

# How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life

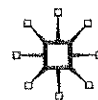
## From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl

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## 6

### Nine Months of Fear and a Lifetime of Paranoia: The Hidden Effects of Pregnancy Manuals, Child Rearing Products, and More

Imagine you're standing in a checkout line surrounded by racks of celebrity magazines and sensational tabloids. You would be hard-pressed not to encounter at least one headline devoted to pregnancy: a feature story on the latest expected Royal Baby, a voyeuristic beachside photo prompting speculation about whether some celebrity or another is trying to hide her 'baby bump', or an intrusive article narrating some woman's failure to reach the all-coveted state of pregnancy. For example, Jennifer Aniston, who has been the focus of countless articles speculating on the angst she must feel after every single one of Brad Pitt's biological or adopted children is announced, recently drew media attention when a red carpet photo gave off the mistaken impression that she might be trying to conceal a pregnancy. The actress finally addressed the never-ending pregnancy rumors targeted at her, stating: 'I don't have this sort of checklist of things that have to be done and ... if they're not checked, then I've failed some part of my feminism or my being a woman or [... decreased] my value as a woman because I haven't birthed a child.'<sup>1</sup> All of this attention (or scrutiny) directed at women could mistakenly be read as revealing the honored space that pregnant women have in our societies. In truth, as Aniston's response reveals, when you search beneath the surface of such media moments, what you really find are pretty terrifying messages like these being sent to women: your ultimate goal should be to become mothers and, once you do, remember we're watching you, so you'd best be carrying that child to term (and raising it in the way we deem fit).

While most of the behaviors promoted during the life 'stages' discussed so far have been based to some degree on fear – fears related to not conforming to societal expectations – no stage relies so heavily on this emotional manipulation as the stage of motherhood. While girls

are often trained early on to be afraid of not measuring up to beauty standards, women are taught to be terrified at the prospect of failing in the dating market and ending up as an old maid, and prospective brides get wrapped up in the various consumer-driven anxieties that surround wedding planning, pregnancy is the first stage of a woman's life that is actually depicted as life-threatening (that is, endangering the pregnant woman or the unborn child she is responsible for carrying to term).

Using fear to police specific populations is nothing new. For example, many cultures have used religious doctrine (for example, fear of eternal damnation) to influence their populations' accepted practices. Women in particular have often been targeted for such emotional manipulation. Even today, despite the advances made by the women's movement, women are still targets of fear-evoking political and/or media agendas. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, Susan Faludi's 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, addresses some of the cultural fears inflicted upon women at the end of the 20th century. During the 1980s, the media blamed feminists for ailments supposedly plaguing the nation, drumming up fear over so-called infertility epidemics and man shortages. According to the conservative mouthpieces of the time, the women's movement had encouraged women to put career before family and society was unraveling accordingly. Faludi explains how these myths became ingrained in the cultural conversation during a period of backlash when negative reactions to the feminist movement were prevalent. The fundamentalist ideology of the time dictated that women could not 'have it all' – and should they attempt to do so, there would be consequences. Although the directives were never spelled out in a clear-cut manner, women began to receive the message that they had to choose either a career or a family, and clearly, conservatives would say, family was the correct choice. Not choosing family over career, according to this platform, would result in a catastrophic infertility epidemic. In actuality, however, no such danger existed. The fear mongering started when a 1982 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* erroneously 'reported that women's chances of conceiving dropped suddenly after age thirty'; the report then concluded with advice that women should re-evaluate their priorities.<sup>2</sup> This study was surprising since prior studies had shown that fertility didn't decrease until women were in their 'late thirties or early forties'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the 'biological clock' scare was really a media campaign that sought to shame working women and advocate for women to leave the workforce, stay home where they belonged, and have babies. Scare tactic or not, the effects of this media rhetoric linger on in the 21st century, as evidenced by many women's

very quick (and uncritical) indoctrination into the culture of fear that still surrounds narratives of pregnancy and motherhood.

This chapter analyzes the ways in which American society cloaks the female pregnant (and postnatal) body in fear. To be clear, trying to have a safe pregnancy and working to ensure children's safety is, of course, extremely important. However, becoming entrenched in a state of constant fear of failure is not healthy for women; nor is it fair that so many cultural texts directed at women are attempting to police women's actions as soon as they become mothers-to-be. Studying pregnancy how-to/self-help books, such as the now widely acclaimed *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, reveals the ways in which these texts subtly use fear to control women during this stage of their life. *What to Expect When You're Expecting* is one of the most influential pregnancy items on the market. Touted as the 'pregnancy bible', it has sold more than any other contemporary pregnancy text, with over 14.5 million copies in print; it has been a perennial bestseller of *The New York Times*, and it has been classified by *USA Today* as one of the top 25 most influential books of the past 25 years.<sup>4</sup> This behemoth on the bookshelf is just one in a long history of problematic medical texts that associate childbearing (and child rearing) with fear. In studying this text, we were interested in not just what effect it may have on potential consumers but in the actual effects it *has* had on its readers. In order to determine this we turned to online customer reviews to support our claims concerning the possible implications that these books might have for the way society views the roles of mothers and mothers-to-be today.

To be clear, it is not just pregnancy that lingers under the dark cloud of fear; cultural products aimed at new mothers continue the trends started in pregnancy. Feminist theorists Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels have termed this phenomenon 'the new momism.' In their book, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*, Douglas and Michaels analyze the ways in which American society instructs women to become all-knowing, all-powerful forces within their children's lives – educational experts to oversee their schooling, product safety specialists to ensure their wellbeing, pseudo medical professionals to guarantee their health, and so forth. We extend this argument and maintain that that these cultural products suggest that in order to be healthy during pregnancy (thereby producing healthy offspring) one must exist in a constant state of minimal fear.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in order to be a successful mother post-pregnancy, these texts imply that one must conform to the mass paranoia of parenthood (thereby extending one's state of perpetual fear indefinitely).

### Historicized problems: the new 'momism' of today as a product of the yesteryears

The association of pregnancy with fear is not uncommon, nor is it new. Take, for example, the many popular culture texts that depict mothers during childbirth screaming, yelling, demanding drugs, and demeaning spouses. In 'Giving Birth Like a Girl', Karin A. Martin lists a string of such examples (be they represented comically or seriously), including episodes of *ER*, *Chicago Hope*, *Friends*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Mad About You*.<sup>6</sup> However, it's not just pregnancy narratives that train women to fear their parental roles; cultural texts train women to be on guard long after labor and delivery as they begin to raise their bundles of joy. Douglas and Michaels explain:

From the moment we get up until the moment we collapse in bed at night, the media are out there, calling to us, yelling, 'Hey you! Yeah, you! Are you really raising your kids right?' Whether it's the cover of *Redbook* or *Parents* demanding 'Are you a sensitive Mother?' 'Is your child eating enough?' 'Is your baby normal?' [...] or the nightly news warning us about missing children [...] or Dr. Laura telling some poor mother who works four hours a week that she's neglectful, the siren song blending seduction and accusation is there all the time.<sup>7</sup>

They continue, explaining that 'mothers are subjected to an onslaught of beatific imagery, romantic fantasies, self-righteous sermons, psychological warnings, [...] and totally unrealistic advice about how to be the most perfect and revered mom in the neighborhood, even the whole country.'<sup>8</sup> Writing their book as a call to arms, Douglas and Michaels explain that they are exasperated by the media-infused myth that motherhood, without fail or lapse, is eternally rewarding, that it is the most important accomplishment in the lives of women, that there is an approved way to do it correctly, and that all women, unless they are abnormal, should enjoy every moment of the experience.<sup>9</sup> They speak out against the cultural narratives that insist that motherhood is the key to personal fulfillment; that women are by nature the best primary caregivers for children; and that good mothers devote their 'entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being 24/7' to their children.<sup>10</sup> Douglas and Michaels argue that while on the surface the messages that contemporary women are receiving seem to celebrate motherhood, they actually promote ideals that are beyond reach.<sup>11</sup> In their view, this new wave of thought is simply the latest variation of what Betty Friedan famously

termed the 'feminine mystique' back in the 1960s and, we would add, it is a mutation of the post-feminist backlash that followed not long after.<sup>12</sup> Douglas and Michaels discuss the ways that postfeminism and the new momism work together in attempts to redomesticate women:

Here's the progression. Feminism won; you can have it all; of course you want children; mothers are better at raising children than fathers; of course your children come first; of course you come last; today's children need constant attention, cultivation, and adoration, or they'll become failures and hate you forever; you don't want to fail at that; it's easier for mothers to abandon their work and their dreams than for fathers; you don't want it all anymore (which is good because you can't have it all); who cares about equality, you're too tired; and whoops – here we are in 1954.<sup>13</sup>

All of these messages sent to women – many of which have remained unchanged for decades – compound over time. And a vast majority of these messages start weighing heavily on women, who awash with their new pregnancy glow, turn to pregnancy manuals to guide them into their new stage in life. Soon after, that happy glow fades to fearful radiation as women become inundated into the culture of fear that is motherhood. To be clear, just as the messages sent to women are not all that new, the practice of coupling fear and motherhood, or guilt and motherhood, is not new either. It has existed for centuries in texts directed toward women, as a review of medical texts and self-help books proves.

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