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Making/Breaking Stereotypes: The Connection Between Maternal Ambivalence and Authenticity in Morgan Jerkins' *Caul Baby*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the portrayal of maternal ambivalence in the novel *Caul Baby* by Morgan Jerkins, investigating the impact of race and economic status on this ambivalence through the fictional representation of motherhood. The selected novel illustrates how dominant discourses on maternity in America continue to distinguish between "good" and "bad" mothers, discriminating particularly against members of ethnic and class-based minorities. One of the primary features of "bad" mothers is the phenomenon of ambivalence, in which women simultaneously feel positive and negative emotions towards their child. Through the aforementioned novel, this paper explores the extent to which ambivalence—whether acknowledged or denied—influences the maternal practices of fictional mothers. It also calls attention to the challenge mothers of marginalised communities face: that of raising their children in accordance with their own principles when opposed by white-majority American society and its insistence on idealised motherhood.

Key Words: Class, Maternal Ambivalence, Maternal Authenticity, Motherhood, Race

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1. Introduction

In a 1957 print advertisement, a smiling woman is depicted five different times, wearing five different outfits. The description underneath the image posits this woman as "the family chef. And the nurse. And the chauffeur and maid", with the final outfit being one meant for going out (Bell Telephone System, 1957). Another similar advertisement lauds mothers for their ability to labor year-round without breaks, sleep or pay, all "with a happy disposition" (Veverka, 2014).

Although intended as a celebration of the work women put into raising their children, advertisers and society in general pushing the agenda of ideal motherhood has had strongly negative consequences for women who do not fit the mold. Women have historically been appointed the responsibility of caring for the children they give birth to, regardless of whether or not the fathers are available to help them in the process. "To "father" a child," Rich (1986) says in her well-known work *Of Woman Born*, "suggests above all to beget, to provide the sperm which fertilizes the ovum. To "mother" a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years" (p. 12).

O'Brien (2007) talks of a similar differentiation in society's perception of mothers and fathers. "The "good father" is admired on ethical grounds," she says. "The "good mother" is merely natural" (pp. 77-78). The concept that mothering comes naturally to a woman who gives birth pervades several fields of study pertaining to motherhood. Psychoanalytic theory, for instance, has historically ignored the nuances and variations to be found in different women's relationships with their children; psychoanalysts assume that a child's caretaker and its biological mother are synonymous entities. They rarely take into account adoptive or collective caretaking where a biological mother-child relationship is less exclusively codependent (Chodorow, 2007, p. 39). Psychoanalysis and other disciplines have been criticised for viewing motherhood from the lens of Western tradition, where families are typically nuclear, and biological—or, occasionally, adoptive—mothers are the sole primary caretakers of children (Chodorow, 2007, p. 27). Such limited perspectives on motherhood are widely accepted in society. This forces mothers of different sociocultural and economic backgrounds to conform to the expectations placed on them and to largely remain within the confines of the private sphere of home and household under patriarchal rule (Rich, 1986, p. 13).

Rich (1986) emphasised that the purpose of highlighting the oppression mothers regularly face is not to present them as blameless victims, nor to call attention only to how such persecution can bring forth negative emotions towards oneself and one's child. She insisted that such persecution can also help mothers recognise their ambivalent emotions and channel them in more productive, creative ways (p. xxxv). This research paper explores how such ambivalence is experienced and channeled by characters in the novel *Caul Baby* (2021) by Morgan Jerkins, a nuanced examination of motherhood and daughterhood in the context of African-American families.

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2. Literature Review

Of Woman Born's first chapter deals with the varied emotions mothers experience, particularly those negative emotions women are not allowed to admit to feeling in relation to their children for fear of being branded as bad mothers. Rich (1986) exhibits a number of extracts from her diary entries to showcase how a mother may feel inadequate or aggravated by the demands of her children and husband, leading to conflicting emotions she cannot share with others (pp. 21-22). She terms this situation ambivalence, and she describes ambivalence as "the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (p. 21). Ambivalence, she writes, exists in all relationships and between all people, no matter how close they may be; however, stereotypes of mothers portray their love and positive emotions as constant and unconditional, leading to women being affected by these images in media and subsequently believing themselves to be in the wrong when their loving emotions occasionally run dry (p. 23). Authentic mothering involves understanding this fact and incorporating it into mothering, a theme explored in further depth by other researchers in the field.

One such researcher is a psychotherapist and writer named Rozsika Parker (1995), who tackles the topic in her book *Mother Love/Mother Hate*. Parker says that there are two distinct and often dissonant narratives to consider when analysing mother-child relationships: one is of the child, and the other is from the mother's perspective (p. xi). Historically, however, psychologists and psychoanalysts have explored this mother-child relationship only from the viewpoint of the child, discussing how a mother's decisions or display of emotions can affect her children. Even the most well-known works on maternal ambivalence fall prey to this prejudice, examining how such ambivalence impacts child growth without considering the causes or potential benefits of acknowledging such ambivalence for the mother (p. 14). Parker's purpose with this book, she states, is to counteract prevalent assumptions regarding maternal ambivalence and explore how accepting the presence of ambivalence in their lived realities can lead to women developing personalised, more authentic versions of mothering.

Parker (1995) puts forward her own definition of maternal ambivalence, one synonymous to Rich's (1986) version: this ambivalence according to the former is "the experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side" (p. 1). Though the usage of the word "all" here insists that maternal ambivalence is no rare occurrence, idealised motherhood and societal perceptions of what mothering should look like—not sparing even the emotions that mothers should feel—beget anxiety and guilt in women who mother, making them wonder if they are somehow in the wrong. Society does not only circulate its opinions on motherhood but also restricts mothers from discussing their ambivalence or allowing themselves to accept its presence in their lives. "Our culture," Parker says, "defends itself against the recognition of ambivalence originating in the mother by denigrating or idealising her. A denigrated mother is simply hateful and has no love for the child to lose. An idealised mother is hate-free, constant and unreal" (pp. 20-21). The denial of the existence of

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maternal ambivalence by one's culture and society affects even the areas where such ambivalence is freely discussed. Parker presents examples of writing on the subject to highlight the tone used by such writers, which is often ironic and touched with humour. When not humorous, the tone aims to be reassuring and rueful, as if apologising for the fact that maternal ambivalence is being discussed at all. Parker then points out that such tones being used to mask the reality of maternal ambivalence, to make the concept of its existence manageable for audiences, is a direct result of how "[n]o one . . . finds it easy truly to accept that mothers can both hate and love their children" (p. 5). To Parker, maternal ambivalence is the primary source for every occasion of guilt felt by a mother, because this mother is unable to reconcile the existence of such widely contradictory emotions within herself towards her child (p. 4).

White American society often also attempts to conflate two opposing, incompatible conceptions of motherhood. On one hand, it insists upon propagating one particular version of motherhood through media, that of the selfless mother who finds completion in the raising of her children and shapes them into adults best fit for integration into society according to a prescribed set of rules. On the other hand, it spreads the belief that there are no actual rules because motherhood is an innate ability and cannot be taught, with mothers naturally understanding what is best for their children. These two actions—of telling a woman how to mother best while also telling her she is the only one who knows how to mother best—clash with each other, confusing mothers in the process (Parker, 1995, p. 2). This confusion contributes to the guilt already felt due to maternal ambivalence, amplifying it in a mother's mind.

Freud's (1957) initial analysis of ambivalence noted that the more negative emotions that make up a significant part of ambivalence are often rotated back onto the ambivalent self, to the effect that the person considers himself to be blameworthy simply because such emotions exist within him. The ambivalence thus "express[es] itself in the form of self-reproaches" (p. 251). Relating this concept to mothers, Parker (1995) puts forward the notion that the guilt and depression ensuing from maternal ambivalence are caused by a fear of harming one's child as well as the simultaneous desire to believe that one's child is harmless, to trust in their "unequivocal lovableness" (p. 15). In a later paper, Freud (1931) dismisses ambivalence as something that only exists within the early stages of a human being's development, with both love and hatred able to occur together and aimed at the same object. According to this later resolution, "[n]ormal adults" are able to separate the two emotions from each other (p. 235). However, Bowlby (1979) questioned this assumption by stating that ambivalence is natural and is felt by all people (p. 7).

Parker (1995) states that the existence of guilt itself is not the problem that must be considered, but what a mother does with that guilt and how she manages to control or channel it in constructive ways (p. 6). Ambivalence when recognised allows a mother to understand her own emotions and be honest with both herself and her children, an aspect of raising a child that is crucial to their growth (Parker, 1995, p. 73). It additionally provides the mother with "a greater awareness of her needs and limitations as a mother" (Parker, 1995, p. 78). Ambivalence when

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accepted and managed brings about a change in a mother's perception of her child. Instead of considering the child solely as an extension of herself, attempting to use them to fulfil her own unfulfilled dreams and aspirations, the mother realises that her child is an autonomous being with their own unique goals they wish to achieve. Once this realisation occurs, once a mother understands that her dreams should be fulfilled by her own self rather than by others, this mother is better able to put aside her conflicting emotions and work for the betterment of her child and herself simultaneously (Parker, 1995, p. 267).

Though Parker (1995) does touch upon the intersection between class, race, and motherhood—she mentions how mothers are homogenised without considering the differences women even of the same ethnicity or social class experience (p. 9), as well as how Black mothers typically have less time to give their children due to the demand of economically providing for them, making children feel as if they are not loved (p. 41)—she does not go into this subject in depth or analyse how maternal ambivalence features disparately according to a mother's socioeconomic or ethnic background. She merely states that context plays an important role in determining how much pressure is put on mothers to conform (pp. xi-xii). Academic Patricia Hill Collins (2007) says that decontextualising motherhood and ignoring the circumstances in which women raise children allows feminists and analysts to freely consider facets of maternal theory such as mother-daughter relationships, maternal desires and sexuality, maternal ambivalence, and more without considering whether these truly do apply to all mothers, including mothers of colour (pp. 313-14).

Elizabeth Kukura (2022), a professor of law at Drexel University, has explored through three case studies the punishment faced by women who display maternal ambivalence. Kukura points out that due to sociocultural causes, pregnant women of certain ethnicities and classes are more likely to be ambivalent towards the idea of giving birth than those from more economically stable backgrounds, because these pregnant women are afraid they will not be able to provide successfully for a child (p. 2910). Even psychologists studying maternal ambivalence focus their efforts on those upper-middle-class white women who are able to afford therapy sessions (p. 2916), with the rest of the world using the existence of this ambivalence as one factor differentiating "good" mothers from "bad" ones. Of the three case studies Kukura takes into consideration, two involve white women and one features a Black woman; all three have in common the fact that their private feelings of ambivalence towards their pregnancies were made public, and they were subsequently taken to court after having miscarriages because law enforcement assumed they must have actively tried to abort their pregnancies. All of these women expressed their reluctance to have another child due to economic insecurity and the belief that they would not be able to provide for more children, and the people to whom this reluctance was expressed portrayed hostility towards them for even considering abortion or adoption as viable alternatives (pp. 2911-15). Their expressed desire to not have more children was used against them in court as proof that their miscarriages were actually abortions, and the suspicion that arose from hearing what these mothers had to say about their pregnancies is what initially

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motivated their prosecution (pp. 2918-19). Kukura highlights how admitting to ambivalence can have far-reaching consequences for women of marginalised communities, for their apprehension and guilt regarding ambivalence is a result of fearing "public condemnation" more than the existence of ambivalence itself. Ambivalence, Kukura states, has become a stigma, and the widespread disapproval of maternal ambivalence causes mothers to be punished if they confess to experiencing it (p. 2917).

Themes of motherhood have often been incorporated into fiction, including by writers who are mothers themselves. Some of these works perpetuate dominant discourses on maternity, insisting upon the common interpretation of motherhood as the sole purpose in the life of a woman with children. Others, however, try to problematise the accepted viewpoint by either pointing out its discrepancies or otherwise centring narratives on mothers and presenting their own personal viewpoints through fiction. *Textual Mothers / Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures* (2010) is a collection of articles and essays exploring maternal absence, ambivalence, agency, and communication in several such works of fiction.

The word "contemporary," however, is a relative one. This paper aims to analyse the portrayal of motherhood in fiction through a currently contemporary text: *Caul Baby* (2021) by Morgan Jerkins. While the novel has been analysed extensively through the lenses of gentrification (Cupar, 2024; Martynuska, 2024), reproductive health (Woods Bennett, 2023), and Du Bois' work on Black magical traditions (Grieve-Carlson, 2023), it has not been examined from the perspective of maternal ambivalence and the role sociocultural factors play in perpetuating it. The focus in this paper is on whether the aforementioned portrayal of motherhood attempts to maintain the status quo held in place by idealised motherhood or points out its flaws and inconsistencies, presenting instead a version of motherhood structured under feminist theory, with mothers able to direct their ambivalent emotions towards the more productive end of raising their children according to their own values and beliefs.

3. Research Questions

This paper aims to answer the following questions:

- To what extent do sociocultural factors influence the characters' experiences with motherhood?
- Do these factors play a role in the pervasiveness of maternal ambivalence?
- How far are the characters in the selected work of fiction able to embody maternal authenticity?

4. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach and inspects the chosen novels through the method of textual analysis. The theoretical framework employed is that of maternal theory, with particular support from Patricia Hill Collins' (2007) work on contextualising motherhood and Rozsika Parker (1995) on maternal ambivalence.

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The selected work by Collins, i.e. "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood" (2007), is a seminal text known for stimulating discourse around Western feminist frameworks and understandings of motherhood with their exclusive focus on the experiences of middle-class white mothers. Lauded as a work that has greatly "influenced the development of maternal theory" and "shaped the way we think about motherhood" (O'Reilly, 2007, p. 2), Collins' text shifts this focus to racial ethnic women's mother work, including that of women who have not given birth to the children they raise.

A British psychotherapist and feminist writer, Parker is widely recognized as having played a pioneering role in bringing maternal ambivalence into focus from the perspective of the mother as opposed to that of the child. *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* (1995) shifted the focus in psychoanalytic and feminist discourses by addressing the emotional complexity mothers experience in their relationships with their children, highlighting the coexistence of love and hate in the maternal role. The book additionally divorces itself from traditional trappings of psychoanalytic belief that any negative emotion experienced by a mother is necessarily an echo of said mother's childhood ambivalence towards her own mother. "It is only really when we go to Rozsika Parker's work on maternal ambivalence," Baraitser (2009) says, "that we see some prising open of the relentlessly backwards movement of psychoanalytic theorizing of the development of maternity. . . . [I]t opens up a space to think about the particularity of maternal experience uncoupled from the mother's infantile experience."

Apart from the aforementioned works, journals, essays, literary articles, and textbooks related to the topic have also been extensively referenced and used to support the conducted research.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1.Maternal Identity

There is no single moment during the course of pregnancy and childbirth in which a woman transforms into a mother. Collins (n.d.) defines a mother as "a female who has given birth to offspring," suggesting that a woman only becomes a mother once her child is born. Adding more nuance to the equation, Gracka-Tomaszewska asserts that a woman's conception of herself as a mother and as the owner of a maternal identity begins developing during her childhood, when associating herself with her parents. This identity strengthens once she decides to become a mother, and it is further intensified a few months after she has given birth: this is when she ceases to perceive herself as a mother solely in terms of her own mother, and her maternal identity becomes fully autonomous (Zdolska-Wawrzkiewicz et al., 2020). From the above research, one gathers that a woman does not "become" a mother instantaneously, the moment her child is born, but undergoes a process towards acquiring a completely developed maternal identity that is lent potency once she commits to the idea of raising a child, be it biologically hers or one she has acquired through other means, such as adoption.

Laila Reserve, the first character readers meet in *Caul Baby* (2021), wanted to be a mother. She and her husband Ralph tried for a child several times, but each pregnancy resulted in

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a miscarriage—to the point Laila "lost count" (p. 3) of how many children she suffered the loss of, leaving the couple steadily more despondent. When the novel opens, Laila is pregnant once more—and this time, she is not willing to take any risks regarding her unborn child. She hides the pregnancy as long as possible; once word gets out, she even declines the idea of a baby shower so as to not "jinx this baby" (p. 18). "Any woman with a smidgen of common sense," the narrator tells us, would be certain that this child, like all of its predecessors, will not survive past the first trimester. Laila, though, quietly holds out hope, as evidenced by her words the moment she finds out about her latest pregnancy: she begs an undisclosed addressee not to let this one go to waste (p. 4).

Despite never having given birth—the prerequisite for being considered a "mother" as explored above—Laila still acts as a mother does when it comes to protecting her child and attempting to keep it alive against all odds. Her original disbelief in the healing properties of the Melancon caul shifts to contemplation of its potential the day she sees a papercut on Josephine Melancon's finger disappear in moments (p. 9). Her Christian faith wars with her budding secular belief that the caul will help her give birth to a healthy baby:

> *Even the saints of the Gospels stumbled in their faith from time to time—even while God was in their midst. And those saints were not women who bore children . . . [N]one of them understood the grief of someone dying inside of their body several times. . . . What if what everyone suspected about those caulbearing women was true? She had to explore any and all possibilities for the sake of her child or the regret would splinter every last one of her nerves. (p. 14)*

She thinks of her pregnancy as a complete child merely waiting to be born, and thus by extension of herself as a mother trying to keep that child alive until the day arrives. Those around her think of her as a mother as well. After the deal with Josephine falls through—Maman becomes afraid that if they give Laila the caul and she successfully gives birth, the Melancons will receive too much attention for their trade from people who wish to shut it down (p. 49)—the baby is stillborn. On her way to confront the Melancons for refusing her, the people of Laila's neighbourhood call out to her and say, "You still a mother, Miss Lay!" (p. 33) Their words mirror what Iris Melancon said to Laila on the day the latter visited the Melancon brownstone: through her visions of the future and her conversations with those long past, Iris gathered that this pregnancy would also fail, and she attempts to console Laila by telling her that she is still a mother, no matter what comes next (p. 25).

Like Laila Reserve, Josephine Melancon wishes to be a mother but has failed in all her attempts to get pregnant. She then chooses to adopt, an option open to her only after a child born with the caul is discovered, for Josephine's mother insists upon continuing the family tradition of selling caul and would therefore not be enthusiastic about a child being adopted into their household if it did not have a caul (Jerkins, 2021, p. 51). Physically giving birth is not necessary to the development of a maternal identity, and Josephine's decision to raise Hallow is enough to

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strengthen her own identity as a mother. Katz & Hunt (2014) provide a psychoanalytic framework for understanding the development of this identity within adoptive mothers:

> *Psychoanalytic processes include identification, differentiation, and symbiosis. Case study analysis suggests that, initially, the adoptive mother identifies with a needy child and seeks to provide for her. Next, the adoptive mother incorporates the child into her sense of self, fantasises about pregnancy and birth, and attempts to parent a perfect child. When the child's imperfections inevitably are revealed, the mother engages in fantasies of abandonment that allow for healthy differentiation. Ultimately, the mother and child reach social symbiosis . . . From this perspective, the healthy adoptive mother remains largely unaware of the processes through which psychological motherhood is achieved. (p. 48)*

Josephine undergoes all three stages of the psychoanalytic process described above. She seeks to provide for Hallow and attempts to raise her as flawlessly as possible, considering her circumstances and her own mother's demands; when she realises much later on in Hallow's life that her adoptive daughter is only human and has a different outlook on life than she does, Josephine starts fantasising about leaving home and separating herself from her now adult daughter (Jerkins, 2021, p. 162).

The authenticity of Josephine's motherhood, connected to her personal longing for a child irrespective of the opinions of others, is displayed through her actions when Hallow is delivered into her arms. She spends weeks with Hallow constantly by her side, unwilling to relinquish her to others except when she has to use the bathroom or shower (p. 86). When Maman and Landon explain to her that in order to pay their bills they must cut and sell a piece of Hallow's caul, in the same manner as her own and her sister Iris's were cut when they were around four months old, Josephine argues against the notion (pp. 87-88). She exhibits her desire for her daughter not to have to live the same life she did, and she is reluctant to succumb to the outside forces attempting to dictate the way she raises her child.

Unlike her aunt Laila, Amara Danville is not ready to become a mother. Her pregnancy is unexpected, she is unmarried, and she wishes to complete her studies without a child in tow. As unplanned and unwanted pregnancies lead to a lower maternal-fetal attachment level than those which are planned (Ekrami et al., 2019), it stands to reason that Amara will be less interested in the well-being of her fetus than Laila is in hers, and the progression of the novel reflects this mindset. When Amara falls down a flight of steps at the church and lands on her stomach, her immediate thought does not feature concern for herself, nor for her unborn child, but the idea that such a mishap could potentially get rid of her "problem" (Jerkins, 2021, pp. 43-44).

Amara deciding not to attempt abortion once she felt movement in her stomach, signifying "a potential person growing inside her body" (Jerkins, 2021, p. 43), contrasts sharply with her later instinct to wish this potential person dead in a demonstration of what Freud has termed maternal ambivalence (Martín-Sánchez et al., 2022).

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5.2.*Maternal Ambivalence*

Ambivalence produces contradictory feelings within mothers for their children and is in turn produced by the societies and socioeconomic situations within which these mothers reside. The concepts of "good" and "bad" mothers are determined via presumptions that do not take maternal ambivalence into account: good mothers always love their children and make raising them the focal point of their lives, whereas bad mothers often get angry at their children and do not spend their whole day beside them. "[P]rescriptions of mothering which designate mothers as either good and normal or bad and deviant," Parker (1995) says, "gloss over *both* the different circumstances in which women mother *and* the commonalities that do exist between mothers" (pp. 9-10). Parker further insists that ambivalence towards one's children is natural, and the way a woman deals with the guilt and anxiety which arises from this ambivalence is the real measure of a mother (p. 6).

A moment of wishing pain on a child without actually following through on the wish does not a bad mother make, and Amara's desire to see the fetus die without actively attempting to abort it is an example of such. She is merely experiencing maternal ambivalence, heightened due to her circumstances and by not wanting the pregnancy in the first place. Young women with negative impressions of their mothers experience greater difficulties during the stage where their maternal identity is developing as this identity is, until months after childbirth, dependent upon their perception of their mothers and how they were or still are mothered by them (Zdolska-Wawrzkiewicz et al., 2020). During her pregnancy, all Amara can think of is how furious her mother will be to learn that she is pregnant out of wedlock, and how distressed her aunt Laila will be upon realising that of the two of them, the woman who did not want a child is the woman carrying one (Jerkins, 2021, p. 43). Her anxiety over not having a proper support system that would allow her to raise a child alongside achieving her educational and professional dreams is what prompts her antipathetic thoughts towards her unborn child and, later, convinces her to give the newborn up for adoption.

Recognising and accepting one's maternal ambivalence can—far from harming one's child or stunting their development—lead to a woman being more creative in her mothering techniques. When a woman is honest with herself regarding her emotions, when she acknowledges the full range of feelings she holds in relation to her child rather than trying to bury those which society would disapprove of, she will be able to replicate that awareness of "her own state of psychesoma" when considering the same in her child (Parker, 1995, p. 94). On the other hand, when a woman does not recognise her maternal ambivalence and the complicated emotions which arise during pregnancy, that woman follows through with her pregnancy "physically but not psychologically . . . even postnatally the child may be shut out of her mind to the extent that she neither feels nor fears being a bad mother, nor experiences emotional concern for the child." When ambivalence is dismissed instead of accepted, it cannot bring about any creativity in mothering or "provide a spur to thought" (Parker, 1995, p. 8). Such is the case with Amara. After giving birth and allowing family friend Landon to take her newborn away for

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adoption, she continues with her life without giving much thought to how Hallow is living her own. Amara only really thinks about her daughter again when she begins a campaign running for district attorney and worries about how her career may be impacted if Hallow's existence is discovered (Jerkins, 2021, p. 233).

A number of factors can and do affect a woman's experience of motherhood. These vary from significant circumstances like race or personal tragedy to more pedestrian issues of public transport and the particular localities within which one lives. "Many cultures," Parker (1995) says in relation to the impact of these factors on one's mothering, "have structures and even ceremonies which acknowledge that the crucial moments of childbirth and motherhood constitute a juncture of such issues." She goes on to point out the lack of similar ceremonies in Western cultures affected by industrialisation, those which employ a "questionable medicalisation of life and death" (p. 10), an example of which can be seen in *Caul Baby* (2021) when two police officers arrive at Laila's house ahead of the ambulance called to take her to the hospital after she has gone into premature labor. Before even considering assisting Laila—covered in blood and clearly in agony—they take out their notebooks and pens and ask Laila's sister Denise, also present at the scene, how long she has been in this situation (p. 30). According to research conducted on the traditions and rituals surrounding pregnancy and childbirth in African-American communities, Black women often prefer alternative methods of childbirth, such as midwives and doulas as opposed to giving birth in a hospital. They additionally turn to women within their own community who either have more experience with childbirth in general or similar viewpoints on birthing (Hansen et al., 2021, p. 227), as opposed to taking classes on parenting and childbirth themselves. Black women also rely heavily on family and community support when preparing for childbirth, often trusting the people they met at church when looking for advice (Abbyad & Robertson, 2011, p. 51).

The Black people living in Harlem in *Caul Baby* (2021) had similar rituals for when a woman was pregnant or in labor, but both Laila and Amara are shown to either shun these traditions or not be provided with them. Because Laila chooses to hide her pregnancy from those around her, she is unable and unwilling during the first few months to rely on support or advice from her family or community when it comes to preparing for the birth of what she deems is her miracle baby. Even after the news has broken, the people at church who would ordinarily offer her their guidance remain silent, noticing Laila's fear and becoming afraid themselves of mentioning the pregnancy out loud, "worried that their words could send tremors to her body and endanger her child" (p. 11). Though they try to convey their support by touching her silently on her hands or on her shoulder, the experience is not the same as what Laila went through during previous pregnancies, surrounded by people who openly conversed with her about the baby (p. 3). Since Laila goes into labor a month and a half early, she does not have a proper system in place for the birth of her child, be it the structure of an in-hospital delivery or the support of a midwife or doula. Though Denise does arrive to assist in the birth, she cannot compete with the experience of a midwife. She admits to herself that she is out of her depth, for she gave birth to

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her only daughter Amara with an epidural and "was too dazed to remember any instructions besides "push"" (p. 29).

Amara's pregnancy, too, results in a birth that is considered unusual by members of the Black community. Like Laila, she experiences the first few months of pregnancy alone, without the support of any in her family or circle of friends. Only after Landon accidentally discovers the pregnancy does Amara receive support in the form of both Landon and his wife Valerie telling her to move in with them and prohibiting her from doing any work around the house (Jerkins, 2021, p. 53). When Amara's water breaks, Landon arranges for a doula named Melinda to take Amara through the birthing process. Melinda brings with her both a Bible to assuage Landon's Christian faith and an eleke to represent her own belief in Yoruban deities. "Both Jesus and Yemoja are here" (Jerkins, 2021, p. 55), she says. Despite having the traditional trappings of a Black pregnancy experience surrounding her, Amara herself did not ask for help or show any interest in organising how childbirth would play out. To Melinda, Amara's labor "was a birth like no other," in large part because she was used to seeing the "laughter and light and music" that accompanied such labor processes in the other households she had worked in, while this one held only "dimness, silence, and solemnity" (Jerkins, 2021, p. 57). The discomfort she feels at seeing this atypical scene prompts her to leave the unfamiliar atmosphere early (Jerkins, 2021, p. 58).

Parker (1995) asserts that when a mother does not have these systems and rituals in place, when she feels alone in her experience of pregnancy and childbirth, she feels herself to be the sole person in charge of her child's life and, perhaps, even of its death:

> *The absence of public structures of recognition [of a woman's pregnancy] means that a mother feels solely responsible for life and death when, of course, these matters do not lie in her total control. This kind of anxiety mobilised by motherhood can magnify the conflicts provoked by ambivalence, although women do respond differently to the fantasies engendered by this aspect of mothering. Some may enjoy a new sense of potency and agency but others, besieged by images of loss and disaster determined by their own social circumstances, states of mind, or possibly their child's physical condition, may be swamped by . . . depressive guilt. (p. 10)*

The fantasies mentioned above that are derived from maternal ambivalence involve harm coming to the born or unborn child. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1975) writes, "We so much dread the hatred in ourselves that we are driven to employ one of our strongest measures of defence by putting it on to other people—to project it" (p. 340). When a mother experiences feelings toward her child that are not considered acceptable by society's standards, like love and joy, she tends to project the unwanted emotions onto others, imagining all the ways that these others can potentially bring harm to her child. Both Laila and Amara act in a similar manner. The former's fear of and subsequent anger over a stillbirth is externalised and attributed to the Melancons not allowing her to buy the caul even though she was able and willing to pay the exorbitant price demanded. She is unable to come to terms with the manifestation of her fears, with the fact of her body yet again failing to produce a healthy baby, and so she goes to the

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Melancon brownstone—holding her dead child, and with a crowd of neighbourhood sympathisers in tow—and screams at the windows, creating a scene that causes police officers to arrive and take her away (Jerkins, 2021, pp. 34-35). Amara's obvious desire to terminate her pregnancy eventually externalises itself in a fear that her newborn will not be cared for wherever she goes after adoption, leading to Amara praying for Hallow: "Make her holy. Make her sanctified. Make her loved" (Jerkins, 2021, p. 58).

After losing their children, both Laila and Amara experience the depressive guilt Parker (1995) discussed. Laila is admitted into the psychiatric ward at Mount Sinai Hospital after her public actions, with the doctors claiming she needed to be monitored for some time. Denise disagrees with their analysis, believing Laila's actions in line with a woman in grief who had just lost her child, though she admits that her sister "was acting like an animal" and that "all the pain and frustration finally broke her" (Jerkins, 2021, p. 38). Since Amara's perspective does not feature in the novel while Hallow is growing up—much like she herself is absent in Hallow's life during this time period—we can only infer what her mindset has been like over the years through her points of view after Hallow has reached adulthood. Amara's introspection after a doctor's appointment does give one plenty of insight into the matter: "If she tried to estimate how long it had been since Hallow was born," Jerkins (2021) writes, "the sadness and shame would set in, and she would stop trying to remember" (p. 229). She did experience the depressive guilt that is a result of negative emotions or actions towards one's child, but she tried to tamp it down and hide from it as well as she could.

5.3.Maternal Authenticity

Iris Melancon from *Caul Baby* (2021) makes a decision regarding her daughter Helena that showcases her maternal authenticity and goes against societal expectations of good mothering: she leaves her daughter at the Bronx Zoo in the hopes that a kind family will take pity on a child wandering alone and take her home with them, adopting and raising her as they would one of their own children (p. 67). To Iris, this decision holds great importance as, in her mind's eye, it is the only thing that can save Helena from a life of subservience trapped in the Melancon brownstone, giving up a piece of herself every time Maman decides to sell some of the caul to a white person believing themselves in need of it. Iris is, however, later troubled with maternal guilt over the consequences of her actions—Helena accidentally ends up in a gorilla pit and is heavily injured before the authorities rescue her and return her to the Melancons—and attempts to make reparations by becoming, according to Helena, "more affectionate than ever before" (p. 68).

"Once a bad mother, always a bad mother" is an aspect of society's perception of motherhood which Jerkins explores and challenges in her novel. When Amara shows interest in learning about Hallow, which family she has been adopted by and how she is doing, Landon shuts her down, acting offended when Amara refers to Hallow as her daughter and reminding her pointedly that Amara wished to "get rid of her" in order to achieve each of her goals in life

(Jerkins, 2021, p. 233). Amara is given no leeway for changing her mind, instead being subjected to shame for ever reconsidering her old decision and contemplating getting to know her daughter. Jerkins (2021) gives Amara that leeway, though: by the time the novel reaches its conclusion, Amara and Hallow have reconciled, and Hallow has decided to move in with her birth mother (p. 333).

All mothers experience maternal ambivalence. Only those who embrace its existence, though, are able to cope with the conflicting emotions and channel their ambivalence into more creative mothering techniques, those which may not necessarily be considered standard in the eyes of their society and respective cultures. Many of the mothers depicted in *Caul Baby* (2021) are actively shown to grapple with the existence of their ambivalence, and while most are unable to come to terms with it and succumb to anxiety or maternal guilt, a few recognise it to be a natural part of their lives, and the narratives of these mothers indicate that this recognition will enable them to better provide for their children's needs while also considering their own.

6. Conclusion

Caul Baby (2021) shows through the lives of several characters that their sociocultural and economic backgrounds greatly influence their experiences with motherhood. Without the traditional trappings of pregnancy and childbirth found in African-American communities, mothers Laila and Amara are shown to suffer both physically and mentally instead of finding joy in commonly held rituals. Josephine, too, has to grapple with her economic status and ultimately succumbs to Maman's insistence that Hallow's caul be cut off in parts and sold in order to keep the Melancons afloat, despite being strongly against the notion and arguing in favour of keeping Hallow away from the family business.

The novel confirms Kukura's (2022) assertion that women of marginalised communities in America are more likely to experience maternal ambivalence than their white, middle-class or upper-class counterparts. It insists upon this statement through the abovementioned correlation between a mother's context and her experience with mothering. The greater the societal demands such mothers feel compelled to satisfy, the more likely they are to associate their negative emotions—connected originally to the pressure they are under to conform—with their children. Both Josephine and Amara act as examples of the same. The former begins planning to escape the Melancon brownstone and leave her daughter behind; the latter, due to an inadequate system for providing marginalised mothers with the assistance they need to both raise children and advance in their careers, cares little for her newborn daughter and allows her to be taken away for adoption.

Several mothers also attempt to be authentic in their mothering practices rather than surrendering to the expectations placed upon them by society. While Josephine fails in this attempt, two mothers do succeed: Iris abandons her child Helena in an act of rebellion against the demands of Maman, believing that Helena can only be safe away from the Melancon way of life; when Amara finally chooses motherhood, she is able to enact it and reunite with her daughter

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despite Landon attempting to keep Hallow away from her, citing her initial decision to leave Hallow as an unchangeable fact.

Due to the limited nature of this study, the findings of this research cannot be generalised to all contemporary fiction with notable maternal characters. There remains a margin for expansion through references to other narratives which may call attention to patterns that did not fall under the scope of this study. Stepmothers and the behaviour of society towards them may be explored further through the literature produced that features them. As this paper focused only on the portrayal of motherhood in fiction set in America, there is room for exploration regarding other areas of the world and the literature they produce on motherhood, with particular reference to whether these fictional mothers are able to be authentic in their mothering and exert maternal agency when it comes to raising their children.

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