a woman who carries out all of her maternal duties towards her stepchildren, nurturing and providing for the child as a birth mother would. As the children remain hostile towards the stepmother, the complex nature of this relationship eventually leads to a bittersweet attachment whereby the children navigate between their lack of love and filial piety towards the stepmother. In paying respect to their stepmother and performing her last funeral rites, the children indirectly illustrate a bittersweet attachment where they acknowledge her role as one that represents motherhood in their lives. Azalia Suhaimi’s *Supermum* also serves as an evocative poem that denotes the idea of bittersweet attachment through the struggles conveyed by the mother. Serving as a reminder of the fact that mothers as perfect as they may be, can also struggle with themselves, the poem becomes exemplary in showing how motherhood may translate into a bittersweet attachment that a mother may have towards the roles she takes upon herself.

In stark contrast, traumatic attachment can also be formed as evidenced in Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s *My Mother Wasn’t*. This poem portrayed a taboo topic when it comes to motherhood; the anger and hatred a child has towards the mother who chooses to abandon her family. Lim’s poem depicts the trauma and pain experienced by the child due to the mother’s abandonment during her infancy. The trauma endured by the child due to growing up without a maternal figure and not knowing why she was abandoned by her mother perpetuates a lasting emotional conflict within the child. Confusion, fear, shame, guilt, stigma, and anger result in the child viewing her childhood as incomplete and distorted. Thus, the child’s only form of attachment tied to the mother becomes one that is perpetually traumatic.

## Conclusion

This research has revealed motherhood encompasses multiple roles assumed by a woman, be it one who is bound by blood or obligation. The selection of the

poems which intentionally includes poems written about mothers by male and female poets divulge the experiences of motherhood as one that is engulfed by conflicts, both internal and external. Nonetheless, this research emphasises the significance of motherhood in creating attachments that may be positive, bittersweet, or ultimately traumatic. While the main focus of the study is limited to six poems written by different Malaysian poets, it is crucial to note that literature, specifically within the Malaysian context, is able to demonstrate the paradoxical representations of mothers as caregivers, nurturers, managers as well as ordinary human beings who are ultimately doing the best they can.

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