

Unruly Care: Maternal Ambivalence and the Politics of Stigma in Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*

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Abstract—Grounded in Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminism, this study examines how maternal ambivalence, mother-blame, and agency are constructed in Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* (2012). Using descriptive qualitative analysis, this study unravels the politics of the stigma mechanism and the negotiation of maternal ambivalence. The analysis finds that Bernadette's ambivalence is cast as deviance because it conflicts with the norm of "intensive mothering" and total availability believed by the society. Gossip, school rituals, and digital documentation convert rumour into quasi-official facts, institutionalising mother-blame. The novel also advances "unruly care" (delegation, strategic withdrawal, and the recovery of creative work) as legitimate maternal agency that sustains caregiving capacity. Conceptually, the article refines O'Reilly's framework by specifying 'unruly care' as an analytic for tracing movement from ambivalence, through stigmatisation, to agency in contemporary maternal fiction.

Index Terms—matricentric feminism, mother-blame, maternal ambivalence, unruly care

I. INTRODUCTION

In postfeminist culture, the "ideal mother" is a performance regime where school/community attendance, ceremonial participation, and etiquette measure maternal "goodness" (Gill, 2007, 2016; Mare et al., 2025). It aligns with intensive mothering, positioning mothers as managers of children's emotions, time, and achievements while rendering parenting success auditable (Hays, 1996). Audit culture reinforces logic through performance metrics and evaluative checklists, producing a domesticated motherhood standard resonant with the ideal performative model (Power, 1997; Suleman et al., 2021; Indrasari et al., 2020). Collectively, these frameworks construct the "ideal mother" as continuous performance, sustaining patriarchal control over women through narratives of maternal perfection (Asriyanti et al., 2022; JUSDALYANA et al., 2024; O'Reilly, 2016).

When parenting practices fail to align with normative indicators, mother blame emerges as disappointment directed at mothers perceived to deviate from expected standards (Arafah et al., 2023). Such blame personalises deviations often rooted in structural conditions, including work demands, institutional schedules, mental health issues, and limited social support (O'Reilly, 2016). Media narratives sustain mother blame by normalising unrealistic expectations and individualising failures (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). From a stigma perspective, labeling and stereotyping separate "good" from "bad" mothers, causing status loss and moral hierarchies (Link & Phelan, 2001). Research shows that such blame individualises structural inequalities.

Literature is believed to operate as a mirror of a series of events in society that can be learnt (Arafah et al., 2024; Arifuddin et al., 2024). Literature can be understood as a social institution that reflects the behaviour and values of society

through language (Irmawati et al., 2020; Arafah et al., 2021; Abbas et al., 2024; Arafah et al., 2025). Transforming phenomena associated with recent and past events into a written piece shows how close the relationship is between literary work and social life (Sunyoto et al., 2022; Yudith et al., 2023). In line with the idea of mimesis, fictional texts represent real life and therefore serve as valid data for mapping social constructions (Arafah et al., 2021; Afiah et al., 2022; Lestari et al., 2025; Rano et al., 2026). The concept of literature offers aesthetic enjoyment and is worthy of scrutiny without overriding the artistic quality of the presentation in conveying the authors' ideas (Tang et al., 2025; Nurcahyadi et al., 2025; Baa et al., 2023). As a product of art, literary works are inseparable from the moral messages embedded in the text, which serve as references for navigating life within social institutions (Arafah et al., 2023; Manugeren et al., 2023; Takwa et al., 2024a; Takwa et al., 2025). Language as a cultural product plays a vital role in literary works, where authors are allowed to use linguistic style to convey ideas, such as the use of figurative language, signs, or symbols (Arafah et al., 2026b; Mofu et al., 2024; Taqdir, 2025; Taqdir et al., 2026). In addition, integrating cultural traditions into literary works aims to maintain and implement positive values for the next generation (Takwa et al., 2025; Effendy et al., 2025; Takwa et al., 2026a). Furthermore, understanding the cultural meaning of language can sometimes cause misinterpretation because language needs to be understood both explicitly and implicitly (Iksora et al., 2022; Kuswanti et al., 2023). The common problem is how the readers understand the language, but it all depends on their language learning aptitude for the language used in the text (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Karamoy et al., 2024; Jamiluddin et al., 2026; Kaharuddin et al., 2026).

However, this does not omit the authors' desire for cultural meaning in their works. Thus, the generation slowly forgets and erodes cultural heritage due to modernity in the era of globalisation (Takwa et al., 2024b; Arifin et al., 2022). Children of the Tolaki Mekongga group find it difficult to speak the Tolaki Mekongga language fluently (Halil et al., 2024; Takwa et al., 2026b). People spend much time surfing the Internet to communicate in any country (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b; Arafah et al., 2023). Meanwhile, digital media can be used as information sources, and literary works are available electronically and as virtual teaching materials (Kaharuddin et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2024; Suparti et al., 2024; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b; Arafah et al., 2025a; Arafah et al., 2023).

Where'd You Go, Bernadette by Maria Semple depicts Bernadette Fox, an architect whose non-adherence to suburban "ideal mother" norms marks her as deviant in her community. School communications, chats, and gossip construct her as a "problem mother," as misunderstandings become evidence of unworthiness. Although Bernadette cares for her daughter, Bee, she resists "intensive mothering," relying on communication, withdrawal, and delegation. Her reinvention reframes motherhood as negotiable rather than imposed (Semple, 2012).

Community support functions as surveillance. Parental conversations and neighbourhood networks act as tribunals assessing maternal worthiness (Lyon, 2018), reflecting disciplinary mechanisms that enforce norms through observation and sanctions (Foucault, 1977). Digital epistolary forms—including emails, memos, and reports—act as reputational infrastructures, archiving selective information as evidence despite their constructed nature (Mutmainnah, 2022). In digitally orientated fiction, documents and typographic formats regulate narrative authority and ethical judgement (Bell et al., 2025). Rapid circulation proliferates labels and normalises stigma through repetition (Baym, 2015), stabilising maternal reputations across platforms (Kress, 2010; Bell et al., 2025). Digital communication requires cultural and interpretive literacy, as meaning depends on social context, cultural nuance, and mediated information processing (Arafah et al., 2026a).

The novel offers a counter-narrative where ambivalence constitutes maternal agency. Drawing on O'Reilly's framework, ambivalence enables reimagining care for sustainability (O'Reilly, 2016). In line with maternal thinking, emphasising responsibility, attention, and reflective judgement (Ruddick, 1989), this study conceptualises unruly care as a strategy rejecting total availability while sustaining nurturing capacity. Previous studies emphasised satire, epistolary multimodality, and women's career issues but have not examined maternal stigma mechanisms (Bell et al., 2025). Focus on form or humour obscures labeling–circulation–sanction processes that naturalise mother-blame (Gill, 2007), reducing ambivalence to a personal rather than political issue. This study examines stigma politics and maternal ambivalence, repositioning mother-blame as a political care issue.

II. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

This research adopts postmodern feminism, rejecting essentialism and recognising women's experiences and subject positions. Motherhood is a discursive construction shaped by power/knowledge relations and everyday practices, not a biological role (Foucault, 1972; Weedon, 1987; Haraway, 1988; Butler, 1990). Conventional attitudes normalize gender expectations and hinder reform, reinforcing the metanarrative of the "ideal mother" as regulatory discourse defining parenting (Fraser, 1997; Suleman et al., 2021; Taqdir et al., 2025). Accordingly, stigma and ambivalence are effects of discourse and power, not individual failure. Literary texts express ideology and worldview, articulating consciousness, social values, and power relations within sociocultural contexts (Malawat et al., 2026).

This approach foregrounds materiality by treating digital epistolary forms as infrastructures that produce "facts," regulate authority, and structure judgment circulation (Anggrawan et al., 2019; Hayles, 2005; Idhan et al., 2026; Kress, 2010). In digital fiction, configurations and multimodality shape credibility and ethical interpretation (Bell et al., 2025), while networked communication accelerates reputation-making and gossip (Baym, 2015). Because vocabulary knowledge and reading practises shape communicative competence, interpretation of discourse depends on readers'

ability to recognise meanings, tone, and linguistic cues in communication (Kaharuddin et al., 2023). Thus, the medium governs meaning, mediating maternal reputation through the organisation, framing, and presentation of ideas (Mardiana et al., 2023).

This framework bridges O'Reilly's matricentric feminism, centring mothers as political subjects, critiquing patriarchal motherhood and mother-blame, and legitimising ambivalence in care (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; O'Reilly, 2016). Maternal thinking emphasises reflective judgement and responsibility in care practises (Ruddick, 1989). Grounded in postmodernism, this study operationalises patriarchal motherhood, mother-blame, ambivalence, and unruly care. O'Reilly distinguishes motherhood as a normative institution from mothering as lived care practice (O'Reilly, 2016). Patriarchal motherhood aligns with intensive mothering, demanding perfection, unlimited time, competence, and framing community judgement in novels as structural within public expectations (Hays, 1996).

Within this system, mother-blame individualises structural problems—such as class position, employment conditions, and lack of support—by framing deviations from ideal scripts as maternal failures (O'Reilly, 2016). Media discourse reinforces this through binary “good” and “bad” mother narratives (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Labelling and stereotyping produce stigma by degrading mothers' status and equating morality with parenting, clarifying the pathway to stigmatisation through sanctions (Link & Phelan, 2001; Almahdali et al., 2026; O'Reilly, 2016).

O'Reilly views maternal ambivalence—love mixed with fatigue, anger, and need for autonomy—as a legitimate care condition, not pathology (O'Reilly, 2016). Ambivalence stems from tension between availability and self-sustainability, with denial intensifying guilt (O'Reilly, 2016). Care involves reassessing attention, creating affective dilemmas (Ruddick 1989). Recognising ambivalence as ethical capital interprets mixed emotions as care conditions, not moral failure (Ruddick, 1989). In matricentric feminism, maternal agency emerges by reconfiguring time, space, and boundaries to sustain care (O'Reilly, 2016). This study views these strategies as unruly care, shifting evaluation to caregiving sustainability and explaining how Bernadette's choices restore care capacity and undermine stigma.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative descriptive analysis to examine the representation of maternal stigmatisation and the negotiation of maternal ambivalence in novels. A descriptive qualitative method was implemented to identify the research object in depth (Arafah et al., 2004; Purwaningsih, 2020a). The source of primary data is from narration and dialogue—both direct and indirect dialogue through emails and chat rooms—in the novel *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* by Maria Semple. Secondary data were obtained from various literature sources that support this study. Data were collected through intensive reading, coding, and note-taking. Primary data and supporting documents were analysed through intensive reading and thematic categorisation (Irmawari et al., 2020; Fadillah et al., 2022).

It mirrors a qualitative-descriptive procedure—close reading and staged coding/interpretation—to derive categories (Arafah et al., 2020; Yulianti et al., 2022). All findings were then categorised into two groups: maternal stigmatisation and maternal ambivalence negotiation. In collecting the data, the forms of tags/labels and the data grouping were used as instruments of data collection. The categorised data was then analysed using Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminist theory. This theory centers mothering as a socio-political practice—not a private instinct—that critiques “patriarchal motherhood” and mother-blame while legitimizing ambivalence and affirming maternal agency in negotiating power structures.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Stigmatization of Motherhood Against Bernadette Fox in “Where'd You Go Bernadette?”

The school-neighborhood community constructs Bernadette as a “problem mother” through mother-blame—that is, the transfer of structural problems to the mother's personal fault—and how this process works in three main channels: gossip, school rituals, and digital archives/documentation.

1. Gossip as a Labeling Machine: From Misunderstanding to “Danger”

The incident where Bernadette allegedly ran her car over another parent's foot at Galer Street School sparked gossip that tarnished her image as a mother. Rumours spread through emails between parents: “I heard Bernadette tried to run you over at pickup! Are you OK? ... WHAT HAPPENED?” (Semple, 2012, p. 17). Audrey Griffin, Bernadette's neighbour, later wrote an email, complaining that Bernadette barely interacted with parents. “She's like Franklin Delano Roosevelt. You see her only from the waist up, driving past. I don't think she has ever gotten out of her car to walk Bee into school” (Semple, 2012, p. 18).

I tried talking to her, but her windows were rolled up, and she pretended not to see me. You might have thought she was the first lady of France, with her silk scarf draped elegantly and her large dark glasses. I knocked on her door, but she drove off. Over my foot! (Semple, 2012, p. 18)

Through the school's Monday Messenger, principal Gwen Goodyear reinforced the narrative by circulating a note naming Bernadette as the perpetrator: “Dear Parents, this is to clarify that Bernadette Fox, Bee Branch's mother, was driving the vehicle that ran over the other parent's foot...” (Semple, 2012, p. 19). Although Bernadette and Bee believed it was a blown-up accident and doubted any feet were actually run over, the school community quickly labelled Bernadette as dangerous. Bernadette recognized how the other mothers targeted her, calling them “gnats.” In an email to her assistant,

she sarcastically wrote that one gnat at Galer Street claimed she ran over her foot at pickup, saying these “gnats” had provoked her for nine years (Semple, 2012, p. 21).

Bernadette’s statement shows that even before the incident, there had long been a hidden conflict and attempts at exclusion from the “gnat” mothers who continued to look for reasons to corner her.

The chain of “labeling → stereotyping → status loss” confirms that Bernadette’s stigmatization is driven by mother-blame activated through gossip, rituals, and digital documentation. Power, distance, and imposition shape whether complaints remain implicit (rumor) or explicit (accusation) (Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019). This demonstrates the politics of maternal reputation in communities and the materiality of epistolary, leading to the conclusion that maternal stigma in the novel is not an anomaly but the result of a discourse ecology that hardens the “fact” of maternal failure. Language manifests hierarchy; labels and stereotypes are produced, reinforcing “moral policing” toward women/mothers (Asri et al., 2023). In a community, gossip and excessive curiosity become social control—“everyone minds everybody’s business” (Suhadi et al., 2022).

2. *School Rituals as Maternal Audits: “Present, Friendly, Voluntary”*

Bernadette was stigmatized for rejecting the norms of the “ideal mother” in her suburban Seattle community, especially her absence from school and social activities. On Galer Street, physical presence and volunteer work signalled maternal success. Audrey criticized Bernadette’s lack of visibility at school: “You see her only from the waist up... I don’t think she has ever gotten out of her car to walk Bee into school” (Semple, 2012, p. 18). Likewise, Soo-Lin Lee-Segal, Bernadette’s husband’s coworker and a Galer Street mother, highlighted Bernadette’s absence from volunteering, telling Elgie, “I am in charge of classroom volunteers. Bernadette has never signed up... she never walks Bee into the classroom” (Semple, 2012, p. 129). Although Elgie noted carpooling was allowed, Soo-Lin stressed the community’s unspoken expectations, especially for stay-at-home mothers. Most mothers preferred walking their children into the classroom (Semple, 2012, p. 129).

At Galer Street, the community views mothers who neglect traffic duty, fail to prepare snacks, or skip gatherings as violating norms. Bernadette’s behavior, such as preferring solitude in the car and delegating tasks to a virtual assistant, leads to her being labeled “disrespectful to the community”. This lets mothers judge her as bad or selfish for not “getting involved” in the school’s communal care. The “ideal mother/wife” label functions as a script audited through rituals and expectations (Indrasari et al., 2020). Participation audits performance. Absence from the ritual = lack of care = “bad mother”. This is the mother-blame pathway. Deviations from availability, tied to creative work rhythms or mental health, are read as personal flaws rather than negotiation of roles and contexts.

3. *Exclusion and Moral Policing: “We Didn’t Invite You”*

Bernadette’s neighbours and parents implicitly and explicitly ostracised her socially. Audrey and Soo-Lin regularly gossiped about her behaviour. In a humorous email to Soo-Lin, Audrey recalled how they used to gossip and collect Bernadette’s “sins”: “Just writing this transports me to the halcyon days when we were happily Collecting outrages about Bernadette! What simple times those were” (Semple, 2012, p. 127). The stigma peaked at Christmas, when Audrey confronted Bernadette at home and told Bee that the mothers’ community had marginalised them: “None of the other mothers like you, Bernadette. ...we had an eighth-grade moms-and-daughters Thanksgiving on Whidbey Island, but we didn’t invite you and Bee” (Semple, 2012, p. 81).

When Bernadette gets angry and berates Audrey for bringing Bee up, Audrey questions Bernadette’s maternal qualities. She praises Bee’s achievements “In spite of it all,” as if Bee could have “turned out so well” despite having a mother like Bernadette. Audrey criticizes Bernadette’s plan to send Bee to boarding school, claiming to speak for all mothers: “if Bee were my daughter... I’m speaking for every mother... we’d never ship her off to boarding school” (Semple, 2012, p. 81). Audrey’s remark exemplifies implicit moral policing, insinuating Bernadette is a wicked, unloving mother unlike others.

This confrontation of gossip, judgement, and humiliation impacts Bernadette. Bee notes that after Audrey yelled at her mother in public, she “was never the same again”. This illustrates how collective stigma affected Bernadette’s state. The categories of symptoms (depression, anxiety, behavior) indicate interaction between drives and environmental influences. Prolonged dissatisfaction may lead to depression, anxiety, and behavioural changes marked by low self-esteem and social withdrawal (Purwaningsih et al., 2020). This “us-them” pattern shows sanctions harden: gossip becomes ostracism, and non-compliance signals character flaw.

4. *Digital Archives/ Documentation: From Rumor to “Fact”*

The stigmatization of Bernadette is recorded in the novel’s narrative documents—emails, memos, and reports—reinforcing her image as a “troubled” figure. Bernadette’s husband consulted a psychiatrist and submitted an FBI investigation file listing Bernadette’s “behaviors” from community complaints, turning gossip into official facts. “...she ran over a mother at school; she had a billboard erected outside this woman’s home to taunt her; she hoards prescription medicine; she suffers from extreme anxiety, grandiosity, and suicidal thoughts” (Semple, 2012, p. 172). Through these reports, Bernadette’s eccentric actions—from school incidents and a billboard mocking a neighbor to her habit of isolating herself and hoarding medication—were constructed as evidence that she was a dangerous and “mentally ill” mother.

Other digital epistolary archives, such as official school letters and email correspondence between characters, further reinforce these negative stereotypes (Hasjim et al., 2026). Principal Gwen Goodyear, for example, implicitly confirms the view that Bernadette is guilty and not acting as a beneficial school citizen through the tone of her letters. Similarly, Audrey and Soo-Lin’s emails scattered throughout the novel function like a digital trail of stigma. They document Bernadette’s

every norm violation (not volunteering, not socializing, behavior deemed odd) and circulate them within the parent network.

This collection of narrative evidence supports Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminist theory, that Bernadette's figure is constructed as a "failed mother" by her surroundings because she rejects the hegemonic demands of the "ideal mother" figure. Community values are produced and circulated through institutions, such as the family and the community, and through communication, directing the normalisation of labelling (Yudith et al., 2024). The quotes above clearly show how the suburban community in the novel delegitimises Bernadette's motherhood, both explicitly through labels and direct insults, and implicitly through gossip, exclusion, and the documentation of her behavior in the community's digital archives.

The data clusters demonstrate a circuit: gossip triggers labels, school rituals audit mothers' worthiness, ostracism imposes sanctions, and digital documentation solidifies narratives into "facts." Platform affordances enable access and cross-platform diffusion, a precondition for rumour-to-record conversions (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023). In O'Reilly's framework, this is mother-blame, a technology that individualizes deviations from the "ideal mother" script, blinding to the mother's ambivalence and work or health context and reducing them to flaws. Bernadette's stigmatization is linked to mother-blame, activated by gossip, school rituals, and digital archives stabilizing "maternal failure." Thus, maternal reputation politics operates as blame ecology, maintaining stigma.

B. Bernadette's Maternal Ambivalence and Alternative Mothering Practises

This section reads Bernadette's ambivalence as a clash with the ideal mother script and then explores how the text instead presents unruly care (delegation, strategic withdrawal, the recovery of creative work) as a legitimate form of maternal agency within the framework of O'Reilly's matricentric feminism.

1. Withdrawal: From "Social Disability" to Relational Hygiene Tactic

Bernadette Fox often displays ambivalence as a mother by isolating herself from her social circle. She experiences social anxiety and is reluctant to interact with her daughter's school community. Bernadette's ambivalence is apparent when she admits, "Of the million reasons I don't want to go to Antarctica, the main one is that it would require me to leave the house. You might have figured out by now that's something I don't much like to do" (Semple, 2012, p. 5). This withdrawal is not a rejection of the child but rather a strategy to maintain mental stability so that he can remain present for Bee.

She formulated her dislike of the social rituals of school mothers cynically:

One of the gnats at Galer Street claims I ran over her foot at pickup. ... See, that's why I call the mothers there 'gnats'. Because they're annoying, but not so annoying that you actually want to spend valuable energy on them." (Semple, 2012, p. 21)

It indicates she refuses to spend energy on petty wars that erode her parenting capacity. She names mothers as "gnats," marking years of provocation: "These gnats have done everything to provoke me..." (Semple, 2012, p. 21). This reflects memories of conflicts and leads her to avoid channels she sees as toxic. In the Galer Street community, this attitude is deviant because it rejects the norm of a volunteer. But in O'Reilly's matrix, withdrawal reads as a tactic preserving caring capacity—valid boundary work rather than a maternal "flaw". When she tells her husband, "Those gnats have always hated me. She's going to turn you against me" (Semple, 2012, p. 89), the ambivalence becomes tension between private space and appearing as an "ideal mother" publicly, preserving selfhood and a healthy mother-child relationship.

2. Delegation: From "Absent" to Redesigning Care Work

As a manifestation of her maternal ambivalence, Bernadette often delegates household chores and parental responsibilities to others. Rather than being directly involved in domestic routines, she relies on a virtual assistant to take care of various family needs.

Bernadette shifts administrative and logistical burdens to a virtual assistant to conserve emotional energy for Bee. "You know I have a daughter, Bee. (She's the one you order the medicine for and wage a valiant battle with the insurance company over)" (Semple, 2012, p. 5). This delegation extends to family matters: "... could you pretty please take over the paperwork, visas, plane tickets, everything involved with getting the three of us from Seattle to the White Continent? Is this something you have time for?" (Semple, 2012, p. 5). She delegates purchasing medicine and handling Bee's health insurance. This shows her normative "untidiness" is burden management. Even with details, she sets boundaries: "Send us several to try on, as long as returns require no more from me than leaving a box outside for the UPS guy" (Semple, 2012, p. 21). Here, ambivalence becomes agency, restructuring care by delegation.

In the eyes of the community, a mother's physical absence from the details of everyday life is quickly equated with "lack of care." Functionally, however, delegation is a redistribution of the burden so that the mother retains the energy and headspace to be meaningfully present to her child—an example of unruly care that is "untidy" but effective in supporting the continuity of the mother-child relationship.

3. Creative Work Recovery: From "Selfishness" to Self-Care that Increases the Capacity for Presence

One form of Bernadette's ambivalence as a mother is her desire to return to her creative world (as an architect) in order to maintain her own health. After a long absence from her architectural career and feeling alienated in her domestic role, Bernadette rediscovered herself when creative opportunities arose. When creative opportunities arose, Bernadette marked them with a burst of vitality:

My heart started racing, not the bad kind of heart racing, like, I'm going to die. But the good kind of heart racing, like, Hello, can I help you with something? If not, please step aside because I'm about to kick the shit out of life." (Semple, 2012, p. 279)

Bernadette describes the passion and positive energy that resurfaced when she faced new creative challenges, as if ready to "conquer" her life again. This was not an escape from motherhood but rather a self-repair that restored her affective resources so she could be present as a mother.

This determination crystallized when she wrote, "From then on, every hour of my day became devoted to plotting my takeover of the new South Pole station. When I say every hour of my day, that would be twenty-four, because the sun never sets" (Semple, 2012, p. 279). Bernadette dedicated all her time, day and night, to designing a new research station project at the South Pole. This emphasised the importance of creative space for her mental well-being. A repositioning of identity from "mother who failed to adapt" to a creative subject who breathes again. In O'Reilly's framework, this is the form of maternal agency, namely re-creating not the antithesis of care, but the conditions for mother-child care to continue without being burned out by the demands of domestic idealization. The mother reorganizes rhythms and spaces for the sake of continuing care, even though her steps do not comply with the protocol of "total availability".

4. *Children's Counter-Narratives: Emotional Legitimacy of Unruly Care*

Bernadette's daughter, Bee Branch, offers a nurturing perspective on her mother. Bee's narrative confirms that her mother's "untidy" strategies did not diminish her attachment. Through Bee's eyes, we see that Bernadette's unconventional behaviour did not diminish her love and support as a mother. Bee frequently challenges stigmas or negative assumptions about Bernadette, recognizing the sincerity of her mother's love despite her eccentricities.

Bee's experience reverses stigma. When being teased by her peers, Bernadette quips:

Mom called to them, "That's really original, I wish I'd thought of that. I can pinpoint that as the single happiest moment of my life, because I realised then that Mom would always have my back. It made me feel giant... I didn't fall, because Mom was in the world." (Semple, 2012, p. 241)

Bee recalls her mother defending her from the taunts of other children with Bernadette's signature sarcasm. Even when outsiders mock the family's decisions, Bee responds sarcastically—a defense that demonstrates her recognition of her mother's love and support beyond outward social performance. In other words, the text grants the child affective authority to revise the community's interpretation of Bernadette's motherhood.

Bee realized from this experience that her mother "always had my back," which gave her a tremendous sense of confidence and security. For Bee, her mother's response, which might have seemed normatively "disrespectful," was concrete emotional protection. When the community accused the outsourcing practice of laziness, Bee instead appreciated her mother's ingenuity. "What was Mom's big crime, anyway?" (she compared her mother's "cheap solution" to her father's expensive technology). It became clear that methods that did not follow the canon of intensive mothering were effective in preserving a child's dignity and well-being—that was unruly care at work. "I guess you love Kyle more than my mom loves me" (Semple, 2012, p. 46). When Audrey—a neighbour who often criticised Bernadette—insinuated that Bee was sent to the boarding school because her mother didn't care, Bee sarcastically responded that Audrey must love her child more than Bernadette loved Bee. Bee's remark only underscored her belief that her mother loved her deeply, making Audrey's sarcasm seem unfounded.

5. *Counter-Narratives of Couples: Reframing "Deviation" as a Creative Necessity*

Elgie Branch, Bernadette's husband, ultimately offered a counter-narrative to the stigma attached to Bernadette. After going through the conflict, Elgie realized that Bernadette's behavior, considered "unnatural", stemmed from a repressed creative need, not a bad mother. He regretted not understanding and supporting his wife sooner.

Ultimately, Elgie revised her interpretation. "That's where I really failed your mom. She was an artist who had stopped creating. I should have done everything I could to get her back" (Semple, 2012, p. 257). Elgie's statement provides the perspective that what others saw as Bernadette's failure as a mother was actually evidence that she needed support to be herself in order to be a happy and present mother. This recognition shifted the axis of judgement from the morality of motherhood to the structural problem of losing a creative outlet. By accepting that Bernadette's creative needs were part of self-care (which culminated in childcare), the family reconfigured roles so that love, mental health, and creativity could coexist. At this point, the stigma collapsed not because Bernadette transformed into the community's "ideal mother," but because ambivalence was recognized as a legitimate part of motherhood and exercised as a maternal agency that nourished relationships.

From the three data clusters—withdrawal, delegation, and restoration of creative work—it appears that Bernadette's ambivalence was indeed read as deviant by the community because it contradicted the script of total availability. However, at the textual and affective levels (Bee's voice), the three formed a matrix of unruly care: care practises that reject the script but maintain relational continuity and restore maternal capacity. In O'Reilly's terms, this is maternal agency—a shift in focus from adherence to ritual performance to the continuity of care as a measure of maternal success.

Bernadette's ambivalence is interpreted as deviance because it rejects the ideal maternal script that demands total availability; however, the text presents unruly care—delegation, temporary withdrawal, and the restoration of creative work—as a legitimate maternal agency that actually supports the continuity of caregiving (Aini et al., 2026).

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Bernadette's ambivalence is interpreted as deviant because it contradicts the ideal maternal script that demands total availability, ritual presence, and adherence to communal etiquette. This interpretation is not the result of a personal flaw but rather a consequence of the normalisation of performative standards of motherhood. Mother-blame is activated through gossip, school rituals (attendance, hospitality, and volunteerism as moral metrics), and digital documentation that bureaucratizes rumors into written "facts." The chain of labelling → stereotyping → status loss shifts structural issues onto the mother's shoulders. The text consistently presents unruly care —delegating tasks, temporarily withdrawing from toxic channels, and restoring creative work—as a legitimate maternal agency, where the measure of care success is placed on the continuity of the mother-child relationship and capacity for presence, not on adherence to rituals.

Conceptually, these findings solidify *unruly care* within O'Reilly's framework, which allows for a trajectory of ambivalence → mother-blame → agency. Practically, these findings suggest an audit of community/school discourse to prevent stigma and open up flexible spaces for mothers' participation.

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