The Voyeurism Of Survival: Classed Resilience In Single Mother Led TV Dramedies

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Abstract

This article examines representations of resilient single motherhood in TV dramatic comedy, arguing that the classed narratives of the struggles of single mothers told in these shows through the management of sex and economy can result in voyeuristic interpretations of survival, which I term 'survival voyeurism', in which female struggle is fetishized and resulting exploitations normalized, or even romanticised. Focusing on two popular American TV dramedy series, *SMILF* (2017) and *Better Things* (2016), I discuss both how classed portrayals of resilience are depicted and interpreted by audiences, centring vulnerability as an area of either increased, or decreased relatability and empathy from the viewer, connecting this to fetishizing audience interpretations.

Crucially, this article makes the point that in the context of neoliberalism and popular misogyny and without feminists having control over interpretation, feminist narratives of dramatic comedies may reinforce normative structures of sex, economy and exploitation, despite been widely credited with challenging social norms and presenting social issues.

Introduction

Resilience has often been emphasised as a core characteristic of TV single mothers (Cheeseman, 2010:8; Bowie, 2019), affording them moral value through hard work in paid and/or domestic labour, through bearing the emotional burden of lone-parenting and in navigating community relationships. Such imagery may contradict general political rhetoric, journalism and reality TV, which routinely portrays (working-class) single mothers as work-shy, dependant, uncouth and irresponsible (Gold, 2011; Cohen, 1972:2) Yet the notion of 'the struggle of single motherhood' endures. Even media texts that are socially critical, with a view to unpacking stereotypes, may end up repeating existing structural narratives, if they are 'pre-reflective or […] achieved through dialogue vitiated by unfairness, coercion, or inequality', writes Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2013:30). Through stories of the resilient mother and her struggles, the nuclear family and often the interconnected 'separate spheres' (Fraser, 2016) model, which have been sold relentlessly to the public through advertising, politics, film and entertainment media (Heınemann, 2018; Tımke and Barr, 2017), are reinforced as the ideal site for social reproduction. Whilst single mothers in televised entertainment media are rarely viewed as 'a threat to societal values' (Cohen, 2002:1) in the same way that 'real life' single mothers are often portrayed in the media, the single mother headed family, through presentation of struggle, may still serve as a cautionary tale in favour of the nuclear family; a 'visible reminder of what we should not be' (Cohen, 2002:2).

Moreover, resilient single motherhood has become fetishized through tropes of survival and self-actualisation, which are articulated in single mother-led dramedy through struggles in sex and economy. These struggles are connected to the characters morality, as described in McRobbie's 'new sexual contract' which details how, in post-feminist ideology, feminine worth is deeply connected to careful management of finances and sexuality (McRobbie, 2009:54-5). As on-screen single mothers are shown to 'struggle socially, sexually and financially' (Feasey, 2012:73), this can position them in a precarious social position, which is enhanced for black and working-class single mothers who are more routinely cast in harrowing situations of basic survival. I argue that such portrayals can fall into a category I term 'survival voyeurism', in which audiences fetishize tales of survival. Literature on reality TV shows has already substantiated the idea that viewers desire on-screen competition as a facet of neoliberal thinking (Grazien, 2010:69), whilst 'survival television', such as *Born Survivor* and *Extreme Survival*, has been critiqued as 'dovetail(ing) with the shadowy side of neoliberalism, ennobling a precarious, self-punishing mode of existence in which one struggles to maintain one's present position rather than improve it' (Davidson, 2020:475).

Through the examination of single-mother led dramatic comedies *SMILF* (2017) and *Better Things* (2016), which explore themes of sex and economy from differing class positions and follow the conventions of the genre of dramedy in challenging social norms and presenting different family structures (Rabonovitz, 1989, Feasey, 2012:32), I argue that this journey of survival of single motherhood becomes fetishized, specifically in those less self-actualising representations where the mothers social position is in constant jeopardy, and upward social mobility remains elusive.

This, I assert, contributes to the socio-political normalisation of sexual exploitation of financially insecure women, who are routinely depicted in troubling sexual encounters as a result of financial insecurity. In the same vein as Nicole Rousseau's historic womanist analysis, which identifies the centrality of struggle in representations of black motherhood in different eras of American film and connects it with reforms to the welfare state, I connect survival voyeurism to meritocratic ideals in the era of austerity, and the potentially dangerous consequences of fetishizing female survival, drawing also on connections between survival TV and primitive masculinity. Whilst this article focuses on classed differences in portrayals of single mothers in dramatic comedy, it also considers the interconnection, and similarities in class and race issues, specifically in terms of portrayals of survival.

It is worth noting that whilst broadly in genres such as film, black single mothers feature prominently in survival narratives, they are often invisible in more everyday storylines found in TV dramatic comedy. In fact, Kerry Washington in *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020) is reported to be the first black female lead in a US drama in 40 years (Mathis, 2016), which is why, whilst this article considers race in narratives of resilience in TV dramatic comedy, there are no specific media texts to draw from.

A history of resilience in TV comedies/dramas featuring single mothers

In the 1960s and 70s television's early representations of single motherhood such as *Alice* (1976), *Julia* (1968-1971) and *What's Happening?* (1976) tended to portray resilience through the drudging endurance of low-paid blue-collar work, and the emotional impact of bereavement or desertion by a spouse. Through their portrayal of hard-working, self-sacrificial single mothers – narratives that often voyeuristically tied the mothers' survival with a stoic, de-sexualised drudgery – these shows were broadly supportive of reforms connected with the Civil Rights and women's movements, which saw greater benefits for single mothers, and allowed black women access to the welfare state (Hill-Collins, 2000:78-9), at a time when the public was becoming more receptive to issues of race and gender inequality.

As political rhetoric and ideas of what constitutes female morality shifted in line with neoliberal values of choice, individuality and self-sufficiency, resilient single mothers became delineated as having more individual agency and self-determination, primarily in areas of finance, employment and sexuality, than the widowed or deserted single mothers of the late 1960s/early 1970s. Changes in workplace opportunities, sexual freedom and greater ease of divorce meant that rates of single motherhood increased from 1970s onwards (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007), whilst flourishing neoliberalism repositioned resilience as a self-actualizing process in which single mothers were responsible not just for parenting or providing their child's basic needs, but also for their own personal development (Barkın and Wısnor, 2013). Such self-actualising narratives tended to cast white, middle-class women as 'the ideal subjects of resilience' (Gill and Orgad, 2018:480). Single mothers in this era of comedy-drama were mostly white, and already possessed comfort and economic security through their professional careers (*Friends* (1994), *Murphy Brown* (1988), *SATC* (1998), *Frasier* (1993)). They continued to flourish after single parenthood and were able to date responsibly and have active social lives (some ultimately reuniting with their child's father). Many were single mothers by choice, speaking to the new morality of self-determination, whilst also only promoting single motherhood as a rational choice for those with the financial backing and community support to make it work.

Meanwhile, working-class mothers had largely moved from the position of protagonist to minor supporting role. Their resilience remained tied to low-paid labour, and often enduring their wayward children's exploits of criminality, drug use and teen pregnancy (as in *Cheers* (1982) and *Two and a Half Men* (2003)). This resonates with what Nicole Rousseau refers to in her analysis of films featuring black mothers during the welfare reform of the 90s as the 'surviving the black mother' trope. Focusing on 'hood films', such as *Menace II Society* (1993), *Juice* (1992) and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), she notes how these films associate 'black boys road to ruin' with 'poor, inferior or deficient, and at other times … evil, awful or wicked' parenting by black mothers – who she also notes, are often absent during the film (Rousseau, 2013:461). Such images were reversed in the case of TV's white, working-class single mother, in that it was typically the children who are not visible in the show, and the mother – usually portrayed as more victim than villain – was able to appear as a successful subject through resilient hard work. However, her absence from the home was also framed as resulting in problems,

supporting an ongoing political narrative of child 'neglect' at the hands of single mothers, one informing various eras of welfare reform through classed and racialized narratives.

In the current era, which follows more than a decade of welfare reform in the name of 'austerity' since 2008's financial crisis, working-class, and to a much lesser extent, black mothers have returned to the small screen in lead roles in the genres of comedy and drama. They are given interesting and ambivalent roles, often challenging neoliberal ideas, and are used to exploring themes of racism, class inequality and stigmatization. As a significant segment of public opinion, on both sides of the Atlantic, has become more critical of government in light of increasing food insecurity, homelessness and impoverished public services, and as issues of race have been emphasised through BLM, dramatic comedy has been given license to explore these issues through single mothers, one of the groups hardest hit by austerity measures. Recent shows such as *SMILF* (2016) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020) have responded to this context, by showing working-class and black mothers in positions where daily routines are often marred by experiences of class or racial inequality or stigmatization.

The distinct difference in the 'struggle of needs' (Fraser, 2013:53-82) experienced by black and working-class mothers, and that experienced by white, middle-class mothers divides what Brunsdon terms 'heroine television', whereby 'women dominate the screen space, juggling work and family commitments, moving between relationships and trying to cope with the day-to-day routine of parenting' (Feasey, 2012:72), into narratives of survival and self-actualisation. In contrast to representations of middle-class 'yummy mummies' (Littler, 2013), whose resilience is geared more towards self-care and work/life balance, working-class single mothers may at times find themselves in cycles of despair in which demise is ever on the horizon, most prominently in the form of potential loss of children (*Weeds* (2005), *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), *Maid* (2021)). Amy Benfor's argument that: 'the lack of single mothers on screen might be due to the fact that this figure is seen to struggle socially, sexually or financially, without the necessary glamour, gloss or escapism that is central to much contemporary programming' supports the idea of struggling single motherhood as being undesirable, whilst also affirming classed moral hierarchies of resilience, that place 'poor, and specifically single mothers needing welfare benefits or other forms of social support … as lacking resilience and the ability to bounce back' (Gill and Orgad, 2018:480).

Self-actualisation and survival as classed modes of resilience

By comparing two American dramedies, *SMILF* and *Better Things*, in more detail, we can see how contemporary narratives of resilient single motherhood differ according to class and opportunity. *Better Things* features Sam Fox as a recently divorced single mother of three teen/pre-teen daughters, trying to juggle work, parenting and community responsibility, whilst also taking time for herself to date and socialise. Sam is very financially secure, having made her fortune as a child star, and thus, she can now, as a result of economic stability, weather the precariousness of being an ageing B-list actress in LA, a close community network of family, friends and fellow celebrities also providing support and respite as she struggles with the chaos of parenting in the big city. Bridgette Bird, in *SMILF*, sits at the other end of the economic spectrum. Young, unemployed and living in insecure accommodation

in a gentrified area of Boston, where she is increasingly an outsider, she perpetually struggles to meet normative expectations of motherhood, much of her energy spent managing an eating disorder that has emerged as the result of childhood sexual abuse, and is triggered at times of stress, particularly that related to sexual activity and shame. Whilst both mothers are essentially indulging in many of the same hedonistic behaviours and dealing with the same issues – using sex as a form of escapism, managing minor acting careers and dealing with difficult mothers – class differences inform what are either presented as acts of resilience, troubles/annoyance that provoke resilience, or failures to be resilient. Whilst Sam's vulnerability is often framed as necessary, even beneficial to her parenting, in Bridgette these same behaviours are framed as disturbing, exemplifying the divide between what Sarah Banet-Weiser describes as 'Can do girls' – 'white, middle class … confident, empowered, entrepreneurial, filled with capacity', and 'at risk girls', 'typically a girl of colour or a working-class girl, and one who thus is seen as more susceptible to poverty, drugs, early pregnancy and fewer career goals and ambitions' (Banet-Weiser, 2018:28).

In both TV shows, the protagonists engage in sexual relationships with men they are not really interested in as a way of relieving the mixture of chaos and mundanity that is present in their parenting lives. Sam is afforded this vulnerability, and the audience is invited to admire and sympathise with her as she arranges clandestine hook-ups whilst her daughter is in the car; and she appears to be more than in control when she takes to task a casual lover, stating that she will simply 'get an Uber' home, when he leaves her stranded following her rant (*Better Things*, FX, Season 2, episode 2, 2016). Ultimately, her emotional resilience and financial stability, trump her vulnerability as a lonely single mother, allowing the audience to laugh at her dating experience. Bridgette's sexual exploits, on the other hand, make for much more worrying viewing. Whilst none of her partners are particularly alarming, Bridgette's low sense of self-worth affects her behaviour in these relationships, contributing to a cycle she quips as 'eat and porn' in which she will emotionally compensate for her misguided escapades by binge-eating and vomiting. Survival, for Bridgette is deeply entwined 'with the painful, unpleasant and humiliating', her resilience of which offers an 'ambiguous neoliberal form of utopia', in which, according to Joe Davidson, 'indignities undergone … chim(e) with the emphasis on the precarious, individual and competitive struggle for self-preservation as a model of human fulfilment in neoliberalism' (Davidson, 2020:476). Throughout her struggles, Bridgette maintains a 'positive mental attitude' that, as Barbara Ehrenreich argues 'has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy' (Gill and Orgad, 2022:17).

The social connection between sex, economy and exploitation is explicitly commented on in the third episode of season 1 of *SMILF*, which documents Bridgette's experiences with the 'new sexual contract' alongside her friends Eliza and Nelson. Whilst Eliza and Nelson, as middle-class women, are shown to use their sexuality to their own financial advantage during the episode as a result of possessing necessary characteristics of 'confidence, creativity and entrepreneurship' associated with McRobbie's 'phallic girl' (McRobbie, 2009:83), (although there are variations in outcomes according to race, Eliza's body, as a large, black, woman is placed within the confines of fetishism when she sets up an internet channel in which she provocatively overeats) Bridgette, lacking in class privilege is pushed towards more basic, and

less safe, transactions of sex and economy when the male employment advisor at the agency she has visited, sensing her vulnerability, asks her if she would consider prostitution. Here, intersectional characteristics of class, race and gender generate differing templates of taking control of the male gaze. The extent to which each of these transactions is safe, profitable and empowering, differs according to the women's social position.

Power structures in audience consumption

In making struggle central to narrative, contemporary TV dramatic comedies assert definite 'television/viewer' (Livingstone, 1989) power structures, that are foundational in the audience's voyeurism of on-screen survival. Both critic and fan reviews of *SMILF*, positive and negative, demonstrated a distinct power dynamic between the audience and the character of Bridgette, in which the viewer sits in a position of power, privilege and anxiety. Acknowledging Bridgette's survival, and praising her resilience, whilst, for the most part, ignoring the systems that are causing her to struggle, critics describe the show as 'rough, but scrappy' (Livingstone, 1989), declaring that they are 'rooting' for Bridgette, which, whilst seemingly positive, demonstrates the distance between themselves and the representation, as well as their enthrallment of the process of survival. The response to the situations that play out on screen are largely sympathetic, rather than empathetic. Fan responses, whilst divided, followed a similar pattern, with viewers asserting that Bridgette was 'at her best when she is trying to be better' (Rottentomatoes.com). Those that were particularly contemptuous focused on Bridgette's sexuality and economic position, blaming her for her own circumstances (Rottentomatoes.com, imdb.com), and demonstrating that without feminists having control of interpretation (Fraser, 2013:48), exploration of resilience in these areas, can often result, particularly in neoliberal societies, in the struggle being fetishized, and subsequent exploitation viewed as the subjects 'own fault'.

Contrarily, more self-actualising depictions of motherhood, such as the televised images of celebrity motherhood shown to the participants of Rebecca Feasey's research, *Mothers on Mothers*, receive a more empathetic response when discussing their struggles, and are considered relatable by viewers. Participants in Feasey's study who were asked their opinions on televised images of celebrity mothers, felt reassured in their own parenting by seeing someone 'successful' experiencing the same struggles as themselves (Feasey, 2016:103). Vulnerability, therefore, *is*, as Gill and Orgad note 'a site of privilege' (Gill and Orgad, 2022:75) in which, not only are only certain women afforded vulnerability, but in which those whose vulnerabilities are not understood or empathised with may be objectified by the viewer who sits in a position of privilege. In seeing representations with greater struggles than their own, viewers questioned: 'could I do that?', cited by Mark Jenkins as 'the inescapable question' posed by voyeurs of survival to themselves (Jenkins, 2003), ultimately knowing that they do not have to. The presence of *resistance* to struggle, as demonstrated above, provides both reassurance and aversion, to the viewer, themes explored by scholars of voyeurism such as Carrabine (Carrabine, 2014) or Fenichal (Metzl, 2004:415), according to classed television/viewer power structures.

Most importantly, fetishizing, rather than empathizing with survival, particularly through struggles of sex and economy, has real world consequences. It is no coincidence, that

'contemporary ideals' of 'passion, grit, confidence, and resilience have flourished in the context of austerity and worsening inequality' (Gill and Orgad, 2022:17), encouraging women to do what it takes to survive, but of course, the will to survive takes on different meanings according to class position. As austerity has worsened, stories of single mothers driven to sex work due to poverty, termed 'survival sex' (Ellen, 2019) have been prevalent in both UK and US journalism, some of which are positive in nature, selling sex work in the same way that it was sold to Bridget, as flexible, profitable and empowering (Witt, 2019). As male-centred survival shows are being connected to a 'primitive masculinity', that couples ideals of 'self-reliance' with a 'fearless pioneering disposition' (Davidson, 2020:481), I note the similar fearlessness of on-screen working-class mothers in survival narratives, such as in *SMILF*, *Weeds* and in films such as *The Florida Project* (2017) and *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), who display persistent courage, and are willing to do whatever it takes to maintain the survival of themselves and their child, even as they lose sexual agency in favour of financial gain. As such, I argue that these narratives, in the context of neoliberalism and popular misogynistic readings in which independent women pose a threat to masculinity, without the economic merit of self-reliance, reinforce the idea that women who are seemingly not self-reliant also have reduced sexual agency, and are therefore vulnerable to exploitation.

Conclusion

Contemporary dramedy presents resilient single motherhood through narratives of struggle that, whilst classed through tropes of self-actualization and survival, often investigate, and shed light on important social issues. However, despite the feminist intentions behind these media texts, without feminists having control over interpretation, struggles in sex and economy may be interpreted through a neoliberal or misogynistic lens, reinforcing exploitative norms and ideals, and becoming fetishized by audiences, resulting in 'survival voyeurism'. The purpose of the essay is not to lambast dramedy, that often brings to life social structures of oppression, but to make the point that without sufficiently addressing, and making strange, the attitudes that make these structures of exploitation possible, these narratives may reinforce or normalise the issues they seek to change.

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