

Exposing the mommy myth: a book review

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Society has always glorified and celebrated motherhood. It considers it the most difficult yet the noblest of professions. So precious is its position in society that traditions and norms have been set up around it to protect it from the vagaries of change as well as from attempts to transform it to keep it abreast with contemporary ways. In these modern times, motherhood still adheres to a rigid script that is anchored on the theme that a woman's true essence is to be a mother, and not just any mother, but to become the Perfect Mom.

Media and the images of motherhood they produce are at the forefront of this endeavor to promote and protect the ideal of the Perfect Mom. Except that there is no such thing as a Perfect Mom. Media are doing a disservice to women of all ages by passing off these images as the standard they must aspire for to be considered successful mothers so they can achieve fulfillment and contentment in life.

“ New Momism”

The book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* by Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels is one work that presents a witty yet scholarly critique of media's romanticized images of motherhood and how they misrepresent the realities confronting mothers. The authors framed their arguments on what they called the “ new momism” which they defined as a “ set of ideals, norms and practices most frequently and powerfully represented in the media that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach.”

The term “momism” was coined by journalist Philip Wylie in 1942 for his book *Generation of Vipers*. He used the term to denounce the way American mothers were raising their sons to be mama’s boys who were incapable of fighting for their country. The authors’ decision to reclaim momism and redefine it was a deliberate attempt to show that nothing much has changed since those war years of the early 1940s with regard to society’s expectation of motherhood: it is the mother who is largely responsible whether the child will grow up into a successful, stable, and happy person or not. And media made sure to instill this in her psyche.

This is how the authors described what mothers internalize when they read magazines, watch TV, or see a movie:

Mothers are subject to an onslaught of beatific imagery, romantic fantasies, self-righteous sermons, psychological warnings, terrifying movies about losing their children, even more terrifying news stories about abducted and abused children, and totally unrealistic advice about how to be the most perfect and revered mom in the neighborhood. (2)

The authors further wrote:

No wonder 81 percent of women in a recent poll said it’s harder to be a mother now than it was 20 or 30 years ago, and 56 percent felt mothers were doing a worse job today than mothers back then. Even mothers who deliberately avoid TV and magazines, or who pride themselves in seeing through them, have trouble escaping the standards of perfection, and the sense of threat, that the media ceaselessly atomize the air we breathe. (2)

It is ironic that the authors started their examination of media messages about mothers during the 1970s, that exciting period in the feminist movement when women were beginning to find their voices and question, even break free from the traditional gender roles that had been assigned to them. Motherhood did not escape their scrutiny and it was one of the topics discussed and debated on during consciousness-raising sessions. They were also beginning to realize that motherhood was not a woman's destiny and there were choices available for her. Women could choose whether they become mothers or not.

And if they chose to be mothers, they could choose to stay at home to raise their children or work outside the home, maybe even pursue a career. Which was what a significant number of them did, giving rise to a phenomenon that may have, in all probability, resulted in the new momism. And why not, motherhood was under threat, especially from feminism, and it had to be protected at all cost. For the authors, "(w)hether you are a married religious fundamentalist, a partnered lesbian, a divorced secular humanist with a Ph. D., or a single twenty-year-old trying to make it in the big city, if you are a female human, the new momism has circled the wagons around you."

The book laid out a historical account of how the new momism manifested itself during the last decades of the 20th century and the contradictory messages they send out to women. It juxtaposed mothering guided by famous pediatricians, through regular media exposure, and childrearing advice columns against the emerging feminist thinking on the political characteristic of motherhood during the '70s. It discussed how in the '80s, media reports of child molestation, abductions and other external threats

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against children presented working mothers with a dilemma of whether to entrust their children to others while they were out working.

But it was also during the same period that media intensified its message that mothers can have both a satisfying career and a stable family life. In the '90s, it is the turn of the celebrity moms, who made ordinary women insecure and less confident of their motherhood skills, and the criminal and welfare mothers to be under media attention. The so-called mommy wars were also being fought, supposed conflicts that pitted working mothers against stay-at-home moms.

The authors, in dissecting coverage of issues facing motherhood, were able to show the evolving, and at times opposing, images of mothers in media and how they were deeply influenced by new momism. Most of the time, the authors constantly referred to popular culture to illustrate their analysis. This, plus their smart-ass style of writing, may have given some readers cause to think of their work as less than scholarly. Still, their analysis was incisive enough and ably supported by well-documented examples to be dismissed as anything but presenting a legitimate issue about the myths of motherhood.

Reclaiming Motherhood

It cannot be denied that in this time and age, media still fail to portray a balanced picture of women's diverse lives, choosing instead to present images and messages that reinforce traditional gender roles that are very limiting. Motherhood is not exempt from this. As the authors argued in their book, media have systematically presented an idealized, and therefore, <https://assignbuster.com/exposing-the-mommy-myth-a-book-review/>

unrealistic picture of it. Media's core message is that women are destined to have children. Their primary role in life is to be mothers who must care for them and raise them to be successful, stable, happy persons.

Their own fulfillment is anchored on this. No wonder then that mothers who feel differently are assailed by guilt and a sense of failure for wanting to be more than mothers. These feelings become especially intense for working mothers who opt to leave their children in the care of others while they take on work outside the home or pursue a career. As long as mothers are in this situation, they will forever be torn between two opposing forces, juggling one set of responsibilities at the expense of the other, and struggling to meet the expectations of new momism just because these are basically society's expectations of them as well.

New momism's supposed aim is to promote the interests of children. But as the authors pointed out, this can very well be just rhetoric, considering how public policies have fallen short in supporting mothers perform their childrearing roles. The fallout from this is consequently borne by the children.

In today's struggle for survival, a two-income family is getting to be the norm. While most mothers may prefer to be stay-at-home moms, more and more of them take on employment outside the house because of economic necessity. It will be a validation for working mothers and how they are valued by society if they can be provided with affordable and accessible day care services and welfare benefits.

Or their employment terms can be negotiated in such a way that they can work flexible hours or avail of parental leaves for family emergency.

Unfortunately, providing support and benefits to working mothers are not high on the agenda of government and business. There have been instances when government has slashed funding for initiatives that respond to the needs of working mothers.

Business, on the other hand, prioritizes profit first before benefits for working mothers. So much for the exalted and celebrated status of mothers, particularly of working mothers. Faced with this, is it correct then to say that motherhood as practiced by them should be less valued since they do not meet the expectations of new momism?

Not so, according to the authors. They argued that mothers would be better served by reclaiming motherhood and redefining it in such a way that it would encompass shared parenting as well as support and welfare benefits for their childrearing responsibilities. At the top of the agenda to accomplish this is to acknowledge new momism for being the unrealistic ideal that it is and to stand firm against it. Motherhood can never be perfect. All that a mother can do is to try and do her best. To constantly aim for perfection is a futile and self-defeating exercise.

The authors have succeeded in debunking the merit of new momism. And they did this with cutting wit and a scathing sense of humor as only two mothers who are fully convinced of their arguments can do. Their style may not work for some readers but there is no denying the fact that they are able

to expose some three-decades worth of fallacious thinking and belief that is the myth of motherhood.

Work Cited

Douglas, Susan J. and Meredith W. Michaels. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*. New York: Free Press, 2004.