

Surrogacy Narratives in Indian Cinema: The Cases of Dasharatham and Mimi

Riya Paul

Assistant Professor
St. Joseph's College Devagiri, Calicut

Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted and ethically complex issue of surrogacy as depicted in two Indian films, "Dasharatham" (1989) and "Mimi" (2021). Both films, produced in different eras, offer poignant narratives that delve into the emotional, ethical, and societal dimensions of surrogacy. "Dasharatham," directed by Sibi Malayil, centres on Rajiv (Mohanlal), an affluent man who opts for surrogacy to combat loneliness, highlighting the class dynamics and emotional turmoil faced by the surrogate mother, Annie (Rekha). The film questions the commodification of motherhood and portrays the deep emotional bonds and societal pressures involved in surrogacy. In contrast, "Mimi," directed by Laxman Utekar, presents a contemporary take on Mimi (Kriti Sanon), a young dancer who becomes a surrogate for financial reasons. When the commissioning parents abandon the child, Mimi's journey reflects the challenges of unwed motherhood, societal stigma, and the transformative power of unconditional love. Both films underscore the complexity of surrogacy, urging viewers to consider its profound ethical and emotional implications. Through their nuanced storytelling, "Dasharatham" and "Mimi" contribute to a broader understanding of surrogacy as a deeply human issue, shaped by love, sacrifice, and personal growth.

Keywords: Surrogacy, Ethical dilemmas, Emotional bonds, Societal stigma, Commodification of motherhood, class dynamics, unwed motherhood, and transformative love

Surrogacy is generally known as a social stigma in India. It is hypothesised that the agony and trauma of infertility are best felt and described by the infertile couples themselves. Surrogacy, a multifaceted and ethically complex issue, is poignantly explored in the films. *Dasharatham* (1989) and *Mimi* (2021). Mohanlal's *Dasharatham*, directed by Sibi Malayil, and Kriti Sanon's *Mimi*, directed by Laxman Utekar, offer distinct yet compelling narratives that delve into the emotional, ethical, and societal dimensions of surrogacy. This paper endeavours to explore various concepts of surrogacy as depicted in these films produced at different points of time.

Dasharatham centres around the affluent and carefree Rajiv (Mohanlal), who decides to have a child through surrogacy to counter his loneliness. The film captures the societal stigma and

ethical dilemmas associated with surrogacy in the late 1980s. It raises questions about the commodification of motherhood and the psychological impact on the surrogate mother, Annie (Rekha), who ultimately forms a deep emotional bond with the child she carries. The film portrays the surrogate as more than a mere vessel, highlighting her emotional turmoil and the societal pressure she faces.

In contrast, *Mimi* presents a contemporary take on surrogacy, focussing on the aspirations and struggles of a young dancer, Mimi (Kriti Sanon), who agrees to become a surrogate for an American couple. The film explores the economic motivations behind surrogacy as Mimi hopes to use the payment to achieve her dreams. However, the narrative takes a dramatic turn when the commissioning parents abandon the unborn child, leaving Mimi to grapple with the consequences. *Mimi* addresses issues such as the exploitation of surrogates, the lack of legal protections, and the evolving concept of family and motherhood.

Both films, while set in different cultural and temporal contexts, underscore the complex dynamics of surrogacy. *Dasharatham* and *Mimi* illuminate the deeply personal experiences of surrogate mothers and challenge societal perceptions, urging viewers to consider the ethical and emotional implications of surrogacy. Through their nuanced storytelling, these films contribute to a broader understanding of surrogacy, making it not just a medical or legal issue, but a profoundly human one.

India has been a significant hub for surrogacy, attracting international couples due to relatively lower costs and a more flexible legal environment. The commercialisation of surrogacy has led to ethical concerns regarding exploitation, consent, and the rights of surrogate mothers. The Indian Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2019, which bans commercial surrogacy and allows only altruistic surrogacy, reflects ongoing attempts to address these issues. Indian cinema, with its wide reach and influence, plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting public perceptions on such complex matters.

"Dasharatham," directed by Sibi Malayil, shows *Class and Power Dynamics*: The film highlights the class disparities between Rajiv and Annie. Rajiv's wealth and privilege allow him to pursue surrogacy as a solution to his loneliness, while Annie's decision is driven by economic necessity. This power imbalance raises questions about the voluntariness of Annie's consent and the potential exploitation inherent in commercial surrogacy.

Early in the film, Rajiv is introduced as a wealthy, carefree bachelor who leads a luxurious lifestyle. Scenes depicting his opulent home, expensive car, and lavish parties establish his

financial status and privileged position in society. Rajiv's decision to pursue surrogacy is portrayed as a personal choice driven by his desire to have a child and combat loneliness, emphasising how his wealth gives him the means to consider such an option without immediate concern for the financial implications.

In stark contrast, Annie's financial struggles are introduced through scenes that depict her modest living conditions and her family's economic hardship. One poignant scene shows Annie discussing her financial difficulties with her husband, highlighting their inability to meet even basic needs. This context sets the stage for understanding why Annie might consider surrogacy—not as a voluntary, empowered choice, but as a means to alleviate her family's financial burdens.

Emotional Turmoil and Maternal Bond: As the pregnancy progresses, Annie develops a deep emotional bond with the unborn child, challenging the initial agreement's boundaries. This development brings to the fore the natural maternal instincts and the ethical implications of surrogacy, questioning whether such arrangements can ever be purely transactional. However, as the pregnancy advances, Annie's emotional connection to the unborn child grows significantly, challenging the boundaries of the initial agreement and bringing forth the complexities of surrogacy.

As Annie's attachment to the baby intensifies, so does her emotional turmoil. The initial clarity of the surrogacy agreement begins to blur as she grapples with the impending separation from the child. The film portrays her inner conflict vividly through scenes of sleepless nights, conversations with her husband, and moments of silent reflection. Annie's turmoil is not just about the loss she anticipates but also the ethical implications of the surrogacy arrangement. She starts to question the morality of giving up a child she has nurtured and loved, even if it was never meant to be hers to keep. The deepening of Annie's maternal bond with the child raises significant ethical questions about surrogacy. The film effectively challenges the notion that surrogacy can ever be a purely transactional arrangement. The emotional and psychological experiences of the surrogate mothers are complex and cannot be easily compartmentalised or dismissed. Annie's journey illustrates that the creation of life involves more than just biological and financial considerations; it encompasses profound emotional and ethical dimensions that impact all parties involved.

As Annie's bond with the child grows, the boundaries of the initial surrogacy agreement are increasingly challenged. The legal and contractual terms become secondary to the human

experiences and emotions at play. This conflict reaches a climax when Annie expresses her fears and desires regarding the child's future, revealing the inadequacy of contracts in addressing the deep emotional connections that form during pregnancy. The film questions whether it is fair or humane to expect a surrogate mother to relinquish a child she has developed such a strong bond with, highlighting the potential for emotional harm.

The film concludes on a poignant note, leaving a lasting impact on the audience. It emphasises the transformative power of love and responsibility and the ways in which personal growth can emerge from challenging and complex situations.

"*Dasharatham*" is a moving and thought-provoking end to a film that delves deep into the themes of personal transformation, emotional complexity, and moral dilemmas. It leaves the audience with a powerful message about the true nature of love, responsibility, and selflessness. When it comes to the Hindi movie *Mimi*, a young dancer who dreams of making it big in Bollywood agrees to become a surrogate mother for a foreign couple in exchange for a significant sum of money. However, when the couple learns that the unborn child might have Down syndrome, they abandon the surrogacy, leaving Mimi to make a critical decision about the child's future. Through this journey, Mimi undergoes a significant transformation, evolving from a carefree individual focused on her dreams to a dedicated mother willing to face societal challenges.

Despite the initial shock and disappointment, Mimi decides to keep the child, whom she names Raj. The film underscores the theme of unconditional love as Mimi embraces motherhood wholeheartedly, finding joy and fulfilment in raising Raj. This decision highlights the strength and resilience of a mother's love, which transcends biological and social expectations. The film also addresses the stigma and challenges associated with being an unwed mother in a conservative society. Mimi's parents initially react with shock and disapproval, but gradually come to support her decision. The acceptance and support of her family play a crucial role in Mimi's ability to raise her son with love and dignity. Towards the end, the foreign couple returns to take Raj back, having realised their mistake. This development introduces a moral and emotional dilemma for Mimi. However, in a poignant turn of events, the couple recognises the bond between Mimi and Raj and decides to leave the child with her. This resolution emphasises the importance of emotional bonds over mere biological connections.

By the end of the film, Mimi emerges as a strong and independent woman who defies societal norms and expectations. Her journey from a surrogate mother to a devoted parent is a testament

to her inner strength and determination. The film concludes on a hopeful note, with Mimi finding a new sense of purpose and fulfilment in her role as a mother. *Mimi* effectively uses the narrative of surrogacy to explore deeper themes of love, sacrifice, and societal norms. The conclusion reinforces the message that motherhood is defined, not just by biology but by the depth of love and commitment one has for their child. The film also highlights the importance of familial support and societal acceptance in overcoming personal and social challenges. Overall, "*Mimi*" offers a heartfelt and nuanced portrayal of the complexities involved in surrogacy, ultimately celebrating the transformative power of love and motherhood.

Some dialogues in the movie made the viewers think more deeply and threw light on a deeper understanding of surrogacy. When Rajiv says "I want to have a child, but I don't want the responsibilities of marriage. Surrogacy seems like the perfect solution. It succinctly encapsulates the central conflict in "*Dasharatham*." It reflects Rajiv's desire for parenthood while avoiding the commitments of marriage. This brief yet powerful statement unveils the moral ambiguity surrounding surrogacy, highlighting the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. Rajiv's dilemma sets the stage for his character's journey of self-discovery and moral reckoning, inviting audiences to ponder the complexities of human relationships and the consequences of our choices.

While Annie says, "I'm not just a womb for rent. I have feelings too. What about my family? What about my child?" Annie's poignant declaration challenges the commodification of her role as a surrogate mother. In "*Dasharatham*," she asserts her humanity and emotional needs, demanding recognition beyond her function as a vessel for reproduction. Her words underscore the ethical dilemmas and emotional complexities inherent in surrogacy, as she grapples with the impact of her decision on herself and her loved ones. Through Annie's character, the film sheds light on the multifaceted nature of parenthood and the importance of acknowledging the rights and emotions of all parties involved in the surrogacy process.

This movie also looks into the ethical dilemmas. When Rajiv says, "I never thought it would be this complicated. I thought I could just buy my way into parenthood. But now, I realise there's more to it than money. Rajiv's admission exposes the ethical complexity of his surrogacy journey in "*Dasharatham*." Initially viewing parenthood as a transaction, his realisation unveils a deeper truth: the profound emotional and moral implications involved. In just a few words, he acknowledges the inadequacy of monetary solutions in navigating the complexities of human relationships and responsibilities. This confession marks a pivotal

moment of growth for Rajiv, underscoring the film's exploration of the transformative power of parenthood and the moral dilemmas inherent in surrogacy.

When it comes to the movie *Mimi*, the initial decision Mimi says, "I need the money to fulfil my dreams. Surrogacy seems like a quick way to earn it." Mimi's admission highlights the financial necessity driving her decision to become a surrogate in "Mimi." Her words underscore the economic pressures that often influence such choices, portraying surrogacy as a pragmatic means to an end. However, beneath the surface lies a poignant reflection of societal inequalities and the lengths individuals may go to pursue their dreams. Mimi's statement sets the stage for her emotional journey, navigating the complexities of surrogacy and ultimately redefining her aspirations in the face of unforeseen challenges. This movie also intended parents' concerns. Mother says "We're not sure if we can go through with this. What if something goes wrong? What if the child isn't healthy?" The intended mother's apprehension in "*Mimi*" reflects common concerns surrounding surrogacy.

Her doubts about potential complications and the health of the child highlight the uncertainties inherent in the process. This dialogue underscores the emotional stakes involved for intended parents, as they grapple with the risks and anxieties associated with surrogacy. It also underscores the ethical considerations and responsibilities that come with bringing a child into the world through this method. Ultimately, the intended mother's concerns add depth to the narrative, portraying surrogacy as a journey fraught with both hope and trepidation.

The emotional attachment of Mimi when she says, "I can't just give up the baby. I've grown attached to him. He's not just a job for me; he's my son." Mimi's emotional bond with the baby in "*Mimi*" is palpable in her heartfelt declaration. Her words convey the depth of her attachment and the profound shift from viewing surrogacy as a transaction to embracing motherhood. This dialogue highlights the transformative power of love and the maternal instinct, as Mimi's connection with the child transcends biological ties. By asserting her role as a mother, Mimi challenges societal norms and underscores the importance of emotional connections in defining familial relationships. Her statement encapsulates the film's central theme of love triumphing over adversity, resonating with audiences on a deeply emotional level.

These dialogues from "*Dasharatham*" and "*Mimi*" reflect the complexities, dilemmas, and emotional aspects associated with the theme of surrogacy in each film. They showcase the different perspectives of the characters involved and highlight the moral, ethical, and personal considerations that accompany the decision to pursue surrogacy.

Both protagonists undergo significant personal transformation. Rajiv Menon evolves from a carefree, self-centred individual to a responsible and caring person. In *"Mimi,"* the titular character's journey from a small-town dancer with big dreams to a devoted mother highlights her growth and resilience. The reactions of society and family to surrogacy play a crucial role in both films. In *"Dasharatham,"* societal norms and family expectations add to the tension and drama. *"Mimi"* similarly portrays the shock, acceptance, and eventual support from Mimi's family and community, reflecting changing attitudes towards unconventional family structures. The movies put forward heartfelt drama with moments of humour.

"Dasharatham," despite its serious themes, includes lighter scenes that provide comic relief. *"Mimi"* employs humour to address serious topics, making the film more accessible and engaging while tackling sensitive issues. In *"Dasharatham,"* the surrogate mother faces social stigma and personal dilemmas. In *"Mimi,"* Mimi encounters unexpected health issues and the emotional turmoil of potentially raising the child herself.

As the story progresses, Rajiv forms a deep emotional connection with the child and the surrogate mother, Annie. The climax of the film sees Rajiv making the selfless decision to let Annie keep the baby. This act of letting go, despite his deep attachment, signifies Rajiv's transformation from a self-centred individual to a compassionate and empathetic person who understands the profound bond between mother and child. Mimi, the young, spirited woman with dreams of becoming a surrogate for a foreign couple, views it as a quick way to earn money for her career aspirations. However, when the couple abandons the surrogacy arrangement midway, Mimi is faced with the daunting reality of raising the child alone. Choosing to keep and raise the baby, Mimi's journey reflects her transition from an ambitious young woman to a devoted mother, showcasing her resilience and capacity for unconditional love. This decision highlights her selflessness and the deep emotional transformation she undergoes, mirroring Rajiv's journey in *"Dasharatham."*

The conclusions of *"Dasharatham"* and *"Mimi"* resonate deeply, portraying the transformative journeys of their characters through the lens of surrogacy. Both films highlight the emotional complexities, societal challenges, and ethical dilemmas inherent in surrogacy while celebrating the themes of love, sacrifice, and personal growth. Through their protagonists' journeys, the films leave audiences with a hopeful message about the true essence of happiness and fulfilment, found in the unlikelyst of places and through acts of profound love and selflessness.

References



- Malayil, Sibi, director. *Dasharatham*. Performance by Mohanlal and Rekha, Century Release, 1989.
- Utekar, Laxman, director. *Mimi*. Performance by Kriti Sanon, Jio Studios and Maddock Films, 2021.
- Pande, Amrita. *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Rudrappa, Sharmila. *Discounted Life: The Price of Global Surrogacy in India*. New York University Press, 2015.
- Saravanan, Sheela. *A Transnational Feminist View of Surrogacy Biomarkets in India*. Springer, 2018.
- Patel, Tulsi. "Commercial Surrogacy and Fertility Tourism in India: The Case of Baby Manji." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2013, pp. 291-315.
- Majumdar, Anindita. *Transnational Commercial Surrogacy and the (Un)Making of Kin in India*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Bharadwaj, Aditya. "Why Adoption is Not an Option in India: The Visibility of Infertility, the Secrecy of Donor Insemination, and Other Cultural Complexities". *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 56, no. 9, 2003, pp. 1867-1880.