

## The Mechanism of Surrogacy: A Marxist Feminist Study of Joanne Ramos's *The Farm*

By

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### Abstract

Recent reproductive technology has become the popular option for infertile couples to complete their families. Gestational surrogacy is a transaction arrangement where poor women agree to carry the offspring of the upper class. Joanne Ramos's debut novel, *The Farm* (2019), depicts the current, controversial issue of international surrogacy. The novel raises ethical, economic, and class-structure questions about the recent form of reproductive technology. The current study aims to examine the text through a Marxist feminist framework by applying the concepts of commodification, alienation, and exploitation. The impoverished women's bodies in the novel are portrayed as breeding machines for the infertile upper-class couples. The study also argues that surrogacy arrangements are alienated labor and exploitative practices. The surrogacy arrangement objectifies the surrogate and converts her body into a commodity. The novel deals with class deference and structural disparity in global economic inequalities. The research shows the corruption features of the capitalist system. The sections of the study deal with the mechanism of surrogacy and analyze the text within a Marxist feminist theoretical framework.

**Keywords:** Commercial surrogacy, exploitation, Marxist feminism, commodification, Hosts, alienation.

### Introduction

Although genetic surrogacy is said to have a long history, there is no acceptable precedent for purposely conceiving, contractually gestating, and expecting to surrender babies. As a result, surrogate motherhood is an abnormal reproduction method (Van den Akker 5). Surrogacy is a process of reproduction used to help specific individuals complete their families. Surrogacy is a contract in which a woman agrees to get pregnant and then relinquish the child to the commissioning couple in exchange for financial compensation. Today, people worldwide are considering surrogacy as a way to start a family, regardless of their marital status or sexual orientation. Couples unable to achieve parenthood and have babies for different reasons, such as infertility, same sex couples, or singles, whether men or women, accordingly, surrogacy was defined as a disaggregated process. In which the various components are packaged to achieve the commissioned results. The procedure is seen to be commercially. It is unique in reproduction since it is both a business and a faith-based transaction; it is emotionally and financially costly. Regardless of this, it is progressively gaining in popularity (Ibid 1).

The Filipino American writer in 2019 Joanne Ramos has written her debut novel, *The Farm*. The novel is published by Random House. Joanne Ramos was inspired by people whom

she met and stories that they shared with her, and with whom they shared ethnic background with her, but unfortunately, they lacked the opportunities that she had, as she describes her work as “a work of Fiction. But it is also in many ways true” (Ramos 323). Ramos attempts to convey a message to her readers about the low class and migrant workers through their viewpoints. Moreover, she exposes the hidden conditions and how far those people sacrifice for their families and loved ones. She also highlights the features of the exploitation of the capitalist system to which low-class people are subjected. The Filipino mothers, nannies, housekeepers, and nurses she had met in Manhattan and become friends with were all mothers. Ramos adds that those women from developing countries like the Philippines and South America who have left their own children in their original nations and migrated to America, by rearing other people’s children in New York they can support their children financially. Accordingly, Ramos was interested in writing about those mothers’ experiences (Ramos 324).

About surrogacy, Ramos was motivated by a Wall Street Journal report on a surrogacy clinic in India. She started to plan and gather her ideas and thoughts using her experiences in America. As Rachel Epstein conveyed Ramos’s clarification in her interview:

what if I did a story about a surrogacy facility? What if it was only billionaires who used it? What would they want? Well, they probably would not want to be in India—they’d probably want to be near the best hospitals. There are great hospitals in New York—where would I put it? Ooh! Maybe I’d put it in the Hudson Valley because billionaires probably don’t want their fetuses smelling the traffic air. (np)

The notion of a residence where females go to be pregnant with other people’s fetuses is extreme; Richard Lea cites in her article Ramos’s comment concerning this issue, “but it’s only an extension of what’s already happening. Women take care of other people’s kids all the time, leaving their own kids behind, sacrificing family for family”. Ramos in her statement attempts to unearth an image of unrecognized detail of the current miserable condition of women who struggle for their families to survive.

### ***The Mechanism of Surrogacy in The Farm***

Before reading the novel, its title attracts the reader’s attention. The word “farm” refers to an area of land used to cultivate or rear animals to produce animal or agricultural products. However, one may ask what kind of “farms” Joanne Ramos depicts in her novel. The farm in Ramos’s novel is different, unusual and unique. It embraces not animals but rather fertile women who used to produce completely different product, babies. Thus, the novel’s title has a symbolic meaning that refers to dehumanizing women and treating them as other nonhuman creature. The concept of “labor includes a great range of activities, from subsistence farming and production on the industrial assembly lines, to the labors of pregnancy and parturition” (Stefano). Thus, gestational surrogacy, considered a business like any other business, is depicted in Ramos’s debut novel, where poor women are employed to produce babies for ultra-rich individuals.

*The Farm* is highly paralleled to Margret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*; in Atwood’s dystopian novel, tyrannical state forces impoverished fertile women of the lower working class to carry children for the upper-class infertility. While in Joanne Ramos’s *The Farm*, fertile weak women also birth the offspring of the infertile and wealthy, in this probable near-future fiction, these women chose pregnancy as their only and best chance of surviving in capitalist America (Phelan).

*Research on Surrogate Mothers*”, Karen Busby and Delaney Vun assert that “many feminist scholars understand *The Handmaid's Tale* to be a novel about the exploitative, dehumanizing elements of surrogate motherhood” (14). In *The Farm*, the author shows the same exploitation and control of female reproductive organs as occurred in Atwood’s Gilead, but in Ramos’s universe, profits, not prophets, and plutocracy, not theocracy, are the driving factors. Their costume is composed of a large number of luxurious, silky cashmere, the labor is handsomely compensated, and the vaccination takes place in a laboratory rather than through a ceremonial rape. Despite Golden Oaks’ luxurious comforts, the environment bears an uncanny similarity to Gilead, where women are only as valuable as the embryos, they provide to more robust people. Accordingly, the WellBand tracks their every movement to ensure the fetuses’ health.

Marxist feminism teaches us that females must fight for their survival since women are the principal caregivers for themselves and their families. The fight valiantly and stand on their own feet. Tong asserts that:

Marxist feminism is always on call, women form a conception of themselves they would not have if their roles in family and the workplace did not keep them socially and economically subordinate to men... Marxist and socialist feminists believe we need to analyze the links between women’s work status and women’s self-image in order to understand the unique character of women’s oppression. (Tong 98)

Accordingly, in this novel, Jane and some women, usually women of color with low income, are paid life-changing amounts to gestate the ultra-rich's bigwigs at Golden Oaks, a luxury baby farm. This was their golden chance for their survival and the sustenance of their families. However, that feminist ideal dream has become a feminist dystopia in Joanne Ramos’ first novel. As Busby and Vun state in their article,

Many feminists, including Overall, Diana Majury, and Mary Lyndon Shanley, have suggested that payment for commercial surrogacy will take advantage of economic, physical, and emotional vulnerabilities of women and they note the potential for exploitation of poor, young, single, ethnic minority women. (41)

Women who expect to attain power and independence are ideal trophies for capitalists in an era of high inequality. Busby and Vun continue indicating to Anita Allen who asserts that “minority women increasingly will be sought to serve as mother machines for embryos of middle and upper-class clients” (41-42).

Through a close Marxist feminist reading to Joanne Ramos’s *The Farm*, it is clear that the work highlights certain hidden exploitative features of the capitalist system. Thereby, *The Farm* is classified as a literary critique work of capitalism, which is a system of economy in which private individuals own capital commodities or production methods. When Lisa, one of the Hosts, clarifies the actual image of Golden Oaks for Jane, she says bluntly, “It’s a factory and you are a commodity” (Ramos 72). Jane quickly realizes what Golden Oaks is when she is selected to carry the fetus of a Chinese millionaire. Capitalism, according to Marxists, is an oppressive system; they believe that human relations are materialistic. In other words, according to them, the universe is dominated by basis, which is manifested in financial and material realms such as products and decides an individual's consciousness and identity. Accordingly, this kind of relationship results in a world of injustice which is portrayed through the novel’s events (Foley).

In a capitalist society, according to Sztompka, the world is divided into binary classes:

the ownership class and the working class; “two-class poles that opposite each other the class of ownership and the class of workers. We can also call them a master and worker, landlord and slaves, oppressor and the oppressed people” (Sztompka 199-200). The narrative alternates among four characters, with Mae Yu, an executive at the corporation that owns the Farm, representing the capital-owning elite. The American Dream is embodied by Ms. Yu, the director and manager of Golden Oaks. Mea overcame discrimination and hardship to get a university education and finally worked her way up the company ladder at Holloway, the parent firm of Golden Oaks. “Golden Oaks... is the future... is her baby” (Ramos 169). She views it as the future of reproduction for women like her, who are too preoccupied with cracking the glass ceiling to take time off for pregnancy. She is nothing if not a capitalist fanatic. In contrast, the other class, so called the proletariat, “who were forced to survive by selling their labor” (Lewis 37), represented by the protagonist Jane, her cousin Evelyn who has migrated to America to earn money to support her disabled son, and Jane’s fellow members of Hosts at the Farm. In other words, they represent the lower class in the novel.

The novel sheds light on the struggle and miserable conditions of the lower class; “I need a job,” (Ramos 57). Jane, a single mother of a newborn daughter, who left penniless, lived in a dormitory filled with women, who worked as baby nurses, and without a job after the abandonment of her husband. In her first meeting with Ms. Yu, Jane declares her desperation to find a job. Ramos in this extract shows the difficulty and the risk that she and her daughter confront:

Two bunk beds away someone coughs, a phlegmy cough that sends billions of germs rushing through the air. Jane glances down at Amalia, still sleeping in the baby carrier, and turns her back to the cougher even as she knows the germs will find her daughter anyway. (Ramos 9)

Accordingly, the miserable condition of her status and the desire to ensure her daughter’s future with a soft, refined life pushes Jane to embark on such hard labor and have her body used as a commodity for wealthy clients.

Marxist feminists argue that exploitation does not require direct coercion, external force, or physical intimidation. Rather, it enabled the capitalist's much greater an economic bargaining power over workers and the lack of appropriate substitutions. Ramos makes it evident that surrogacy is simply one-way women earn a livelihood. Perilous, challenging employment involves monitoring, ethical difficulties, and capricious customers who must be made to feel better about their own caprices. When a poor, uneducated woman like Jane, out of poverty, embarks on hard work under restricted rules, it is not her free choice but coerced since she lacked any other choice (Tong 99). Furthermore, Golden Oaks engaged in certain exploitative behaviors during the pregnancy of the Hosts.

Moreover, Marx argues, “that the value produced by workers is greater than the wages that they paid” (Tong 98). The predicament is aggravated by the fact that Hosts get a dismal monthly payment. “The typical surrogate motherhood arrangement provides merely partial or no payment for the time the surrogate expends in failed attempts at insemination, or prior to a miscarriage, or healthy baby, or when stillbirth occurs” (Bellioti 393). However, when Jane asks her fellow Host “what happens if you have a miscarriage?”, Tasia illustrates, “you get paid a little every month ... but the bonus, the big money Ms. Yu promised? That is only at the end.” (Ramos 68). Here, points of exploitation occur when a Host misbehaves, miscarries, or delivers a baby that is in some way abnormal that bonus will be canceled.

One of the exploitative features of Golden Oaks is revealed when the cellphones and WiFi are disabled, as Evelyn explains to Jane the mechanism of the upper class and their deal with their employees. She says, “They are used to controlling things. This is what their money gives them” (24). Moreover, the Hosts’ behaviors and movements were limited to a tool called WellBand, and used to track their movements, which is symbolically refers to the limited and restricted Golden Oaks. When Jane starts her job as a surrogate, “The Coordinator straps a bracelet on to Jane’s wrist,” and continues explaining “this is a WellBand. Custom made for us. I gave you red cause it was just Valentine Day It tracks all your activity level” (Ramos 64). Furthermore, the whole region of Golden Oaks is scrutinized by cameras dedicated to monitoring the Hosts’ every step.

Marx’s early critiques of capitalism emphasized labor alienation, the idea that working activity is detached from, and in contrast to the producer's agency (Smith 459). Marx's concept of *alienation* or estrangement had a great impact on Marxist feminists. Moreover, it is also quite essential when considering surrogacy.

Alienation, according to Nancy Holmstrom, is explained as “workers are not the owners of the means of production, they are not free to determine what to produce ...they have no control over what products they make nor over the process”. The Marxists maintain that alienation is the outcome of economic forces and the capitalist production system, particularly capitalist production relations, which deprive workers of decision-making power. Employees struggle to meet their basic survival and sustenance needs. Without a vote in important production decisions. According to Tong, “as the new reproductive technologies develop, an increasing number of women may be alienated from both the product and the process of reproduction” (114). When Reagan is asked about the sex of the baby in her womb “but what does Reagan know about anything? She doesn’t know what kind of baby lies within her...boy or girl. Black or white... whether it’s the offspring of a self-made millionaire or a murderous dictator” (Ramos 244).

This idea is also obviously depicted by Ramos. When one of the Hosts called Anya, who had a forced abortion because of trisomy, “it is not true Anya had a miscarriage, they made her kill the baby” (Ramos 129). Anya has been treated as a commodification, as a “mere object” not as an “appendage of machine” (Marx and Engels 18), but she is the machine itself, and even without getting her bonus, as Reagan has described the violation action of Golden Oaks with a furious tone, saying “Who cares about that goddamned baby they forced Anya to abort. Like we are in China or something it’s a complete violation” (131).

***Additionally, alienation in Kelly Oliver’s sense has shaped differently; she claims that,***

the surrogate is seen, and sees herself, as a fragment of a woman, a womb and/or egg. Her body itself is seen as a machine which can be rented out. Unlike other workers, she is not an appendage of a machine. She is the machine. Her body becomes the machinery of production over which the contractor has ultimate control. (115)

The bodies of the Hosts in Golden Oaks become fragmented and are dealt with based on their function. Thus, the surrogate is alienated from her own body, and this notion is depicted by Ramos when Liza tells Jane and Reagan about the rumor that she was informed by Julio that the most affluent Chinese couple “will pay their Host an enormous sum of money...if she manages to deliver healthy baby...and if she delivers it vaginally, the Host will receive an astronomical bonus” (Ramos 85).

### ***Commodification of Surrogacy***

Commercial practices like surrogacy can be claimed to be predicated on making human beings' commodities, which encourages an unethical environment while renting a vital organ. Individuals are not considered as persons but as statistics, numbers, or cogs in an abstract economic system. Accordingly, people are becoming more and more like things. "The commoditization of human beings proceeds apace" (Wilkinson 45). Concerning the objections of surrogacy arrangements, "the payment of money for reproductive services commodifies women and children and is, therefore, contrary to human dignity" (Busby and Vun 39). The Hosts in Golden Oaks are identified by numbers, as though they represent people who lack existence. For instance, Jane is labeled with the number 84, and her fellow Host Reagan is called with the number 82. Mea, in a business meeting with the employees of Golden Oaks, says, "Let's start with a review of 84" (The Farm 195). Capitalists reduce women to mere numbers; they do not refer to the Hosts by their names, denoting human individuals' identities. Thus, the gestational who is the essential party in the process of surrogacy which is wholly controlled as a nonhuman or an emotionless machine.

In his book *Surrogate Motherhood Families*, Olga Akker discusses how commissioning parents propose and pick surrogacy transactions, as well as the legal and financial papers necessary for their acquisition, which may make the surrogate-born kid or human seem like a commodity. He also refers to the terminology used to characterize surrogacy methods, surrogate mothers, and intermediaries, which as often emotional and designed to shock, reflecting the genuine ethical problems many individuals face when considering surrogacy. Additionally, it displays a lingering bitterness and commercialization. Corea, in 1985, was one of the early feminist authors to express her views on surrogacy. Intermediaries are referred to as "surrogacy entrepreneurs," while surrogate mothers are referred to as "breeders" in her terminology. The words "contracting out" and "transacting of newborns" express her opposition to women's exploitation and infant commercialization (204). The quotation below shows how the surrogacy policy in Golden Oaks turns women into objects that can be transacted according to the quality of their bodies:

She glances through the photos on page one of each stapled packet and frowns. Most of the applicants are from the Caribbean, but she has enough of those. What she is low on are non-Black Hosts. Really, Mae muses, what she could use are a few more Filipinas – they are popular with Clients, because their English is good, and their personalities are mild and service-oriented. (Ramos 41)

This also reflects the direct access to Mea's thoughts, which shows the mechanism of selection and the fact that Golden Oaks functions on a capitalist economic paradigm that is very controversial ethically, since it prioritizes white Clients by allowing them to choose their preferred Hosts from a pool of applicants, the majority of whom are of colored women. Women's shapes and bodies are treated as commodities, they are preferred for the quality of their bodies, their skin color, whether dark or blond, and for having a healthy uterus and still being educated, particularly after Mea learned that "Clients are willing to pay a gigantic premium for wombs that have graduated from Princeton or Stanford" (The Farm 42). This sort of woman is referred to as a Premium Host, which generates more revenue for capitalists. "Reagan McCarthy who represents the holy trifacta of Premium Hosts" (41), she is "Caucasian", "pretty" and "educated" (Ibid 42). She is a good choice for clients to host their children.

Marx and Engels assert that the bourgeoisie, or capitalists, subjugate the working class and exert influence over a society's ideology. This negative interpretation of ideology is called *false consciousness*, a term which refers to the modes of thought created by repressive

ideologies that cause individuals to believe and act contrary to their interests. It occurs when dominating social classes influence and dominate an individual's self-definition and class consciousness (the ownerships). Marx observes that working-class people are blind to their true nature as an exploited, oppressed, and alienated social class. Marxists would deny the surrogate's claims of monetary and emotional fulfillment as subjective accounts based on previous capitalist alienation and exploitation. Accordingly, this limited her possibilities and caused her to consider her social position inexorably linked to reproductive functions ( Belliotti 391). The above Marxist ideology can be observed when Jane shows her satisfaction. It is shown in this quotation: "Mea lets you live here because it's a great deal for her. Not an act of generosity," Reagan said during her last visit, her voice ugly. "It is both," Jane had answered. "I am grateful" (Ramos 314).

According to Marxists, Jane here represents another victim of the false consciousness. She is satisfied with her status and feels grateful to Mea because she works for Mr. Yu at her home. Conversely, Marxists, regard such statements as ideological distortions, parasitic on past capitalist exploitation, role indoctrination, and retraining. Jane receives payment and lives in an apartment in Mea's home. However, for Marxists, such subjective assertions of monetary and emotional fulfillment are rejected.

## Conclusion

It is a new and particularly vicious kind of race and class prejudice. Within a decade, thousands of sectional and poor women will probably be utilized as a "breeder class" (Busby and Vun 41). To conclude, the study results at the end of Jane's narrative are equally problematic, both oversimplified and wholly disappointing. Jane is content and, in many ways, in better condition than she was at the start of the narrative, yet she is still a tool of the affluent, privileged, and influential. Probably, Ramos was attempting to emphasize how muddy and unavoidable capitalism's waters are, as though history repeats itself beneath capitalism's dome. The study concludes that surrogacy arrangements are unjust since the circumstances of the protagonist and the other surrogates lead them to embark upon surrogacy. A Marxist feminist interpretation of the novel has shown some of the exploitative aspects of surrogacy transactions that are hidden behind the curtain. Surrogates are subjected to alienation and commodification. The privileged class's aspirations are fulfilled using surrogates' bodies as reproductive machinery. The poverty of some sectors allows the capitalists to take control of some poor women's reproductive labor and to make use of their bodies. Worthy while of mentioning that Jane and her fellow Hosts members would never enter into a surrogacy arrangement if their socioeconomic conditions were better. In one way or another, the capitalists exploit poor women to accomplish their desires to make more profit by using the impoverished people of the lower class.

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