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# The rise of the ‘yummy mummy’: popular conservatism and the neoliberal maternal in contemporary British culture

Jo Littler

## Abstract

This article analyses the emergence of the new social type of the ‘yummy mummy’ by examining the constellation of narratives circulating through and around it in British culture. It contends that, whilst it has some notable precursors, the idea of the yummy mummy marks a fairly substantial cultural shift given the weight of the western Christian tradition that has overwhelmingly positioned the mother as asexual. Coming into being in part through an increasing social divide between rich and poor, this stock type most often serves to augment a white, thirtysomething position of privilege, shoring up its boundaries against the other side of the social divide (so-called ‘pramfaces’). At the same time it is part of a wider fetishisation of the maternal that coexists with profoundly gendered inequalities in relation to childcare in particular. Drawing from a range of sources, and in particular autobiographical celebrity guidebooks and ‘henlit’ novels, the article argues that the figure of the yummy mummy functions to elide such social contexts, instead espousing a girlish, high-consuming maternal ideal as a site of hyper-individualised psychological ‘maturity’. ‘Successful’ maternal femininity in this context is often articulated by rejecting ‘environmentally-conscious’ behaviour and in attempting to render what are presented as excessive eco-delusions both abject and transparent. This tendency, the article argues, is indicative of the conservative nature of the phenomenon, which is forced to belittle and disavow wider structures of social, political and ecological dependency in order for its conservative fantasy of autonomous, individualising retreatism to be maintained.

## Introduction

What, or who is ‘the yummy mummy’? Whilst her characteristics are mutable according to context (or as changeable as her clothing), most often the term is used in contemporary Britain to symbolise a type of mother who is sexually attractive and well groomed, and who knows the importance of spending time on herself. She is, according to Liz Fraser’s book *The Yummy Mummy’s Survival Guide*, ‘the ultimate modern woman’: someone who ‘does not identify with the traditional, dowdy image of motherhood [...] who knows her Gap from her Gucci’ (Fraser 2006: xvii). The term has a widespread currency across a range of media: there are, for example, newspaper quizzes that ask you to decode whether or not you are a yummy mummy, and blogs and websites like ‘yummymummy.com’, founded for those ready to embrace the term.<sup>1</sup> It is frequently used to describe glamorous celebrity mothers - entertainment website *Starpulse*, for instance, invites us to share

supermodel Claudia Schiffer's 'yummy mummy secrets' – and in the UK is a phenomenon stoked by the publication of autobiographical guidebooks on pregnancy and motherhood by celebrities including Jools Oliver, Myleene Klass and Melanie Sykes. The figure of the yummy mummy has also surfaced through the genre of popular fiction targeted at women - in which 'chick lit' has grown up into so-called 'hen lit' - through books such as Polly Williams' *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy* (2006) and Fiona Neill's *The Secret Life of a Slummy Mummy* (2007) (see Hardyment 2007: 305 for a fuller discussion of the genre).

The yummy mummy is a social type, in the same way as the yuppie, the hippy, the new man, the ladette or the chav.<sup>ii</sup> The consideration of such figures has a long trajectory in cultural studies, from Stuart Hall's seminal analysis of the hippies (Hall 1969) through Richard Dyer's work on stereotypes (Dyer 1977) to Imogen Tyler's recent work on the chav (Tyler 2008). They are overdetermined figures that gain their force as figures repeated across different media. As they are usually expressive of an underlying social crisis or anxiety which plays itself out through such excessive and caricatured forms; types which are usually, to some extent, mobilised as figures of fun, a process which gives the commentator more credibility and implicitly attributes superior forms of social capital to him/herself (Tyler 2008: 18-19). Tyler's analysis or 'figurative methodology' of the stock type of the chav refuses any simple binary distinction between the material and semiotic in order to consider what such figures or categories of existence generate or 'body forth'.<sup>iii</sup> In the case of the chav, it is bad old-fashioned (and yet also newly-fashioned) class disgust which is 'bodied forth', and which blocks the potential for social mobility for its disparaged subjects. (Tyler 2008: 18)

But what does the yummy mummy 'body forth'? Most references to her are not about disgust or the abject, but the opposite: desirability and sexual attractiveness. The yummy mummy quite clearly 'bodies forth' a new figure of the mother as a sexually desirable being. Where did she come from, the yummy mummy, with her flyaway hair, skinny fit jeans and Silver Cross pram? What does the yummy mummy indicate about

contemporary ideas of femininity and parenting, and what does her popular existence tell us about the times we live in?

To answer these questions this article explores some of the different dimensions of this stock type. Beginning by looking at the most conspicuous traits of the yummy mummy - her appearance and sexualisation - it relates this figure to the slightly less conspicuous new social demographics of motherhood and its calibrations in terms of class, age and 'race'. To do this is not simply to look at simply how the yummy mummy might have emerged as a 'reflection' of trends in mothering but rather to focus on how the formulation of this figure is *actively* used within a particular social context to shape ideas about what a mother's role is and should be. Later on, it focuses on some less obvious and little-commented features of the yummy mummy: her relationship to environmentalism and to romance, in order to outline something of her relationship to wider social and political formations, or what Felix Guattari called 'ecologies' (Guattari 1989/2000). In doing so, it outlines the individualising tendencies of a neoliberal fetishisation of singular models of desirable maternal femininity, alongside their refraction of the psychological, environmental and social ecologies in which they are formed and which they attempt to shape and to deny.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Sexualisation**

Most obviously the yummy mummy positions the mother as a sexually desirable being. This formation is actually a substantial cultural shift, given the enormous weight of the Western Christian tradition which has positioned the mother as asexual, as enshrined by the figure of the Virgin Mary. As Adrienne Rich wrote in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*,

The divisions of labour and allocations of power in patriarchy demand not merely a suffering Mother, but one divested of sexuality: the Virgin Mary, *virgo intacta*, perfectly chaste. Women are permitted to be sexual only at a certain time of life,

and the sensuality of mature – and certainly of aging – women has been perceived as grotesque, threatening and inappropriate. (Rich 1976/1995: 183)

By questioning the role of women in the family – in particular by questioning what Kathryn Woodward calls the ‘gap between motherhood as a moral ideal and a social reality’, second-wave feminists including Ann Oakley, Germaine Greer and Kate Millet challenged the Madonna/whore dichotomy, the complex of attitudes that was understood as existing as a patriarchal cultural norm (Woodward 1997: 241, Greer 1970, Millet 1970, Oakley 1974). Motherliness, to quote Rich again, had become ‘acceptable in its ‘nurturing, self-sacrificing form: thus, in the fourteenth century, the Virgin Mary could be worshiped while living women were brutalized and burnt as witches’ (Rich 1976/1995: 114-5). The myth that mothers were asexual beings therefore began to be dismantled in some of the key texts of second-wave feminism. Interestingly, however, the role of mothers’ sexuality featured much less in these texts than might be expected.

The yummy mummy’s positioning of mothers as desirable and sexually active beings might therefore be thought to strike a further emancipatory blow through this Western Christian history of maternal asexuality. Certainly the yummy mummy’s glamorous and overt sexualisation of motherhood as a state is unprecedented in the stereotypes of motherhood which populate recent mainstream Western cultural history, from the 1950s domestic goddess (groomed yet chaste), to the 1970s oppressed housewife (made-up and miserable), to the working mother of the 1980s (powerful and besuited) (Woodward 1997).

If we were to try to formulate an aetiology we might say that the yummy mummy’s invention began in one sense with the sexualisation of the pregnant body from the late 1980s, marked by the iconic picture of a naked Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair* (Tyler 2001; MAMSIE 2007) and extended through the flaunted bumps of 1990s pop stars like Neneh Cherry and Melanie Blatt. However, such sexualised bodies were primarily restricted to *pregnant* women, not mothers; and by the 1990s the key tropes around motherhood were instead focused firstly around moral panics over single mothers,

and secondly through women juggling their lives through increased participation in the post-Fordist labour market (Woodward 1997). The yummy mummy of today is different because no longer is it merely the *pregnant* body which is allowed to look sexual, and no longer is the post-pregnant ideal simply to combine work with an attractive motherly saintliness: now mothers themselves are encouraged to look ‘hot’.

### **Circumscribed sexualities**

However, the negative aspects of this configuration are multiple. First, it becomes an imperative – the message is that mothers are not just allowed but *expected* to perform a specific kind of sexualisation. Treatments like facials that would 20 years ago have only been the preserve of the very rich are now advised as necessary and routine. As minor UK celebrity Melanie Sykes in her guidebook *Blooming Beautiful* tells us:

Being a gorgeous mum just takes a bit of imagination and more planning than it did before, but you really have *no excuse* for sinking into frumpdom and blaming it on parenthood (Sykes and Bond 2006: 146).

It is hard to imagine a clearer expression than this of how the onus - no matter the extent of resources or income - is on a self-governing subject to regulate herself. Such urgings are part of a wider canvas of neoliberal responsabilizing self-fashioning that Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, for example, have discussed in relation to ‘makeover TV’ and Ros Gill and Christina Scharff in relation to the remodelling of contemporary femininities (Ouellette and Hay 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011). In this context, the yummy mummy functions as an *aspirational* figure, offering a form of ‘emulation framing’; a phrase used to describe media which display glamorous lifestyles as desirable (Kendall 2005: 53; Negra 2009: 126). This is at its most conspicuous in guidebooks that explicitly set out to teach how to acquire the social deportment and material accoutrements of a yummy mummy lifestyle, such as *Living the Posh Mom Life* and *The Fabulous Mum’s Handbook* (Saunders 2007; Negrin and Nebens 2007).

Second, this sexuality is delimited in highly particular ways, through a circumscribed idea of what is attractive. Its preferred mode of femininity is ultra-feminine, and the most obvious traits central to its fantasy ideal are the familiar staples of women's magazines: of being well-groomed, wearing 'good' fashionable clothes, and being very slim. In other words, it involves the extension of a fashion and beauty complex to the pregnant and post-pregnant body (Jermyn 2008: 174). For example, the author of *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide*, (and self-confessed bulimic) Liz Fraser, warns pregnant women not to eat too much, stating that all pregnant women probably need are 'a few more grains of rice and some grapes' (Fraser 2006: 60-3).<sup>9</sup> Even when the yummy mummy is ostensibly being rebelled against – through books like *Undomestic Goddess* (Kinsella 2005), *The Secret Diary of a Demented Housewife* (Greene 2007) and *The Secret Life of a Slummy Mummy* (Neill 2007) - its paradigm is often reinforced. For example the mother in *Secret Diary of a Slummy Mummy* is at one point characterised as slummy for failing to get a manicure that month. Similarly, in a survey in the UK mid-market tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail*, 'Are you a Yummy Mummy or a Slummy Mummy?', the slummy is even more endearingly feminine than the yummy for not quite being able to achieve the dizzy heights of yumminess, whilst still participating in its value system (*Daily Mail* 2007). (If the mummy really was significantly 'slummy', the *Mail* would probably have something quite different to say about it).

We can relate this configuration to what to Angela McRobbie has identified as the contemporary motif of the woman who is endearing by virtue of 'failing', like Bridget Jones. For McRobbie such behavioural codes are part of a wider socio-political landscape which calls women to push feminism away and position it as outmoded in order to feel fully contemporary, sexy and cool (McRobbie 2009). Similarly, the idea of a slummy mummy usually codes being unable to reach such full-blown 'perfection' as endearingly feminine whilst still revalidating the yummy mummy as a complex.

Third, the yummy mummy is figured as more of a desired than a desiring subject: her sexuality is circumscribed. Being a desired object rather than desiring subject is even more evident in the case of her transatlantic cousin, the MILF, or 'Mother I'd Like to

Fuck’,<sup>vi</sup> who is more thoroughly constituted through the pornoisation of culture than the yummy mummy (see Levy 2005, McRobbie 2009). In turn, the yummy mummy has been most used as a stock figure in Britain, and so, unsurprisingly, has more specific class associations.

### **Classy subjects**

The yummy mummy is profoundly classed. She has the ability to afford a plethora of beauty treatments and ‘good’ clothes as well as the time to plan to buy them. Such affluence is apparent from the designer-obsessed yummy mummy of *Shopaholic and Baby* to the high-end clothing recommendations of celebrity guidebooks like Sykes and Oliver (Kinsella 2007; Sykes and Boyd 2006; Oliver 2006). The landscape of henlit is overwhelmingly populated by people living in extremely affluent metropolitan centres who are surprised and embarrassed that people actually live in less affluent zones like Hackney or Queens.<sup>vii</sup> The heroine of *Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*, for example, is shocked that her partner lives in Hackney, and relocates him to a more genteel area; one of the lead characters in *Babyville* tries to persuade the National Childbirth Trust she lives in Hampstead rather than Gospel Oak; and *Momzillas* documents the intricate snobberies of mothers in Manhattan’s Upper East Side (Green 2001; Williams 2006; Kargman 2007). Celebrities who are given the moniker of ‘yummy mummy’ are also overwhelmingly light-skinned, and even celebrity maternal-guru Melanie Sykes writes in *Blooming Beautiful* about how she disguises her ‘slightly yellowish skin tones’ with fake tan (Sykes and Boyd 2006: 30). White privilege, alongside the heteronormativity, of Yummy Mummies in henlit novels is unspoken, where the only people who tend to be racially marked are nannies: in *Momzillas*, for example, one nanny is described as ‘large and black’ and the area of the park where nannies congregate is referred to by a key character as ‘Little Trinidad’ (Kargman 2007: 24).

If these classed and racialised dynamics reflect the fact that these are genres written about primarily by white thirty-something metropolitan-based female journalists, they also relate to wider social demographic trends. The birth rate in much of Western Europe and the US has been increasing since its historic low in the early 2000s. Whilst this is



nowhere near the boom of the 1960s, it is, in relative terms, a marked upswing. In the US, where there have been no improvements in welfare entitlements, the rise in births is usually simply put down to the wealthy having more babies. As the US Council on Contemporary Families put it in its commentary a few years ago "birthrates ticked up quite a bit among the most affluent. [...]Kids are luxury goods"<sup>viii</sup> (Nasser and Overberg 2007).

In the UK the story is similar yet different. The rich are also having more babies. But so are other socio-economic groups, which can be related to the partial increase in some family-friendly policies. These include, in particular, the after-effects of New Labour's lengthening of the amount of time it is possible to claim Statutory Maternity Pay and the introduction and extension of paternity leave. In both cases, the picture is most significantly polarised through one particular combination of class and age, for women in their thirties are typically having babies older, bringing the average age of a woman having a baby in the UK up to 29 (Office for National Statistics 2011). This makes the more significant factor a perceived social gulf between younger mothers who are more likely to be working class (and often demonised as 'pramfaces') and the middle-class career women in her thirties, whose route to motherhood is often deemed more culturally acceptable (see McRobbie 2006, Tyler 2008).

It is from this latter group of thirtysomething middle-class career women who 'delayed' having babies that the yummy mummy most usually often springs. Even so, the world the character inhabits bears an increasingly tenuous relationship to that inhabited by the vast majority of mothers. If, as McRobbie has pointed out, the 'delay in the birth of a first child' by young western women is directly connected to their ability to 'come forward' in the labour market', today the labour market is making it harder to have enough resources to comfortably have a family, unlike a generation ago. As Kate Crawford writes, young people are castigated for being adultescents, when in fact they are economically infantilized through the accumulation of debts and their inability to afford housing deposits, let alone the rising cost of childcare (Crawford 2008).

This situation has been exacerbated in the UK as the Conservative-Liberal coalition governments cuts during the recession have affected women more than men, (particularly as there is a higher proportion of women working in the public sector) and have targeted ‘family friendly’ policies (through the abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant and the Child Trust Fund, and the cuts in funding for SureStart nursery centres and child benefit, for example) (Stratton 2010, Women’s Budget Group 2011). These actions fall on top of a context which is already largely family unfriendly. As Bea Campbell has commented, one of the key problems to persist since second-wave feminism has been that neither it, nor society more broadly, has dealt effectively or equitably with the issue of childcare (Campbell 2008). Despite the rhetoric, there is a widespread lack of support in many workplaces for flexible and/or part-time working, a continued cultural expectation that the mother will constantly be the ‘foundation parent’ and a lack of subsidised childcare possibilities. This situation is shared to a considerable extent (though with some important differences) by the US (Asher 2011; Slaughter, 2012).

In the midst of these contexts – comprising a collective social failure that makes it very hard to combine work and childcare in equitable and supportive fashion - there has been a fetishisation of the maternal. This fixation has taken a number of forms, including the mediatised pitting of ‘stay at home’ mothers against ‘working mothers’ - as two angry tribes in a race to the moral high ground - and a reinvigorated romanticisation of the housewife. Susan J. Douglas and Meredith Michaels argue in their book *The Mommy Myth* that the American stay-at-home and downscaling mom have achieved a new prominence in the past two decades, having become idealised at exactly the same time as neoliberal policies have sought to cut back on and avoid providing state daycare provision (Douglas and Michaels 2004). The idealisation of motherhood works to obscure the effects of these policies as it renders looking after children a thoroughly private issue. In other words, fewer mothers can afford to stay at home ‘all the time’, and indeed, many of them do not want to, but they are made to feel bad about not doing so by images of wealthy moms doting on their kids. Such analysis has been extended by Negra’s persuasive account of the glorification of feminine domesticity as a form of ‘retreatism’ from the problems of the public sphere (Negra 2009: 130). This widespread

fixation on the maternal has also provoked an ‘anti-maternal’ backlash in some quarters, where both the assumed connections between maternity and pleasure, and the wider linkages between maternity, futurity and the state have been roundly questioned (Badinter 2012; Edelman 2004; Maier 2009; Power 2012).

The yummy mummy can be understood as one of these forms of fetishisation of the maternal. It attempts to elide such social conditions by reducing mothering to an individualized matter of ‘psychological maturity’ and ‘personal choice’. The dilemmas faced by the heroines of the guidebooks and the novels – whether about baby rearing or relationships – are overwhelmingly presented as emotional issues, occluding the questions of money and privilege. It is here that the role of such media constructions is important, for it is such images and messages that make different modes of motherhood something to either aspire to or to scorn. By yoking together, or articulating, glamorisation with a denial of social dynamics, the yummy mummy works actively to generate a popular conservative fantasy. The denial of social dynamics is also registered in how, for example, the yummy mummy herself is presented as infantilised – as in effect too *girlish* to engage with such bigger issues.

### **Infantilisation: rich little rich girls**

‘I don’t regret finding out Rice was a girl for one second. It meant we could get everything we needed in pink!’ Myleene Klass, *My Bump and Me* 2008: 112

The very term ‘yummy mummy’ is infantilising, with its half-sexualised, half childlike address. It is a semi-childlike address spoken by an adult, an adult ventriloquising a child’s voice, a fusing together of sexualised objectification with infantilisation. It reverses the idea of the mother as devouring monster; the hungry, castrating monstrous feminine that populates psychoanalysis, flipping the trope around so it is instead the mother herself who is not only edible but also a diminutive tasty morsel.

This infantilisation effect also works through celebrity guidebooks. Their offer of chummy intimacy and advice functions in a post-traditional society where family networks can no longer be relied upon to deliver support to new mothers, but it is delivered via a diminutive little-girlishness through the design of the books and the narrative tone. The books themselves are often decked out in nursery pastels with multiple kisses from the author (Oliver 2006; Klass 2008). This is part of a larger formation; as Dianne Negra puts it, 'postfeminism seems to be fundamentally uncomfortable with female adulthood itself, casting all women as girls to some extent' (Negra 2009: 14).

One further interesting point in the light of this diminutive feminisation is the traffic between gay male sensibilities and the re-sexualisation of femininity. Often a whole camp vocabulary informs the narrating of this process, perhaps best illustrated by the title *The Fabulous Mum's Handbook* (Saunders, 2007). Indeed, it is often explicitly gay men who give women permission to re-sexualise themselves, whether through TV makeover shows like Gok Wan's *How to Look Good Naked* or characters like Stanford Blatch, Carrie Bradshaw's gay best friend in US drama series *Sex in the City*. This process is clearly ambivalent. It can mark the lessening of rampant homophobia and the queering of mainstream cultures via the camaraderie of heterosexual women's consumption. It can mark the success of gay men in the realms of fashion and of lifestyle TV (Palmer 2008). It can mark the celebration of a particular kind of feminised femininity. At worst, it can result in the situation where an ultra-feminine, gay male version of a femininity that has been implicitly derided and parodied is re-absorbed and valorised by a female buying public. In other words, if these lines of traffic are sometimes ironic, and sometimes empowering, they can also work to serve up a rather old and less than ironic and empowering mode of femininity.

Such over-privileged infantilisation is also writ large in henlit novels, which tend to borrow heavily from the romance genre and are often remarkably similar in terms of characterisation and plot. Disoriented new mothers embark on attempts to refashioning their image (through shopping, Botox, near-affairs) until they come home to their

husband who revalidates them as an ideal mother (eg Williams 2006: 370). The final or penultimate scenes in these novels will invariably be a romantic one, involving a reunion with the husband and basking in the happiness of their shared domestic family life (although the terms of the sharing are often far from equal) in what we might call the 'redomesticated romance'. The final line of *Diary of a Slummy Mummy*, for example, involves the husband literally grabbing her wrist ('Lucy' he says, smiling. 'You're home' Neill 2007: 420). The final scene of Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* depicts the satisfied heroine tidying the kitchen whilst daydreaming about her husband. As Tania Modleski argued, romantic resolution offers the female reader the pleasure of overcoming the traditional gendered splitting of themselves - where they are both object and subject of the gaze - and instead allows them to experience the kind of transcendent nurturing love that that women may receive in infancy from their mothers. The romance, in other words, offers a transcendent space where the fantasy is that you can let yourself go and give up self-monitoring, and he will love you anyway (Modleski 1982: 35-58; see also Gill 2007: 223).

There is a particular ironic circularity in this context, for the yummy mummy is a mother figure herself, and so the fantasy of a nurturing romantic resolution also ties into a more multivalent discourse of how new mothers are themselves 'vulnerable' and need to be 'mothered' by a range of people including their friends, partners and their own parents if they have them, an issue discussed in a variety of pregnancy and new baby guidebooks (for example, Kitzinger 2003). However, in the yummy mummy novel, as we have seen, the mother is usually positioned as needing to be mothered by the male figure, a far narrower narrative which serves to create the image of an infantilised women in need of paternal rescue.

What I am terming the 'redomesticated romance' can be connected to the resurgent idealisation of the stay-at-home mom, as mentioned earlier (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Negra 2009). The yummy mummy has an ambiguous relationship to the stay at home mother: in some henlit novels working in the public sphere is simply abandoned and not returned to, or left unmentioned; in others it is often presented as a measured realisation

(the former career woman either gives up her work, only to go back to work part-time or to work from home). Whether it is mentioned or not, work tends to be minimised in yummy mummy narratives, pushed to the sidelines, often like the character of the baby or child. In Allison Pearson's book, *I Don't Know How She Does it*, for example, by the end heroine Kate Reddy has left her high-powered city job to work part-time from home making doll's house furniture, in a very literal metaphor for downscaled feminine aspiration. (Pearson 2003: 353). The fetishisation of the maternal and its recoding as sexually desirable minimises the question and so forecloses the possibility of finding more equitable parenting solutions.

### **Commodification and ecological disavowal**

The infantilisation through which the yummy mummy is constituted also stakes out an active popular conservatism by 'turning away' from wider social issues and publics. One interesting example of such a 'turning away' is the extent to which it is used to ridicule environmentalism: an issue that is obviously broad and 'global' at the same time as it is also registered as being deeply intimate and domestic (even if it is being registered as such if only to be disavowed). The disparaging of environmentalism in the context of conservative femininity is remarkable: in most hen lit novels people interested in 'natural birth', breastfeeding for longer than a few weeks and anybody involved with the National Childbirth Trust are ridiculed; 'organic' is often positioned as - whilst commonly available - the consumer choice of cranks and wierdos.

For example, in *Babyville*, two wealthy, upper-middle-class mothers, Maeve and Sam, are shown bonding in Sam's kitchen where Maeve derides 'all that bloody organic stuff' as pointless:

'Oh God,' groans Sam. 'You know what? I bloody agree with you, but look,' and she opens her fridge door and beckons Maeve over to have a look. Organic milk. Organic cheese. Organic bread. Organic vegetables. 'Isn't that

ridiculous? I think exactly the same thing, but I've done it because everyone else does it.'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' Maeve can feel herself creasing up with embarrassment. She had no idea Sam would be one of those women, Sam looked so ...*normal*. 'I shouldn't have said anything. Me and my big mouth.'

'You should have said something, because you're right.' (Green 2001:415; italics in original)

The key point is italicised for us: organic food is *not normal*. It is the province of weirdos, of 'other' women. We may be tempted into it by the herd, the mass, but this is *stupid shopping*, not what normal, smart mothers with a good solid sense of their own individualism do.

Importantly, this is not a working class critique of organic food as a luxury foodstuff: this is a profoundly privileged voice ridiculing the practice and urging us to spend our money on, for example, corporate non-organic formula (explicitly referred to as 'normal') and pesticide-produced food. This is a universe in which what is coded as normal is to have a very upwardly aspirational ethos in terms of fashion and beauty– it endorses spending much more than most people do in these areas – but positions giving organic food to your child as ridiculous. It both appeals to this specific idea of 'the normal' and works to help create it as the norm.

The hostility towards and dismissal of organic food and of environmentalist politics in yummy mummy novels in particular is striking. There is nearly always a character that 'represents' an environmental position amongst the protagonist's post-partum friends or acquaintances. Invariably the mother's new friends fall into three or four stock types, including the yummy mummy, who spends a lot of time on labels and self-care; the competitive or Alpha mother, who insists on her child's brilliance and the superiority of her mode of mothering; the eco mother, who is unbelievably dull and unfashionable; and the 'normal' 'sane' mother (often, with narcissistic predictability, some kind of journalist) who the heroine doesn't know well at first but with whom she bonds by the

end of the novel. The eco-loon figure is always presented as extremely drab, someone who breastfeeds too often or for too long, and who is socially incompetent as well as physically unattractive. In *Rise and Fall*, for example, eco-mother Michelle is described as an 'extreme lactivist' who drinks her own breastmilk herself as well as giving it to her child, and her breast 'can only be described as 'an udder' (Williams 2006: 56-7). Eco-mothers are without fail drawn as characters who can only occupy a position of evangelical sermonising about breastfeeding and who castigate other women unfairly (Williams 2006: 56). Indeed, this mythic, hyper-exaggerated figure is a phenomenally popular stereotype, being constantly invoked across a wide range of hen lit texts.

The habits and appearance of the eco-practitioner are therefore often expanded into the grotesque. In *Shopaholic and Baby* the eco-female is Becky's recently-discovered long-lost twin sister Jess. Jess, an environmentalist, anti-consumerist and even (horror of horrors) an academic, brings her endearing and loveable label-conscious sister some already-used rags out of which she is going to make reusable baby wipes, and a copy of the magazine *Frugal Baby* which features 'pictures of babies dressed in old flour sacks' (Kinsella 2007: 28, 70). An environmental stance positioned as unhygienic, sour-faced and ridiculous, and importantly is substantially exaggerated to a far greater degree than other roles in the novel. For example, it is notable that the now widespread practice of buying biodegradable baby wipes does not feature in Kinsella's novel, as that would not be able to be so roundly dismissed and derided. In this light it is significant that the triumphant final scene of *I Don't Know How She Does It* features a group of other women getting retribution on a former sexist male colleague by encouraging him to invest in an ridiculous investment opportunity: the biodegradable nappy. Whilst the book accurately pinpoints how a completely biodegradable nappy has still not been made (because it would collapse when wet) the fact that there are nappies on the market that are largely biodegradable and produced using recycled materials, for example, is ignored. The novels' choice of a biodegradable object therefore enables an ecological project to be positioned as both economically unsustainable and slightly insane.



The emphatic dismissal of environmentalism runs against the grain of the popularity of these products: given both the relative expansion of organic food and the fact that the segment of the market in which it has increased most is baby food (Harrison et al 2005; Littler 2009). The yummy mummy discourse is a feminine ecology that rejects environmental ecology. Indeed, its presentation of environmentalism is so exaggerated and high-pitched that we might say its relationship to ecology and environmentalism is explicitly one of *disavowal*. Equally importantly, what's at stake here is the incitement of a particular kind of consumerism: both buying more and more objects, and ensuring that these objects are new, not second-hand; corporate, not co-operative; intensively-produced, not organic. Yummy mummy guidebooks are less vitriolic, but undeniably work to incite more high-end buying; for example, Jools Oliver includes a list, 'Where I buy baby clothes' at the back of her book (Oliver 2006: 305-309).

The 'normal' role sanctioned here, then, is a kind of pro-corporate consumer, and as such has a wider agency in encouraging and driving consumerism. The logic of this position as anti-political is also occasionally rendered explicit; in *I Don't Know How She Does it*, for example, Allison Pearson disparages a man who 'was probably some kind of student activist at college. He read economics the better to arm himself for the workers' struggle while morally blackmailing all the kids of his corridor into buying that undrinkable Rwandan coffee' (Pearson 2003: 25). In these terms the yummy mummy sits as part of a reactionary discourse in which environmental and political concerns and actions are routinely positioned as the zone of freaks and social misfits whilst validating and encouraging a corporate, intensely acquisitive consumer subject.

Environmentalism, then, perhaps surprisingly, and very strikingly, functions as the key object of disavowal for the yummy mummy. There are several reasons why this might be so. First, ridicule can be a means of hiding other drivers, such as thrift (saving money by not buying organic) or convenience (it might be easier to not try to source environmentally-friendly nappies). Second, it can be a means of being mildly risqué, rebelling against an ostensible 'moral norm' imaginary whilst remaining firmly within the confines of the social symbolic (in that it's not the law to buy organic food). Third,

environmentalism is in many ways the diametric opposite of what the yummy mummy endorses: consumerism, narcissism, individualism. Fourth, within this discursive framework, environmentalism comes to stand in for ‘the political’: for forms of social public life beyond the boundaries of the private, not only for campaigning and activism and work which attempts to address social change but for any kind of interest in the public future (or even the welfare of children, understood in different terms from their status as markers of the parents’ own success as consuming subjects). The rejection of environmentalism - which is so viscerally violent in this context – might therefore be understood as a rejection of politics and the public – even, at times, of any orientations towards a shared or common future. This is marked by how its mode of femininity is fixated on private worlds: of interior emotions, domestic self-fashioning and infantilisation. In this imaginary, regressive infantilisation and anti-environmentalism are connected together through psychosocial disavowal.

## **Conclusion**

The yummy mummy might therefore be thought of as quasi-emancipatory in the sense that it undermines the idea of motherhood as an asexual state -- but deeply constricting in its promotion of its hyperfeminine heterosexual form of maternalism. It comes into being through an increasing divide between rich and poor, serving to augment a white, thirtysomething position of privilege, shoring up its boundaries against the ‘pramfaces’ perceived to be on the other side of the social divide. Its inconsistencies reveal the fragile, and increasingly economically infantilised nature of even this middle-class position; but they are also articulated to a very conservative discourse which attempts quite frenetically to normalise a fetishized maternal which is characterised as a corporate, intensely acquisitive consumer subject.

In the figure of the yummy mummy, the mother becomes recoded as a subject responding to the individualistic pressures of contemporary society not by seeking equality in work and childcare provision, but rather by becoming an infantilised and sexually desired (rather than desiring) subject seeking an upwardly mobile domestic retreatist romance.

Above all, her orientation is *insular*. It is as a form of popular disempowered feminisation articulated to upper-class aspirationalism.

Popular culture is an important place to look to see how the multifaceted terrain of politics plays out. Whilst as we have seen, whilst in the UK under the Conservative-Liberal coalition government, there are some moves towards a slight parental gender rebalancing (in that some maternity/paternity pay will be shared) the savage cuts in public welfare hit women much harder than men (Women's Budget Group 2011). This serves to stoke the 'responsibilisation' of a self-governing subject who disavows social and environmental issues in favour of a retreatist fantasy and an extensive commitment to grooming.

There are signs that popular motherhood might be articulated differently. In the bestselling book *How to be a Woman* by *Sunday Times* journalist Caitlin Moran, for instance, there is an account of motherhood which emphasises 'doing rather than being', the importance of social equality, and which seeks to reclaim 'strident feminism' through comedy (Moran 2011). It is, in effect, connected to a wider formation of popular 'fourth wave' feminism: from slutwalks through websites like *The F-Word* and *Pink Stinks!* to mass market books by Natasha Walter and Cordelia Fine (Walter 2011, Fine 2011) which are all beginning to have a wider impact, and are closer to the critiques of neoliberal femininity mentioned here by academics such as Angela McRobbie, Imogen Tyler, Diane Negra, Ros Gill, Christina Scharff and Susan Douglas. It is towards such connections, energies and articulations that we might look to find more generous resources of hope.

It is also the case that as the recession cuts deeper, there have been newspaper articles proclaiming the death of the yummy mummy; her most decadent manifestations have started to grate a bit more. There are shifts and mutations occurring around the figures of the desirable maternal. The figure of the 'mumtrepreneur', who develops business ideas from the kitchen table whilst her children crawl beneath it, is rising in popularity (Smith 2011). There is a trend for celebrity mothers to emphasise their working lives in relation to their maternal identity: Claudia Schiffer, for instance, has launched a 'school-run-chic'

line of clothing (*Daily Mail*, 2011). Undeniably, the mumtrepreneur is more active than the passive yummy mummy (although, tellingly, we don't hear of 'dadtrepreneurs') and the gungho attitude to valorising enterprise in all of these narratives translates their activity into new variants of the neoliberal maternal. As we saw earlier, one of the key problems to persist since second-wave feminism has been that neither it, nor society more broadly, has dealt effectively or equitably with the issue of childcare (Campbell 2008). Both the social type of the yummy mummy and the mumtrepreneur can be viewed as, in effect, potent cocktails of these failures to deal more fully with gender equality, blended with the atomising, responsabilising tendencies of neoliberalism.

The recent film version of *I Don't Know How She Does It* is perhaps particularly instructive in this respect (McGrath, 2011). The film's ending is changed from the book: heroine Kate Reddy no longer downsizes her career in the city to make crafts in the countryside with her children, and indeed, the book is more like the 1987 film *Baby Boom* in that respect (where the heroine leaves her career in the city to bring up her baby in the country and establish, in true mumtrepreneurial spirit, an apple sauce business on the side; Shyer 1987). Instead, Reddy makes demands of her boss - telling him she's not going to work this weekend as she needs to make a snowman - and her husband pledges to pitch in with more domestic help. Such conclusions clearly relate to some of the contemporary feminist critiques of parenting balance. The heroine states her terms, the father's domestic role is increased, and there's no longer what Rebecca Asher terms only one 'foundation parent' (Asher 2011). But the fact that our heroine is a phenomenally highly paid city banker is symptomatic of our recession-ridden neoliberal order in which it's much more possible for the 1%, rather than the 99%, to achieve gender equality. The hidden story of the film (and, arguably, a key reason why it is so bland) is that despite post-Fordism and the feminisation of labour, the social infrastructure is not really equipped for equality in relation to childcare, with its greater proportion of women than men being affected by the cuts, paltry childcare provision and long hours culture. Dealing with the problem of the yummy mummy will also entail dealing with this broader landscape.

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<sup>ii</sup> ‘Ladette’ was term popularised in the 1990s to describe young women who behaved like ‘lads’ by being confident, noisy and drinking copious amounts of alcohol. ‘Chav’ is a derogatory term used to describe a member of the ‘underclass’ and has been in widespread use in the UK since the mid-2000s.

<sup>iii</sup> In this sense it finds an echo in Hall’s emphasis on the phenomenology of the hippies, although this taken in a different direction, by his imagining their subjective forms of ‘being-in-the-world’, rather than Tyler’s analysis of the affective modes of distancing produced as the chav becomes an object of/for class disgust.

<sup>iv</sup> Such an analysis also connects this piece to the new wave of studies of the maternal, eg Tyler 2001, 2008, 2009; Baraister 2009; MAMSIE 2007.

<sup>v</sup> Fraser mentions that her bulimia is ‘worrying’, but the inference and the brevity of its reference obviously render it as being not *too* worrying. Myleene Klass’s book is at pains to distinguish itself from Fraser’s approach.

<sup>vi</sup> This is a term popularised over the last decade through use in films and TV series including *American Pie* and *30 Rock*.

<sup>vii</sup> Sample dialogue from *Babyville*: ‘I know the computer says it’s Gospel Oak,’ I said on the phone, in my most imperious voice (which, incidentally, makes the Queen sound like an extra in *EastEnders*), ‘but actually we live just off Hampstead High Street.’ (Green 2001: 284)

<sup>viii</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-12-19-fertility\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-12-19-fertility_N.htm)