

Does Our Constant Romanticization of Motherhood Set Unrealistic Standards for Women?

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the societal romanticisation of motherhood and its potential to impose unrealistic expectations on women, focusing on the psychological and social ramifications. Through a comprehensive review of literature and empirical studies, the paper identifies how idealised portrayals of motherhood, often propagated by media and cultural narratives, contribute to feelings of inadequacy among mothers. It examines the dichotomy between the glorified image of motherhood and the lived experiences of women, revealing a gap that exacerbates issues such as anxiety, guilt, and diminished self-worth. Additionally, the paper analyses the role of social media in amplifying these romanticised ideals, creating a pervasive culture of comparison that affects women's mental health. By synthesizing diverse viewpoints and existing research, this study seeks to highlight the urgent need for a more nuanced discourse around motherhood that recognizes its challenges and complexities, ultimately advocating for supportive frameworks that empower women rather than constrain them.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Motherhood, Psychological Impact Social Comparison, Sociology

1. Introduction

Motherhood, a term which we are all accustomed to and hear quite frequently in our lives. Combining both romanticization and motherhood, this essay addresses the issues with the thought process which, “thinks about or describes something as being better or more attractive or interesting than it really is” (Britannica.com ,no page) in this case, “the state of being a mother.”(Dictionary.com, no page) While to some extent this idolization is befitting, sometimes, we can take it too far. Moreover, by setting unattainable expectations for women and pushing them to fit the ‘superwoman’ stereotype, their mental health is adversely affected by a significant amount. Since it is extremely common in our lives and even more prevalent due to social media, this becomes an issue we must address. Being both personal and relatable to most of us today,

what is something we have seen as normal for generations turns out to be one with crippling repercussions. As a matter of fact, it may lead to self-judgement, parental burnout (Hubert-Aujoulat, 1), or even depression (Brennan, 1). Nonetheless, this romanticization continues to prevail and with that continues to hurt generations of women.

Attested by different perspectives, this essay attempts to analyze the arguments in support and in opposition to the question, “does our constant romanticization of motherhood set unrealistic standards for women?” on a global level. It will conclude with the current courses of action and my opinion on their continuation.

2. Why does this problem exist?

The reason due to which this overly glorified image of motherhood exists is closely linked to religion and traces as far back as the stone age (Muscato,1)

Beginning with the job of “homemakers” being looked upon in a positive light, the sacred feminine ideology of this job imbibes this (Etain, 8) and has thrived in each religion, each household, each thought process. Every culture, especially that of the ancient world, has looked upon mothers as being the closest thing from God. But the fact that this identity is all that women are looked at for is what leads to major toxicity in our society.

Additionally, the influence of patriarchy and internalized misogyny has reinstated this belief system time and time again. The difference that strikes though, is the same romanticization built up in a way that it becomes harmful for the mental and physical health of women. In today’s world, the difficulty in recognizing a line between praising, and swaying mothers to think that they must do certain tasks forces them to become dependent on external validation. Romanticism can be an empowering tool to motivate mothers, but we are unconsciously taking it way too far leading to the taking away of a woman's identity and looking at her only as the sacrificing parent. Not only does this take credit away from the amount of hard work mothers put in, but it also prevents us from being the equal world we can be.

3. Consequences of the problem:

With the continuation of the prevalence of the issue in society, it creates what is called a “singular identity” for women. Them being seen only as parents, and nothing else. If in a situation a woman with children attempts to broaden her horizons, society look at it as offensive and labels her a “bad mother”, calling her selfish. This both prevents women from gaining success in all aspects of their lives and ruins their mental health.

Firstly, attaching mothers with the “superwoman” tag (scripps.com, no page) leads them to drive themselves into unhealthy conditions. The amount of pressure that this need of being perfect in all aspects brings, eventually directs people into a spiral of burn-out (mekky, no page). The amount of exhaustion both emotional and physical is unfathomable. Yet, society ostracises mothers who may not “have it all together”. This leads to self-hate, loneliness and perfectionism. (Hubert- Aujoulat, 3). So much so that they almost forget where to stop, as primary sources state, “One does not realise that one is going too far and should stop or change [...] On the contrary, I used to feel that I was not doing enough. That’s crazy...” (Bénédicte, no page).

Concepts such as “mothers’ guilt” which mothers feel when they do things such as “I felt so guilty for not playing with my children. Because it is widely accepted in our society that a mother should not leave her child sitting in front of the television.” (Bénédicte, no page). All this stops healthy work - life balances, it is made to seem that in a society like ours it must be one way or the other for a mother. This also is what contributes to more and more women with children ending up in poverty as they remained economically dependent through their marriages (mekky, no page). These patriarchal influences upon households throughout the world, end up putting mothers on pedestals throughout the period of their child growing up. When taken too far, though, it leads to under representation of women in positions of power, lower participation and lower pay. Therefore, the next time we wonder why we don’t see women as majorities in work forces and why pay parity is so prevalent, we can clearly accredit it to the thresholds of society trapping them with no visible escape which even stops them from asking for help (Morshed, no page).

Parenthood can be exhausting but rarely do mothers get enough credit for it. Dealing with the destructive amount of fear that all women are made to feel, the fear of deviating from society's prescribed path cripples them from truly enjoying the flavours of life.

4.1. Global Perspectives

The gender roles debate is one that sparks time and time again, but it is in moments like these in which we realise how unconsciously internalised patriarchy acts up. The role that women must have their brains in the kitchen, their souls in their houses and their hearts in their children has become sort of a compulsion at this point. Mothers are expected to do so much for their children, it becomes unrelenting for them. This problem is one that remains local at a very global level.

Globally, our mentalities develop together. Whether that is in terms of our media or our neighbourhoods. It is very difficult to follow a line. As the world media continues to portray traditional gender roles, particularly male roles. Respondents to a poll held by UN Women believe that the media portrays women and men in traditional roles and this perception has

increased significantly since 2018. 68% of respondents believe that the media portrays women in traditional female roles, such as wives, mothers, or caregivers, its impressions young girls to believe in the same.

Lately, it has been with the help of women liberationists globally that we have been able to take up a voice on such a quieted down problem. The fact that women around the world are raising their voices, taking a stand and letting everyone know, “we deserve to be more than mothers” stands for our global development. Not only does this give a voice to silenced mothers but it also brings us closer to our goal of gender equality. (UN sustainable development, no page)

4.2. National Perspectives

Both in developed and developing nations, motherhood is often forced due to its image of being seen as a rewarding experience. However, we see that lines are blurring between the motivation to have a family, to that in a damaging respect.

In Indian society, the ‘good mother archetype’ is directly associated with the child focused mother. That too with its own hypocrisy, motherhood is only romanticised in a heterosexual setting within the socially approved class, caste and religion. As examples of this constant romanticisation, for a mother, eating a meal without her child is termed as “maternal blasphemy” (Nandy, no page) More so, in cinematic perspective, films such as Mother India & Karan - Arjun portray women's lives limited to that of her children, glorifying their sacrifices which are seen as godly. Exactly this is what leads to unattainable expectations from mothers. There is an unbridgeable gap that lies between the idealised mother and the real mother, the unacceptable of the latter leads to the previously mentioned grave results.

Even in a significantly more developed nation, the United States of America, the condition is not much better. Motherhood is romanticised so much that women are disallowed from not wanting it (BBC News, no page). Laws such as that stemming from Roe v Wade reinstate this patriarchal institution. This societal norm is so strongly believed in that it has now become a law.

5.1. Claims towards the issue

From early poems, to mythology, to cinema, to laws, what is expected from birth givers is debilitating. Throughout this essay, we have discussed the causes and consequences of it but how it happens can be explained through examples.

The list could go on with the number of expectations that there are on mothers, and a lot of them contradict themselves, showing just how impossible these standards are. Mothers are told that they must breastfeed their babies, but they should not do it outside of their homes. That mother’s

need to always put their children first, negating their mental health in the process. The fact that they must not have mental health struggles, so shouldn't ask for help. How can they possibly do it all? Society expects mothers to be superheroes, fighting crime, but never expects them to need a break.

When we hear from real mothers, we learn the intensity of their struggles, the invalidation they receive and the shame they deal with themselves as they do not feel good enough. This societal build up for pressure has led to imposter syndrome among parents. (Moose, no page)

5.2. Counter-viewpoints to the issue

However, religious beliefs reflect the beauty in motherhood and how it deserves to be glorified. While it may be demanding, it gives women the chance to find a new side to themselves and bring out their selfless sides. Also, in society, it generates a lot of respect and honour which is valuable to every family as they get it. Additionally, what's common between Christianity, Islam and Hinduism is the way in which their religious texts write about the importance of glorifying mothers. Through the methods of description, what comes across is that motherhood is something which deserves to be romanticised, the continuity of which should happen. (Petrucci, no page) Nonetheless, this does not acknowledge the struggle mothers go through.

6. Courses of Action

The problem is that we don't realise where this becomes toxic which is why awareness is key when it comes to solving it. As the main issues have been illustrated, solutions that are being implemented currently are starting to aid them. Firstly, parental support groups have started to be established in many communities so that women gain the support that they may need (BBC News, no page). Secondly, governments around the world have pledged to devote resources to the mental health care of mothers and fathers in their countries as they may recover from burnout, postpartum depression, etc. (un.org, no page) Also, essential care to birth givers has started to become available to many even free of cost. Although these factors improve the conditions of women, they still don't address over-romanticisation.

7. Limitations

A large part of the resources used to write this report are those which come from interviews with primary resources - mothers themselves. This exposure to their personal experiences made me understand the intensity of this problem. Furthermore, reliability on branches of the UN for global, unbiased information both statistically and otherwise was present. However, the sources were leaning toward certain perspectives which were against romanticisation. Therefore, there wasn't a lot of evidence toward the counterclaims.

8. Conclusion

Research conducted brought clarity that the prejudice we often blame upon other people is in fact internalised among us. In my belief, there is a lot more that we can do to directly tackle the problem in our daily lives. Firstly, by spreading awareness as to why this is a problem in the first place is a stepping stone for all the solutions to flow through. Secondly, if we make help readily available for mothers who may find shame in explicitly asking for it, we can aid them from potential chronic depression and parental burn out. Thirdly, by fighting societal notions in our daily lives and educating others on them too we can eradicate issues like the portrayal of gender roles in media and more specially cinema. This may also create a larger influence toward policy-making related to family.

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