Labor by Paris Paloma: An Evolutionary Psychology Analysis

Introduction

Throughout history, women have shouldered an invisible burden – one of unpaid labour, emotional endurance and societal expectation. Paris Paloma's "Labour" speaks to a collective female experience rooted in centuries of domestic inequality through her evocative music video, that was released on March 27, 2023.

In the music video, Paris Paloma is dressed in historic clothing and brings out dishes of food to complete a candlelit feast.



The man at the head of the table (Henry Hayward; her husband here) fills his plate and greedily devours meat and fruit while she watches silently.





He taps his knife against a tankard, signaling for more, yet she remains frozen, her own plate untouched.



She fingers her wedding ring, symbolizing her entrapment, before briefly rising with her plate and cup, only to sit back down.



In a powerful act of defiance, she breaks a pomegranate open, its red juice splattering across her dress.



She then shoves berry pie into her mouth with her bare hands, creating a chaotic mess.



Her unsettling smile follows, met with his oblivious laughter. When he finally lifts his head again, she is gone.



And her candle is extinguished-a haunting symbol of her absence, whether through escape or symbolic death.



I chose this song because it stands as a modern expression of a struggle deeply embedded in evolutionary history. The word "labour" itself transcends generations, tracing back to our earliest ancestors. From childbirth to caregiving, women have historically carried the burden of tasks essential for group survival.

In this analysis, I will examine "Labour" through the lens of two key evolutionary theories: Parental Investment Theory and Reciprocal Altruism. By doing so, I aim to

highlight how these psychological frameworks provide insight into the persistent inequalities that women face and the evolutionary roots of emotional labour in relationships.

Introduction to Evolutionary Theories

Parental Investment Theory by Trivers (1972)

Parental investment theory, introduced by Robert Trivers in 1972, states that the sex that invests more in offspring-typically females-will be more selective in choosing mates, while the sex that invests less-typically males-will compete for reproductive opportunities (Trivers, 1972) Parental investment theory explains not only mate choice but also broader gender dynamics, including why women bear more child-rearing responsibilities and why men often engage in status-driven competition. One key biological difference is reproductive cost-women have about 400 eggs in their lifetime, while men produce 12 million sperm per hour (Buss et al., 1992). This disparity means women must be more selective in choosing mates since each pregnancy is a significant investment.

Even after fertilization, the biological demands on women remain extreme. Pregnancy lasts about 38 weeks, during which the mother must provide nutrients and energy to the developing fetus (Soares et al., 2018). The human placenta aggressively extracts resources, even manipulating maternal blood sugar, sometimes leading to complications like pre-eclampsia (Fathalla, 2013).

Birth presents another major challenge due to the obstetrical dilemma-humans evolved large brains and bipedalism, which narrowed the birth canal, making childbirth unusually painful and risky. Unlike other primates, human infants are born with only 25% of their brain developed, requiring years of intensive care (Wells et al., 2012).

Because of this biological investment, women are naturally inclined to continue investing heavily post-birth. Breastfeeding, for instance, is a major energy demand that only mothers can provide. While cooperative caregiving evolved-with fathers, grandparents, and others contributing-women still carry a disproportionate burden (Gintis, 2012).

Trivers' theory suggests this is biologically rooted; since women have already invested heavily in pregnancy and birth, they are inclined to continue that role. Societal norms often amplify this expectation, adding further pressure (Trivers, 1972).

Men’s parental investment is more variable, influenced by factors like paternity certainty-mothers are always certain of their genetic connection, while fathers are not (McLanahan, 1999).

Though cultural shifts and advances like formula feeding and childcare services are helping redistribute caregiving roles, deeply ingrained expectations still result in women shouldering greater emotional and physical labor (Mulder, 1998).

Reciprocal Altruism by Trivers (1971)

Reciprocal altruism, a key concept in evolutionary biology, explains why individuals help others despite an immediate cost. Robert Trivers proposed that this behavior evolved because it increases the likelihood of receiving help in return (Trivers, 1971). Cooperation can thrive if individuals recognize those who reciprocate and avoid those who exploit generosity.

This idea aligns with the "tit for tat" strategy in game theory, where individuals start by cooperating and continue unless the other party stops. However, unlike "tit for tat," reciprocal altruists may permanently withdraw cooperation if trust is broken, while "tit for tat" allows for reconciliation under certain conditions (Dawkins, 2006).

For reciprocal altruism to evolve, specific conditions must exist. Helping must involve an initial cost to the donor while benefiting the recipient, and the donor must expect future repayment. Individuals must also recall past interactions to avoid exploitation by "cheaters"-those who take without giving back. Human social systems use mechanisms like reputation and social bonding to enforce this. For instance, in traditional societies, food sharing relies on the expectation that others will reciprocate in times of need. Persistent takers risk being ostracized or denied help in the future (Stephens, 1996).

When reciprocity fails, relationships suffer. If one person continually gives while the other only takes, the giver may feel drained, unappreciated, or resentful. This imbalance is common in friendships or romantic relationships where one side invests far more effort. Over time, this dynamic breeds emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Trivers, 1971).

Emotions such as gratitude, guilt, and moral outrage have evolved to regulate these interactions. Gratitude strengthens bonds with those who reciprocate, guilt encourages beneficiaries to return the favor, and moral outrage motivates individuals to punish or distance themselves from exploiters. Without reciprocity, individuals and even entire communities risk disillusionment and a breakdown of cooperation (Trivers, 1971).

Literature Review

Chemaly's Research in 'Rage Becomes Her'

In *Rage Becomes Her*, Soraya Chemaly highlights the power of female anger-and society's refusal to hear it. From childhood, girls are taught to be polite and accommodating, while boys are encouraged to be assertive. This double standard shapes emotional expression: men's anger is seen as strength, while women's is dismissed as irrational (Chemaly, 2018). To avoid being labeled difficult or dramatic, women suppress their feelings, fearing backlash and

isolation. But anger doesn't vanish-it festers, leading to stress, anxiety, or depression. Women's anger often arises from real injustices-being ignored, underestimated, overworked, or denied control over their bodies (Chemaly, 2018). Yet instead of addressing these issues, society criticizes their tone and attitude, urging them to calm down or smile more. What if anger was no longer treated as a gendered emotion? What if it was seen as a valid response to injustice, rather than something to suppress?

Federici's Research in 'Revolution at Point Zero'

In *Revolution at Point Zero*, Silvia Federici discusses how capitalism exploits housework and reproductive labor. Early human groups thrived through shared responsibilities-child-rearing, food preparation, and caregiving were collective efforts as vital as hunting or crafting weapons. However, as societies shifted to larger civilizations, labor value changed. With the rise of agriculture and private property, family units became economic units, and household duties-primarily assigned to women-were seen as natural, unpaid tasks (Federici, 2012). During the industrial age, this divide deepened. Factories needed wage workers, and domestic labor-despite being essential for workers' well-being-was overlooked as non-productive (Federici, 2012). Capitalism thrived by treating this unpaid labor as an invisible yet indispensable resource. Without caregiving and domestic work, economies cannot function. Reproductive labor-raising children, caring for the sick, and maintaining homes-isn't a luxury but the foundation of economic survival (Federici, 2012). In evolutionary terms, society shifted from valuing communal care to neglecting it. Recognizing and compensating this labor is crucial-not just for fairness, but for acknowledging the true backbone of human progress and survival (Federici, 2012).

Coltrane's Research on 'Research on Household Labor'

In *Research on Household Labor: Modeling and Measuring the Social Embeddedness of Routine Family Work*, Scott Coltrane highlights that despite shifts in gender roles and employment, the division of domestic labor remains uneven. Historically, this division evolved to maximize efficiency-women managed childcare and household tasks, while men focused on resource acquisition. Even with modern social changes, this pattern persists (Coltrane, 2000). While men have increased their household contributions, women still perform most routine tasks like cooking and cleaning-essential for daily survival. Coltrane's research shows that shared domestic labor improves marital satisfaction, reducing stress and promoting relationship stability-key factors in long-term pair bonding and offspring well-being. Economic shifts have also influenced this dynamic; women who earn more or work longer hours tend to do less housework, reinforcing how resource control continues to shape domestic roles, much like in prehistoric times (Coltrane, 2000). This evolving redistribution of household labor reflects an ongoing adaptation-where ancient survival strategies meet modern ideas of equality. Though the fire has been replaced by dishwashers and takeout, the question of "who does what" at home continues to shape family dynamics, just as it has for centuries (Coltrane, 2000).

Clark and Mills' Research on 'Interpersonal Attraction in Exchange and Communal Relationships'

In *Interpersonal Attraction in Exchange and Communal Relationships*, Clark and Mills (1979) explore two distinct ways humans connect-communal and exchange relationships-and how these patterns may have evolved. Communal relationships, like those with close family and friends, operate without keeping score; people help because they care. This instinct likely evolved from our ancestors' need to protect and support their tribe,

strengthening family bonds across generations (Clark et al., 1979). In contrast, exchange relationships are more transactional-people give with the expectation of receiving something in return. This fairness-driven approach likely emerged to help early humans cooperate with non-family members, ensuring trust and preventing exploitation during interactions like food or tool trading (Clark et al., 1979). Interestingly, the study found that in exchange relationships, getting something in return builds trust and strengthens the bond. But in communal relationships, directly repaying a favor can reduce attraction by making the relationship feel transactional rather than genuine (Clark et al., 1979). From an evolutionary standpoint, this research suggests our brains are wired to navigate both deep, unconditional support in close bonds and fairness-based exchanges in broader social settings-ensuring survival in both intimate groups and larger societies (Clark et al., 1979).

Geary's Research on Parental Investment Theory

Humans are naturally wired to be devoted parents-and that's no coincidence. Evolution shaped us to invest time, energy, and love into raising children because human babies are born especially vulnerable. Unlike newborn animals that quickly gain independence, human infants require years of care to survive, making parental investment crucial for passing on genes (Geary, 2000). Mothers typically become primary caregivers since pregnancy and nursing create a natural bond, while fathers often contribute through food provision, protection, or social support. Both roles evolved to enhance a child's chances of survival in different ways (Geary, 2000). Parents are also instinctively selective with their energy, often investing more in children who appear healthier or show stronger signs of thriving. While this may seem harsh, it aligns with evolutionary strategies that prioritize survival success (Geary, 2000). Though biology shaped these instincts, cultural and social

norms now heavily influence parenting styles. Yet beneath it all, the ancient drive to nurture, protect, and ensure survival remains deeply embedded in every parent today (Geary, 2000).

Analysis and Application to "Labour"

Labour's powerful lyrics connect to various psychological and social theories showing how these patterns have roots in both biology and culture.

Parental Investment Theory (Trivers, 1972) suggests that because women invest more biologically in childbirth and parenting, they're often expected to take on caregiving roles. The song's lyrics reflect this idea:

> *"Who tends the orchards? Who fixes up the gables? / Emotional torture from the head of your high table"*

These lines highlight how women are seen as the caretakers of both the home and emotional well-being, while men are often positioned as the authority figures. This reflects societal norms that place caregiving burdens on women. Feminist theorist Silvia Federici (2012) expands on this in *Revolution at Point Zero*, where she argues that women's domestic work often goes unnoticed and unpaid.

> *"All day, every day, therapist, mother, maid / Nymph, then a virgin, nurse, then a servant"*

This list of exhausting roles shows how society expects women to constantly switch between demanding identities. The song critiques how these roles are treated as a duty rather than something that deserves recognition.

"24/7 baby machine / So he can live out his picket-fence dreams"

This line criticizes the outdated belief that a woman's main role is to bear children and support the family dream, echoing Federici's argument that capitalism heavily relies on women's unpaid labor at home.

From an evolutionary angle, this pattern may have developed as a survival strategy. In early human societies, tasks like nurturing children, gathering food, and maintaining the home were crucial to group survival. While these roles ensured the safety and development of offspring, over time, they became cultural norms that restricted women to caregiving roles, even when such patterns were no longer necessary for survival.

Reciprocal Altruism (Trivers, 1971) suggests that healthy relationships thrive on mutual give-and-take. However, when one person constantly takes without giving back, the relationship suffers. The song portrays this imbalance vividly:

"Apologies from my tongue, and never yours / Busy lapping from flowing cup and stabbing with your fork"

These lines paint a picture of a relationship where one partner keeps apologizing and giving, while the other simply takes. This kind of emotional imbalance leaves the speaker feeling drained and taken advantage of.

"For somebody I thought was my saviour / You sure make me do a whole lot of labour"

This line reflects the disappointment that comes when someone once seen as loving turns out to be a source of stress and exhaustion.

"The silence haunts our bed chamber / You make me do too much labour"

Here, silence symbolizes emotional distance, where the speaker's constant effort goes unrecognized. This emotional burnout mirrors the way relationships crumble when reciprocity is lost.

From an evolutionary perspective, Reciprocal Altruism may have evolved to build trust and cooperation within early human groups. Those who maintained balanced relationships were more likely to survive, while those who exploited others risked social exclusion. The song highlights the emotional toll when this balance is broken.

The song also explores female anger, a theme Soraya Chemaly discusses in *Rage Becomes Her*. Chemaly argues that women's anger is often dismissed, even when it's justified. The speaker's frustration shows this:

*"And I'm getting f**king tired / The capillaries in my eyes are bursting"*

This raw imagery reflects the toll of suppressing anger and frustration. Chemaly explains that ignoring or stifling these emotions often leads to stress and burnout.

"If our love died, would that be the worst thing?"

This haunting question challenges the belief that women must keep relationships intact no matter how much they suffer. Chemaly argues that women are often pressured to sacrifice their well-being to maintain peace.

"It's not an act of love if you make her / You make me do too much labour"

This powerful line rejects the idea that love excuses exploitation. Chemaly highlights that society frequently frames women's emotional and physical labor as "just part of love," rather than recognizing it as unfair.

Scott Coltrane's research on household labor shows that even as gender roles evolve, women still end up doing most of the chores. The song reflects this imbalance:

"Who fetches the water from the rocky mountain spring? / And walk back down again to feel your words and their sharp sting"

This paints a painful image of women performing both physical tasks and enduring emotional abuse. The line emphasizes that even after their efforts, women's contributions are often met with hurtful words.

"If we had a daughter, I'd watch and could not save her / The emotional torture from the head of your high table"

This heartbreaking line captures the fear that societal expectations will continue to harm future generations. Federici warns that these gendered patterns are deeply ingrained, making change difficult but necessary.

"So now I've gotta run, so I can undo this mistake"

By choosing to leave, the speaker rejects these unfair norms, aligning with Federici's belief that women must reclaim autonomy and have their contributions valued.

The song also reflects Clark and Mills' (1979) theory on communal versus exchange relationships. Communal relationships involve unconditional care, while exchange relationships are more transactional. The song shows how a relationship can shift from the former to the latter:

"Just an appendage, live to attend him / So that he never lifts a finger"

This line illustrates how the speaker's role has become purely functional, resembling a transaction rather than a loving bond.

"It's not an act of love if you make her"

Here, the speaker emphasizes that genuine love isn't about forcing someone to carry an unfair burden. This reflects how losing that sense of mutual care breaks the foundation of a healthy relationship.

From an evolutionary perspective, communal relationships may have been crucial for survival, especially in early human tribes where cooperation and shared caregiving ensured the well-being of offspring. The song shows how this natural inclination can be twisted into exploitation when care becomes one-sided.

Similar themes are seen in literature and media. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist's emotional and physical labor is dismissed by her husband, leading to her psychological breakdown. In Indian media, shows like *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Thappad* powerfully explore the emotional and physical labor women endure in traditional family roles.

Conclusion

Parental Investment Theory reveals how survival-based biological realities have evolved into cultural norms that unfairly place caregiving and domestic labor on women. Reciprocal Altruism highlights the emotional strain of relationships where one partner constantly gives while the other only takes-leaving the giver drained, resentful, and disillusioned.

The burdens expressed in *Labour* are not just remnants of the past-they persist today. Women are still expected to manage household responsibilities, childcare, and emotional caregiving, often without recognition or support. Despite workplace progress, many women face a "second shift" at home, handling tasks like remembering birthdays, comforting children, or maintaining family peace. While these duties may seem minor, they accumulate, creating mental exhaustion.

Even in romantic relationships, women are often expected to be the emotional caregivers-checking in, resolving conflicts, and offering reassurance-while their efforts go unnoticed. This imbalance has evolutionary roots; historically, women's heavy investment in childbirth and caregiving reinforced these roles, while men, once focused on providing resources, were excused from emotional labor-a pattern that lingers today.

Labour powerfully exposes this inequality, showing that unrecognized emotional labor isn't just exhausting-it's unjust. As Paris Paloma declares, "It's not an act of love if you make her." This line confronts the harmful belief that women's sacrifices are simply part of loving others. Real love-and real progress-demands shared effort, respect, and appreciation.

The rage in *Labour* isn't just rebellion-it's a call for autonomy, a demand to break free from inherited burdens and ensure emotional labor is no longer invisible. As Soraya Chemaly aptly reminds us, "Anger is loaded with information and energy. You can't get to the core of healing unless you let yourself feel it."

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