

A Critical Analysis of Toxic Maternal Performance in Jennette Mc Curdy's *I'm Glad My Mom Died*

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

Mothering is a universally idealized performance. A mother is considered to be the epitome of caring, providing all that is the best for her children. However, one can find numerous instances where a mother's care and nurturing become toxic and traumatic to the child. Psychological therapists like Susan Forward and feminist thinkers like Adrienne Rich have theorized elaborately on the negative impact of mothering on children. This paper attempts to analyze the toxic maternal performance in Jennette Mc Curdy's autobiographical memoir *I'm Glad My Mom Died* employing the theories put forward by Forward and Rich.

Keywords: Toxic parenting, Trauma, Maternal Monster, Emotional abuse, Manipulation, Exploitation, Identity crisis.

1.INTRODUCTION

Jennette Mc Curdy is an American author, film maker, former actress and singer. She won the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards four times. She acted in many television series like Malcolm in *the Middle*, *Zoey 101*, *Lincoln Heights*, *True Jackson and Victorious*. What's Next for Sarah? was a web series written and produced by Mc Curdy. In 2022 she published her autobiographical memoir *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. The memoir portrays a poignant picture of her emotionally traumatic childhood. The paper makes an attempt to make a foray into her trauma which she attributes to toxic parenting. Traditionally, a mother is considered to be the best nurturer for a child. A mother's actions supposedly cater to the positive moulding of the child. However, Mc Curdy's memoir unveils a dark shade of mothering. Susan Forward's theory on toxic parenting and Adrienne Rich's concept of "maternal monster" are employed in analysing Mc Curdy's childhood trauma. The method of close reading is resorted to in exploring the dynamics of the mother daughter relationship to analyze how mothering can turn out to be detrimental to a child.

2.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mothers play a pivotal role in the formation of the identity of a child. A child's perception of the world is rooted in the interactions with the mother. The mother plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of security, confidence and self-worth.

The concept of "maternal monster" was originated by Adrienne Rich, the feminist scholar in her work "Of Woman Born : Motherhood as Experience and Institution"(1986). As per her analysis the mothers who emotionally exploit the children belong to the archetype of "bad mothers". This is in stark contrast to the "good mothers" who are the idols of nurture, care, selflessness etc. The "maternal monsters" are narcissistic and possessive and exploit their children's emotions without any empathy. Rich finds three major reasons for the existence of "maternal monsters": patriarchal societal expectations, internalized misogyny and unresolved trauma.

In the essay "The Cycle of Toxic Mothers: Intergenerational Trauma and the Impact on Daughters of Today" the therapist Mari Grande affirms the idea that hurt people hurt others. She elaborates on the concept of

intergenerational trauma. Toxic mothers do not know how to keep boundaries. They will be intrusive, rigid and manipulative. The daughter of a toxic mother will grow up feeling unsupported, unloved and unworthy. This will lead to lifelong struggles with self-image, communication with others, depression, anxiety, addiction problems, eating disorders, relationship issues and the like.

In the book "*Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life*" (1989) Susan Forward details how the well-being of children are emotionally and psychologically ruined by over-ruling parents. She categorises the overarching parents into five types: the emotional parents, the dictatorial parent, the rejecting parent, the overindulgent parent and the inadequate parent. She proposes that emotionally hurtful parents leave a lasting hurt and trauma in the children's minds where the negative messages lie internalized. The result will be low self-esteem, emotional imbalance, anxiety, depression, lack of trust in intimacy etc. They will develop difficulty in relationships and self-destructive behaviours.

Obsession with body image and food lead to eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia which will lead to devastating physical and psychological consequences. Usually, genetic predisposition is the key factor behind the disorders. However, psychological and sociocultural factors also cater to the situation. Society's standards of unrealistic beauty which get highlighted through media representation exert great pressure to be thin. The failure in reaching the expected norm will lead to low self-esteem, anxiety and the craving for perfectionism. Anorexia nervosa leads to self-starvation for fear of weight gain. The fear intensely consumes the individual and it leads to restrictive eating habits. Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder which involves binge eating. Compensatory methods like self-induced vomiting, laxatives or excessive exercises are resorted to by the person.

The British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein introduced the theory of the concept of 'good mother' and 'bad mother'. Good mothers symbolize nurturing and caring whereas bad mothers symbolize rejection and neglect. According to Klein the inner world of the child is moulded by the nature of the relationship with the mother. She categorizes the stages of the mother-child relationship into three: the paranoid-schizoid position, the depressive position and the holding environment. At the very early stages infants find the mother either as a good mother or as a bad mother. A good mother is nurturing and caring whereas a bad mother is withholding, frustrating or threatening. It is a split way of attachment. As time passes, the child sees the mother not in a split way but as a whole person. The child may develop feelings of guilt and concern for the mother. The third one, that is a holding environment is essential to hold the anxieties and insecurities of the child and facilitate the growth into an emotional healthy being. When the mother is emotionally unavailable, neglecting or over expecting the child struggles to form a coherent perception of the mother. This leads to fear, anger and lack of trust. In Klein's theorisation, the unresolved emotional conflicts of a mother may get projected onto the child. An overly critical and controlling mother is in actuality projecting her own anxieties onto the infant. The child in turn fails to form a positive sense of self. The result will be a fragmented sense of sense with irreconcilable conflicts. The child faces difficulty in building healthy relationships. The 'bad mothers' foster excessive guilt, fear and dependency in the child's mind.

Nancy Chodorow has theorised the interplay between psychoanalysis and social structures in analysing how mothering and gender roles are reproduced. In her finding, mothering is conventionally framed as a gendered activity. It is constructed as a predominantly female role and is passed down to generations as a gendered one. Mothers unconsciously identify themselves with daughters which results in the daughters too assuming caregiving roles similar to the mothers. In the text which is being analyzed here this is found to be true. Jennette's relationship to her mother is a similar one.

3. I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED

The memoir *I'm Glad My Mom Died* portrays the harrowing childhood experiences of Jennette which led to emotional and psychological trauma. Her mother Debra was a dominating and manipulative mother who wished to fulfill her dreams through her daughter. According to Adrienne Rich such mothers are narcissistic. She gave importance to her own desires, needs and interests over those of her daughter. Debra wanted Jennette to become an accomplished child actress. Unable to resist her mother, Jennette complied with the wish. As a child, she was forced to please her mother not being aware of the violence it would inflict on her mind. The mother took her for auditions with unrealistic expectations. She monitored and enforced strict control on each minute aspect of Jennette's appearance and diet. This led to a severe eating disorder. Jennette slowly started getting accepted as an actress. But she did not find any happiness or worth in it. She felt guilty that she did not share her mother's dream about herself. She didn't like acting. But she continued it as she was scared of disappointing her mother.

Ozipko Kohlbay has opined that mother-daughter relationships need not essentially be healthy. The travails of Jennette's childhood proves this. Jennette became a renowned actress in TV series like "iCarly" and "Sam & Cat". But the turbulent relationship with her mother who forced her into show business left a lasting scar in her

mind. Her mother criticised and even ridiculed her. She was never satisfied. The toxic dynamics of the relationship deprived Jennette of a sense of self-worth. Her mental health was chronically affected. She developed dread, worry and a deep sense of inadequacy. She failed to express herself and lost trust in others. The poisonous parenting included verbal abuse, emotional blackmail and severe neglect of emotions. She says, "My mother emotionally, physically and mentally abused me in ways that will forever impact me. She gave me breast and vaginal exams until I was seventeen years old. These "exams" made my body stiff with discomfort. I felt violated, yet I had no voice, no ability to express that. I was conditioned to believe any boundary I wanted was a betrayal of her, so I stayed silent. Cooperative." (303)

Forward analyses the "insecurity" feeling projected by toxic parents. She argues that the "insecurity" is a strategy which they employ to secure sympathy from their children which will indirectly bestow authority to them. They exploit the children emotionally by highlighting their misery. Jennette's mother was a stage 4 cancer patient. The chance of survival was very bleak. She used to make her children watch her "goodbye" video every night as an emotional ploy. Debra presented an idealised image of herself as a martyr. She made the children weep and express sympathy for her illness on seeing the farewell video. She presented it as family time. However, it served only her interests and her desire for concern and respect. She evoked the feelings of guilt and shame in the children's minds. This acted as a covert technique on her part to gain self-confidence. The title of the novel can be comprehended in this context.

Debra was very possessive. Jennette was the only daughter in the family. Debra projected her wishes onto her. Debra had desired to become an accomplished actress. She saw Jennette as a vehicle for her self-actualization. The mother considered the daughter as an extension of herself, rather than a separate individual. Jennette had been alienated from her father. She became a pawn in the power struggles between her parents. Debra used to quarrel with the husband in front of the children when he came late from work. She would not accept any reason. Jennette used to try to patch up the quarrel in her own way though it was a torture for her. At a mature age she understood that her mother had actually poisoned her psyche by manipulating her to support the mother and turn against the father. Jennette loved her father. She felt that he cared for her happiness and well-being. She was happy when he took her to dance school. She says:

Dad has taken me to dance class a few times before. I'm excited because when Mom takes me, I never know if she's going to yell at someone or complain to the dance studio owner that my part in the ballet isn't big enough or whatever. Dad doesn't do stuff like that. He doesn't even seem to be aware of stuff like that. He just kinda...exists. Maybe he wants to help me. He wants to save me. I'm enjoying time with Dad despite the disconnect. I'm enjoying the ease, so I say nothing (50,51)

Childhood

Jennette was forced to become a child actor at the age of six. The pains she had to undergo to remain a celebrity and the restrictions imposed on her by her mother deprived her of any positive childhood experiences. She says, "Child stardom is a trap. A dead end. And I can see that even if Mommy can't" (121). She became the breadwinner of the family. The responsibility was a great burden for her. The pressure led to several long-lasting negative impacts on her mind and body. She developed an eating disorder at the age of eleven. The mother enforced very strict regulations on her food habits to be a successful actress. At the age of 11, the mother enforced calorie restrictions. This resulted in anorexia and bulimia. She explains, "I was eleven, I was concerned about getting boobs, so mom taught me about calorie restriction to help me out" (247). Maintaining her thinness was the means to please her mother. Too much concentration on low food intake led to Jennette's unhealthy relationship with food itself.

Jennette got a prominent role of Sam Puckett on *iCarly*, a Nickelodeon show. Her stardom increased. Along with it her anxiety and eating disorders too increased. Her mother still controlled her finances, relationships and decisions. She started thinking seriously about the mother's actions as intrusive. She started realizing that she was being denied a chance to explore her own identity. The mother had been manipulating her by evoking guilt feeling in her. Debra manipulated Jennette through her emotional outbursts. She used to threaten her talking about her terminal illness. Jennette dedicated all her power to please her mother and make her feel proud. This led to her emotional breakdown.

The environment of Hollywood also was toxic. Navigating Hollywood was traumatic for Jennette. Sexism and exploitation were predominant. Hectic work schedule and lack of appreciation made her emotionally deprived. The higher-ups in the industry abused her both physically and mentally. She names the one who abused her as "The Creator". She describes how she was forced to drink alcohol and wear revealing clothes. Too much concentration on physical appearance worsened her situation. The negative atmosphere stifled her thoroughly. She felt extremely lonely and depressed.

The mother entered into the last stage of cancer increasing Jennette's conflicts. She desired to be independent. But she was tortured by the health condition of her mother. When Debra passed away Jennette was gripped by grief. However, she was very much relieved. The trauma inflicted on her by her mother continued its grip over her. She struggled hard to liberate herself from the negative hold of the mother. Jennette developed bulimia.

She gave up acting realizing that it was her mother's dream, not hers. She began a search for identity. A reassessment of life happened.

The subsequent days were a journey to self-discovery and healing. She sought the help of a therapist. She had to confront the past openly. She understood the impact of her mother's toxic attitudes on her mind and body. Healing started. She learnt to forgive herself. She managed to accept the harsh reality of the past. She resorted to creative writing for solace. Finally, she gained freedom from the shadow of her mother and reclaimed autonomy over her own life.

Looking at the memoir through the lens of Rich's "maternal monsters" one can find that monstrosity arose in Debra's behaviour because of societal expectation. As a mother she was expected to be nurturing, supportive and selfless. But in actuality she was controlling, emotionally abusive and exploitative. This contradiction between societal expectations and her actual behaviour made her monstrous. Debra went through intense and suffocating emotional labour being a cancer patient. However, she controlled Jennette's emotions. She decided her daughter's course of action. This created a sense of obligation and guilt in Jennette which is a hallmark of the maternal monster.

Jennette's trauma is one that arose from the conflict between order and chaos. Her mother created chaos in her family and in her personal life. The mother was very unstable in her emotional responses. Anything could irritate her. So Jennette tried hard to change her own emotions and responses according to the expectations of the mother. She hated her house as it was one chaotic place. She found it shameful and embarrassing. To find an order in life Jennette resorted to the church. It was an escape for her. She says, "Church is beautiful, peaceful. three-hour weekly reprieve from the place I hate most: home" (21). Again she says, "I want order. I want peace. I want my three-hour reprieve from this place" (24). She tried vainly to get the entire family to get dressed fast so that they could reach the church on time. The young girl ran from one room to another ordering everyone to hurry. But her efforts got spoiled when the brothers split cereal onto the carpet and the mother exploded over it before she could clean it. Jennette was denied the full three hours reprieve of church time. The little girl's mind blamed herself for the failure. She wondered whether she could try a better method the next time. As a result of the responses of the abusive mother she found fault with herself and felt herself to be insufficient. The child was dependent on the mother for survival. She directed her disappointment with the mother towards herself. This was damaging for her as she internalized her feelings of her own badness. She rationalized the harmful behaviours of the mother accepting them that she deserved them. This led to her low self-esteem, lack of boundaries with others. She became vulnerable to unhealthy reliance on abusive relationships to feel useful in the world. Jennette was homeschooled by her mother. Thus she was deprived of the chance to mingle with other children of her age. The church was her only sanctuary. It gave her a feeling of order, a place where everyone listened to and did what they were told, unlike her chaotic and mad home. However, she realized to her pain that her family was considered "second-rate" in the church as they did not embody the ideals that the church demanded. She failed to understand that she alone could not make up for the behaviour of the whole family. Her disorderly family forced her to search for order and the feeling of self-worth by getting included in the church group. It was part of her psychological disorder to attempt to cope with the unconscious deficit in her mind. This resulted in her developing OCD. She started imagining that the Holy Ghost was speaking to her. She got a short term confidence to go through the auditions as she felt that she was doing things as told by the Holy Ghost. Soon she reached a mental state where she could not function without some compulsion. The OCD betrayed her and she was deluded into believing that it was better to place her well being in the hands of her mother. She hoped that handing over the absolute control to her mother would satisfy her mom which in turn would make herself happy.

Jennette's expectation and trust were misplaced. Her mother was narcissistic. Psychology has categorized two kinds of narcissists : overt narcissists and covert narcissists. The psyche of a narcissist has a deeply wounded and insecure child. They build defensive self-images in order to hide their vulnerable self from others. "Overt narcissists tend to make themselves known, whether it be through personality, displays of behaviour, outlandish and fantastic stories etc." (Ambre Associates). Overt narcissists will openly demand admiration. Covert narcissists use tactics such as fake self-depreciation to get complimented by others. Debra used her illness as a way to gain sympathy and power. She made a video of herself singing lullabies to the kids. Like a ritual she played the video every night and the children had to watch it. Jennette was just four years old when the video was filmed. She kept on singing *Jingle Bells* in the background. Debra was angry that Jennette ruined the moment by singing the song. While watching the video she would accuse and shame Jennette for it without giving any consideration that she was only four. She could not accept Jennette stealing the spotlight. She delved in the ideal image of herself being a martyr. She delighted in watching her children cry and felt sad for her that she was sick. She was happy to remind them that the cancer could come back any time. She demanded that they should be grateful to her. Under the mask of family bonding time she satisfied her need to feel powerful and revered. She saw the only girl child Jennette as her ploy for wish fulfilment. She was extremely happy that Jennette craved her approval and attention. Jennette yielded to her because she understood that her mother's love is not unconditional. For that she had to grant her mother absolute control over her mind and body. But that was not enough for her. Even when Jennette succeeded in Hollywood, that was not enough for her. She

attained her mother's goal weight of 89 pounds. The mother's obsession with the ideal weight made Jennette believe that this achievement of hers was powerful enough to wake her mother magically from the comatic state she reached at the end of her life. To her utmost shock and sorrow, Jennette realized that none of her self annihilating actions made her mother happy.

The title of the memoir explains the depth of the torture she had been through. She would never have been able to escape from the toxic relationship with her mother had she been alive. She found it difficult to break the shackles even after the death of her mother. Her mother had asked Jennette to sing the song "Wind Beneath my wings" at her funeral. She had a very difficult time coming to the decision not to sing it. That became a crucial moment in her journey towards independence. However, when the freedom came to her she was at a loss to handle it. She could not handle the absence of a controlling figure. She yielded to Bulimia Nervosa as a substitute mother figure which used restrictions and shame and controlled her body functions just like her mother. But it caused harm to her. Slowly, she achieved balance through giving up her acting career and focussing on therapy.

4.OBSERVATIONS

The memoir portrays a situation which many may relate to. It is the harsh reality which many children face in real life but has not been paid much attention to. The text is a pointer to the urgency of the need to address the issue of toxic parenting in today's lives. It advocates the necessity of seeking and assistance. The narrative prioritizes resilience, optimism and self- love in the attempt to redeem oneself from harmful circumstances.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Only one text has been selected for analysis as a sample of representation of toxic parenting situations. There is scope for conducting further studies on the contemporaneity of the issue of toxic parenting represented in written narratives.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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