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Surrogacy As An Exploitation Of Sorts In Amulya Malladi's *A House For Happy Mothers*

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Abstract

Commercial surrogacy is a hotly debated topic in feminist literature particularly when surrogacy occurs in underdeveloped nations and when it is carried out by local women for wealthy foreign individuals. Surrogate mothers have acknowledged that surrogacy is linked to extramarital relationships and they have encountered challenges and social stigma. This paper aims at probing into the pain, guilt and frustration of a surrogate in *A House for Happy Mothers*.

Keywords: Surrogacy, exploitation, frustration, female psyche.

1. Introduction

Surrogacy involves a woman agreeing to carry a baby for someone else. After the baby is born, the birth mother gives custody and guardianship to the intended parent or parents. Surrogacy has complex legal and medical steps that must be met. *A House for Happy Mothers* by Amulya Malladi portrays the experience of a woman who agrees to be a surrogate for the welfare of her family.

Set in Hyderabad, *A House for Happy Mothers* imagines a grim contract between the first and third worlds, in which desperate people can sell their wombs to wealthy clients from America in return for food, water, shelter and riches for themselves and their families. This novel by Amulya Malladi is about India and the tenacious Third World reality. People still suffer and find a way to support their families with food and shelter so that they will do almost anything to make a living. Indian surrogates became increasingly popular amongst intended parents in industrialised nations because of the relatively low costs and easy access offered by Indian surrogacy agencies. Women from poor families are surrogate mothers who take up the work for money. The transaction is purely commercial. The sensitive bonds they establish with the babies in their wombs for nine months and the agony they feel once the umbilical cord is snapped are unexplainable.

On the other end, the woman who seeks a baby is also not to be blamed. Some unfortunate women due to some physiological conditions could not give birth to babies. The urge for motherhood is pursuing them to find an alternative to fulfil their womanhood. A few artificial methods of becoming mothers are Artificial Reproductive Technology (ART), In-Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) and Intra-Uterine Injections

(IUI). Apart from all these is surrogacy. Surrogate means substitute ie the embryo from the biological parent is transplanted to a substitute till the baby is born. It has become one of the commercial businesses in India by Westerners. As a result, the baby becomes a commercial product. Such women wanted to try their luck with surrogates also.

A House for Happy Mothers centres around two couples, one from India and the other from America. Priya and Madhu who works in an IT Company seek the help or to get the help of Asha and Pratap from a village in India to complete their desire of becoming a parent to their baby. Priya, due to her physical condition could not bear a baby. After a thorough discussion, they decided to opt for surrogacy. Whereas, Asha and Pratap suffer insufficient food and shelter. Both the families are connected through doctor Swathi, the owner of Happy Mother's Home. Though it is not an exact Faustian bargain but offers a close look at such a deal.

Like other novels, this work also starts with Asha and Pratap going to Hyderabad to meet doctor Swathi to confirm Asha's pregnancy. The couple moved to Pratap's brother's house for time being till the contract is over. Being poor and suffering famine in the family, Asha accepts to be a surrogate mother. Her sister-in-law Kaveri has prior experience with the doctor as a surrogate. With her guidance, Mother in Law Puttamma's and her husband's support, she agrees to this mission. Also, Asha wanted to put her extraordinary intelligent son in a better school. On the whole, she decided to rent her womb for the sake of her husband, children and family.

The day when they are about to confirm her pregnancy seems a stage day for Asha. It looks like a day of anticipation for her. She believes that everything in their entire life is going to be altered completely. For a poor girl like Asha five lakhs is a lot of money. When Manoj, the son of Asha – Pratap performs outstandingly and his teacher suggests a better school, they do not have any other choice except this. Even this idea was planted by Raman, the brother of Pratap, whose wife has undergone one such.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, these surrogacy-related issues are eventually faced by the Handmaids. The fertile women are known as the Handmaids of Gilead. For the elite, the Commander and their spouses, are compelled to carry children. As the owner of their Commander changes, so do their names. Though Asha was not compelled directly to be a surrogate like The Handmaids, her situation forced her to involve.

Asha suffers pain, guilt, fear, and irritation and is also happy to be a surrogate mother. When someone asked her about the children, she said two "and felt a pang. What would she say after this baby growing inside her came out?" (22) This is the constant question in her mind which eats up Asha's consciousness. She knew very well that it is wrong to be a surrogate mother for the sake of money but she wouldn't have done this if their financial status was fine. To provide Manoj with a good education in a city, they needed money. She realised that this is one viable way to earn money legally. This money will help them to lead a decent life also. Her mother-in-law had been all for Asha and Kaveri. She too suggested and encouraged Asha that becoming a surrogate was "better than selling a kidney." (25).

Asha an ideal Indian housewife is exploited by her husband, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, doctor Swathi, Revathi and Priya. She accepted all the misery to come over from her poverty. To convince Asha at the beginning she says, "Not many of us get a chance to give such a big gift" (26). The confirmation of the baby and its biological parent does not make Asha Happy. Is there any need to be happy for a paycheck baby? Asha tries to console herself from the beginning that the baby does not belong to her. She wanted to keep her distance or not be much affectionate towards the baby in her womb. She struggles between motherhood and surrogacy.

The thought that she was not the owner of the baby created some irritation towards everyone around her. She even felt like screaming. Pratap started to be over concerned which did not happen in the case of Mohini or Manoj. He enquired then and there about her comfort. She felt a bit of agony since he forced her into this by using Manoj's future to blackmail her. She started feeling some queasiness towards Pratap. She has been humiliated by the whole society. She is just a vessel to carry the baby for

a while. Without any relationship either blood or a love relationship, the baby grows in her womb till it is born. “She felt a strange sense of injustice, of unfairness, that for nine months she would be very well taken care of and after that, nothing except the money.” (51). Humanity is entangled here.

On the other side, Asha feels satisfied when her daughter Mohini drinks enough milk in the mornings. Priya and Madhu offer some gifts and cash before the contract ends. With this money, the poverty of the past stayed away; no need for them to struggle for their food anymore; they could buy their rice, vegetables, milk and sugar and whatever they needed. Mohini’s second birthday was celebrated with the meal of “kid’s favourite foods: mango dal, potato fry, and yoghurt with thick slices of mangoes...” (93) The celebration was very simple as Asha has to save little money to meet the expenses. But the following year celebration becomes a feast. Big lunch with “okra curry, sambar, pulao rice, payasam, and even a cake.... Pink cake with Mohini’s name written on it in English.” (93).

The sense of guilt picked her consciousness then and there. She has been helped by Kaveri as long as she was there at home. Kaveri constantly instructed not to think that the baby is hers. Asha has to feel detached. Kaveri said, “you’re like a machine; you’re just growing it; you’re not a mother to this one.” (57) The due date was given by the doctor as October 3 2013. Priya and Madhu started giving her gifts like panties, toys, clothes and toys for the kids and a soft shawl which embarrassed Asha. She felt parch to talk to the parents over the phone.

For the safety of the baby in the womb, Asha was moved to the home because of slight bleeding, though the doctor herself accepted that it was because of the examination. She didn’t want to leave her family. Her heart knew well that her family is there to take care of the kids but still she hate Swathi. “I miss the children” (122), Asha said to her husband during one of his visits. Keerthana in the home tried convincing her that, “We have a house, a TV, a car --- next time we can save for a dowry for our daughter” (123). But Asha couldn’t accept or digest the words since she missed her children and her husband badly.

Another woman named Chitra called this type of home “a bazaar, a marketplace” (158) and she added that one had to sell both the womb and honesty for money. After a few months, Priya arrived in India and she could not control her curiosity to see the surrogate mother. Asha was at the top of her frustration. She did not want her or her aunty to visit the home. After visiting the home even Priya confessed that even her surrogate mother could see surrogacy as an exploitation of sorts.

In her play *Harvest*, Manjula Padmanaban depicts the sale of unidentified organs to a wealthy individual through Inter Planta Services, Inc. for a modest sum. The receivers and Inter Planta are obnoxiously intrusive in their control of Om’s life and are fixated on keeping Om healthy. Selling wombs is only one aspect of this. Even those like Om are a type of surrogates who sell themselves just for financial gain.

2. Conclusion

Throughout the novel, we can witness both the intended parent’s and surrogate’s perspectives, due to the dual points of view. Although Priya’s passion for becoming a parent consumes her, her husband Madhu supports her attempts. Asha is reluctant to accept the surrogate position, but she does so out of concern for her son’s future and at her husband’s insistence. Despite their concerns, all parties remain hopeful that the outcome will ultimately meet their needs. Asha and the other surrogates stay at the ‘Happy Mothers’ home as they are ready to give birth. Several of the mothers chose to be surrogates up to three times for the welfare of their families. This is indeed pure exploitation of the poor which becomes so common in today’s world. Malladi has given a vivid picture of *the pain, guilt and frustration of surrogates*

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