



## Navigating the Nexus of Motherhood and Mental Well-being in Manu Joseph's *The Illicit Happiness of Other People*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.1.249](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.1.249)



### Article info

Article Received: 17/02/2025

Article Accepted: 25/03/2025

Published online: 30/03/2025

### Abstract

'Motherhood' refers to the act of giving birth and becoming a mother. Fostering a child's development, providing them with love and support, and providing care are all aspects of parenting. There are a number of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology, that investigate motherhood in literature. This research paper will conduct an analysis of Manu Joseph's *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* published in the year 2012. The Chacko family is the primary subject of this book, and the book examines how their close link enables them to overcome challenging obstacles. This book is an excellent illustration of how to combine an engaging tale with concepts that provoke thinking. As we continue reading, it unfolds like a captivating mystery and provides fresh insights into the dynamics of interpersonal interactions. However, in addition to having profound concepts about life and society, this book also discusses sentiments in a manner that is both humorous and reflective. This study aims to elucidate the psychological obstacles that women commonly encounter while raising their children, with a specific focus on their mental well-being. It achieves this by examining the depiction of motherhood in popular culture as a means of understanding the psychological challenges faced by women.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, Women, Mental well-being, Mystery, Society.

Motherhood is a challenging experience that encompasses all aspects of being a mother. It involves providing care for a child in every sphere, including the child's physical, emotional, and social development. Being pregnant, giving birth, feeding, educating, and assisting a child in their development are all part of motherhood. This applies not only to

biological mothers, but also to adoptive mothers, stepmothers, and anyone else who provides care for a child in the same way a mother would. Motherhood is commonly linked to affection, selflessness, duty, and the connection between caretakers and their children. The term 'motherhood' encompasses a multifaceted concept that may be subject to

several interpretations, resulting in divergent and perhaps contradictory notions. In her influential work, *The Future of Motherhood*, Jessie Bernard, an American sociologist and feminist scholar, expands the definition of 'Motherhood' as "more than the biological process of reproduction" (2).

Sociologists frequently use the term 'motherhood' to refer to societal norms, interpersonal interactions, and institutional frameworks associated with the role of a mother. The word "motherhood" is used to distinguish between the biological process of giving birth to a baby and the activities involved in caring for children, as opposed to the societal and cultural expectations related to the production and upbringing of children. In simple terms, a woman becomes a mother through the act of giving birth, but she fully embraces the role of a mother by actively fulfilling the socially prescribed and publicly recognised responsibilities, "mothers try to balance their own desires against the requirements of motherhood, it is socially unacceptable in the world of motherhood for them to put their own needs above those of their children. In addition, when they put their children's needs above their own, the mothers are engaging in behavior that appears to be freely chosen" (Collett, 340).

Maithreyi Krishnaraj in *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment*, demonstrates that the societal position of women as mothers has been established through a persistent historical practice. Given that reproduction is a significant component of the female role, motherhood has remained essential to women's lives and the structure of the family. It is also crucial to shaping the ideology around women. Due to her physiological reproductive organs, a woman has the ability to conceive and give birth to offspring. By conceiving and delivering a child, a woman achieves the state of 'Motherhood'.

Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, presents the concept of mothering as a dual structure, influenced by both childhood experiences and the societal framework of familial ties. Chodorow clarifies that the process of a woman transitioning into motherhood transcends mere biology and instinct. Chodorow asserts that the inclination to engage in mothering behaviour is inherent in the feminine psyche due to the fact that we are nurtured by women. In her work, she also examines the maternal aspect of women's roles, with a special emphasis on the intergenerational transmission of this position. This generates inquiries on the contemporary function of women as mothers and proposes potential for changing the current sexual division of labour. Although the physical and bodily needs of pregnancy and caring for children have declined over the years, motherhood continues to be a crucial element of family life. The essential function of women as mothers has become more significant on psychological and ideological levels, exerting a strong influence on the identity and experiences of women. According to Nancy Chodorow: "the actual physical and biological requirements of childbearing and child care have decreased. But mothering is still performed in the family, and women's mothering role has gained psychological and ideological significance, and has come increasingly to define women's lives" (4).

Motherhood is often regarded as a very gratifying and satisfying event in a woman's life. Nevertheless, some women encounter a multitude of psychological difficulties throughout the process of becoming mothers, particularly when combined with mental illness. Psychological disorders may significantly affect a woman's capacity to successfully manage the challenges and obligations of becoming a mother.

Daphne de Marneffe in *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life* explores

mothers' relationships with their children. Marneffe defines maternal desire as the innate desire of a mother to nurture and establish a deep connection with her kids. She aims to reinvent the concept of maternal desire within a feminist framework, avoiding clichés and sentimentality. Marneffe contradicts the notion that women who want to care for children are devoid of power and agency. She challenges the conventional psychoanalytic view of the mother-child connection, dismissing the notion of it being a psychologically harmful mixture. She suggests that the bond between mother and child involves authentic interaction. Marneffe suggests that this interaction enables both parties to preserve their individuality. Marneffe suggests that maternal desire is a reflection of a woman's normal propensity to bond with and take care of children, symbolising women's authority and influence in the mother-child relationship and their individual lives: "The desire to mother involves the intention and commitment to enter into a relationship of love and care with a child. It represents an attempt to integrate our deepest personal longings and highest human aspirations" (177).

Amber E. Kinser in *Motherhood and Feminism*, mentions that "the terrain of motherhood... is still difficult ground for most women to navigate... despite feminist effort and accomplishment, women still are largely thought of first in terms of maternal capacity" (161). One of the main reasons for this is the long-lasting link between motherhood and lower social standing, as Wendy Chavkin contends that: "Motherhood is one of the most intimate and essential of human connections and therefore of concern to all; and female biological reproductive capacity and social assignment for childcaring and the maintenance of domestic life have been centrally connected with women's subordinate status across many cultures and historic eras" (4).

In Scott Coltrane's work on *Household Labor and the Routine Production of Gender*, Scott Coltrane explores the societal expectations

placed on women to give emotional support to the men in their lives and expertly care for their children. The significance of a woman's role as a mother in shaping family dynamics, gender relations, societal beliefs about women, and the unequal distribution of labour and power both inside and outside of a household has received limited attention in academic discourse. In modern industrialised societies, motherhood is often considered a societal expectation for women. Compulsory motherhood encompasses a collection of cultural norms that dictate that women should derive complete fulfilment from having kids as well as caring for them.

The experience of women often revolves around the role of motherhood, whether it be their own relationship with their mother or their own journey into motherhood. "Motherhood itself is seen as a central part of women's identity, and an essential stage of women's development. Motherhood provides women with an identity in terms of both occupation and social structure. Motherhood, and more specifically, childbearing, continues to be defined as the primary route to physical and emotional fulfilment for women and as an essential part of female identity" (Stearney 147). In today's world, motherhood plays an essential role in shaping women's identities, seen as an important part of their personal development. It appears that this aspect is deeply rooted in a woman's identity.

Motherhood has evolved beyond its biological origins and now encompasses the complex nature of women's innate nurturing abilities. As society becomes more open-minded, women are discovering the mother-child bond in various roles beyond the physical act of giving birth. These kinds of relationships can offer similar experiences to those of a conventional biological mother: "mothers may feel "on stage." By portraying positive mother-child interactions that others may observe, others may then conclude that this woman is a "good mother"" (Heisler and Elis 463).

Parsons and Bales, in *Family, Socialisation and Interaction Process*, describe the woman's role in the family as one that focuses on providing comfort, safety, and emotional stability. Therefore, due to the act of giving birth and nurturing children, mothers develop a more intimate and powerful bond with them. This is crucial for the successful socialisation of the young. They present the idea that the division of labour is influenced by biological differences, suggesting that women are naturally inclined towards nurturing roles. Additionally, they place more importance on the role of the mother, assigning her more responsibility compared to other adult women. In addition, the woman's increased presence in the home due to her husband's frequent absence allows her to develop a closer bond with the children, as she is primarily responsible for their care.

The novel *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* by Manu Joseph, published in 2012, explores the lives of the complex Chacko family in Chennai, with a combination of dark humour and poignant moments. The Chacko family lived in a gossipy housing community in Madras during the late 1980s. In the otherwise uniform Balaji Lane, the Chacko's, a Catholic family of Keralite immigrants, stand out, earning them the nickname "cuckoos among the crows" (*Illicit Happiness* 5). In contrast to Joseph's previous novel, *Serious Men*, which explores the complexities of class and caste divisions, *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* investigates the enigmatic narrative of a family's secrets. Throughout the course of the narrative, there are many interconnected mysteries in this novel. Many families may experience it, and there are a lot of circumstances that make it special and memorable.

The narrative centres on Ousep Chacko, a journalist who has faced challenges in his career and resorts to alcohol as a means of dealing with his frustrations. His wife Mariamma skilfully manages their finances, takes care of their two boys, and, in her free time, playfully daydreams about Ousep's

demise. When their son Unni, who is seventeen years old and has a passion for drawing comics, falls from the balcony one day, they begin to question whether it was an accident.

After a period of three years, Ousep Chacko receives a parcel, which prompts him to initiate an investigation. In addition to attending a gathering of cartoonists and having a conversation with a well-known brain surgeon, he searches for his son's friends. As part of his inquiry, Ousep concentrates on Unni's drawings, particularly his mystery comics, since he believes that these paintings disclose a great deal about Unni's emotions. During his investigation, Ousep encounters challenging truths about his personal issues, his family's past, and societal expectations. All of this occurs as he tries to uncover the truth about what really happened to Unni. *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* is a clever, ironic, and emotionally powerful novel that captivates readers with its enigmatic plot, philosophical themes, and unconventional romance.

Mariamamma Chacko, the mother, is quite a vibrant character. She has endured numerous tragedies like a steadfast rock. Mariamma attempts to shield her younger son, Thoma, from Ousep's non-threatening yet embarrassing alcoholic outbursts by boosting his self-assurance with the encouraging words, "Be strong Thoma, don't be afraid. I am here" (*Illicit Happiness* 47) or "Don't be afraid. I am the Rock, Thoma, and I shall never fall" (*Illicit Happiness* 99). In the meantime, Ousep's obsession affects Mariamma. The opening line of the book provides substantial proof of this assertion: "Ousep Chacko, is the kind of man who has to be killed at the end of the story" (*Illicit Happiness* 3). Mariamma engages in soliloquy, expressing her rational grievances to the empty walls "told her bare walls all her reasonable grudges" (*Illicit Happiness* 5). She "bites her lip with a ferocity that makes her head tremble and her eyes look interested. She stands facing the bare yellow wall and she wags her index finger. She tells the wall, in quivering voice, about Ousep's mother

and his nine sisters... She gets into this state sometimes and when she is this way, she loses her sense of the world around her" (*Illicit Happiness* 27). She harbours a strong wish for her husband's death. Ousep was completely unaware that his wife, who had been enduring a lot, was planning his murder. The circumstances also have an effect on their young son, Thoma, who is terrified of almost everything and is on the verge of puberty. Meanwhile, Thoma, develops strong feelings for an elder girl who had become friends with both him and his brother. Confident and elegant, she keeps her own mysteries.

The novel explores various themes such as societal expectations, identity, maternal grief, guilt, and the elusive nature of happiness as the story progresses. This book examines the dynamics of families and how individuals cope with difficult situations such as loss and trauma. *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* provides a profound and fascinating perspective on what it means to be human. The book discusses how society's expectations of women can significantly impact their mental health. The protagonist's wife, Mariamma, and the mother of Unni and Thoma demonstrates how the people in the novel feel when they are subjected to a great deal of strain from the expectations of others. The novel depicts a society that strictly establishes gender roles, with males occupying positions of authority and women performing domestic duties. Additionally, even undergarments conform to a standardised norm: "Men are managers, mothers are housewives. And all bras are white" (*Illicit Happiness* 5). It emphasises the strict societal expectations linked to gender, focusing on traditional roles and behaviours.

In one part of the novel, Mariamma talks to Ousep directly about a lot of things, speaking in a way that is both sharply literary and reminiscent of village wisdom: "There are things Mariamma tells Ousep, looking him in the eye and addressing him in the third person, which have a stinging literary quality to them

that reminds him of what they used to say in his village – all wives are writers" (*Illicit Happiness* 57).

Ousep really admires the way she describes his daily walk, comparing it to someone ready to be honoured with a significant award. Although he seems confident on the surface, he struggles with internal conflict, doubting his capacity to improve as an individual, spouse, and parent. Ousep engages in self-examination while he observes Mariamma from afar. She may seem modest, yet she has complexities that go beyond what others may notice. Despite her high level of intellect and extensive education, she continues to be excluded from social circles and is met with sympathy rather than acceptance. Others disregard her poverty and challenges, resulting in her feeling lonely but yet showing resilience: "Mariamma looks like any other person in the world. Small, harmless, unremarkable, which she is not. It makes him feel oddly triumphant that she does not know he is watching her – Mariamma, up to something, going about her day, resolute and solitary" (*Illicit Happiness* 57).

Mariamma is consistently excluded from the sisterhood within her community. She is frequently left out of their social gatherings and is not invited to participate in their gossip or attend events. She is frequently overlooked and left to her own devices, even when she goes to the market: "She is not part of the sisterhood here. She is not included in their evening chatter, no one tells her gossip" (*Illicit Happiness* 57). It explores societal customs and expectations surrounding gender roles and poverty. The fact that Mariamma is not included in the community's social activities highlights the sense of isolation she feels.

Mariamma elicits sympathy from them, which functions as a superficial means of self-affirmation for them. Mariamma's circumstances, which include her difficulties in relationships, the tragic death of her son, and her lonely walks, evoke their compassion.

Nevertheless, they are unable to understand her hardship: "She makes them feel they are better than her. They pity her for her man, for the loss of her child, for the way she walks along the road talking to herself, scowling sometimes, smiling sometimes" (*Illicit Happiness* 58). Mariamma's suffering is clearly visible as others sympathise with her, seeing her as a woman weighed down by her circumstances, such as the tragic loss of her child. Her reserved nature and occasional fluctuating emotions reveal the inner struggles she faces. The complexities of motherhood in relation to societal expectations and norms are evident as Mariamma finds her role within her community.

Unni has a strong bond with his mother, Mariamma. He frequently shares his unique ideas with his mother, Mariamma. He contemplates the concept of death, proposing that although she would grieve his departure, it may not be as profound as societal norms dictate due to the prevalence of happiness. Unni is thoughtful and openly communicates his thoughts with Mariamma, in contrast to other boys who may disregard their mothers. As Unni articulates, "'But still, if I die, imagine I die,' he said, 'you would be sad, I know. Of course, you will be sad. But not as deeply as people would presume. In this world, it is very hard to escape happiness. That's how it is'" (*Illicit Happiness* 29). It explores the complicated feelings and connections within families. Unni's thoughtful reflection on the fragility of life and his consideration of his mother's possible response demonstrate a deep comprehension of human feelings and the ability to find solace amidst sorrow. It also showcases the relationship between personal experiences and societal expectations regarding grief and emotional display.

The novel illustrates Mariamma's responsibilities as a mother and wife, highlighting her strength and self-reliance in the face of societal norms. She expresses herself confidently through her actions and words, pushing back against conventional gender roles.

Judith Butler, a feminist thinker, contends that gender roles, such as motherhood, are not innate but rather influenced by societal factors. The expectation of conforming to these roles can result in psychological suffering, "gender is something that one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (*Gender Trouble* 143).

The novel also examines the theme of maternal grief and how it affects mental well-being. After her son Unni passes away, Mariamma is overwhelmed with grief and emotional distress. She struggles with experiences of guilt and inadequacy, as shown by her inner thoughts: Unni's death haunts Mariamma, and she keeps picturing the moment when his head smashed the ground over and over in her thoughts. The novel explores Mariamma's internal conflict and guilt after the devastating loss of her son, Unni. She thinks over her behaviour before his passing, wondering if she fulfils her role as a mother. It represents Mariamma's extreme grief and self-criticism following the loss of her son: "The moment Unni's head hit the ground, what was she doing? She has thought about this many times. She hopes it was not the moment when she was trying not to laugh... She hopes he had not fallen when she was in the prayer group because she is not proud of what she does there" (*Illicit Happiness* 27-28).

Mariamma Chacko's profound care and affection for her children is evident in the novel. She intends to fulfil her responsibilities as a mother by providing for her children, despite facing challenges and personal difficulties. It illustrates the importance of maternal responsibilities and the wish to fulfil societal expectations of being a 'good mother': "She hopes she was doing something dignified when the last sigh of breath left the lungs of her child; she hopes she was walking back home like a

good mother, thinking about what meal to cook for two boys who ate so much" (*Illicit Happiness* 28).

In one of the scenes of the novel, Mariamma looks at the picture of her son, Unni, hanging in the hallway. As she gently touches its smooth surface, she finds comfort in the image, even though it lacks vitality. Unni's striking resemblance to her evokes a bittersweet mix of emotions, as she fondly remembers his distinct features: "He surveys his mother with a knowing smile. He has her beautiful nose, her skin of high pedigree, her colour. He has his father's high forehead" (*Illicit Happiness* 52). Unni is sometimes misunderstood as arrogant, but Mariamma has a different perspective, recognising that people often misinterpret such characteristics. Nevertheless, there is a subtle undertone of achievement in their discussion of his demise, seeing it as a downfall. Mariamma finds it difficult to understand the events leading up to Unni's death, as there are many rumours about what happened in the final moments of his life at home or on the stairway. Regardless of the assumptions, she finds it hard to understand anything. Some people indicate that Unni was different from other children, suggesting that he had deep thoughts or displayed exceptional intelligence for his age. Throughout the whole hardship, Mariamma struggles with the grief of losing her son, attempting to figure out the mystery behind his premature death while fulfilling her responsibilities as a mother.

The novel portrays Mariamma's deep psychological suffering following the death of her child. According to the psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, grief involves several stages, including anger, denial, depression, bargaining, and acceptance, "grief always include some qualities of anger. Since none of us likes to admit anger at a deceased person, these emotions are often disguised or repressed and prolong the period of grief or show up in other ways" (*On Death and Dying* 18). Mariamma's journey through these stages illustrates the

subtle complexity and emotional nature of maternal grief and demonstrates the psychological difficulties that accompany the experience of loss.

*The Illicit Happiness of Other People* by Manu Joseph ultimately provides a compelling portrayal of the emotional burdens or psychological trauma experienced by mothers, exploring the intersection of motherhood and mental well-being with a depth of compassion that is rare in a work of fiction. It illustrates the emotional stress of motherly responsibilities, the societal pressures of maintaining decorum as mothers, and the experiences of grief and sorrow through characters like Mariamma. The story draws a portrait of the complexities of such experiences, one that readers cannot easily dismiss at a time when the emotional realities of motherhood are too often accepted without a second thought. It develops a better understanding of and empathy for women, who encounter immense difficulties at every step as mothers. This paper has provided multiple views on parenting and mental health as evident in *The Illicit Happiness of Other People*. This research has given important insights into the experiences of motherhood in the novel through literary study and psychological viewpoints. The novel reveals that a significant number of individuals, particularly mothers, are experiencing difficulties with their mental health. In the present day, it is vital to promote recognition and support a framework that advances women's overall well-being and capability to respond to their familial and societal commitments. Joseph expertly weaves together elements of philosophy, mystery, and social commentary, providing insightful reflections on the complexities of human nature and society. The novel examines the complicated emotions of grief, the way we perceive things, and our search for purpose in a world filled with uncertainty, all through the journey of Ousep and Mariamma. *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* explores the depths of

the human experience, cleverly disguised as a captivating story of family dynamics.

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