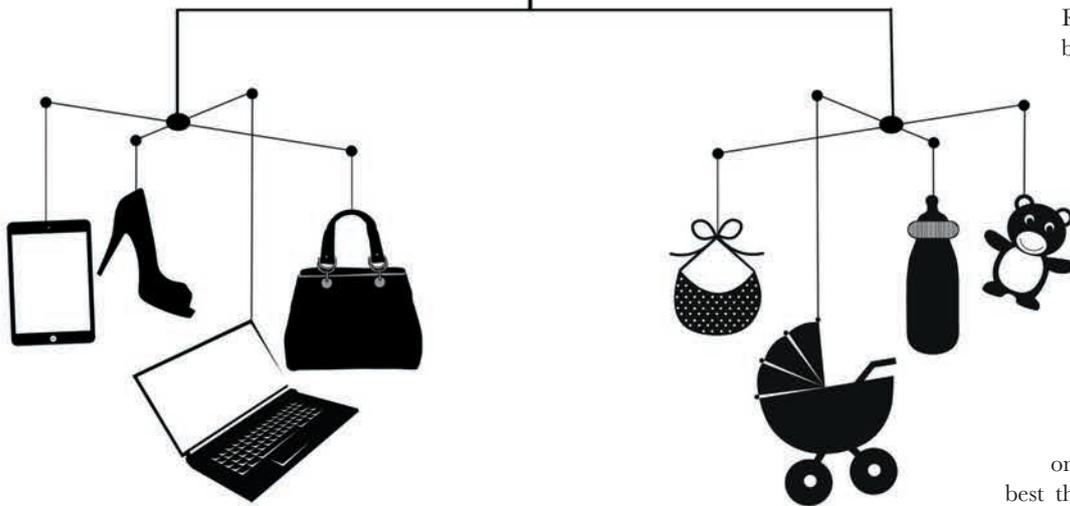


MOMMY ISSUES

Magical journey or meaningless drudgery? The endless debate around motherhood is far removed from its rather ordinary reality

By KAVITHA RAO



Last March, British singer Lily Allen gave me one more reason to love her, apart from her music. In a much-debated interview, Allen admitted that she quit being a stay-at-home mother and came out of musical retirement because she was “bored” by her two small daughters, aged one and two. “It was really hard because you’re spending all day, every day, with two human beings that can’t communicate. I felt like I needed to get out and do something else with my time,” Allen told *Hello!* magazine.

Bravo. I wish more mothers were as honest as Allen, especially in this country. Sadly, we are still stuck in an era where most Bollywood role models continue to burble on about the bliss of motherhood, and how they willingly gave up everything for their children. Our ads show mummies waiting on spoiled, bratty children, hand and foot, and loving every minute of it. Our TV serials constantly show women who do nothing but mother.

Recently, however, there has been a smattering of views begging to differ, with a few women writers and bloggers talking about the flip side of motherhood.

In March this year, author and an editor at *The Hindu*, Veena Venugopal, wrote a controversial piece headlined ‘Stop The Lies About Parenting’.

She slammed parents, especially mothers, for relying on the narrative of ‘This is the best thing I’ve ever done’.

“Besides giving them an excuse to do nothing else with their lives, it also gives them a lofty platform from which to preach,” she wrote. The story went viral, and Venugopal got hundreds of angry responses from seething parents, but mostly mothers. “I think the fact that the responses were all so furious actually validates my story,” says an unrepentant Venugopal. “We are so conditioned to think of motherhood as a divine state that any criticism of it is seen as unnatural. This is one taboo that has not been broken.” Venugopal calls for more frank conversations. “Motherhood is hard work, and involves huge sacrifices, and to think of it as some sort of universally warm, fuzzy experience is

simply not true. Women know they have made a huge sacrifice to have children, and many are resentful. They just don't talk about it."

Both the motherhood-is-my-life and the motherhood-ruined-my-life camps nurse equal suspicion and derision for the other. I find myself unable to empathise with either extreme: that motherhood completes a woman, or that it is a brutal journey which requires you to sacrifice all your desires at the altar of parenthood. There's no balance in either of these views, no greys. And life is, after all, mostly grey.

The truth is that for most of us, motherhood will be a mixed bag. Sometimes it will be blissful. Sometimes it will be hell. Often it will be dull. It will vary depending on our children, our partners, our circumstances and our bank balances. We will hate our children, and love them intensely. We will have moments of wishing they had never been born, and equally, moments when we think they are the best things that ever happened to us.

In other words, stripped of its myths, it's like most human relationships: immensely complicated in a way that cannot be reduced to a snappy headline. We need to talk about motherhood with balance – about both the good and the bad.

So, the bad then. One of the dirty little secrets of motherhood – and there are many – is that you will be tired, beyond anything you have imagined. When people without children tell me they are tired, I think: you have no idea. The sheer exhaustion of being sleep-deprived for months, of being unable to do a single task uninterrupted, of being unable to read even a newspaper because of feeding all day. Magical experience? Not so much. Not when they are babies, anyway.

Then there's the boredom. When my children were babies, I was often totally, weepily, soul-crushingly bored. Did I find my children boring? No. But I found that particular stage of parenthood, with its endless feeding, changing diapers and bad sleeping, indescribably dull, and not the life-changing journey recounted in so many parenting magazines. The loss of identity, the time off from work, the lack of energy to do anything else was so intense, it sometimes felt like a stab in my chest.

Another dirty little secret is the fact that your career will likely never be the same, unless you have lots of help. To be a mother is to have your mind and focus blasted into tiny little scattered pieces, at least for the first few years. This is not to say you can't have a career, maybe even a very successful one.

But it will likely be a different sort of career, one with compromises, setbacks, and most importantly, always someone else to think about, and budget for.

We don't talk about these things nearly enough, because it's seen as regretting parenthood, and being that most un-Indian of things: not maternal. You are allowed to vent about finding your job difficult, your parents annoying, your spouse controlling, but never about your children.

Could there really be a good (or good enough) part after all that? I can't speak for others. But for me, somewhere between the gruelling hard work and the undeniable sacrifice is a great and quiet joy, made up of many minute moments, adding up to a whole. It is the joy of sharing an Agatha Christie with your teen daughter, discussing Poirot and Marple. It's the joy of going to a football match with your son, and having him explain the game to you. It's that feeling of being a family, round and full and warm, of having your own in-jokes and nicknames, you against the rest of the world. The best I can explain it, is that the good moments with your children are like having that drunken, giggly, 2.00am conversation with your best friend, except infinitely better. I won't use that horrible phrase 'gives meaning to your life' because I think that it is quite possible to have an infinitely meaningful existence without children. I will only say that it's all part of life's rich tapestry. I wanted to have it all – work, children, travel, the full cupboard.

Which brings me to the point of this whole argument. Why is being a mom seen as more important an achievement than any other? I now see intelligent, high-achieving women describing themselves in their bios as – "Mother, entrepreneur and business founder", with the mother emphasised. Even *The New York Times* obituaries recently described rocket scientist Yvonne Brill with this introduction: "She made a mean beef stroganoff, followed her husband from job to job and took eight years off from work to raise three children."

Mint Lounge recently ran an essay by Urvashi Butalia, publisher of Zubaan books, in which she wrote movingly of her decision not to have children, and of how her life was still fulfilling. And yet, in the comments, people wondered, "Is she truly fulfilled?" Because building your own publishing house, turning out path-breaking books and travelling all over the world doesn't make for enough fulfilment? That's the kind of mindset we need to fight.

We need fewer platitudes about motherhood being the best job in the world, and more support for women who want meaningful lives outside, or alongside, motherhood. We need flexible hours, reliable childcare, corporate support, and above all, family support. We need to stop either deifying or sneering at motherhood, and see it for what it really is: just one of many chapters in our lives, as wrenching as it is wonderful – and maybe not for everyone. ●

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