

## Exploring the Materiality of Surrogate Bodies: From Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' to Meera Syal's 'The House of Hidden Mothers'

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### Abstract

*In the realm of literature, the concept of materiality holds a significant place. It explores the relationship between the material world and the human experience, delving into the impact of the physical on emotions, relationships, and societal structures. This article aims to delve into the theme of surrogate bodies in literature, with a specific focus on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015). By examining the portrayal of surrogate bodies in these novels, we can gain a deeper understanding of the concept of materiality in literature. Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, presents a harrowing vision of a society where fertile women are forced into sexual servitude as surrogates for infertile couples. The handmaids, as they are called to embody the ultimate form of surrogate bodies. They serve as vessels for reproduction, reduced to their reproductive capabilities and stripped of their identities. Atwood's portrayal of surrogate bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful critique of patriarchal control over women's bodies, highlighting the commodification of fertility and the dehumanising effects of such practice. Meera Syal's novel, *The House of Hidden Mothers*, takes a different approach to the theme of surrogate bodies. Set in contemporary London, the story follows Shyama, a British-Indian woman who chooses to become a surrogate mother for a couple unable to conceive naturally. *The House of Hidden Mothers* delves into the intimate struggles faced by surrogate bodies, highlighting the deep emotional connections that can develop between the surrogate, the child, and the biological parents. Despite their distinct settings and narratives, both Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and Meera Syal's 'The House of Hidden Mothers' share a common exploration of materiality and surrogate bodies. Both novels delve into the physical and emotional aspects of being a surrogate, shedding light on the profound impact it has on the individuals involved. While *The Handmaid's Tale* focusses on the societal implications and power dynamics surrounding surrogacy, *The House of Hidden Mothers* delves into the personal and cultural dimensions of the experience. By comparing these two novels, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of surrogate bodies and the materiality they represent.*

**Keywords:** Materiality, surrogate bodies, reproduction, identity, motherhood, surrogacy.

## **Unveiling the Material Essence in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

In Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author presents a chilling and thought-provoking exploration of a future society where women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities. Set in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime, the story follows Offred, a handmaid assigned to bear children for the elite ruling class. Atwood's masterful storytelling delves into the complexities of power, control, and the material essence of the surrogate bodies within this oppressive society.

Surrogacy forms the central theme of *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this fictional world, a decline in fertility rates has led to the creation of a system where fertile women are assigned as handmaids to high-ranking government officials and their wives. These handmaids are vessels, forced to bear children on behalf of infertile couples. Through this concept of surrogacy, Atwood explores the commodification of women's bodies and the dehumanization that accompanies it.

### **Exploring the Material Essence in *The Handmaid's Tale*:**

Atwood's novel delves into the material essence of the surrogate bodies, highlighting the physicality and objectification of the handmaids. The handmaids are stripped of their individuality and reduced to their reproductive capabilities, resulting in a loss of agency and autonomy. Their bodies become vessels devoid of personal identity, existing solely for procreation. This material essence is a stark reminder of the dehumanisation and objectification that women face in patriarchal societies. The surrogate bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale* carry significant symbolism throughout the narrative. The red dresses worn by the handmaids symbolise both their fertility and their subjugation. The red colour represents blood and life but also signifies danger and oppression. Additionally, the white wings worn by the handmaids symbolise their purity, yet they also act as a restrictive and confining garment. These symbols serve to emphasise the paradoxical nature of the handmaids' existence—simultaneously revered as vessels of life and oppressed as mere bodies to be controlled.

Motherhood plays a central role in *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlighting the importance of reproduction and the societal expectations placed upon women. In Gilead, motherhood is elevated to a sacred duty, and the handmaids are reduced to their ability to bear children. Their worth is solely determined by their fertility, reinforcing the notion that their value lies in their reproductive capacity. Atwood explores the complexities and contradictions of motherhood

within this system, questioning the true essence of motherhood when it is reduced to a transactional arrangement.

### **Analyzing the Portrayal of Bodies in The Handmaid's Tale**

Atwood's portrayal of bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the oppressive nature of the society in which the handmaids reside. Their bodies are constantly scrutinised, regulated and controlled by the ruling class. The handmaids are subjected to regular medical examinations, sexual encounters solely for procreation, and strict dress codes that cover their bodies. This hyper-focus on the physicality of the handmaids reinforces the notion that their bodies are not their own, but rather, objects to be owned and controlled by others. Themes of control and ownership in relation to the surrogate bodies are prevalent themes in *The Handmaid's Tale* when it comes to the surrogate bodies. The handmaids are stripped of their bodily autonomy and subjected to a system of strict control. Their movements, actions, and even thoughts are monitored and regulated by the government. The women are treated as property, owned by the ruling class, and their bodies are seen as commodities to be traded and controlled. This exploration of control and ownership sheds light on the oppressive nature of patriarchal systems and the dehumanisation of women.

### **Comparing the Novel's Portrayal of Surrogacy to Real-Life Surrogacy Arrangements**

While *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a fictional portrayal of surrogacy, it raises important questions about the ethics and implications of real-life surrogacy arrangements. The novel serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the potential for exploitation and commodification of women's bodies in such arrangements. It prompts readers to critically examine the power dynamics and potential abuses that can arise when reproductive rights and bodily autonomy are compromised. *The Handmaid's Tale* has sparked numerous critiques and interpretations of the surrogate bodies portrayed in the novel. Some argue that Atwood's portrayal is a warning against the dangers of patriarchal systems that reduce women to their reproductive capabilities. Others believe it serves as a commentary on the control and ownership of women's bodies in contemporary society. These varying interpretations highlight the power of Atwood's storytelling and the impact her novel has had on discussions surrounding gender, power, and reproductive rights.

### **A Material Reading of Surrogate Bodies in Meera Syal's "The House of Hidden Mothers"**

In Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015), a complex narrative unfolds around the controversial subject of international surrogacy. The novel focusses on the experiences of an

Asian-British couple, Shyama and Toby, who travel to India to find surrogate mother for their child. In *The House of Hidden Mothers*, Syal approaches the sensitive topic of international surrogacy by exploring it from different perspectives—from the surrogate mother's lived experience to that of the intended parents, while also examining the ethical and commercial justification of the doctors involved in the procedure. *The House of Hidden Mothers* treads into a legally and socially sensitive territory both in the UK and India. The term 'reproductive outsourcing' is used in this context to emphasise the connection between this form of reproduction and economic globalization. The novel delves into how surrogacy works, with women agreeing to become pregnant and gestating a foetus "genetically unrelated to the surrogate" and then "relinquish their parental rights and responsibilities" at birth.

### **Surrogacy and the Commodification of Women in the Novel**

The novel raises questions about the ethics of reproductive outsourcing and prompts readers to reflect upon surrogacy as a neo-colonial practice. It depicts the Indian surrogacy market as a continuation of the long-established practice of outsourcing call centres in India. *The House of Hidden Mothers* also addresses issues of gender oppression, including ageing and sexual abuse suffered by women both in the UK and India. These issues contribute to the problematization of female liberation and gender equality rights in the UK relative to India. In the novel, Mala, the surrogate mother, is initially forced into surrogacy by her husband. However, she subverts her position as a disempowered woman and uses her situation to her advantage, demonstrating her resourcefulness and resilience.

### **Abusive Nature and Female Bodies**

In the novel, Priya and Lydia are coming through their ageing process; they were Shyama's friends. The novel describes them as mature women from the beginning of the novel. "women d'un certain age, maturing like fine wine or expensive cheese, ripening into what might be regarded in some cultures as their prime years, when the children had flown the nest, the husband had mellowed." But they were struggling with the acceptance of their bodies. Shyama owns a beauty salon where women take treatments not for their own but for their partners. Priya is also trapped by the myth as well. As she describes herself as "vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem to the air". Lydia's childish nature and Priya's decisions were not to show their free will. It was the consequence of social pressure on the female body. Mala's female body was a site of gender exploration portrayed in the novel. As Syal describes in *The House of Hidden Mothers*, Dr. Passi's approach was quite

uneasy for Toby when they showed the available surrogate mothers' catalogue, and Shyama displays a pragmatic attitude then. Meera Syal challenges perception of Western women who resort to surrogacy as oppression and portrays them as victims of gender stereotypes and social oppression regarding motherhood, thus surrogacy is a multilayered matter.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a profound exploration of the material essence of the surrogate bodies within a dystopian society. Margaret Atwood's masterful storytelling shines a light on the dehumanisation and objectification of women in patriarchal systems. Through symbolism, themes of control and ownership, and an examination of motherhood, Atwood challenges readers to confront the implications of reducing women to their reproductive capabilities. *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of bodily autonomy, agency, and the fight against the commodification of women's bodies. Whereas *The House of Hidden Mothers* presents a nuanced view of surrogacy, challenging stereotypical perceptions of Western women as oppressors and Indian women as victims. It depicts both places as spaces where experiences are "still to come, unknown and unnamed, waiting to be lived." Overall, the novel emphasises the need to consider surrogacy as a multi-layered and multifaceted matter when passing judgement on this form of motherhood/parenthood.

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