



# Mother, Monster

**Her mother often goes to another space, returning as another woman. An endless game of hide and seek**

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My mother has played hide and seek all her life. Sometimes she is around, sometimes she isn't. A year ago she was diagnosed with a serious illness. Through some divine or devilish intervention, she has been showing signs of recovery in the past two months. The mind, however, is a delicate matter. "Sometimes I feel she's someone else," said my father, a former abominable patriarch now turned nurse. This was not the first time. My mother had gone to another space before, and had returned as another woman.

My mother was the one who taught me to read, write, and tell stories. When I was a child, she bought me many books but never read me bedtime stories. She invented her own. She would tweak fairy tales by adding new characters, contexts, twists. I, too, wanted to create my own stories, so when I was in fourth grade, my mother bought me a typewriter. My writing journey began with the voice and words of my mother.

It was a hot ordinary day in Jakarta when the other side started to reveal itself. I was in my bedroom when I heard a shriek from the kitchen. My mother had broken a plate in the kitchen sink, on purpose, and was wailing like an animal. I sat in silence. I finally came out of my room to ask her, in

a meek voice, if she was okay. I received no answer. In the evening she acted as if nothing had happened. And I wondered: who was that madwoman in the kitchen? Did a monster, for a brief moment, enter her body? Was she *kerasukan*, possessed?

I have lost my mother several times since then. Each time she returned, she became another person. And another. And another. I lost her for the first time in 1997, when I was 17. I cannot reconstruct fragmented memories; all I can say is that I spent a lot of time in the hospital's ICU, waiting for her to wake up. After a week she finally opened her eyes, and she held me. I was crying, but I wasn't sure if it was my mother that I embraced.

Not long after that, I lost her again. I could not find her at home. "Your mother needs some time to recover," my father said. I was angry that my mother constantly played hide and seek, and I believed my father was to blame. He was the tyrant in the house, and it took me a long time in my adult life to make peace with him. I decided to stay at a friend's house, seeking refuge with another family until my mother returned from her hiding place.

As I write this, I am probably playing hide and seek, too. I conceal many things about my mother, but I reserve the right of the storyteller.

we tell some stories and erase others.

This was the official story of my mother's absence: she went to a remote place to learn about Islam and spirituality with a Muslim teacher. I imagined that an exorcism was performed to force the demons out of her body. When my mother returned, her eyes looked empty, but she became more religious and started to wear the hijab.

I observed her day by day and concluded that she had been bitten by wild beasts in the wood. This woman with a hijab was not her; it was another woman, another mother. Yet there were times when I noticed an eerie

obsessed with motherhood, dreaming terror, my mother reminded me of Mary Shelley, though she had no environment in which to turn her 'hideous progeny' into a creative force. Yet resistance, like the goddess Durga, has many faces.

When, in my early twenties, I started to fight against everything - my father, religion, cultural expectations - I began to see clearly the yellow wallpaper that entrapped my mother. And becoming a woman was the true horror; I realised I was not an outsider looking in - I was inside the wallpaper too. I saw my mother's face in the mirror.

*"Becoming a woman was the true horror; I realised I was not an outsider looking in"*

smile on her face, furious and remorseless. In a strange way, the sight gave me comfort. She had not been bitten by wild beasts. She was the beast. The monster is always with her, playing hide and seek, and I just need to wait and see whose face will appear: mother, or monster.

As I grew older, I learned how my mother navigated unfulfilled dreams and motherhood, her relationship with my father, and many layers of oppressive patriarchal structures. I saw my mother's face in many stories. I read Charlotte Perkins Gilman and recognised her as the woman behind the yellow wallpaper. She was Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, Calon Arang the Balinese witch, the nameless monster in *Frankenstein*. Isolated,

And so my journey with monstrous women began. I write about them to make sense of my mother, her monster, and other women who traverse and disobey. We might have taken part in the culture of patriarchy by idealising motherhood, nurturing the fiction that separates mothers from monsters. But motherhood is messy and, as I have learned in my journey, hide and seek is tactical.

Throughout this journey my monsters keep me company. I keep them safe under my bed, in the dark, though many times, you can see them in the living room, in the market, in my writing. They come out and play.

*Apple & Knife* by Intan Paramaditha is out now (Harvill Secker)