

Third World Women as Reproductive Vessels: Surrogate Motherhood in Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers*

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Abstract

A House for Happy Mothers (2016) depicts the recent debated reproductive technology practice of surrogacy. Though the practice is valued as one of best opportunities for many individuals and infertile couples to complete their families, however, surrogacy arrangement is engaged with several critical studies. Commercial surrogacy in India has been the absolute attractive source for infertile couples around the world to make their dreams come true. Surrogacy has been accused of exploiting the poor and vulnerable women and commodifying their bodies. The current study examines the text from a Marxist feminist theoretical framework. The researcher argues that surrogate motherhood is an alienated labor and accordingly, treating women's bodies as a mere machine to produce the offspring of the upper class. The study aims to explore the experiences and the psychological consequences of the women who gestate the fetuses of their more privileged couples.

Keywords: commercial surrogacy, alienation, incubators, Marxist feminism, exploitation, liberty, Asha, Priya.

Introduction

Surrogacy is considered as a process by which women agree to gestate a fetus who is "genetically unrelated to the surrogate" (Robinson 205), these surrogates sign a contract which involves to "relinquish their parental rights and responsibilities" (ibid 205) after she gives birth to the child. In the recent years, surrogacy has been on the increase, and burgeoning surrogacy markets have emerged in numerous nations, notably e.g., parts of the US, India, Thailand, or Nepal are beginning to emerge (Horseley et al. 11). As a result, India is the second most popular global health location for medical tourists since it offers high-quality medical services, equipment, and facilities at a lower cost. Reproductive tourism is a subtype of medical tourism that involves travelling outside of one's own country to get IVF2 and other forms of Reproductive Technology (ART). Indian surrogacy has grown into a multimillion-dollar business since its beginning in 2002. Commercial surrogacy in the country has swiftly become the top destination for commissioning parents from wealthy Western nations like Australia, Germany, and the United States. In 2014, the commercial surrogacy industry in India was projected to be worth more than 400 million dollars a year, including over 3000 fertility clinics operating throughout the country (Pande 213).

Baby factories are springing up all across India, as Amulya Malladi depicts in her novel *A House for Happy Mothers* to shed light on the process of surrogacy transactions in India. Furthermore, she highlights the experiences of those poor women who embark on being

surrogates and the reasons behind them. The novel sheds light on the number of sacrifices these women make for the sake of their families' survival, but at what cost?

A surrogacy arrangement involves three parties: Malladi, the writer of this novel, portrays the surrogate mother by the protagonist Asha; the commissioning couple, with the partners from the United States; and the surrogacy agency, represented by Dr. Swati Gudla, who monitors the whole process.

Liberty Versus Exploitation

There are many parallels between Deborah Spar's examination of the surrogacy business in her book *The Baby Business* (2006) and the novel *A House for Happy Mothers*, which portrays couples as consumers as they struggle to have children. "I want a baby... Madhu, this is our last chance. Hell, this is our only chance" (Malladi 5). Priya says this line to her husband to express her insistence and eagerness to have a child. As noted by Robert Edelman in his psychological analysis, the chance to become a mother is one of life's most significant milestones. A failure in the reproductive system may be pretty stressful (143). As a woman, motherhood and pregnancy are life-changing experiences for Priya. Accordingly, surrogacy was the only option after three miscarriages and three unsuccessful IVF cycles. As Malladi depicts the dialectical perspectives of surrogacy, a difficulty faces Priya in convincing her husband and her mother, who object to her. Throughout the narrative, Priya is often seen defending herself against her husband by:

When Priya declared her decision to use a surrogate, her mother accused her of exploiting poor people. "My own child is exploiting my people ... I can't support this, Priyasha. I will never support this. It's an exploitation of the poor, and you should be ashamed of you" (Malladi 5). Discrimination and prejudice targeting surrogates are unfair, who emphasizes the lack of options and agency of those who "offer themselves up as subjects, giving clinics access to the productivity of their in-vivo biology, the biological labor of living tissues and reproductive processes" (Waldby and Cooper 59).

Surrogacy is divided into advocates and objectors. For liberals, it is women's right to control their bodies as they desire while for radical feminists, surrogacy is an exploitative and coercive. According to Amrita Banerjee, because commercial surrogacy is already accessible in worldwide, most surrogacy research focuses on current issues. As international commercial surrogacy has grown in popularity and become more readily available, philosophers' attention has turned to the ethics of the practice, with debates about reproductive liberalism and the potential for exploitation raging (107). Kelly Oliver points out to the advocates of surrogacy arrangements, saying:

However, the depicted characters highlight the debated issue in this novel. For instance, the characters described surrogacy arrangements as equal relationships and win-win business that benefits all parties. In other words, by helping the poor women with the money that they would give, eventually it will improve the quality of their lives. On the other hand, and the other party will gain a child. It is evident in the quotation below:

The argument here questions whether the three parties that involved in the surrogacy arrangement have equal rights or not. Amulia Malladi shows the hidden facts through this novel by exposing the surrogates' experiences during their pregnancy. By giving equal voice to both parties, she successfully gains the proper access to the inner side of each character to unearth the hidden truth behind the practice. Using alternating narratives from the surrogate mother and

the woman who hired her, the book follows the phases of pregnancy: conception; first, second, and third trimester; labor; delivery; and postpartum recovery.

According to feminist perspectives, surrogate mothers are exemplifying the ideals of feminists everywhere by taking back control of their reproductive bodies. In the same way that having an abortion or staying childless would be a decision, so too is having an abortion (Van Akker 42). In other words, surrogacy is a way for women to gain power over their bodies and their reproductive capacities. According to advocates of surrogacy, they “argue that an infertile couple has the right to procreate, and a woman has the right to use her body as she pleases” (Oliver 97). However, women in the dominant patriarch system in India are subjugated to their partners. Accordingly, the previous perspectives raise questions about whether Asha chooses to embark on surrogacy on her own decision or her husband makes her decision?

In a culture characterized by patriarchy, gender inequality is common. As a result, women are subordinate to men, and men have the power to exercise authority over them. The novel *A House for Happy Mothers* by Malladi depicts the exploitation of several women by a single influential figure. Gender norms also impacted Surrogate mothers' choices. The protagonist of the novel, Asha, as a case in point, is a submissive, voiceless woman. Her husband and his brother were the decision-makers of Asha's destiny as a surrogate, and it was their plan. When her husband suggested she be a surrogate for the sake of their son's education and future, Asha wondered if she could reject and say, “no, this is my body, I decide? ... Now it was too late. The seed had taken hold and she could feel her body already nourishing this child that was not hers.” (Malladi 21). Asha is obliged to embark on surrogacy arrangements. According to Margret Radin, as she states, “surrogacy contracts can only be appreciated when surrogacy is seen as another provision in the sexual contract, as a new form of access to and use of women's bodies by men” (131). Malladi points out that the decision to become a surrogate or prostitute is not free, and the group rather than the individual woman makes decisions about her reproductive capacity. This is annoyed and grumbling after she had to vomit for the second time in the morning, is shown in this quote:

Malladi echoes Anne Donchin's statement that even though surrogacy is the sole viable choice and is seen as a survival strategy, this in no situation signifies that the decision to become a surrogate or a prostitute is free (324).

Malladi unearths the oppression that women confront in a patriarchal society. Moreover, women are expected to have a son for the benefit of their husband's family to ensure their heirs' well-being. No matter what, the female must always follow the male's lead. It does not matter what else happens to her, even if a mature woman's pregnancy risk is high. The happiness of her husband's family is all that she cares. The quote above clarifies the status of Vinita, one of the surrogates in the Happy House who is forced to be a surrogate because she did not give her husband's family a son. As a punishment, she embarked on surrogacy to gain a dowry for her daughters.

Because it is an economic necessity mandated by the state, the choice on being a surrogate cannot be made freely. However, Marxist feminists believe that a poor, uneducated, and unskilled woman's decision is more likely to be compelled than free when she offers reproductive or sexual services (Tong 99). In this novel, the author assures us that all women who are surrogates are confronted with financial difficulties, and they all do it for their families' sake. In many circumstances, what seems to be an option is a product of coercion since transactional surrogacy extends the surrogate's choices but also forces her to make a decision she does not want to make because the price of rejection is too great for the surrogate (Banerjee

109). Asha, it is not a possible option if their finances were better. As it is observed in this quote from the text:

Numerous claimed advantages for the surrogate are delusive. In a capitalist patriarchal society, the illusion is produced by the underlying assumptions of the liberal framework. From liberal perspective, all individuals are seen as autonomous and are free to use their rights so long as they do not violate the rights of other individuals. In this context, the surrogacy agreement is comprehended as an arrangement involving three parties on an equal footing. There is a fair exchange of money for services rendered (Oliver 98). However, Kelly Oliver distinctly opposes the liberal point of view. She states that:

Exploitation happens when one participant in a transaction is directed toward exchanging “gift” values, whereas the other side functions in line with commodity market exchange standards. In her first meeting with Dr. Swati, she informed her that it is a practice of gift-giving. She says, “Not many of us get a chance to give such a big gift,” Doctor Swati said. “You have that opportunity.” (Malladi 26). Surrogate mothers frequently act within the parameters of gift relationships. The surrogate organization, on the other hand, conforms to market standards. It aims to negotiate the most acceptance deal possible for its clients and itself, leaving the surrogate mother to care for her own concerns as best she can. This condition allows surrogate agencies to abuse the surrogate emotions to obtain advantageous terms for themselves.

Third World Women as Incubators

By applying Marxist theoretical frameworks, Kelly Oliver discusses transactional surrogacy in her article *Marxism and Surrogacy*. Oliver’s goal is to raise awareness about some surrogacy arrangements’ underlying concerns. Furthermore, Oliver contends that without class divisions, women would not get into surrogacy arrangements (99). A commercial surrogate is compensated for her services, converting pregnancy into a sort of waged labor. The surrogate mother performs a form of alienated or estranged labor in the Marxist framework. As a result, she no longer has a claim to the product of her labor. Meanwhile, the worker suffers from a psychological detachment from her labor, since it does not belong to her (Smith 459).

The surrogate, Asha, in her first trimester, finds it difficult to realize that the baby inside her could be a product, and detachment is a challenging task. “As she put a hand on her stomach, she wondered how a woman could not be attached to the life growing inside her” (Malladi 57). She asks the former surrogate, “But you grow this life in your stomach; don’t you feel like it’s your own?” (Ibid 57). Elizabeth Anderson, in her article contends that commercial surrogacy raises new ethical concerns because it signifies an incursion of the market into a new sphere of action. Women’s reproductive labor is devalued when it is considered a commodity, namely the labor of carrying children, termed pregnancy (80). When the economic norms require the surrogate to repress her emotions and feelings toward the child. These norms turn pregnancy labor into that alienated labor. Thus, according to Anderson, this demeans and disrespects the surrogate mother. Furthermore, market values degrade the surrogate mother by exploiting and denying authenticity to her developing perception on her pregnancy (Anderson 81).

There is also proof of a different type of control. According to Rivkin-Fish in Russia, commissioning parents to have complete control over the surrogate mother, from conception through delivery and every point in between. Many people maintain surrogates in their apartments or in adjacent residences designated for surrogates to supervise and manage them.

Because of the income inequality between the surrogate and commissioning women, the women are never equal. It may bring demands rather than liberties, such as leaving their own family for the term of the agreement to receive the promised money (Akker 45). Because of “a small bleeding that Doctor Swati herself agreed had happened because of the examination that she had insisted on”(Malladi 115). Asha is obliged to leave her family and her children and stay in the house which was arranged for the surrogate two months earlier than planned. The class distinction is exposed; the baby of intended parents comes first. As Priya comments on this issue saying, “ I understand it is not easy but . . . it’s our baby Madhu” (Ibid 101).

Furthermore, in her Marxian theory, Oliver claims that capitalists treat mothers as “machines of production,” (111). As a result, it can be observed how the capitalist legal system strives to treat the surrogate as nothing more than a machine while acknowledging her proper standing as a mother and a human being. The description of the rich people in Asha’s eyes makes her feel inferior. She realizes that she is only an incubator, not a human being as is evident in the quote below:

Due to the alienation experience, the surrogate here loses her unity. The surrogate here is in a fragmented mind, she views her body divided into parts of using, “we’re just business. We’re not people. We’re just . . . nothing. I’m a womb . . . a belly”. The alienated process, according to Robert Heibroner is a fragmented experience; individuals who ought to be connected instead they appear as separate (Tong 101).

Asha’s fellow member Revati, another surrogate, captures Asha’s physical and mental suffering perfectly:

Here women’s womb is considered nothing more than a vessel that is alienated from the woman’s body. Similarly, Asha’s depiction of a genetic crisis has similarities to Gena Corea’s description of the dehumanization of surrogates. Wombs, Corea claims, are like “hatcheries,” “plumbing,” or even just “rented property” in the capitalist system (Corea 222).

In other words, her work is alienated because she must distract it from the final aim that pregnant social norms rightfully encourage emotional attachment to the child. The surrogate contract, therefore, substitutes a parental standard that throughout pregnancy, one develops a loving bond with the child, with a commercial production norm that the producer forms no unique emotional links to her product. In this novel, Malladi sheds light on the bonding between the surrogate and the child that she gestates. As one of the conditions in a surrogacy contract the surrogate mother, as laborer, must detach herself from the child’s product. She signed to relinquish the parental rights to the intended parents. According to Alison Jaggar, this process is unjust because the gestational mother might be bonded to the fetus emotionally and physically (Tong 113). Emotional bonding between Asha, the surrogate mother, and the fetus is portrayed; “Asha loved watching the baby on the screen. The thump-thump-thump of the heartbeat always brought tears to her eyes, but she held them back. She didn’t want Doctor Swati to think she was unduly attached.” (Malladi 213).

Furthermore, for the Marxist theory of alienation, workers are alienated from themselves; therefore, the symptoms of alienation generate a psychological crisis (Tong 101). A traumatized feeling grows yet despite such feelings they surrender the child. During giving birth to the child, the surrogate Asha suffers from intolerable psychological pain. The following lines expose her grief for giving up the child:

Despite what the market contract imposes, that the surrogate must alienate and detach herself from the product (the child), loving attachment with the child takes place. Accordingly, treating women's labor as a mere commercial process, as Elizabeth Anderson claims it violates of valuable emotional ties between the mother and the child (82).

There is no denying that the payment for the labor performed would most likely improve the surrogate's living status since she chose the surrogacy marketplace to conquer her precarious circumstances and to assist her family. She is still endangering her life and health for the sake of those not in the same vulnerable position as she is. Strong societal stigmas are linked to women who operate as surrogates in several areas, especially India since the women are thought to be conceived by a male apart from their spouse. Because of the potential stigma, most women prefer to keep their pregnancy concealed from their communities and families, and most stay in seclusion in surrogacy facilities, during their pregnancy. Despite the danger of societal stigma, countless women accept using their bodies in this manner since it is a feasible choice for making money.

Conclusion

Generally, surrogacy arrangements are viewed as an equal deal, as liberals claim that it is a woman's right to use her body in the way she desires. Moreover, it is the commissioning of parent's right to complete their families. Within the Marxist feminist framework, the current study has brought some of the concealed issues of surrogacy to the surface. Within the Marxist feminist framework, the analysis of the novel shows that the commercial transaction in surrogacy agreements generates gender and class concerns as the participants do not join the agreement as sovereign equality. Moreover, they do not have the equal right to express their views freely. Alternately, the parties agree individually basis, with the surrogate being the sole individual vulnerable to alienation and exploitation. Accordingly, surrogacy transfers women's bodies into mere machines and commodities. In other words, commercial surrogacy is a as a result of the unequal power relationship that leads the surrogate to confront physical and psychological risks. Furthermore, this type of liberty harms women's striving for equality. The surrogates in this novel do not embark on surrogacy with total autonomous way, so they present a massive sacrifice for the sake of their families and are exposed to commodification and exploitation by the contract. Although the intended mother, Priya, has been supportive of the surrogate, Priya herself is aware of the exploitation. However, the study concludes that the whole process of commercial surrogacy is morally unjustifiable and exploitative practice.

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