

Deciphering the Intricacies of Commercial Surrogacy; Navigating Motherhood and Rented Wombs in A House for Happy Mothers

Niva Vijayan

Assistant Professor

Post Graduate Department of English

Christ Nagar College Maranalloor, Thiruvananthapuram

Abstract

India's burgeoning role as a global centre for commercial surrogacy has thrust it into the spotlight, attracting couples from diverse backgrounds who seek reproductive solutions through readily available surrogate services. This trend, characterised by the acceptance of commercial surrogacy arrangements, has substantially commodified the bodies of women in developing nations, contributing to a cycle of exploitation within the sphere of reproduction.

*Within feminist discourse, commercial surrogacy in underdeveloped nations, where local women serve as surrogate mothers for wealthy foreign clients, emerges as a focal point of scrutiny. Moreover, the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in international surrogacy transactions lay bare broader issues of economic disparity and exploitation, wherein affluent clients from developed nations contract marginalised women in underdeveloped contexts. This article critically examines surrogacy, drawing from Amulya Malladi's novel *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016) to illuminate its role as a manifestation of stratified reproduction.*

Key Words: Commercial Surrogacy, Biomedical, Artificial Reproductive Technology, Rented wombs, Surrogate, Biopolitics, Intended parents.

Nature has undeniably granted women the incredible ability to create life and relish the profound experience of motherhood. Regrettably, some women, due to certain physiological conditions, are incapable of bearing their children. In such cases, surrogacy stands out as a viable and indispensable alternative. The remarkable advancements in assisted reproductive techniques, including donor insemination and embryo transfer methods, have dramatically transformed the reproductive landscape, firmly establishing surrogacy as the most compelling option. Portraying a beacon of hope, surrogacy has provided solace to numerous infertile couples yearning to embrace parenthood. Capitalising on state-of-the-art medical facilities, they actively pursue alternative avenues such as Artificial Reproductive Technology (ART), In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF), and Intrauterine Injections (IUI) in their relentless quest to fulfil

their long-held desire to have a child. The term “surrogate” unequivocally signifies a substitute, thereby signifying that a surrogate mother serves as a warranted substitute for the genetic-biological mother. Put simply, a surrogate mother is an individual who is engaged to gestate a child and subsequently relinquish the child to the intended parents upon birth.

The goal of the current study is to examine Amulya Malladi’s *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016) and determine how the resurgence of consumer-driven, neoliberal, worldwide commercial surrogacy markets in India is a result of the biomedical industry’s employment of AIRT. The article outlines how the apparent systematic and structural gender and class disparities between commissioning parents and surrogates serve as the foundation for the exploitation of surrogates in the ART industry, effectively turning them into nothing more than “rented wombs.” India has become a commercial centre for the biomedical sector. Because of the neoliberal mindset’s growth, targeted consumers’ transnational mobility, and the absence of legislative and regulatory frameworks, developing nations like India are emerging as major hubs for commercial surrogacy. Commercial surrogacy flourishes in India due to the low-cost packages and the “client-friendly policies of private clinics and hospitals where doctors are willing to offer options and services that are banned or heavily regulated in other parts of the world” (Pande, 2011, p. 54). Reddy (2020) opines that the Indian surrogacy industry is valued between \$400 million and \$2 billion, with hundreds of foreign couples hiring ‘cheap labour’ to proliferate their genetic heritage. Feminist scholarship posits that commercial surrogacy perpetuates and exacerbates existing inequalities, exploiting economically marginalised women by commodifying their reproductive labour for financial gain. Absent robust legal frameworks, surrogate mothers face heightened risks of coercion and abuse, not having acknowledgement or urgency for protective measures. Compounding the complexity is the acknowledgement by surrogate mothers that surrogacy often intertwines with extramarital relationships, amplifying social stigma and exacerbating challenges faced by these women within their communities.

A House for Happy Mothers delves into the intricate dynamics of surrogacy, offering a lens into the lives of women who navigate the complexities of renting their wombs for others’ parenthood dreams. By framing the narrative around these women who are neither happy nor mothers themselves, the novel likely delves into the nuanced emotions and moral dilemmas inherent in the surrogacy process.

Since commercial surrogacy became legal in India in 2002, many marginalised women have been forced into “reproductive slavery for the benefit of their families” (Reddy, 2020, p. 98).

Due to some ethical concerns regarding the surrogacy markets, a draft Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill was introduced in the Indian Parliament in 2005. According to Majumdar (2013), the bill's "appearance in two subsequent drafts in 2008 and 2010 (there is also a 2012 version) had not led to any significant changes in its primary perspective." The surrogacy (Regulation) bill 2019 was reintroduced on July 15, 2019, by India's Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament. It "prohibits sex selection for surrogacy, and allows surrogate moms to revoke their agreement for surrogacy before embryo implantation, among other changes that convert several criminal punishments from minimum terms to feasible sentences (Reddy, 2020, p.109). The Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian parliament, enacted the bill in February 2020, outlawing the commercial parts and giving intending parents just the choice of selfless surrogacy. The outlawing of commercial surrogacy may lead to the development of illicit marketplaces, which will increase the exploitation of surrogates.

The goal of the study is to examine how neoliberal subjectivities and biotechnology interact to shape the commercial surrogacy markets. Infertile individuals should take personal responsibility for their fertility and make behavioural and lifestyle choices that maximise their chances of pregnancy and upward mobility, while simultaneously turning reproductive matter into particular types of commodities, which is a concept that is promoted by neoliberal ideology. In the 2016 book *A House for Happy Mothers*, it is suggested that engaged couples support neoliberal eugenics and participate in neoliberal surrogacy markets as bio-consumers.

Amulya Malladi's 2016 book *A House for Happy Mothers* is set in the current century. Through the experiences of an Indian-American couple named Priya and Madhu, it depicts international commercial gestational surrogacy (ICGS). They have employed Asha, an Indian surrogate from a section of the underprivileged community, via Dr. Swati Gudla's Happy Mothers reproductive centre in Hyderabad. Reproductive tourism is illustrated in *A House for Happy Mothers*, when Priya, a Silicon Valley native, employs Asha, an Indian surrogate, to bear her own kid since it would be "a lot cheaper than having three IVFs" (Malladi, 2016)

Malladi observes astutely how the impoverished surrogates are caught in between the physicians, commissioning parents, agents, and clinics. The "procreation politics and the plot of "parenthood" in the book centre on the lives of a surrogate and an intended mother. The plot investigates Priya and Asha's contradictory stories from the beginning. From the beginning of the pregnancy till the baby's delivery (Karmakar & Parui, 2019, p. 5). Malladi depicts the emotional rollercoaster that these moms experience over the entire course. In relation to surrogacy. The book is especially intriguing because it features the commissioning couple as

well as the surrogates, who are from South India; they have the same ethnic heritage. Distinct social and financial origins. Asha serves as a metaphor for the institutional and systemic discrimination against women and people of colour that exploits surrogates. She is a first-time surrogate who must give up a child that she will carry to term in addition to the responsibility of rescuing her family from severe financial hardship. This article examines the power dynamics between intended parents and surrogates through a reading of the novel. It also looks at the systemic exploitation of surrogates by the biomedical sector and the neoliberal medico-industrial complex. The novel is especially important since it explores the unequal power dynamics between the surrogates from the Global South and the commissioning parents of the Global North.

The decision to use a surrogate mother establishes a consequential relationship with the foetus. White surrogacy provides benefits for both the surrogate and the intended mother, but it comes at a cost to both parties. However, the overall outcome outweighs these costs. Additionally, the surrogate mother serves as a saviour for her family, helping to alleviate financial crises but at the expense of dealing with the emotional burden associated with the foetus. Malladi's novel vividly portrays the intense emotional state of surrogates, depicting whether their lives are a 'boon' or a 'bane'. In *A House for Happy Mothers*, the surrogate Revati deeply expresses the drawbacks of surrogacy, questioning who truly benefits from the arrangement. This reflects the unfortunate reality that economic circumstances drive women to repeatedly undergo surrogacy, despite the exploitation of their bodies.

Even though most relationships formed during surrogacy tend to be positive, challenges may arise after the procedure and need to be addressed by mentors. For example, Asha, who is carrying a child for Priya, may struggle with the emotional burden of feeling like a constant reminder of Priya's infertility. However, after giving birth, Priya expresses deep gratitude, saying, "You have given us the greatest joy imaginable. I can't thank you enough for your courage and your generosity" (Malladi, 2016, pp. 299). Eventually, Asha understands Priya's yearning for a child and empathises with her struggles. The two parties come to an understanding, based on hope and trust in each other. As the author Malladi puts it, "Asha has given them a gift that they couldn't get themselves, a gift they pined for, but they had given Asha an even bigger gift—a future for her son" (Malladi, 2016, pp. 301). This highlights that while surrogates may face psychological challenges and health risks, they often make the decision to proceed in order to fulfil the hopes of the intended parents without compromising

their own hopes. This decision-making process profoundly impacts the lives of both the surrogate and the intended parents for the better.

Lamba, Jadva, et al. (2018) highlighted that most surrogates reported feeling positive about living in the surrogate house. Staying there might have made them feel more supported and less burdened by the pressures of maintaining a secret from those around them, thus feeling free of everyday life stress. Additionally, surrogates' satisfaction with the payment they received for surrogacy did not facilitate their psychological well-being (Lamba, 2018, pp. 651).

In the novel *A House for Happy Mothers*, most of the surrogates have entrusted their children to relatives and shifted into the "House for Happy Mothers." Although they missed their families and children, the needs of their lives and the unavoidable trials make the unhappy house appealing by comparison. The author highlights the surrogate mothers who live in a place arranged by the hospital called "Happy Mothers," portraying this house as cosier than surrogate homes. All the mothers there are waiting to deliver babies while missing their own children, like Asha, who did the same. The protagonist, Asha, finds her life exhausting and intricate, gestates, and waits in a house filled with women doing the same thing as their daily routine. She said, "Even though they had all the creature comforts they could dream of, none of the women in the Happy Mother's House was happy. Asha saw it everywhere. The frustration of being away from their families, the humiliation of lying to everyone about their pregnancy, the conflict of having a baby inside of them they mustn't bond with—these were definitely not Happy Mothers." (Malladi, 2016, pp. 154).

The novelist Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers* includes a segment with the hype tactics handled by a clinic, which adds a notable account of the publicity audio-visual for the health centre:

This is a life-changing experience for everyone involved: for the couples who long for a baby, and for the women who carry the child for them. The fees that our surrogate mothers receive enable them to transform their lives: to buy their own homes, educate their children... it gives them financial independence they could not get any other way... As for the couples who visit us from all over the world, because India is now the world centre for ART, they not only get the gift of a longed-for child, but also they know that their money is going to help the woman who has given a new life to them (Syal, 2015, pp. 92).

The passage above discusses the challenges of surrogacy and the transformation experienced by surrogate mothers. In *A House for Happy Mothers*, Dr. Swati selects some surrogates to

promote the Happy Mothers clinic on a TV program for the clinic's welfare. However, the surrogates feel uncomfortable with this arrangement, as they fear it could lead to humiliation for their families if their faces are shown on TV. Dr. Swati is aware of the surrogates' backgrounds, especially Asha, who wants to get her son, Manoj, into a good school. The doctor promises to help Asha get her son into the school, giving her hope. With this promise in mind, Asha decides to participate in the program, stating, "This was a bazaar, a marketplace. First, she had to sell her womb to get money. Now she had to sell her honesty to get Manoj into a good school" (Malladi, 2016, pp. 158).

For Indian women living in remote areas, becoming a surrogate mother can be a life-changing event. Despite experiencing physical, emotional, and economic exploitation due to the money received from commissioning couples, surrogates are cared for and respected in clinics during pregnancy, which sets them apart as valuable breadwinners in their families. Regarding relinquishment, studies in the UK and USA have consistently shown that most surrogates were able to part with the infants they carried (Ragoné 1994; Jadvā et al., 2003, 2012; Van de Akker 2003; Imrie and Jadvā, 2014).

Surrogates develop a bond with the infant as the parental attachment largely arises from the physical experiences of childbirth. The emotional connection of the surrogate mother compels her to respond to the foetus appropriately. Research shows that surrogates who have given up the babies they carried often experience psychological issues and depression. In the book "A House for Happy Mothers," most surrogates involved in the pregnancy process did not show significant differences in their psychological traits. This could result from the fundamental and societal traits of Indian surrogacy that require Indian surrogates to live in a surrogacy house with a single intention—to care for the foetus and then relinquish it. The concept of "worker-mother" dualism suggests that surrogates suppress their role as a "mother" by not forming a psychological attachment to the baby but instead conscientiously acting as a "worker" by considering the wishes of the unborn baby (Pande, 2010). In "A House for Happy Mothers," Asha, a first-time surrogate, tries to maintain emotional distance from the baby growing within her, but she struggles with feelings of attachment to "their" baby throughout the pregnancy. It has become apparent that surrogates make a deliberate effort to treat surrogacy as a business and do not view the child as their own (Snowdon, 1994; Baslington, 2002). Commercial surrogacy is also believed to contribute to a psychological detachment between the surrogate and the unborn baby (Baslington, 2002). In addition, surrogates encounter various challenges, such as language barriers and cultural differences, which can hinder the bond with the intended

parents. They also face social stigma and disapproval from relatives and the public (Karandikar et al., 2014). These experiences can negatively impact the surrogate's psychological well-being. Moreover, unlike in Western countries, detailed screening for psychological issues is often omitted in Indian surrogates, and psychological counselling and support are not readily available to them, potentially making them more vulnerable to psychological problems (Lamba, 2018, pp. 648). In "A House for Happy Mothers," Asha struggled to hide her position as all the surrogate mothers in present society. She feels it is unfair that she receives more attention for carrying someone else's child while her own children are deprived of the same attention (Malladi, 2016, pp. 22).

In an in-depth analysis of Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers*, this paper examines the impact of biomedical and biotechnological advancements on reproductive choices. It highlights how individuals can opt for bioengineered babies by utilising the services of less privileged women as surrogates. While the wealthy couples view the surrogates as gift-giving missionaries, the surrogates themselves have limited agency and are portrayed as benefiting from a "God-given opportunity to serve their families" (Pande, 2011, p. 623). This commercial surrogacy industry accentuates the alignment between neoliberal eugenics and state-led biopolitics, in which bodies and babies are traded as commodities by medical and legal professionals, intended parents, and surrogates. Through its portrayal of various characters, the novel uncovers the social disparity between affluent consumers in the Global North and impoverished surrogates in the Global South, depicting international commercial gestational surrogacy as a conspicuous choice offered to transnational intended parents within the framework of neoliberalism. Furthermore, the paper delves into the bioeconomic and bioethical aspects related to the exploitation of surrogates, underscoring the structural and systemic class and gender inequalities in India. The novel, therefore, serves as a subtle and compelling representation of the complexities within India's commercial surrogacy industry shaped by the medico-industrial complex.

Works Cited

- Broomsfield, Nicholas. "Global Surrogacy in India: Legal, Ethical and Human Rights Implications of a Growing". *Industry Rewire*, Accessed 21 May 2024.
- Karmakar, M, & Parui, A. "These were made-to-order babies: Reterritorialised Kinship, Neoliberal Eugenics and Artificial Reproductive Technology in Kishwar Desai's *Origins of Love*". *Med Humanities*, 2019. pp. 1–10.
- Krolokke, C.H., & Pant, S. "I only need her uterus": *Neoliberal Discourses in Transnational Surrogacy*, *Nora: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2012. pp. 233–48.



- Lamba, N, Jadv, V, et al. "Psychological Well-being and Prenatal Bonding of Gestational Surrogates". *Human Reproduction*, vol. 33, no.4, 2018. pp. 646-653.
- Malladi, A. *A House for Happy Mothers*. Lake Union Publishing, 2012.
- Pande, A. "Commercial surrogacy in India: Manufacturing a perfect mother-worker". *Signs*, vol. 35, 2010. pp. 969–992.
- Pande, A. "Transnational commercial surrogacy in India: gifts for global sisters?" *Reprod Biomed Online*, vol.23, 2011. pp. 618–625.
- Reddy, J. "Indian surrogacy: Ending cheap labour". *Santa Clara Journal of International Law*, vol. 18, no.1, 2020.
- Robinson, C. "Surrogate Motherhood: Implications for the Mother-Foetus Relationship". *Women and Politics*, vol. 13 no.3, 1994. pp. 203-224. doi.org/10.1300/J014v13n03_13
- Syal, M. *The House of Hidden Mothers*. London: Doubleday, 2015.
- Temam, E. *Birthing a Mother: The Surrogate Body and the Pregnant Self*. University of California Press, Berkeley. 2010. doi.org/10.1525/9780520945852.