

The Representation of Mothers in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article's impetus was the representations of motherhood in the film entitled *Bad Moms*. It elaborates how the film problematized the construction of good motherhood or what was considered to constitute good mothers. By using the perspective of feminist cultural studies, the article unfolds the issue and contends that the film presented the complexity of the construction of motherhood as well as the existing perceptions and assumptions surrounding motherhood. It argues that the film resisted the binary notion of “good moms” and “bad moms” and offered a notion that ideal mothers were not the ever-present ones, but rather those who played multiple roles as nurturer, friends, and caregivers without really losing their own identity and subjectivity as women. The film showed that ideal mothers provided enough space for their children to learn and to mature just as the mothers also enable themselves to maintain their agency and subjectivity.

Keywords: *Bad moms, Good moms, Motherhood, Feminine agency, Subjectivity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bad Moms [1], a female-led comedy film starring Mila Kunis, Kristen Bell, and Jada Pinkett Smith, among others, problematized what good mothers mean or what was considered as good moms. *Bad Moms*—literally, mothers who are considered to be bad in the complexities of social life—framed the construction of motherhood in society. While it took American context, the values and perspectives, as well as the assumptions of motherhood depicted in the film, may not be significantly different from other cultural contexts.

Some mothers were portrayed to be perfect. They were always there for their children. The children came punctually to school and dutifully follow all school activities while the mothers were actively involved in the PTA (parent-teacher association). More than anything, the good mothers were portrayed to be middle-class women who took care of their appearance and had very good relationship with their husband. On the other hand, the “bad moms” were depicted as those mothers who were frequently late in taking their children to school. They did not mingle with other mothers and were always in a hurry to go from one place to another because they also need to navigate their other responsibilities. Another trait for being bad moms was being flirty and sexually active.

This characterization shows clearly that the construction of motherhood is closely intertwined with the construction of women's sexuality. A good mother is a woman who is not sexually active, but needs to maintain a level of sexual appeal nevertheless. She has to be beautiful without attracting men's attention. A good mother has to make gestures that are desirable for opposite gender and has attributes that may prove to be quite tricky and challenging. They have to be and to do different things at once. While the boundary between good moms and bad moms seems to be clearly outlined, the boundaries prove to be more complex and complicated.

2. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bad Mom, Good Mom, and the Construction of Good Motherhood



Figure 1. *Bad Moms* Film

The explication of motherhood in the film served as a very intriguing illustration of the complexity of motherhood and the oppressive and detrimental nature of normative construction of motherhood. Providing different types of mothers, the film showed that mothers/wives/women were essentially overworked in juggling their different roles. The film can easily fall into the category of feminist film in its spirit for acquiring recognition for the women who do works both at home and at the public sphere. It strived for the better understanding of the need for the sharing of both domains for the sake of everybody, women and men alike. Balance in sharing domestic and public life was also portrayed as good for the children. We argue that this is where the portrayal of mothering and motherhood needs to be directed at.

Femina magazine in its issue no. 37/XLIV, 17-23 September 2016 featured three young women in its cover. These women presented what they call “*mamah muda*” (young mothers). However, it referred to young mothers who met certain traits and attributes, most notably were middle class and beautiful. In the related subsequent articles, it was mentioned how the three women have managed to fulfil their functions as mothers while still performing their successful careers and maintaining their existence in the entertainment industry. Despite their being mothers, they continued to be recognized as celebrities with certain characteristics.



Figure 2. Femina magazine in its issue no. 37/XLIV

The depiction of perfect mother in the film, just like the one in the articles of *Femina* magazine, showed what Hays [2] calls as “intensive mothering”. The tendency to connect the idea of perfect motherhood to the ever-

present mothers and to the domestic[ated] mothers were rampant in the representation of mothers or motherhood in the mass media. The three women in the *Femina*'s cover were described as mothers highly dedicated to their children. It was also claimed that they closely monitored their children's development as well as provided their children's needs without the help from the others. To be completely dedicated to their being mothers, the magazine described how these young mothers reduced their public and professional activities or at least they negotiated their individual project in accordance with their children's needs. In some cases, they needed to work around their husbands' needs as well.

Within celebrity culture, this high value put into the function of mothering was also observed by Dorce Gamalama [3: 117]. Dorce was a celebrity whose transition from being male to female has been documented in her auto/biography detailing her efforts to be fully recognized as a woman. In her auto/biography Dorce singled out motherhood as one crucial aspect that will define her womanhood. She wrote that a woman's life will never be complete until she has become a mother. This conviction has led her to adopt four children to affirm her womanhood. The statement, “I am a woman”, as uttered in the title of her auto/biography was emphasized by her being a mother as the ultimate evidence of her merit as a woman.

It is fair to say that not all depictions of mothers in the media and popular culture in general represent the strong tendency to domesticate women. Some magazines and celebrity auto/biographies featured strong women mothers who acted as agents of change against normative gender construction. In her auto/biography, *Seribu Satu KD*, Krisdayanti showed how hard her mother has worked to be both the breadwinner and the caregiver for her two daughters, herself and her sister. In this auto/biography, her mother's struggle in public domain was not signified as masculine, rather it was considered to be strongly feminine [4]. The struggle and the roles to fulfil the livelihood and to improve the living condition were not only accepted, they were celebrated as motherly rather than fatherly, as feminine strength rather than masculine power. Yet, it must be noted that Krisdayanti described her mother as very womanly, a woman who liked to make up and dress up but at the same time was also strong and highly independent. The auto/biography offered a notion of femininity that did not necessarily fall into the construction of normative femininity. In other words, the portrayal of her mother offered the construction of strength and power as feminine.

As a magazine whose main target reader was middle-class women who have careers of their own, *Femina* has featured women in different walks of life. These women needed to work around different domains and different professional and personal relations. Women were portrayed to be carrying out not only their mothering duties but also their professional works, including the various strategies they employed to negotiate different responsibilities. What needs to be emphasized though was the fact that the magazine, though not quite frequently, included elaboration of how the husbands actively shared the caregiving and domestic responsibilities. We also found it important to note that

the women featured were not described as perfect mothers. They were described to be working hard to be “good enough” mothers, instead.

In the context of *Bad Moms*, the requisitions for perfect mothers and ideal wives demanded a lot from women in a way that can be potentially detrimental to women, both psychologically and physically. The claims of being “bad moms” by the mothers in the film have actually liberated them and gave a lot of space both for the mothers as well as the children to grow and develop. As argued by Winnicot [5], a perfect mother may very well be simply a “good enough” mother and not exactly a mother who conducts the function of “intensive mothering” without flaws and failures.

In the film, “the bad mom”, played notably by Mila Kunis, was described to have stopped preparing their children breakfast. After all, her hard work in preparing it was never quite appreciated by her children. The decision of the mother to embrace the label of “bad mom” has enabled her children to be more independent in fulfilling their daily needs, including preparing their own meals and their study. The space left by the “lazy mother” in preparing their breakfast has forced the children to learn to be more independent and the mothers to find some time and rooms for their own needs and concerns. In other words, the imperfection of the mother has taught the children, both girls and boys, to live independently and to earn basic skills for livelihood, at the very least. In elaborating the issues of the everyday, the film resisted the construction of the ideal mothers as well as the normative gender attributes which situated women within domestic domains and responsibilities.

Another type of woman portrayed in the film was the stay-at-home mother who was totally submissive to her husband’s wishes and be always around her four children. In her newly found friendship with Amy, the character that Mila Kunis played, Kiki (played by Kristen Bell) was depicted to be developing consciousness of being a person of her own rights and wills and that the caregiving role was not an exclusive duty that she has to perform as a wife and a mother. In her journey to [feminist] consciousness, she urged changes in her marital relationship and domestic arrangements. She demanded that her husband contributed to the caregiving roles. She also began to garner strength to take a space for her own self apart from being a mother she has been assigned within their marriage. The film showed the price women have to pay in their quest for being “a perfect mother”. A good mother was demanded to be always around the children and bound to domestic chores, resulting in the neglect of their own self. Claiming to be “a bad mom” enabled her to be happier and to respect herself more. This claim also enabled her to have the strength to force her husband to be more involved in taking care of their children and not to underestimate his wife.

3. CONCLUSION

By portraying the construction of motherhood that resists the normative ideal of motherhood, the film, the magazine as well as the auto/biographies written by

women discussed in this article depict the “ideal mother” that does not refer to the always-present mothers, to the mothers who are always at the service of her children and husband, but to the mothers who play as mothers, friends, as well as the caregiver of their children without losing her sense of self as a human being, and as a woman. An ideal mother is perhaps a mother who makes her children know that their mother is not a perfect mother. Yet, despite her imperfection, the children will still love, respect, and need their mother. As Rich [6: 247] contends:

As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need to be the vessels of another woman’s self-denial and frustration. The quality of the mother’s life – however embattled and unprotected – is her primary bequest to her daughter because women who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.

Rich’s argument shows that mothers have the potential to be the role-models and active agents of change that can negotiate her functions and responsibilities, and at the same time shows authority and sensitivity. Mothers provide a safe space for her children to grow and develop. The agency that women obtained through motherhood and the transgression against the normative construction of motherhood will also provide a space for mothers to grow and develop themselves and maintain their own subjectivity.

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