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Maternal distress as a universal motif: A comparative study of contemporary American and Indonesian novels

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Abstract: *This study asks to what extent maternal distress can be read as a universal literary motif in Meg Wolitzer's The Ten-Year Nap (2008) and Andina Dwifatma's Lebih Senyap dari Bisikan (2021). Comparative close reading draws on Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and institution and Sharon Hays's account of intensive mothering. In Wolitzer's novel, Amy's professional shame and Jill's adoption-related doubt reveal uncertainty within desired motherhood, while Karen's retained choices challenge the inevitability of maternal distress. In Dwifatma's novel, Amara's reproductive questioning and exhausting infant care develop into crisis amid material insecurity. Across the four comparative configurations, maternal expectations unsettle valued identities, insufficiently supported care intensifies strain, and narrative form determines how distress becomes intelligible. Wolitzer's shifts among women's perspectives contrast with Dwifatma's concentrated first-person account; redistributed care and supported recovery qualify the persistence of distress. The findings support universality as cross-cultural recognizability within these texts, with differences in severity, resources, and narrative trajectory. The study positions Indonesian fiction as an interlocutor in world literature whose treatment of maternal embodiment and recovery helps redefine the shared motif.*

Keywords: *maternal distress, comparative literature, feminist motherhood studies, Indonesian literature, world literature*

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood becomes a problem for literary interpretation when maternal attachment coexists with exhaustion, resentment, or a diminished sense of self, as it does in *The Ten-Year Nap* and *Lebih Senyap dari Bisikan* (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008). These novels invite a question extending beyond whether their protagonists love their children: how do the conditions under which women mother shape the emotional and narrative possibilities available to them (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008)? Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood as lived experience and as institution provides a starting point because it separates maternal relationships from the systems claiming authority over those relationships. Within this perspective, the present article investigates distress as a recurring literary pattern rather than as evidence of an inherently defective mother.

The American novel follows women whose marriages, friendships, and interrupted working lives complicate the apparent freedom of staying home, particularly through Amy Lamb's prolonged departure from legal practice (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 35–38). The Indonesian novel follows Amara through efforts to conceive, pregnancy, infant care, deteriorating household finances, and a crisis followed by supported recovery (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8–15, 59–64, 115, 138–150). Their conjunction is productive because care occupies different stages of the maternal life

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course while repeatedly raising questions about responsibility, recognition, and self-worth (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008). The comparison therefore concerns two situated fictional worlds, not representative portraits of every American or Indonesian family.

Existing research already complicates the assumption that maternal difficulty is simply personal inadequacy. Meeussen and Van Laar (2018) found an association between pressure to be a perfect mother and parental burnout among full-time working mothers in the United Kingdom and United States. Collins (2021), drawing on a cross-national interview study, showed that maternal guilt is shaped partly by the organization of work and care across policy environments. Minnotte (2023) further argued that motherhood practices vary with racialized and classed social locations, making a single model of intensive mothering insufficient. These studies establish relevant questions about social organization, but their findings cannot substitute for evidence about how a particular novel produces meaning.

Research on Dwifatma's novel provides a specific point of departure. Fitri and Anindita (2023) examine Amara's maternal image through physical, psychological, and social dimensions, identifying particular difficulties during childcare. Sari, Suryani, and Rahariyoso (2024) locate patriarchal power in unequal household roles and violence. These studies establish the significance of maternal experience and family power. The present article asks how such conditions become a recurring motif through narrative form and how that motif changes when read alongside Wolitzer. Its contribution connects conditions, emotional indicators, and textual manifestations across the two works without claiming that maternal distress has previously escaped critical attention.

The research question is: can maternal distress be understood as a universal motif across contemporary American and Indonesian novels? Here, "universal" designates a proposition about cross-cultural recognizability tested through this pairing; it does not mean that every mother suffers or that every national literature contains the same pattern. The argument is that both novels make maternal distress legible through tensions between caregiving demands and the mother's capacity to sustain a valued self, while their plots distribute those tensions differently (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008). Accordingly, similarity must be established through textual relationships, and difference must remain part of the explanation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motherhood as experience and institution

Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood as experience and institution provides the primary framework for separating women's relationships with children from the patriarchal organization of those relationships. Experience encompasses the possibilities of maternal attachment and embodied life; institution concerns the authority through which motherhood is defined and regulated (Rich, 1976). The distinction does not posit an entirely private experience untouched by social relations. Its analytical value lies in making affection for a child compatible with criticism of the expectations governing care (Rich, 1976).

Recent literary scholarship extends these institutional questions to the construction of maternal voice. Wahlström Henriksson, Williams, and Fahlgren (2023) examine how tone, structure, and perspective shape culturally situated maternal

narratives. Rodgers, Kačkutė, and Šlapkauskaitė (2025) distinguish motherhood's thematic prominence from narrative techniques that give access to a mother's experience. These accounts direct the present study toward who speaks, whose needs receive attention, and how maternal adequacy is judged. Rich's institutional distinction requires textual demonstration: a represented expectation must be connected to the character's experience through a particular narrative arrangement (Belsey, 2013; Rich, 1976).

This distinction also guards against reducing attachment to submission or professional withdrawal to distress. Amy's pleasure in caring for Mason coexists with difficulty returning to legal work; Amara's satisfaction in Yuki's growth accompanies exhausting bodily care (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 63; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38). These conjunctions make the relationship between experience and institution an interpretive problem rather than a predetermined opposition. Rich's (1976) framework therefore supports analysis of both the conditions of strain and the possibilities created when care is reorganized.

Intensive mothering and the moralization of responsibility

Hays (1996) specifies an ideology that assigns mothers primary responsibility for children and values child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive care. Her account identifies a contradiction between selfless nurturing and the competitive individualism associated with employment (Hays, 1996). Its contribution to the present framework is to explain how the demand to care can become a demand for seemingly unlimited maternal availability. Rich (1976) establishes the broader institutional distinction, while Hays (1996) identifies a particular normative organization of maternal effort.

Meeussen and Van Laar (2018) associate perceived perfection pressure with parental burnout, while Collins (2021) relates maternal guilt to the organization of work and care. Literary criticism specifies how such pressures are narrated. In her reading of *Chanson douce*, Rodgers (2020) traces the nanny's movement from devoted care toward anxiety, exhaustion, and violence through her working and personal circumstances. McIlvanney (2023) reads the same novel's maternal ambivalence through class and social alienation, challenging judgments that isolate a mother's conduct from its conditions. These studies support examining how limited capacity becomes a judgment of maternal worth without assuming that distress necessarily leads to violence.

The framework requires contextual limits. Minnotte (2023) argues for greater attention to racial and class differences in motherhood norms, challenging the adequacy of a single dominant model. Accordingly, intensive mothering is activated here when the text moralizes child-centered effort or availability; it is not an automatic explanation for poverty, pain, or reproductive expectation. Amara's bodily labor becomes relevant where she interprets life as entirely directed toward her child, whereas pressure to conceive requires the broader institutional framework (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 15, 63–64; Hays, 1996; Rich, 1976).

Maternal distress and its narrative mediation

This study operationally defines maternal distress as narratively represented strain connected to becoming a mother, caregiving, or judgments of maternal adequacy.

The definition adapts the institutional questions raised by Rich (1976) to textual analysis rather than importing a clinical category. Exhaustion, shame, guilt, perceived inadequacy, and threatened selfhood function as indicators only when their context establishes a maternal relation (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 63, 140; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 38, 79, 102). A difficult circumstance alone is insufficient evidence of distress.

Three analytical dimensions keep that distinction workable. Conditions identify represented arrangements, such as unequal care or employment constraints; indicators identify interpretable expressions of strain; manifestations identify their presentation through dialogue, thought, bodily action, repetition, metaphor, or sequence. This synthesis combines Rich's (1976) institutional perspective with Belsey's (2013) attention to textual meaning. The explanatory relation runs from conditions toward distress and its expression, while close reading begins with the manifestation and tests the proposed connection. It is a heuristic relation, not a causal law or a sequence of independently observable psychological stages.

Maternal ambivalence remains a related but distinct category. Williamson (2023) examines how contemporary narratives give public form to embodied experience and conflicting maternal feelings; Vijayakumaran and Marx (2024) show how *Burnt Sugar* brings mothering and being mothered into the same account of intergenerational ambivalence. Here, ambivalence concerns conflicting attachments or desires, whereas distress identifies strain. Amara's desire to embrace Yuki alongside fear of harming him differs from her earlier feeding exhaustion (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 63, 145). Neither automatically signifies resistance, and a mother's self-accusation must be distinguished from the narrative's framing and consequences (Belsey, 2013; Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 140–150).

Comparative recurrence and the limits of universality

Baldick's (2015) account of motif foregrounds recurrence within literary works. In this study, motherhood names the thematic field, while maternal distress becomes a motif when situations of responsibility and troubled self-evaluation recur through identifiable textual forms. Comparison therefore requires more than locating one unhappy mother in each novel. It must establish patterned relationships across scenes and explain how similarities persist through differences of voice, maternal stage, and consequence (Baldick, 2015; Belsey, 2013).

Elias (2020) compares East African and Indonesian texts to show how cultural and religious discourses authorize maternal identities and stigmatize childlessness. Üstün Kaya (2020), using Rich across selected works of world literature, identifies recurring maternal expectations while limiting cultural generalization. These studies establish grounds for comparison, but shared expectations leave open how distinct narrative forms construct distress and allow it to change. This article tests recurrence through four configurations: expectations and identity, care and recognition, narrative mediation, and support and change. Their evidence appears in Table 1 and the discussion. Universality names recognizability within the pairing, tested against differences of class, maternal stage, voice, and consequence (Collins, 2021; Minnotte, 2023). Amara's crisis and recovery bring bodily and material limits into dialogue with professional uncertainty in Wolitzer, allowing the Indonesian novel to help define the comparative terms (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008).

METHOD

This qualitative study combines a comparative literature approach with feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis (Belsey, 2013). The primary sources are Wolitzer's (2008) *The Ten-Year Nap* and Dwifatma's (2021) *Lebih Senyap dari Bisikan*, purposively paired for their sustained maternal perspectives and contrasting contexts. Data comprise narration, dialogue, represented thought, and action linking strain to maternity. Wolitzer citations use the consulted 315-page PDF's page count because print pagination is absent; Dwifatma citations use printed pages, ten below the PDF counter.

Data were collected through close reading and passage recording. Existing reading records served as locators; selected passages were checked against the novels and read with surrounding events. Indonesian quotations were verified against scanned page images and retained verbatim with English translations supplied for this article. Analysis distinguished conditions, emotional indicators, and narrative manifestations, then examined voice, temporal organization, evaluative language, and consequences within each novel. Cross-text comparison identified recurring relationships and divergences using Rich (1976) as the primary framework and Hays (1996) where intensive mothering was textually supported. Findings were organized into four configurations shared by Table 1 and the discussion.

Interpretive credibility was supported by source checking, contextual rereading, and testing interpretations against later developments, counterexamples, and alternative readings (Belsey, 2013). Character judgments were distinguished from narrative framing, and suffering was not automatically classified as resistance. No independent-coder reliability is claimed. Conclusions concern patterns in the paired novels, with attention to class, family arrangements, and maternal stage; they do not establish clinical diagnoses or nationally representative experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The comparison yields four connected findings: maternal expectations unsettle valued identities; caregiving demands generate exhaustion and a need for recognition; narrative form makes these strains intelligible; and changing support arrangements qualify their persistence (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8–15, 63–64, 138–150; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38, 79–80, 102, 306–310). These findings concern relationships among conditions, emotional indicators, and narrative manifestations rather than equivalent symptoms in every character. Amy's professional uncertainty and Jill's adoption-related guilt broaden the American material, while Amara's interrupted employment prevents the Indonesian material from being reduced to reproductive pressure alone (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8, 15; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38, 102).

Table 1. Comparative configuration of maternal distress

Comparative configuration	*The Ten-Year Nap*	*Lebih Senyap dari Bisikan*
Maternal expectations and changes in women's identities	Conditions: interrupted work; adoption. Indicators: Amy's shame; Jill's uncertain belonging. Forms: retrospective career history, interview dialogue, private apology (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38, 102).	Conditions: reproductive expectations; interrupted work. Indicators: uncertainty about womanhood and desire. Forms: accumulated efforts to conceive; parenthetical self-questioning (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8, 15).
Caregiving labor exhaustion and the need for recognition	Conditions: continual demands; limited recognition. Indicator: exhaustion. Forms: Leo's question, parallel claims about women, apparent leisure contrasted with felt demands (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 79–80).	Conditions: intensive infant care; economic insecurity. Indicators: exhaustion; strain of sustaining the household. Forms: feeding schedules, bodily detail, bitter parallelism (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 63–64, 115).
Narrative forms of maternal distress	Indicators: shame, exhaustion, guilt. Forms: dialogue contrasted with private feeling; shifts between Amy and Jill; narratorial generalization. These mediate the preceding conditions (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 38, 79, 102).	Indicators: inadequacy; self-condemnation. Forms: first-person questions, repeated self-insults, bodily action, escalating crisis. These mediate accumulated pressures; severity exceeds Amy's dissatisfaction (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 15, 140–141).
Support change and the limits of universality	Changed conditions: shared school journeys; retained professional options. Development: Amy's continuing fatigue; Karen's relative contentment. Forms: revised routines and contrasting trajectories qualify inevitability (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 306–310).	Changed conditions: protected accommodation; shared care; medical support. Development: improvement with continuing fear. Forms: wounded-bird metaphor and incomplete recovery qualify permanence (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 145–150).

Table 1 distinguishes conditions of strain, emotional indicators, and narrative manifestations within four shared configurations. Its final row incorporates later developments and counterexamples, so changes in support form part of the comparative finding. The discussion examines each configuration through passages from both novels (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008).

Discussion

Maternal expectations and changes in women's identities

The first configuration in Table 1 concerns the difficulty of sustaining a valued identity through entry into motherhood and changes in employment. In both novels, maternal investment coexists with uncertainty about who the woman can become, although the timing and objects of that uncertainty differ (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8, 15; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38, 102). Rich's (1976) distinction between experience and institution helps explain this coexistence: attachment to a child does not remove the constraints organizing the mother's opportunities. The comparison consequently examines how the narratives connect desire, interrupted possibilities, and self-

evaluation rather than presuming that motherhood simply displaces an authentic professional self.

Amy's growing pleasure in infant care precedes the retrospective statement, "Then it became clear that she would not return at all" (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 37). The sentence turns a gradually extended absence into an established professional break. Later, during a difficult interview, Amy admits, "I've been sort of removed from everything" (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 38). The indefinite "everything" expands unfamiliarity with legal software into a broader feeling of exclusion. Her subsequent return to reading picture books with Mason combines gratification with a defensive rejection of the professional world that has embarrassed her (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 38). Interrupted work is therefore a condition; shame and uncertainty are indicators; retrospective narration and awkward dialogue are their manifestations.

Amara's account also links maternal aspiration to employment, but the interruption precedes childbirth: "Aku bahkan berhenti bekerja" ["*I even stopped working*"] (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 8). The intensifier "bahkan" places this decision at the end of an accumulating list of efforts to conceive. Later, the question "Karena itukah aku ingin punya anak?" ["*Is that why I want a child?*"] unsettles her imagined recognition as a successful woman (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 15). The surrounding parenthetical questions connect reproductive desire with bodily purpose and relief from repeated family inquiries. Unlike Amy's decade-long retrospective account, Amara's questioning makes uncertainty audible within the anticipation of motherhood itself (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8, 15).

Jill's adoption narrative provides a second American trajectory that must be included in this comparison. After receiving the child, she thinks, "We don't belong together," and silently addresses her with "I am so sorry" (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 102). These statements interrupt an arrival that her husband voices as the formation of a family. Her desire for a baby becomes entangled with guilt about removing the child from familiar caregivers, so the passage complicates any assumption that longed-for motherhood guarantees immediate emotional certainty (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 102). Its represented thought parallels Amara's self-questioning while directing doubt toward belonging and the consequences of adoption rather than reproductive recognition.

The paired evidence supports the first row's identification of threatened selfhood and maternal uncertainty without treating the characters as interchangeable. Amy confronts professional exclusion after becoming a mother; Jill questions the legitimacy of an achieved attachment; Amara interrogates the social purposes of a desired pregnancy (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8, 15; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38, 102). What recurs is the mother's difficulty in reconciling a valued relationship with the meanings assigned to it. This reading develops Rich's (1976) framework through differences within the American novel as well as between the two novels, preventing career and reproduction from becoming separate national categories.

Caregiving labor exhaustion and the need for recognition

The second configuration concerns the distance between sustained caregiving and the recognition or support it receives. Amy's domestic time is treated as insufficient explanation for fatigue, whereas Amara's account makes the bodily costs of infant care unusually explicit (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 63–64; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 79–80). The shared

issue is the relation between demands and available capacity; the difference lies in how those demands enter everyday interaction. Hays's (1996) account of intensive mothering is useful where availability becomes a moral expectation, but it does not make a decade of domestic responsibility identical to the physical demands of early infant feeding.

Leo's question, "What are you so tired about?", makes Amy's exhaustion something she must justify (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 79). The narrator responds with a parallel construction: "Women who worked were exhausted; women who didn't work were exhausted" (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 79). Repetition dismantles the apparent explanatory sufficiency of employment status. The surrounding scene also contrasts Amy's attention to Leo's workplace anecdotes with his limited recollection of her daily stories, making recognition a matter of whose experience merits sustained attention (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 79). The irony of the novel's title thus emerges through a tension between apparent leisure and narratively asserted exhaustion.

Amara provides a bodily counterpart: "Aku harus memompa ASI delapan kali dalam sehari untuk menjaga suplai susu" ["*I had to pump breast milk eight times a day to maintain the milk supply*"] (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 63). Obligation is expressed through "harus," while the numerical schedule turns caregiving into repeated demands on the body. The surrounding account of pain, sleep disruption, and relief when Yuki gains weight places distress alongside maternal satisfaction (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 63). When Amara subsequently considers life "seratus persen untuk anak" ["*one hundred percent for the child*"], bodily effort acquires the force of a maternal norm (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 64). Hays's (1996) framework applies to this moralization of availability rather than to lactation as a biological process.

Material insecurity further changes the scale of Amara's responsibility. Facing a move to cheaper accommodation, she describes the household division as "aku bagian bertahan hidup dan dia bagian kepengin mati" ["*my part is to survive and his part is to want to die*"] (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 115). Her bitter parallelism turns unequal practical responsibility into an emotional division between sustaining life and withdrawing from it. This extends the attention to household power in Sari et al. (2024), while showing how a particular formulation carries that power into narrative meaning. Amy's demand for recognition and Amara's struggle to sustain care consequently share a relational structure without sharing the same material stakes (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 115; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 79–80).

The second row therefore connects unequal demands with exhaustion through distinct manifestations: marital dialogue and narratorial generalization in Wolitzer, and schedules, bodily detail, and bitter parallelism in Dwifatma. Neither employment status nor physical effort alone proves distress; each becomes significant through the accompanying interpretation of obligation, insufficient support, or diminished recognition (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 63–64, 115; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 79–80). Collins's (2021) cross-national analysis similarly makes the organization of work and care relevant to maternal guilt, although the present evidence supports claims about fictional representation rather than the prevalence of such feelings in either country.

Narrative forms of maternal distress

The third row asks how the preceding configurations become literary experience. Its focus is not an additional cause of distress but the mediation of the conditions and indicators already identified. Wolitzer distributes interpretation across retrospection, dialogue, and the thoughts of several women; Dwifatma concentrates much of the pressure within Amara's first-person account (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 15, 63, 140; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38, 79, 102). Following Belsey (2013), the analytical task is to explain how these arrangements produce meaning, rather than treating quoted speech as transparent information about a character's psychology.

In Amy's interview, the narration states, "She couldn't tell Leo about her shame" (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 38). The sentence identifies an emotional indicator that her spoken reassurances during the interview conceal. The subsequent movement from awkward professional dialogue to the warmth of reading with Mason makes maternal intimacy both valued experience and a response to humiliation (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 38). The reader encounters the relation through sequence rather than through an explicit theoretical explanation. This movement also complicates the idea that her maternal life can be judged only as fulfillment or only as loss, a distinction that Rich's (1976) framework helps keep open.

Jill's silently expressed apology supplies another distribution of voice. Her husband's spoken assurance, "Mommy and Daddy have you now," sits beside the private doubt "We don't belong together" (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 102). The collective family identity is publicly voiced, while its emotional uncertainty remains inward. Because the novel allows access to Jill's thought, the apparent certainty of the adoption scene cannot stand as its only meaning (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 102). Alongside the narrator's broader claim about exhausted women, this contrast shows that Wolitzer constructs the motif through differences among available voices rather than through a single maternal confession (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 79, 102).

Amara's self-address becomes much more punitive: "Bodoh, bodoh, bodoh, dasar ibu bodoh!" ["*Stupid, stupid, stupid, you stupid mother!*"] (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 140). Repetition intensifies the accusation, and the final phrase attaches it to maternal identity. In context, she strikes her head and bites a pillow to suppress her cry; the judgment is consequently made visible through bodily action as well as internal language (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 140). Unlike Amy's explicitly named shame or Jill's silent apology, Amara's accusation moves toward an encompassing condemnation of herself as a mother. The comparative relation concerns self-evaluation, while the narrative intensity remains unequal.

The subsequent pillow scene requires particular attention to sequence. Amara's thought that Yuki deserves a better life accompanies an act of harm, but Macan intervenes and the story later follows Amara into supported recovery (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 140–141, 145–150). The act therefore cannot be treated as the novel's final definition of motherhood, a direct equivalent of Amy's dissatisfaction, or an automatically emancipatory rejection of a maternal norm. Likewise, Jill's apology should not be read as the narrator's proof that adoption is illegitimate (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 102). In both novels, a character's judgment must be distinguished from the larger narrative that frames and qualifies it (Belsey, 2013).

This third configuration explains why recurrence need not involve identical scenes. The interview, adoption, marital exchange, and crisis make maternal adequacy available through different combinations of speech, thought, repetition, and action (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 15, 140–141; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 38, 79, 102). In the sense of recurrent pattern developed from Baldick (2015), the motif lies in these repeated relations between responsibility and troubled self-evaluation. The formal differences are part of the finding: Wolitzer repeatedly broadens the field of comparison, while Dwifatma intensifies the reader's proximity to one mother's accumulating crisis.

Support change and the limits of universality

The final configuration tests the motif against change and exceptions. Both novels alter the circumstances of care, making later developments necessary checks on earlier interpretations (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 145–150; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 306–310). Borham-Puyal's (2023) reading of Emma Donoghue distinguishes enforced individual endurance from resilience enabled by relationships and acknowledged vulnerability. That distinction helps frame the question here: which changes make care more sustainable, and what strain remains? Rich's (1976) separation of maternal experience from its institutional organization keeps altered support within the argument, because distress need not persist unchanged when the distribution of responsibility changes.

When Amy resumes employment, the narrative makes redistribution explicit: "Amy and Leo now took turns taking Mason to school in the morning" (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 309). Leo's initial concerns about the gym and arrival time at work are followed by the recognition that his clients can manage a more reasonable schedule (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 309). This concrete adjustment gives the earlier problem of apparently limitless maternal availability a changed practical setting. Nevertheless, hectic mornings and Amy's continuing tiredness prevent paid work from becoming a complete cure (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 309–310). The development demonstrates altered conditions and remaining strain, not the disappearance of maternal demands.

Karen provides an internal counterexample to a different oversimplification: that interrupted employment necessarily destroys professional value or produces dissatisfaction. The narrator states, "her worth had remained high even over these years of absence," and describes her freedom to decline attractive offers (Wolitzer, 2008, p. 306). Unlike Amy's humiliating interview, Karen's interviews confirm that her expertise remains wanted. Financial sufficiency and her husband's acceptance help distinguish her circumstances, while nearby scenes of fathers undertaking care further interrupt a fixed association between domestic responsibility and women (Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 306–307). Minnotte's (2023) attention to varied maternal locations is relevant here: the American novel itself supplies differences that a national category cannot explain away.

Amara's later account similarly changes the conditions surrounding care. In her mother's home, she compares the setting and herself through "Rumah Mami seperti sarang yang aman dan nyaman dan aku burung yang terluka" ["*Mami's house was like a safe and comfortable nest, and I was a wounded bird*"] (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 149). The metaphor joins protection to continuing vulnerability. Visits from Macan and meetings with a doctor form part of that changed environment, while Yuki is cared for in Mami's room (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 145, 149–150). The narrative thus makes support

observable through relationships, space, and the distribution of care rather than through an abstract declaration of recovery.

Improvement remains incomplete: "Aku belum memercayai diriku sendiri" ["*I still did not trust myself*"] (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 150). Amara can contemplate employment and separation from Baron while still finding proximity to Yuki difficult (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 150). Amy's continuing fatigue and Amara's continuing fear are not equivalent outcomes, but both prevent a simple restoration narrative (Dwifatma, 2021, p. 150; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 309–310). These developments also preserve maternal attachment without requiring it to accomplish recovery alone. Support changes what becomes possible; the narrative does not erase the earlier costs or promise an immediate resolution.

Across the four configurations, universality is therefore defensible only as qualified recognizability: both novels repeatedly connect maternal demands, self-evaluation, and distress, while retaining differences in material security, narrative intensity, and available change (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008). Karen's relative contentment, Jill's uncertain attachment, Amy's renegotiated routine, and Amara's supported but incomplete recovery prevent the motif from becoming a universal destiny. Meeussen and Van Laar's (2018) research makes maternal perfection pressure a relevant question, but neither that research nor this pairing authorizes diagnoses of fictional characters or generalizations about all mothers. The comparison establishes a literary relationship whose limits remain visible within the same evidence that supports it.

CONCLUSION

Maternal distress emerges as a shared literary motif through four interrelated configurations: expectations that unsettle identity, caregiving demands exceeding recognition or support, narrative forms that articulate troubled self-evaluation, and developments that modify the conditions of care (Dwifatma, 2021; Wolitzer, 2008). The comparative table and close readings locate these configurations in both novels. Amy's professional shame and Jill's adoption-related doubt intersect with Amara's reproductive questioning and interrupted employment; domestic exhaustion connects the texts while differing markedly in bodily intensity and material stakes (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 8–15, 63–64, 115; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 37–38, 79–80, 102). Narrative form explains how these relations become recognizable without making the characters' experiences identical.

The study's contribution is a mode of comparison that keeps conditions, emotional indicators, and textual manifestations distinct while relating them throughout the analysis. Its account of universality is limited to cross-cultural recognizability within this pairing, not invariant maternal suffering. Changes in Amy's household routine, Karen's retained choices, and Amara's supported recovery demonstrate why consequences and counterexamples must participate in the explanation (Dwifatma, 2021, pp. 145–150; Wolitzer, 2008, pp. 306–310). Indonesian fiction thus participates in defining a world-literary motif: Dwifatma's treatment of bodily strain and recovery tests what a comparison centered on professional identity alone would leave unexplained.

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