



The Harmful Effects of Romanticizing Motherhood: An In-Depth Analysis of the Pressure to be an Impeccable Mother in Today's Society

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ABSTRACT

The idealization of motherhood can create negative consequences for both mothers and society as whole. The glorification of motherhood can create unrealistic expectations and pressures for women to conform to traditional gender roles, which can limit their opportunities and autonomy. Additionally, the glorification of motherhood can contribute to a cultural devaluation of other forms of caregiving or non-parental caregiving, leading to gendered division of labor that reinforces inequality. This article examines the concept of toxicity in the glorification of motherhood, as portrayed in the novels "Little Fires Everywhere" by Celeste Ng and "The Fifth Child" by Dorris Lessing. The analysis focuses on how the novels present the idealised image of motherhood and the harmful effects it can have on women who are unable to meet these expectations. Through the close reading of the two novels, the article argues that the glorification of motherhood can create a toxic environment that perpetuates unrealistic expectations and can lead to feelings of inadequacy and guilt in women. This article will explore these issues and argue that we need to move away from the toxic idealization of motherhood and toward a more inclusive and equitable vision of caregiving.

Key words: toxicity, glorifying motherhood, Little Fires Everywhere, expectations, challenges, The Fifth Child, idealised image.

In contemporary society, the portrayal and idealization of motherhood often reach harmful levels, subjecting women to tremendous pressure to adhere to a specific standard of maternal behavior. Consequently, women's mental health, relationships, and overall well-being can suffer adverse effects. This article aims to delve into the toxic aspects of glorifying motherhood and examine its impact on women.

The pressure to conform to societal expectations of motherhood can be overwhelming for women, and this is a theme that is explored in both "Little Fires Everywhere" by Celeste Ng and "The Fifth Child" by Doris Lessing. These two novels shed light on the toxicity of glorifying motherhood, and the toll that it can take on women who struggle to meet these expectations.

The glorification of motherhood is the cultural belief that motherhood is the highest and most important role for a woman. This belief can lead to unrealistic expectations of what it means to be a "good" mother, causing stress and anxiety for new mothers. The pressure to be a perfect mother can lead to postpartum depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Women who struggle with postpartum depression or anxiety may feel like they are failing as mothers, which can further exacerbate their mental health problems. It is important for society to recognize that motherhood is not the only defining aspect of a woman's life, and that women should be supported and encouraged to prioritize their mental health during and after pregnancy.

The glorification of motherhood can also impact relationships. Mothers who feel pressure to be perfect may become more critical of their partners, leading to marital stress and conflict. Additionally, the belief that motherhood is the most important role for a woman can create competition between mothers, causing strain on relationships with other women. Society should recognize that there are many important roles in a person's life, and that motherhood is just one of them. Supporting women in their many roles can help alleviate the pressure on mothers and reduce stress on their relationships.

The glorification of motherhood can also negatively impact women who are unable to have children or who choose not to have children. Women who are unable to have children may feel left out or isolated from society, which can lead to feelings of sadness and depression. Additionally, women who choose not to have children may feel judged or stigmatized by society, leading to feelings of guilt and shame. It is important for society to recognize that motherhood is a personal choice and not a requirement for a fulfilling life.

"Little Fires Everywhere" by Celeste Ng delves into the complexities of motherhood and the pressures that come with it. Set in a suburban community, the story follows two mothers from very different backgrounds whose lives become intertwined in unexpected ways. Through their struggles and triumphs, the novel explores the ways in which motherhood can be both fulfilling and overwhelming, and the toll it can take on women who feel the need to be perfect mothers.

Whereas "The Fifth Child" by Doris Lessing tells the story of a married couple who have four children and decide to have a fifth child. However, this child is different from the others and proves to be difficult to manage, causing strain on the family and the mother in particular. The novel explores the pressures and expectations of motherhood, and the consequences that come with trying to conform to these expectations.

Motherhood is often glorified in society as the ultimate expression of femininity and womanhood. While the act of giving birth and raising a child can be a fulfilling experience for many women, the pressure to conform to societal expectations of what it means to be a good mother can lead to mental health problems and identity crises.

The glorification of motherhood can create unrealistic expectations for women, causing them to feel inadequate or like they are failing if they do not fit the mold of the perfect mother. This pressure can lead to anxiety and depression, as well as feelings of guilt and shame.

Women who struggle with infertility or who choose not to have children may also experience an identity crisis when faced with the societal expectation that motherhood is the ultimate goal for women. They may feel like they are not fulfilling their role as a woman, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

Furthermore, the idea that motherhood should be a woman's primary focus can lead to a lack of support for working mothers. Women who choose to pursue careers or other interests outside of motherhood may face criticism and judgement for not prioritizing their children above all else. The glorification of motherhood can also perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce traditional gender roles. Men are often seen as secondary

caregivers, leading to a lack of support and understanding for fathers who want to be more involved in their children's lives.

It is important to recognize that motherhood is not the only path to fulfillment for women. Women should be allowed to make their own choices about their lives and careers without feeling like they are failing as women if they do not become mothers. Additionally, society should provide more support for working mothers, including affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements. Fathers should also be encouraged to take on a more active role in parenting, breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting equality in caregiving responsibilities.

In "Little Fires Everywhere," Ng tells the story of Elena Richardson, a mother of four who prides herself on being the perfect mother and wife. She lives in the affluent suburb of Shaker Heights, where everything is carefully planned and controlled. Elena embodies the idea of the perfect mother, and she expects her children to behave in a certain way and to achieve certain goals. When Mia Warren and her daughter Pearl move into the rental property owned by the Richardson, Elena sees Mia as a threat to her way of life. Mia is a single mother who has raised Pearl on her own, and she doesn't conform to Elena's idea of what a mother should be. Mia is an artist who values freedom and creativity above all else, and she has a different approach to parenting that is at odds with Elena's.

As the story unfolds, we see how the pressure to conform to societal expectations of motherhood affects both Elena and Mia. Elena struggles to understand her daughter Izzy, who rebels against her mother's expectations and sets fire to the family home. Elena feels that she has failed as a mother, and she is desperate to maintain her image of perfection. Meanwhile, Mia must navigate the judgment and criticism of others who see her as an unfit mother because of her unconventional lifestyle. Mia is constantly aware of how others perceive her, and she must constantly defend her choices as a mother.

Similarly, in "The Fifth Child," Lessing tells the story of Harriet and David Lovatt, a couple who pride themselves on their perfect family. Harriet becomes pregnant with their fifth child, and the pregnancy is difficult from the start. When the child, Ben, is born, it quickly becomes clear that he is different from their other children. Ben is aggressive, violent, and unpredictable, and he doesn't fit into their carefully constructed image of the perfect family. Harriet struggles to understand her son, and she feels isolated and alone in her struggle to raise him.

Both "Little Fires Everywhere" and "The Fifth Child" highlight the pressure that women face to conform to societal expectations of motherhood. They both show how this pressure can be suffocating, and how it can lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure. Elena and Harriet are both desperate to maintain their image of the perfect mother, even when their children don't fit into this mold. Mia and David both struggle to understand their children, and they must navigate the judgment of others who don't understand their unconventional approaches to parenting.

These novels also shed light on the way in which societal expectations of motherhood can impact familial relationships. In "Little Fires Everywhere," the strained relationship between Elena and Izzy is a direct result of Elena's rigid expectations of her daughter. Izzy rebels against her mother's expectations, and she feels like she can never measure up to her mother's standards. Similarly, in "The Fifth Child," the strain that Ben puts on the family is felt by everyone. The other children feel neglected and ignored, and Harriet and David's relationship is tested as they struggle to understand and cope with their son's behavior.

The Fifth Child" by Doris Lessing. The story follows Harriet and David, a couple who have four children and are expecting a fifth. However, the fifth child, Ben, is born with physical and behavioral differences that make him difficult to raise, and the strain of caring for him puts a significant strain on the family. The society has a norm that whatever be the condition of child, the entire responsibility of nurturing the child is been bestowed upon the mother. The sole responsible for every aspect like the physique of the child, lack of breast milk, and the disability of the child etc. is a mother according the society.

"Harriet had not expected this; she had expected that having a baby would be difficult and that the baby itself would be demanding, but she had not expected that the very people who should have been helping her would instead make her feel so inadequate." (Lessing, p. 29)

The hurtful gossip that Harriet's family and friends engage in behind her back, blaming her for the baby's deformities and developmental issues are the clear-cut examples of the societal misconception about a mother and her responsibility over the deformities of her child.

"They said, when they were alone together, that there was something wrong with the baby, that he was deformed, and that it was all Harriet's fault. They said she had not looked after herself properly, or that she had drunk too much, or taken drugs, while she was pregnant." (p. 30)

Society is always concerned about a new born baby and its health but, they are never bothered about how the mother feels in their comments and retorts. As is the case in the novel "The Fifth Child" by Dorris Lessing where the mother Harriet's loved ones do not talk about her feelings or struggles and instead focus only on the baby's problems. "What they never talked about was how Harriet felt, or how she was coping with the strain of looking after a child who seemed to be so different from their other children." (p. 32)

In some cases, people may feel sympathetic towards a mother and they discuss her problems, but they never feel empathetic and find solutions for her problems, rather jus discuss and accept the problems faced by a mother. This is clearly depicted in the novel where Harriet's family and friends do not offer practical help or solutions to her struggles, even though they praise her for her strength.

"It was as if everyone had agreed not to see what was happening. They would all come, and they would all praise her for being so strong and so capable, and then they would leave, and nothing would change." (p. 48)

The novel is a powerful exploration of the challenges of parenting and the social pressures that can make those challenges even more difficult to overcome.

In "Little Fires Everywhere", the author explores the theme of motherhood and the pressure society puts on women to conform to a certain ideal of what it means to be a good mother. The novel highlights how the fear of not being a good mother can stifle a woman's passion and sense of self. The pressure to conform to societal expectations can be so great that women may feel they have to sacrifice their own desires and dreams for the sake of their children.

"All her life, she had learned that passion, like fire, was a dangerous thing. It so easily went out of control. It scaled walls and jumped over trenches. Sparks leapt like fleas and spread as rapidly; a breeze could carry the flame. The heart, she learned, was a risky fuel to burn."(p.12)

Mothers may feel pressured to present a perfect image to the world, even if it means denying or distorting their own experiences. This pressure can be especially strong when it comes to the way society expects mothers to raise their children. That is everyone in the society expect mothers to raise the children in any adversity they face, without the consideration selfhood. The priority goes to motherhood rather to self as explained by Ng in "Little Fires Everywhere"

"Her mother, she knew, had a selective memory. She remembered what she wanted to remember, and forgot what was too painful to bear. Sometimes she reinterpreted her own history, restitching her own seams to make it look as though she had been the one in control all along." (p.32)

Society tries to impose the idea that there is no one "right" other than a mother. They even try to impose strict rules and guidelines for motherhood, but ultimately, each woman has to find her own way and make decisions based on her own values and circumstances which may not be according to motherhood rules formulated by the society. Which obviously will isolate the mother in that woman.

"The problem with rules, he reflected, was that they implied a right way and a wrong way to do things. When, in fact, most of the time there were simply ways, none of them quite wrong or quite right, and nothing to tell you for sure which side of the line you stood on". (p.234)

The pressure to be a perfect mother can lead women to second-guess their decisions and actions. The fear of making a mistake or not living up to societal expectations can be paralyzing and may cause mothers to constantly question their choices. This always create mental problems to a mother while taking decisions. "It was like she had a map in her head of every wrong turn she'd ever taken, and even now she was carefully retracing those steps, trying to understand where she'd gone astray." (p.246)

Societal expectations of motherhood can create a narrow definition of what it means to be a "good" mother, and how this can impact familial relationships. Mothers may feel pressured to conform to the values of their family, even if they do not necessarily agree with them, in order to maintain love and support. Ultimately, the novel "Little Fires Everywhere" suggests that there is no one "right" way to be a mother, and that each woman must find her own path based on her own values and experiences.

"Mia knew from experience that families existed as a sort of conditional democracy. Embrace the values of the family and you were granted love and support; reject them and you were cast out. At the end of the day, it all came down to whether or not the family members were willing to forgive, to excuse, to see all the extenuating circumstances."(p. 288.)

In conclusion, "Little Fires Everywhere" by Celeste Ng and "The Fifth Child" by Doris Lessing both explore the toxicity of glorifying motherhood. These novels show how societal expectations of motherhood can be suffocating for women, and how they can lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure.

While motherhood can be a fulfilling experience for many women, the glorification of motherhood can lead to mental health problems and identity crises. It is important to recognize that there are many paths to fulfillment for women and that society should provide support for all choices. Breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting equality in caregiving responsibilities can help create a more inclusive and supportive society for all parents.

Obviously, motherhood is a significant and rewarding experience, but glorification of it can lead to toxic societal expectations that can harm an individual's identity and freedom. It is essential to recognize and respect the choices of all individuals, whether they choose to become mothers or not, and to acknowledge that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to living a fulfilling life. By promoting a culture of acceptance and inclusivity, we can create a society where everyone can thrive and be true to themselves.

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