

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614

E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue 4, September
2026**

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A Literariness.org Project

DOI: 10.67147 literariness.v1i4.028

When Care Becomes Evidence: Maternal Riskification and Algorithmic Surveillance in Helen Phillips's *Hum* and Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*

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Abstract: Contemporary speculative fiction increasingly places motherhood inside systems that promise safety while converting intimate life into data. This article reads Helen Phillips's *Hum* (2024) and Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* (2025) together to examine a more specific problem than technological surveillance alone: the transformation of maternal care into evidence against the mother. Drawing on Sharon Hays's account of intensive mothering and Helen Thornham's concept of algorithmic vulnerability, the article proposes "maternal riskification" as a name for the process by which ordinary acts of care, exhaustion, refusal, or self-preservation are translated into indicators of maternal negligence or dangerousness. In *Hum*, May's attempt to remove her family from continuous digital mediation culminates in the public and institutional recoding of her protective decision as negligent parenting. In *The Dream Hotel*, Sara Hussein's decision to adopt a sleep technology after the birth of her twins produces the dream data later used to classify her as a future threat and separate her from her family. The comparison reveals two related forms of judgment: retrospective, viral riskification and anticipatory, predictive riskification. Where older forms of mother-blame punish a perceived failure after the fact, these novels imagine systems that make maternal failure permanently inferable from data. Their most unsettling insight is therefore not that mothers are watched, but that no maternal choice remains outside interpretation: refusing surveillance can look irresponsible, while accepting care technologies can generate the very evidence through which a mother is governed.

Keywords: *Maternal Riskification; Algorithmic Surveillance; Intensive Mothering; Algorithmic Vulnerability; Contemporary Speculative Fiction; Digital Motherhood*

Introduction

A mother takes technology away from her children because she wants to care for them more attentively. Another mother accepts a technology because she is too exhausted to care for newborn twins without sleep. The gestures move in opposite directions: refusal in Helen Phillips's *Hum* and adoption in Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*. Yet both decisions produce a remarkably similar result. What begins as care is detached from its circumstances, converted into data, and returned to the mother as evidence that she may be unfit, negligent, or dangerous. Observation is only the beginning. More consequential is the gradual displacement of the mother's capacity to explain what she meant by caring by systems that claim to know what her behavior signifies. That distinction matters because surveillance has already become an obvious critical language for both novels. *Hum* imagines an environmentally damaged near future in which humanoid "hums," wearable artificial-intelligence companions, personalized advertising, facial recognition, and networked domestic devices have become ordinary conditions of family life. May, a mother of two, has lost her job to artificial intelligence and undergoes an experimental facial procedure for money, partly because it can make her less legible to ubiquitous surveillance. The money finances a rare family stay in the Botanical Garden, where she hopes to recover something that the surrounding city has made scarce: clean air, unmediated attention, and the experience of being together without screens (Phillips). *The Dream Hotel* moves from corporate observation to algorithmic pre-crime. Sara Hussein, a museum archivist and mother of twin toddlers, is detained after the Risk Assessment Administration calculates that her dreams and other data make her an imminent threat to her husband. She has committed no crime. Her detention is justified by what an algorithm predicts she might do (Lalami).

Recent criticism has begun to map this territory from adjacent angles. Noha Ahmed Abdelaziz reads *Hum* through posthumanism, emphasizing the novel's unstable human/nonhuman boundary and its dependence on technological actors. Brahim Barhoun's 2026 study of *The Dream Hotel* focuses on the data double, showing how Sara is governed by a statistical surrogate that she can neither fully access nor correct. These studies make clear that surveillance and algorithmic mediation are already visible critical concerns in the two novels. What remains less fully explored is the moment at which care itself changes evidentiary status: a protective choice, a bodily limit, or an attempt to remain functional becomes material from which maternal negligence or dangerousness is inferred.

The comparison pursued here begins at that point of reversal. In *Hum*, May's decision to interrupt technological tracking is judged after a crisis; in *The Dream Hotel*, Sara's earlier adoption of a sleep technology generates data that authorizes punishment before any crime occurs. One narrative renders maternal behavior suspicious in retrospect, while the other renders maternal interiority

dangerous in advance. I use maternal riskification to describe this conversion of maternal conduct, feeling, exhaustion, and care into evidence from which a mother can be classified as a present or future risk. The term is deliberately narrow. It refers to the loss of relational context that makes an action intelligible as care while leaving behind a trace that institutions, platforms, or publics can reinterpret. The force of this reversal becomes clearer through two complementary accounts of maternal responsibility and datafied vulnerability. Sharon Hays's account of intensive mothering clarifies the cultural expectation that the individual mother should remain child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbed, and personally responsible for anticipating a child's needs. Helen Thornham's concept of algorithmic vulnerability, developed from research on early motherhood and tracking technologies, explains how datalogical systems can position subjects in ways that do not correspond to their lived identities and are difficult for those subjects to interrupt (Thornham 171-85). Hays explains why maternal conduct is so readily treated as a moral test; Thornham explains how technical systems can stabilize that test as data. Their conjunction reveals the bind Phillips and Lalami dramatize: the good mother is expected to anticipate risk, while the infrastructures through which she is encouraged to manage risk make her increasingly legible as a risk object.

Seen through these lenses, the novels are less interested in a future without privacy than in a future in which privacy no longer guarantees interpretive authority. May and Sara know why they make particular choices, yet their accounts matter less than what networks, publics, and institutions infer from the traces those choices leave behind. *Hum* develops this problem through viral visibility and retrospective mother-blame; *The Dream Hotel* pushes it toward predictive scoring and pre-emptive detention. Across both, care remains morally demanded even as the mother loses the power to define what her care means.

From Intensive Mothering to Algorithmic Vulnerability

Hays's formulation of intensive mothering remains useful because the digital mother in these novels is not created from nothing. She inherits an older moral economy in which motherhood is individualized as responsibility. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Hays describes an ideology that makes the mother primarily responsible for child rearing and imagines proper care as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially demanding (Hays 8). The standard is structurally difficult to satisfy: vigilance, emotional availability, expert knowledge, and self-sacrifice have no obvious point of completion. Maternal adequacy can therefore always be reopened to doubt. Digital technologies do not abolish this expectation. They provide new instruments through which it can be performed and judged. Research on contemporary parenting repeatedly shows the ambiguity of these instruments. Danica Facca and her colleagues found that digital resources can

give mothers information and social support while simultaneously intensifying guilt, self-doubt, comparison, and the sense that there are morally correct ways to use technology (Facca et al.). Tama Leaver likewise observes that monitoring technologies can become normalized as a culture of care to the point that choosing not to monitor a child may itself appear irresponsible (Leaver). These findings matter for *Hum* because May's refusal of tracking is not interpreted in a cultural vacuum. The safety provided by the children's wearables has already been naturalized. Once that safety is available, choosing to suspend it can be redescribed as choosing unnecessary risk.

The shift from maternal responsibility to maternal data is captured more sharply by Thornham. Her study of tracking-as-care regimes focuses on the ways apps and wearables translate the messy conditions of early motherhood into datalogical forms. The problem extends beyond surveillance as watching. Thornham's "algorithmic vulnerability" names a mismatch between a person's lived sense of self and the position assigned by technical systems, a mismatch that is increasingly difficult for the person to challenge (171-85). A mother may know herself through fatigue, improvisation, embodied knowledge, affection, fear, and relational history; the system knows what can be entered, tracked, compared, scored, or inferred. Once those representations acquire institutional authority, the mother's account becomes one description among others rather than the privileged explanation of her own conduct. Hays's and Thornham's accounts meet in the pressure to anticipate. Intensive mothering makes vigilance a moral obligation; datalogical systems make vigilance appear measurable. The result is a volatile form of maternal judgment. A mother is encouraged to rely on data because responsible parenting is imagined as foresight, yet the same systems can record lapses, moods, purchases, movements, or associations and reclassify them as risk. Expertise migrates into infrastructures that do not require her interpretation. Autonomy remains nominal, while the evidence through which her decisions are judged increasingly belongs to someone else.

The broader term riskification has an established history in risk and security studies, where Olaf Corry uses it to describe the political translation of uncertain future harm into a governable problem (235-58). Maternal riskification is used here in a more specific literary sense: the conversion of maternal experience into a trace that can be detached from its relational setting and read as evidence of possible failure. A missing location signal, a recorded image, a purchasing history, a dream file, or a behavioral score does not speak by itself. It becomes powerful when an external interpreter—a networked public, an agency, or an algorithm—assigns the trace a meaning that outranks the mother's explanation. The resulting asymmetry is evidentiary as much as technological: classification can begin with partial information, while context is demanded only after the mother has already been made legible as a problem. That asymmetry also prevents either novel from settling into a simple anti-technology argument. In *Hum*, networked systems help recover missing children. In *The Dream Hotel*,

the Dreamsaver restores Sara's capacity to sleep and care. Their usefulness is precisely what makes the infrastructures difficult to refuse. Care and surveillance become entangled because records generated for one intimate purpose can travel beyond the relationship in which they were produced. A trace that reassures in one setting can incriminate in another; a device that relieves vulnerability can create a new route through which vulnerability is governed.

Refusing the Device: *Hum* and the Manufacture of Negligence

May's struggle in *Hum* begins before the Botanical Garden because Phillips places her motherhood inside several overlapping economies of inadequacy. She has been made professionally redundant by the artificial intelligence she helped train. Her family is financially precarious. The city around them is environmentally degraded, and access to clean air, unpolluted water, and living nature has become commodified. Meanwhile, the family's devices continuously solicit attention and consumption. May's children, Lu and Sy, wear "bunnies," AI companions that entertain, communicate, and track. The bunnies are not external to parenting; they are woven into the children's expectations of safety and companionship. Hums, too, perform forms of calm responsiveness that make ordinary human care appear slow, irritable, and inconsistent by comparison (Phillips). May's decision to take the family to the Botanical Garden is more than escapism. It is an attempt to make care tangible again. She spends money the family can barely spare because she wants to give the children something that cannot be delivered as personalized content: trees, clean air, physical movement, shared time. Leaving the devices behind intensifies this ambition. The children will inhabit the green refuge without being continuously locatable, prompted, or entertained. The act is risky, but Phillips makes its motive recognizable. May wants her children's attention without technological competition, and she wants to encounter them as bodies moving through a landscape rather than as profiles accompanied by signals.

This desire also exposes the contradiction of intensive mothering. May is supposed to maximize her children's safety and maximize their development, intimacy, environmental awareness, and emotional wellbeing. In a world where these goals no longer align, there is no neutral maternal choice. Leaving the bunnies on would preserve location tracking while extending the very technological dependence she fears. Removing them restores an experience of untracked childhood while surrendering a safety infrastructure. What later appears as an obvious error is therefore the product of competing definitions of good care. The novel's tension comes from the fact that May's decision is not irrational before the crisis. It becomes irrational retrospectively, once the worst plausible consequence has occurred. The Botanical Garden episode performs this retrospective conversion with unusual clarity. Lu and Sy wander away and pass beyond the controlled refuge into the city. Without the bunnies, May and Jem cannot locate them. A hum eventually sends an emergency

inquiry through the network, and the children are found unharmed (Phillips). The technological system that May tried to suspend now becomes indispensable. Rescue also produces an evidentiary narrative of what has happened. Surveillance reconstructs the crisis, and May's earlier refusal of tracking becomes newly legible as a causal mistake.

The Garden episode turns May's choice into a compressed causal story. Device removed; children lost. Once those two facts are placed side by side, the larger field of care recedes: the family's dependence on screens, May's fear of technologically outsourced intimacy, the ecological deprivation that makes the Garden meaningful, and her attempt to create a period of direct attention. The trace is not false. The children were untracked, and they did become lost. Its authority comes instead from selectivity. By narrowing the range of relevant facts, the record makes one judgment appear self-evident: a responsible mother would have preserved the capacity to monitor. Phillips then moves the judgment from network to public. The family's private emergency becomes a viral event, and May is transformed into a social-media villain. The asymmetry is striking. The people judging her possess more visual evidence than relational knowledge. They can see the event but not inhabit the compromises that preceded it. Viral circulation does more than amplify gossip; it reorganizes the conditions under which maternal meaning is produced. The mother is no longer the narrator of the incident but its object. Her intentions are treated as self-serving explanations offered after the fact, while the circulating images appear immediate and self-evident.

Katy Waldman's review of *Hum* recognizes the same escalation, describing the episode as a dramatization of the intensified judgment mothers face online while questioning whether the scale of the backlash is fully plausible (Waldman). That skepticism does not weaken the episode's critical function. Phillips magnifies a familiar process: maternal behavior becomes content, content hardens into a moral verdict, and the verdict attracts institutional attention. The important movement is from visibility to admissibility. Strangers do not know May, but circulation helps construct her as the kind of mother whose conduct now appears to warrant investigation. The Bureau of Family Aid completes that movement. As Waldman notes, the agency opens an investigation "related to the negligent treatment of minors" (Waldman). The bureaucratic phrasing is revealing. "Negligent" converts a contested parenting decision into an administrative category, collapsing motive, circumstance, and outcome. The state need not establish that May intended harm; it asks whether her departure from available safety practices can be construed as a failure of care. Hays's intensive mothering is thereby translated into institutional expectation: if the good mother is supposed to anticipate danger, then an unpredictable event can be recoded as evidence that she failed to anticipate enough.

The gendered distribution of this scrutiny is equally important. Jem is present in the family and shares the Garden experience, yet the moral crisis is organized around May's mothering. Her self-conception is the one placed on trial. This imbalance follows the logic Hays describes: although parenting may be shared, maternal responsibility remains culturally individualized. The mother is imagined as the final guarantor of children's welfare, which means that a collective family decision can be narrated as her personal failure. Phillips intensifies this dynamic by placing May's private guilt alongside public judgment. The online crowd and the Bureau do not create maternal self-surveillance from nothing; they enter a psyche already trained to ask whether every compromise has harmed the children. Thornham's account of algorithmic vulnerability clarifies the next step. May's lived identity as a loving, anxious, imperfect mother does not match the subject produced by the data surrounding the incident. That mismatch is difficult to interrupt precisely because each element of the technological account is defensible. The children lacked tracking devices. They left the Garden. A networked search found them. Images circulate. From the system's perspective, these are stable points. May's explanation consists of what those points exclude: why she removed the devices, what she hoped to protect, how much attention technology had already taken from the family, and why temporary disconnection felt like care. Her vulnerability lies in the fact that what matters most to her understanding of herself is least compatible with the evidentiary form through which she is judged.

The irony is that *Hum* never allows May a clean anti-surveillance position. She needs the hum to find her children; later, technical observation also participates in determining her parental fitness. The system that threatens her can reassure her, and the system she resists can rescue her. This ambivalence is crucial to the novel's force. If technology simply endangered children, May's refusal would be vindicated. If technology simply protected them, her refusal would be foolish. Instead, Phillips stages a world in which responsible care and technological dependence have been made almost indistinguishable. The mother is compelled to choose between forms of vulnerability and then judged as though one of those choices had always been obviously correct. For that reason, the public shaming plot should be read less as a caution against disconnecting children than as a study of retrospective legibility. Once the outcome is known, the maternal decision is rewritten as evidence that predicted it. Risk here reorganizes the past as well as naming uncertainty about the future. The event's contingency disappears, and May is judged through the fiction that a sufficiently vigilant mother could have eliminated it. *Hum* turns mother-blame into a data practice: the past is processed as a sequence from which negligence can be inferred rather than remembered as a field of competing needs.

Accepting the Device: *The Dream Hotel* and the Production of Risk

If *Hum* begins with a mother who refuses monitoring, *The Dream Hotel* begins its decisive backstory with a mother who accepts a device because ordinary caregiving has become physically unsustainable. This difference prevents the comparison from collapsing into a single moral about technological dependence. Sara does not adopt the Dream saver because she is careless about privacy or seduced by novelty. Pregnancy disrupts her sleep; the birth of twins turns exhaustion into an everyday incapacity. Lalami's published excerpt lingers on forgotten household tasks, irritability, fatigue, and the fear of making mistakes while caring for Mona and Mohsin. Her husband Elias already has a Dream saver and can sleep efficiently between night feedings. Sara eventually reaches the point at which the device appears not indulgent but necessary (Lalami). That bodily history is central to the novel's politics of care. Sara's vulnerability to surveillance begins in a form of exhaustion that intensive mothering makes morally consequential: sleeplessness threatens patience, memory, attention, and the emotional availability expected of a good mother. In the authorized excerpt published by Literary Hub, the Dream saver "came in handy when the twins were born," and after implantation Sara "was able to function again" (Lalami, "Dream Hotel"). The word function matters. It describes recovery in the language of performance, quietly aligning maternal wellbeing with restored productivity. The device does not enter the household by displacing care; it becomes attractive because it makes care physically possible again.

The later betrayal is sharper because the technology has worked. The Dream saver records dream data, and the terms governing it allow those records to circulate beyond the intimate purpose for which Sara adopted the device. When the RAA folds her dreams into a crime-prediction score, an involuntary mental event becomes an actionable forecast. Sara insists on the gap between dream and deed; the officer collapses it with the chilling reply, "They might turn into crimes. That's the whole point" (Lalami, "Dream Hotel"). The sentence makes prediction sound less like interpretation than inevitability. Possibility is no longer something to weigh; it becomes a reason to act on the subject before conduct exists. Barhoun's analysis of the novel persuasively describes this process through the gap between Sara and her "data double," the statistical surrogate assembled from records and predictions. His account foregrounds surveillance capitalism, carceral governance, racialized classification, and the difficulty of challenging a profile that governs the person it supposedly represents (Barhoun). The maternal dimension sharpens that analysis in a different direction. Sara's data double is assembled from more than generic consumer behavior. One of the infrastructures that makes her legible to the state entered her life through postpartum exhaustion. A technology adopted so that she could meet the daily demands of care becomes a conduit through which the state classifies her as a threat to the family she used it to sustain.

Lalami then shifts maternal riskification into the future tense. *Hum* recodes an action after an adverse event; *The Dream Hotel* does not require an event at all. Risk scoring turns possibility into evidence. The state does not claim that Sara has harmed her husband or children. It claims that enough indicators exist to justify separating her from them. Present identity is subordinated to a statistical future in which she has already become dangerous enough to contain. The logic is especially perverse because the system treats context as noise when context would alter moral meaning. Sara's dreams do not arrive as stories embedded in exhaustion, memory, marriage, frustration, trauma, and unconscious association. They enter the risk apparatus as one data source among many. The RAA aggregates legal, financial, residential, reputational, medical, and behavioral information into a score (Lalami). The result resembles knowledge because it is extensive, but the novel repeatedly exposes the difference between accumulation and understanding. A record that Sara survived sexual assault, for example, can add to her score rather than elicit care; vulnerability becomes a statistical risk factor (Hildyard). The institution knows more about Sara and less of Sara at the same time.

Thornham's algorithmic vulnerability is particularly apt here because Sara's difficulty is not that the state lacks information. It has too much information in the wrong form. Her lived identity cannot interrupt the stabilization produced by the score. She can explain that she loves Elias, that dreams are involuntary, that her device was adopted for sleep, that the violent scenario has never been an intention. Yet her speech enters after classification. The number precedes her account and structures how that account is heard. Denial can be interpreted as ignorance of one's own risk; anger can look like volatility; refusal to comply can extend detention. The predictive system thus produces the behavior that appears to confirm the need for its own authority. The retention center intensifies this logic by making compliance itself a data-generating performance. Sara is initially told she will be observed for twenty-one days, but minor infractions can extend her confinement. Her ability to return to her children depends on demonstrating a form of docility under conditions designed to provoke frustration. The mother who wants urgently to reunite with her twins must manage not only grief and fear but the appearance of governability. Intensive mothering persists inside detention as an impossible demand: because the children need her, she should do whatever is necessary to return to them; because the institution controls what counts as necessary, maternal devotion can be leveraged into compliance.

Lalami also makes the gendered structure of the facility impossible to ignore. Sara is held among women who are attempting to prove innocence for crimes that have not happened. The setting expands her experience beyond an individualized algorithmic error. Prediction is presented as an institution that finds particular bodies available for pre-emptive management. Sara's Moroccan American background and the novel's attention to inherited forms of racialized suspicion complicate any attempt to treat motherhood as a universal category. Her maternal status does not cancel other

forms of differential scrutiny. Rather, it becomes another intimate site through which the cost of classification is felt: detention removes her from the twins at an age when everyday development is rapid, and time that the state calls "observation" is experienced by the family as irreversible absence. Sara's work with historical records supplies an important counterpoint. Her profession has trained her to understand that archives preserve through selection: they organize some relations into visibility while obscuring others. Barhoun reads this archival consciousness as a basis for recognizing the incompleteness of the data double (Barhoun). From the perspective of maternal riskification, it also exposes what the risk score excludes. The algorithm can connect data points but cannot preserve the relational meaning of why the Dream saver entered Sara's life. It knows the device, the dreams, the score, the arguments, the history. What it cannot know in its own terms is that a mother chose sleep because exhaustion was making care harder, and that the device's success deepened her connection to the family from which its data later removes her.

The reversal also changes the temporal structure of mother-blame. Hays's intensive mother is already charged with preventing foreseeable harm; Lalami imagines an institution that claims to calculate harm before the mother herself has conceived it. Protection is no longer judged only by what happened. It is judged against what a model says could happen. Under that logic, innocence ceases to mean the absence of a harmful act and becomes a demand to remain below an opaque threshold of future dangerousness. Sara's predicament reveals the most disturbing version of algorithmic vulnerability: the system's prediction alters the reality it claims merely to measure. She becomes separated from her family because she is classified as a possible threat to it. The state's attempt to prevent hypothetical domestic harm produces actual domestic rupture. The algorithm's future is speculative, but its punishment is immediate. *The Dream Hotel* goes beyond dramatizing surveillance's invasion of privacy; it shows prediction converting care infrastructures into carceral infrastructures while the intervention continues to be described as protection.

Maternal Riskification: From Mother-Blame to Pre-emptive Judgment

Reading the novels together makes the double bind unusually visible. May becomes less legible in order to recover intimacy and is judged for abandoning a safety infrastructure. Sara becomes technologically assisted in order to recover the bodily capacity for intimacy and is governed through the data that assistance produces. Both decisions make sense as care before they are recoded as risk. The pairing unsettles the familiar idea that digital harm can be solved by better individual choices. In these worlds, responsibility is not fixed in advance; its meaning is revised after data has been collected.

In *Hum*, maternal risk travels through circulation. An emergency is recorded, compressed, distributed, and morally interpreted by a networked audience. Because the consequence is already

visible, May's earlier decision acquires the appearance of recklessness. I call this viral riskification: a retrospective process in which circulation makes contingency hard to perceive. The counterfactual—had the bunnies remained on, the children would not have been lost—starts to feel like certainty, and certainty slides into a judgment of character. A choice with consequences becomes evidence about the kind of mother May is. *The Dream Hotel* organizes the same problem around forecast rather than circulation. Sara's dream data, personal records, and behavioral information are aggregated into an administrative future. Here there is no bad outcome from which negligence can be inferred. The system produces a probable outcome and treats that probability as justification for intervention. Predictive riskification therefore reverses the temporal direction of the accusation: instead of allowing an event to redefine an earlier choice, it allows data to define the person Sara may become.

What joins these temporal logics is care's evidentiary reversal. May removes tracking because she wants to reconnect with her children; the measurable residue of that choice is the absence of a location signal. Sara adopts a sleep technology because exhaustion is eroding her capacity to care; the measurable residue is a stream of dream data. In each case, the trace survives more easily than the relationship that gave it meaning. Once detached, it can be attached to a different story—negligence in one novel, dangerousness in the other. The distinction between explanation and excuse becomes politically important here. Mothers operating under intensive expectations are often permitted to explain themselves only after something has been identified as failure. Context is then easily treated as an attempt to evade responsibility. May's longing for unmediated family life can sound sentimental after the children are lost. Sara's exhaustion can sound irrelevant after the score marks her as dangerous. Maternal riskification thus reorganizes interpretive sequence: classification comes first, context second. The system asks the mother to speak from inside a category she did not choose. This temporal structure also explains why both protagonists experience guilt even when the system's judgment is excessive. Intensive mothering teaches the mother to imagine that better anticipation could have prevented harm. May can endlessly rerun the choice to remove the bunnies. Sara can blame herself for accepting the Dream saver, failing to read contractual language, losing her temper, or violating minor rules in detention. Such self-blame helps institutions appear objective because the mother begins to search for the error in herself. Yet the novels repeatedly show that the relevant systems are designed around precisely this uncertainty. They promise to reduce risk while creating new domains in which mothers can be held accountable for not predicting how their own data will be interpreted.

The comparison also complicates the language of consent. May actively withholds data by taking devices away; Sara formally consents to a product whose data practices she does not meaningfully understand. Neither act produces control. Refusal makes May suspicious after an

emergency, while consent makes Sara available to forms of inference she never intended to authorize. The problem extends beyond whether a user clicks "agree" or chooses to disconnect. Consent is structurally weak when the social benefits of participation are substantial and the downstream uses of data are unknowable. For mothers, that weakness is intensified by the moral pressure to use whatever tools appear capable of improving safety, sleep, attention, or development.

Hays and Thornham meet at precisely this point. Hays explains why the maternal subject approaches technology already carrying an expansive burden of responsibility; Thornham explains how technical systems can then position her through representations she cannot readily correct. Maternal riskification emerges from their intersection. A moral demand to prevent harm becomes attached to infrastructures that continually generate evidence about whether the mother is likely to succeed. The demand can therefore extend indefinitely: another signal can always be collected, and another deviation can always be interpreted. Neither novel, however, asks the reader to replace expertise or technology with an idealized maternal instinct. Such an inversion would romanticize motherhood. May's intuition does not prevent her children from getting lost. Sara's subjective certainty that she is harmless cannot by itself solve the broader problem of how societies assess danger. The novels' critique lies elsewhere: partial evidence should not be mistaken for complete knowledge of a person. Their mothers are compelling precisely because they are fallible. Phillips and Lalami refuse the fantasy of the perfectly knowing caregiver at the same time that they expose technologies built on a fantasy of perfectly knowing data.

The mother's fallibility also gives the concept of maternal riskification an ethical edge. If only flawless mothers deserved privacy, autonomy, or interpretive authority, the critique would reproduce the very ideology it opposes. May makes questionable decisions. Sara becomes angry, quarrels, forgets, and sometimes behaves in ways that an observer can read unsympathetically. The point is not that the systems misclassify saints. It is that ordinary human inconsistency is transformed into a permanently expandable evidentiary field. A mother does not have to be abusive or criminal to become legible as risk; she only has to generate enough ambiguous traces under a regime eager to interpret them. The speculative form allows both writers to magnify this process without severing it from the present. Today's mothers already negotiate tracking devices, social-media judgment, parenting platforms, location sharing, biometric monitors, recommendation systems, and searchable digital histories. Facca and her colleagues show that technologies promising support can intensify guilt and self-doubt; Leaver shows how monitoring can be culturally folded into responsible care; Thornham shows how the resulting data can stabilize maternal identities that do not match lived experience. *Hum* and *The Dream Hotel* ask what happens when these tendencies become infrastructures through which public and institutional judgments are made rather than remaining diffuse cultural pressures.

Together, these patterns mark a movement from familiar mother-blame toward anticipatory maternal governance. *Hum* retains the retrospective logic in which something goes wrong and responsibility is assigned to the mother who should have known or done better, but networked visibility accelerates the judgment. *The Dream Hotel* removes the need to wait for failure at all. A possible failure can be calculated and acted upon in advance. Maternal riskification thus stretches accountability into the future, turning what a mother might become into a reason to govern her in the present. That extension also changes the possibilities of resistance. May seeks opacity and finds that opacity can be recoded as irresponsibility; Sara participates in a care technology and finds that participation opens her interior life to prediction. Neither withdrawal nor compliance offers a stable refuge. The novels shift attention away from individual technological hygiene toward the institutions that authorize interpretation. The decisive question is who gets to convert traces into judgments—and how much context must be removed before those judgments can pass as objective. The mother's problem is finally not only that she is watched, but that others hold the authority to decide what the watching proves.

Conclusion

Hum and *The Dream Hotel* locate the danger of digital motherhood in a subtle change in the status of evidence. Care leaves traces—images, location data, behavioral records, dreams—and those traces can be separated from the relationships that produced them. Because mothers are already burdened by an ideology of intensive responsibility, the resulting records do not remain neutral. They become material for judging whether a mother anticipated danger, chose the right tools, controlled herself, and protected the family well enough. Phillips stages that judgment retrospectively. May's attempt to create unmediated family time becomes legible as negligence only after the children disappear and the event is circulated beyond the family. Lalami moves the same logic into prediction. Sara's attempt to recover sleep succeeds as care, yet the Dream saver also generates the data through which a hypothetical future is made punishable in the present. In both cases, what is lost first is context and what follows is interpretive authority.

The two novels therefore refuse the comfort of a correct technological choice. Refusing monitoring can be narrated as withholding safety; accepting monitoring can create the very evidence through which a mother is governed. Hays clarifies the inherited demand that mothers prevent harm, while Thornham shows why datafied representations can become difficult to contest. Maternal riskification names the point at which those pressures converge: maternal fallibility is observed, recorded, and made continuously classifiable. What makes these futures unsettling is not the disappearance of human judgment but its persistence under the borrowed authority of data. Strangers

shame, agencies investigate, guards extend detention, and institutions decide what counts as sufficient evidence. Phillips and Lalami return us, against that apparent objectivity, to the irreducibility of context. Care is neither a trace nor a score; it is a relationship unfolding amid uncertainty, compromise, and imperfect knowledge. When systems forget that distinction, the demand to protect families can become a mechanism for governing the mothers who sustain them.

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