

## **The Fraught ART of Life and Family Fictions: Wombs for Rent in Contemporary South Asian Women's Novels**

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**Abstract:** *Transnational womb surrogacy has acquired prominence in contemporary discourses around reproductive technologies generating new imaginaries regarding perceptions of bodies, families and gender. This essay attempts to locate Indian surrogate mothers' voices and perspectives, exerting (limited) forms of agency in two recent South Asian women's novels at the interstices of the choice and altruism narratives imposed on these women by those who stand to benefit from their precarious mother-work. The power differentials set up through the complex of the subcontinental surrogacy industry and heteropatriarchal normative discourses around Indian motherhood, alongside desires for family among infertile transnational couples, shape continuing forms of gendered subjugation. The surrogates' oscillations between the appropriation of and resistance to these types of sociological narrative are articulations of precarious Indian female subjectivity at the intersections of race, class and gender.*

**Keywords:** transnational womb surrogacy, feminist subjectivity, South Asian women's literature, mother-worker, intersectionality, ART (Artificial Reproductive Technology)

### **Introduction**

Transnational womb surrogacy has acquired prominence in contemporary discourses around reproductive technologies generating new imaginaries regarding perceptions of bodies, families and gender. Surrogacy is viewed by infertile couples as a viable option to acquire the families they desire. Contemporary perspectives on surrogacy are often read as fulfilling a lack marking those unable to align themselves with heteronormative ideals of procreation and family, deemed necessary for hegemonic ideals of respectability and successful citizenship. Varada Madge has observed that "although surrogacy has existed in human history, it generally resulted from altruism, adopting at birth, or adopting unwanted children of a neighbor or a

friend” (2014, 50). In the subcontinental context, altruism is constructed as a prerequisite mindset for surrogate recruits – Indian citizens and residents often in precarious socio-economic situations and marginalized social positions. Such altruism is often seen as inherent to these women’s own sense of moral responsibility – with decision makers arguing in favour of the material (and moral) gains for the surrogates themselves. The Indian surrogate mother carrying out this altruistic service is thus constructed as a docile, unquestioning and ‘grateful’, gendered, raced and classed subject with little negotiatory power over the outsourcing of her own body.

The literary productions by South Asian women writers addressing womb surrogacy as part of India’s cultural economy are the main focus of the present treatment from a combined literary and cultural studies perspective. Subcontinental writer Kishwar Desai’s *Origins of Love* (2012) and diasporic writer Meera Syal’s *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015) address the intricacies of the relations between the surrogates, prospective parents, the medical professionals and institutions invested in the surrogacy industry, against the backdrop of medical tourism<sup>1</sup> in contemporary India. Attendant concerns are how families and homes are constituted to accommodate surrogacy in subcontinental and diasporic cultural imaginaries and contexts. Surrogate mothers’ positions have to date been represented in diverse sociological, ethnographic and medical narratives, usually mediated through interviews and journalistic reports. Indeed the two novels might be considered alongside many “strong and divided responses from various segments of activists and scholars, particularly feminists, not only within India but also internationally” (Nayak 2014, 4). While fiction should not necessarily be read as sociological evidence, I have recourse to literary scholar Vijay Mishra’s observation that “[t]he art of story-telling – fiction itself – is given a legitimacy here in so far as the means by which experiences otherwise lost may be captured” (2007, 180). This is especially significant in light of the subordinate positions of women and girls in South Asian societies (which are aligned with conservative patriarchal ideologies) and the very real problems encountered by these marginalized positions concerning citizenship rights. Thus I read these literary works in line with another of Mishra’s observations that “the aesthetic becomes a site from which critical thinking can take place” (2007, 149). These literary works themselves thus contribute to the cultural work being done on surrogacy alongside the social and medical sciences. The novels imagine the voices, perspectives and situated knowledges of surrogate mothers, providing intersectional insights into precarious maternities contingent on performing ART services to create families for more well-to-do couples from other parts of the world. Surrogate mothers are faced with the conundrum of choice and altruism – as part of their mother-work.

### **Subcontinental Surrogacy in Perspective**

Among numerous polarizing debates, a major concern is the exploitation of women in countries of the global South, according to the use potential of their reproductive capacities. Delhi-based *Globe and Mail* correspondent Amrit Dhillon evokes colonial history in his critique of the Indian surrogacy industry as contributing to a postcolonial scenario of exploitation:

As a woman she is at the mercy of her husband and her in-laws. As a surrogate she is at the mercy of the doctors treating her and, according to a new study, what some of them do to her goes against medical ethics but they do it anyway because she is poor and illiterate. [...] Given the vulnerability of the mothers, it is shocking that India has left the surrogacy industry, [...] almost totally unregulated. [...] It is insulting to surrogates, who are already victimized, to call them, as some do, “biological coolies”. [...] They rent out their wombs to raise money to care for their own families, or to escape their squalid slums. That [...] MPs have not bothered to act on legislation that would help these women is a brutal demonstration of the fact that [...] particularly poor Indian women – have no voice or clout in the corridors of power (2015, n.p.).

Dhillon’s critical intersectional interpretation focuses on how power impacts on the Indian surrogate mother’s body. His provocative use of the term ‘biological coolies’ recalls the post-slavery phase of indentured labour from 1834 to 1920, where women were among those recruited from the peasant classes in colonial India and shipped to the Caribbean to work the sugar plantations as replacements for the former enslaved labour force consisting of people of African origins.<sup>2</sup> Equating contemporary surrogacy practices in India with past colonial practices of indentured labour echoes radical feminists’ readings of surrogates as “a caste of breeders, composed of women of color whose primary function would be to gestate the embryos of more valuable white women” (Pande 2010b, 293). While Dhillon addresses the subcontinental and transnational neocolonial and heteropatriarchal implications of this practice, the financial remittance aspect of the arrangement is used as justification by those favouring the practice.<sup>3</sup>

It is imperative to note that not just white European or American couples avail themselves of Indian surrogates; both subcontinental and diasporic Indians too use surrogacy to procure families, as a viable alternative to adoption. The hype around Bollywood stars’ personal experiences with surrogacy demonstrates the Indian media’s prominence in shaping public opinion. Aamir Khan’s endorsement for surrogacy was meant to work against the public stigma that still surrounds surrogacy in India.<sup>4</sup> While Shah Rukh Khan has spoken in favour of womb surrogacy as fulfilling the desires of infertile parents, his advocacy for governmental regulation of the process does not address what this could mean for surrogates, whose bodies are the service-providing ‘machines’.<sup>5</sup> Reading Indian surrogacy in the context of labour patterns, Holly Donahue Singh considers class differences in Indian urban spaces:

People living in urban India who consider themselves to be “middle class” commonly appropriate the labor of people with fewer resources, who often belong to lower Hindu caste groups and may be migrants from rural areas or from distant Indian states [...] Within India, well-established local patterns of outsourcing labor serve as a model for the mapping of surrogacy relations. These labor patterns extend to transnational contexts in ways that advantage not only relatively wealthy people seeking surrogacy but also the physicians and institutions in India that facilitate and profit from surrogacy arrangements (2014, 825-826).

Donahue’s intersectional readings consider caste affiliations, professional and poverty-stricken classes and intra-Indian migration between rural and urban locations of the clientele and the surrogate recruits, operating in established cultural practices of locating cheap labour resources and allocating labour on precariously situated bodies. It also bears noting that the Indian surrogate women recruited in transnational and domestic contexts as service-providers would not have access to such services, if they themselves had been barren, thus underscoring extant social inequalities. These narratives also illuminate the entrenched heteronormative framework around the nuclear family unit as a social organizing structure in India, reinforcing the discursive authority of gendered labour on women’s reproductive capacities.

Amrita Pande remarks that the scholarship on surrogacy has been framed in three ways: moral and ethical concerns are treated in feminist and legal frames; radical feminist stances view surrogacy as the ultimate in medicalization, commodification and technological colonization of the female body; cultural meanings of motherhood and kinship are considered through the impact of surrogacy (2010a, 971; 2014, 91). Eurocentric depictions and speculations on Indian commercial surrogacy are considered blind to the social realities of poor rural Indian women, for whom the practice furnishes survival strategies through temporary forms of gainful employment.

Hence transnational womb surrogacy requires a more complex set of evaluative tools and frameworks (e.g. intersectionality, decoloniality and reproductive justice, to name a few) in order to understand what undoubtedly, is one of the most provocative sociocultural phenomena in the world today. Alison Bailey considers the intersections<sup>6</sup> of race and class in reading the power differentials operating in commercial subcontinental and transnational contexts: “If fertility markets are driven by those who can afford these services, and if this demographic is composed primarily of white Westerners, high-caste Indian nationals, and Asian and Middle Eastern couples who want children with culturally valued features (for example light skin), then the market will respond to these preferences” (2014, 27). Bailey’s concern here also underscores the ‘racecraft’<sup>7</sup> evident in the implementation of raced, gendered and classed bodies of Indian surrogate mothers, thus highlighting the implicit colonization of these gendered bodies in meeting market demands.

### **ART as Questionable Art**

Surrogacy is an Artificial – or Assisted Reproductive Technology practice – in a range of technologies that “assist in conception and carrying a pregnancy to term” (SAMA 2014, 3), the most common form currently practiced being gestational surrogacy effected through IVF.<sup>8</sup> ART thus entails remodeling a biologically unrelated fertile female body to receive the genetic material of prospective parents, and thus furnish these with their child. The acronym is consistent with the idea of reproductive technology as a scientific ‘artistic’ practice that rescripts the womb as a vessel of service catering to the desires of infertile couples, and those unable to procreate in non-heteronormative<sup>9</sup> partner constellations. This is in line with Rosi Braidotti’s reading of reproductive technology as an “artifact of male technique” that imitates and improves on female reproductive labour: “the artificial process of science and technique perfects the imperfection of the natural course of events and thus avoids mistakes” (1997: 71).<sup>10</sup> The notion that ART is an ‘art’ meant to ameliorate the “imperfections” and “mistakes” of infertility then interrogates current understandings of family structures and kinship patterns. Thus reconceptualizing hegemonic scripts with regard to the production of families as a purely heteronormative exercise and right, commercial surrogacy “commodifies and hence threatens the traditional understanding of families as grounded in love, marriage and sexual intercourse” (Pande, 2014: 87). ART and commercial womb surrogacy then challenge the ideal of ‘proper’ maternity, wherein the genetic mother ideally carries, births and raises the child (ibid.). In this sense, ART produces multiple maternities: the surrogate birth mother, the gamete donor mother and the commissioning intended mother; in some cases the gamete donor mother can also be the intended mother who cannot conceive or carry a pregnancy to term despite having viable eggs. These simultaneous maternities in the surrogacy complex (with the potential for modes of sisterhood) are subject to power differentials. The surrogate mother-worker is the service-provider, whose access to ‘choice’ is complicated by her class, caste, gender and racial positioning as well as her family’s standpoints to the practice; her body is the site of both cultural and economic ‘capital’. However the intended mother – who pays for the service rendered – subscribes to the ‘choice talk’ and altruism discourses in interesting ways in the pursuit of her desires.

A plausible arrangement at first glance, the desires of all the parties involved appear equitable: the infertile couple’s desire for a child and the Indian surrogate mother’s desire for financial means to cater to her own and her family’s needs. Preeti Nayak however maintains that the representation of such arrangements should be read “in light of the legal, medical and ethical concerns that surround commercial surrogacy”, where the practice is located at “the intersection of a low-tech workforce and high-tech sophisticated reproductive technologies” (2014: 4). The ambiguities of emotional investment

and pragmatism involved for surrogates in their navigations of the surrogacy contract encompass: a) the rules imposed on the surrogates as mother-workers; b) hopes for reciprocal generosity from the intended couples and the clinic personnel; c) the emotional struggles evident in their attachments to their families and spouses; d) the recognition of micro- and macro-aggressions they suffer, ranging from sexual abuse, marital abuse, child mortality, adverse reactions to hormonal treatments; e) separation anxiety when surrendering the child to the commissioning parents; f) post-partum depression and medical complications during pregnancy and birth, miscarriages and death, lack of counseling and post-surrogacy care, among others.

Reading surrogacy as a mode of violence towards Indian women living precarious lives<sup>11</sup>, Sayantani DasGupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta observe:

Like the babies they carry, surrogate mothers too exist in a liminal space between technology and biology, global North and South, labor markets and sex markets. This 'in between-ness' is represented all too literally in the sequestering of gestational surrogates in clinic dormitories, where clinic staff control not only their health and nutritional status but even their ability to interact with their families back home or the 'intended parents' (2014, 193).

Indian surrogates thus are located in a liminal pivotal site of power relations between reproductive clinic staff, doctors, the intended parents, the babies the surrogates carry and the surrogates' own families. Despite their value as material objects necessary for ART, these women's subjectivities are not viewed in egalitarian terms with regard to their social standing, emotional and physical wellbeing. DasGupta et al. emphasise the workings of power, aligned with Rosi Braidotti's stance that "the production of scientific knowledge works as a complex, interrelated network of truth, power and desire, centred on the subject as a bodily entity" (1997, 60).

While Braidotti underscores the necessity of considering power differentials operating in the production of subjectivities, such ruminations require intersectional engagement to read how subjectivities are conceived of and interpreted, pertaining to racial, classed, gendered and caste perspectives in Indian society. The liminal conceptual location between technology and biology noted by DasGupta et al., is described by Braidotti as linking motherhood, the female body as machine, and the monstrous maternal in its refunctionalisation as a reproductive technological object (1997, 61-62). The conceptual node thus unravels heteronormative readings of maternity as contiguous with biological reproduction. Braidotti's 'nomadic' feminist framework produces a complex re-visioning of what subjectivity might generally mean to and for surrogates. Against Braidotti's reading of surrogate maternal bodies as 'machines' and 'monsters', the mechanization of the Indian surrogates' bodies exacerbates these women's alienation from their own bodies as well as from (European) ideas of a feminist subjective self:

Ultimately, the phenomenon of 'wombs for rent' enacts violence not only upon the individual bodies of women and upon the bodies of the children they bear, but it enacts a

discursive cultural violence against Indian motherhood itself. By making women ‘other’ to their own bodies, their own fetuses, and to their roles as respected mothers, global surrogacy privileges Western white parenthood, and specifically Western white maternity, over Indian motherhood (DasGupta et al. 2014, 195).

This conceptual fragmentation of surrogate bodies into ‘rentable’ wombs by the transnational surrogacy industry serves to alienate Indian surrogates from their families and communities (e.g. husbands are often estranged from their wives through long periods of separation and the consciousness that the women are carrying babies not conceived from their genetic material.)<sup>12</sup> Braidotti’s theoretical tripod of mother-machine-monster acquires troubling Othering connotations then in imagining non-genetically related babies born from unrelated racialised Indian surrogate bodies – difference is writ large on socio-cultural and cellular levels. Contingent on such difference, the kinds of transcultural genealogical narratives thus generated between surrogates and the families they help to create, should be scrutinized with regard to the recognition of these ‘Other’ mother-workers. Against this canvas, Braidotti’s figuration of feminist subjectivity does not translate smoothly into the Indian surrogate context, which is necessarily complicated by the intersections of race, class, gender, caste, religion, cultural context, colonial history, citizenship and belonging.

The matter of choice is a western concept underscoring the autonomy of the citizen subject thus prompting the critique that ‘choice talk’ is a mode of discursive colonization. Bailey notes the potential of Western intellectual traditions to “distort, erase and misread non-Western subjects’ lived experiences” (2014, 24).<sup>13</sup> One distortion is the belief that Indian surrogates access the same narratives of choice and altruism that western surrogates embrace. The notion of choice thus imposed on Indian surrogates obscures the social injustice realities in their access to basic rights e.g. food, clean water, education, housing and medical care (see Bailey 2014, 30). Choice talk also erases the forms of coercion experienced by Indian surrogates, subject to the emotional vagaries of affective attachments especially pertaining to marital and other familial relationships (e.g. marital abuse, abandonment and estrangement), and the contractual obligations in working with fertility clinics, entailing modes of bodily policing and isolation from family and community (see DasGupta et al. 2014, 190-193).

Indian surrogates downplay the notion of choice through emphasizing their economic desperation and their belief in higher motivations and divine powers dictating their decisions (Pande 2010a, 988; 2010b, 303; 2014, 94-98). These discourses are mobilized by surrogate mother-workers to reinforce their own self-perceptions as dutiful mothers invested in serving their families’ needs. The altruism narrative often precipitates in the binary notion of ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ surrogacy: “the ‘pure’ surrogate creates a child out of maternal love while the ‘wicked’ one ‘prostitutes her maternity’” (Pande 2014, 92). Both frames are evoked in Desai’s and Syal’s novels; the literary stagings of which have been

imbued with a critical moral edge.

Desai's main protagonist Simran Singh, a social worker / amateur sleuth investigates the death of an English couple, while trying to find another set of intended parents for their orphaned HIV positive surrogate baby girl. Simran discovers that the surrogate mother of the baby (along with several other surrogates) has disappeared from The Madonna and Child<sup>14</sup> Fertility Clinic in Delhi under mysterious circumstances. Suspicion is cast on the surrogate mother, as having breached the surrogate contract; she is thus a 'bad' womb – both in ostensibly having infected the child and in disappearing after delivering 'damaged goods'. The woman is later found to have been kidnapped and used for stem-cell research by an unscrupulous ART specialist, to find cures for wealthier Indian citizens. Here the discourses of 'good' wombs, desirable and desired children as 'gifts' of 'maternal love' are interrogated through the generic conventions of the crime novel as well as Simran's critical feminist stance, intent on securing an abandoned child's and a kidnapped woman's welfare, while exploring the shadowy underbelly of ART practices.

Syal's ironic distancing from the idealization of 'pure' altruistic wombs is provided through the discrepancies between what her surrogate says and actually thinks with regard to her relationship to the commissioning couple, whose child she is carrying. The mixed race couple, Shyama and Toby, complicates the neocolonial narrative of white European and American couples accessing and exploiting Indian surrogates' bodies. Instead the commissioning mother is a middle-aged South Asian British businesswoman seeking to consolidate her new relationship to her much younger white partner by having a child with his sperm and an egg from an Indian gamete donor. An astute reader of character, the surrogate Mala generates a familial bond with Shyama and Toby – who are persuaded to take Mala with them back to the UK, when it becomes apparent that Mala's husband could endanger the pregnancy. The young woman reassures them of her commitment to providing them with their desired child, while she privately plans her own escape from an abusive husband and dreams of a better life in the UK.

Both novels articulate the surrogate mothers' own perspectives in ways that leave no doubt of the multiple contradictions between personal desire and the narratives of altruism that the surrogates are meant to internalize and ventriloquize for the intended parents, the fertility clinics and specialists. Desai and Syal use paratextual elements such as author's notes and acknowledgements to ground their literary universes and the experiences of their protagonists Simran and Shyama in realistic sociopolitical discourses around commercial surrogacy in India and in transnational contexts. Desai's author's note proffers some caution on womb surrogacy despite the euphoria attendant on having found a solution for declining fertility:

[...] most of the cases and stories examined by my heroine, Simran Singh, in this book [...] are based on reality – but have obviously been changed and fictionalized not only

to protect the characters but also to weave them into a single narrative. [...] Declining fertility among men and women all over the world has led to some solutions – IVF, surrogacy and so on – none of which are without pitfalls (*Origins of Love*, 471).

Desai's literary text might be considered a hybrid product in that it is based on her own fieldwork and critical stance as a former journalist and media commentator on social developments in India. In her acknowledgements at the end of her novel, Syal demonstrates her investment in the concept of family in any manifestation:

Special thanks are due to Dr. Anand Saggarr for all his medical advice and expertise [...] Deepest thanks to K and N for sharing their remarkable story and for opening up their hearts and meticulous records for me. I am so glad your journey ended with a family. And finally thank you to my parents, though words will never be enough, measured against what you have always given me and continue to give: wisdom, conscience, purpose, love (*The House of Hidden Mothers*, n.p.).

These paratextual elements address the political aspect of material exploitation of surrogate bodies contingent on the investment in hegemonic narratives of family. The novels demonstrate the ambivalences in the Indian surrogates' self-perceptions between their maternal roles and contractual wage-earners.

### **Mother-Work Dilemmas and Resistance**

Amrita Pande has made the case for considering womb surrogacy as: “gendered, exploited, stigmatized labour” – an apt description since this form of labour is “a means of earning income as well as the process of childbirth” (2010a, 971-972). Given the financial precarity that many Indian surrogates find themselves in, this labour is often a viable means of escaping abjection, thus complicating the discourses of altruism and choice implemented by the fertility industry to protect their interests and objectives. In her feminist ethnographic work with Indian surrogates in Gujarat, Pande has argued that the perfect Indian commercial surrogate is produced in fertility clinics and surrogacy hostels, ‘educated’ and disciplined for the ‘business’ arrangement: “the mother-worker duality is manipulated in ways that most benefit the mode of production, from the recruitment of guilt-ridden mothers to the disciplining of poor, rural, uneducated Indian women into the perfect mother-workers for national and international clients” (2010a, 970). The terms of motherhood are dictated by constraints imposed through the surrogacy contract; these constraints shape spaces and regulate language – often leading to conflict and resistance (ibid.). Poor uneducated women from rural areas, unable to be ‘good’ mothers to their own children, find themselves interpellated through discourses of guilt and need, to commit to surrogacy contract arrangements. Many surrogates interviewed have spoken of acting out of “majboori” or “compulsion” (Pande 2010b, 301-303; 2014, 95-96), by performing another form of ‘good’ motherhood in producing babies for infertile commissioning couples. Such narratives “reify the structural inequalities based on class, race and nationality between the buyers and sellers of wombs” (Pande 2014, 87).

Although understood as ‘mother-work’, surrogacy is often read as ‘dirty’ due to the controversies of ‘selling motherhood’ through renting wombs, based on uninformed equations of surrogacy with sex-work, on the part of the surrogates’ families and communities (Pande 2010b, 294). The conflation of surrogacy and sex work is often read in subcontinental contexts, as breaches of cultural *izzat* (honour), as causes for familial and communal *sharam* (shame). The connotation in this stigmatizing conflation of the surrogacy with sex work stems from the uninformed assumption that the surrogate is required to have extramarital sexual intercourse in order to conceive, which is of course viewed as violating the sacrosanctity of heterosexual marriage and procreation; this stigmatization requires negotiation by the surrogates at pragmatic and ideological levels (Nayak 2014, 5). Equating surrogacy with sex-work disrupts the easy reading of an economically viable contractual situation contiguous with the altruistic choice narrative of an impoverished fertile female body, providing for financially and socially well positioned but barren couples. Needless to say, such conflations are often the grounds for debasement, estrangement and even physical abuse of surrogates by their spouses, extended families, communities and the medical personnel in the fertility clinics treating and monitoring them. Here Pande observes various positions negotiating these discourses:

Most of the surrogates’ husbands and in-laws view surrogacy as a familial obligation and not as labor performed by the women. The media and community often equate surrogates to sex workers. In medical discourses, surrogacy is portrayed as an impersonal contract and surrogates as disposable women (2010b, 298).

Despite such objectification, the surrogates display diverse forms of resistance to media, medical and cultural discourses constructing them as instances of deviant and disposable mothering. They claim their stories, their bodies and their (limited) agency, by creating symbolic boundaries between surrogacy and sex work: they resist their disposability as labour resources; they simultaneously distance themselves from, and make claims on the babies they carried; they downplay the element of choice in their decision to become surrogates (see Pande 2010b, 299). These narrative strategies also work in constructing complex surrogate subjectivities aware of the inequities and the ambiguities of the surrogate industry, which offers (limited) opportunities in financial advancement on the one hand and yet reinscribes social inequalities on the other. And yet, surrogates do often disrupt (based on their situated knowledges and means) the disciplining contractual narratives imposed on them by the industry to create ‘perfect’ mother-workers, thus confounding the altruistic ‘gift-giving’ metaphor as a cultural tool (Pande 2014, 103).

And yet, the gift-giving narrative is appropriated by intended parents: commissioning mothers often evoke surrogacy as a missionary narrative where the “primary motivation is to transform the life of a family living in desperate poverty”(Pande 2014, 99-101). Despite such generosity, such ‘missions’ by intended mothers “reinforce the structural inequities between their surrogates

and themselves”, whereby “personal freedom” of choice and “role-related” moral duty are broadly read as distinct forms of cultural difference linked with European-American and Indian subcontinental frameworks respectively (Pande 2014, 101-102).

The Indian surrogates confound the mission narrative by generating affective attachments grounded in sisterhood discourses, “to forge ties with women from outside their class and sometimes, national boundaries” (Pande 2014, 98). Such affective forms of kinship (viewed by some as fictive and even emotionally manipulative) represent modes of resistance to medical narratives of the surrogates’ disposability, as well as the contractual narrative of surrogacy as a business arrangement between consenting parties. Emotional attachments are often embraced by intended mothers, in the hope of imparting their gratitude for the ‘gift’ – a possible assuaging of guilt felt about having the surrogate mother’s body at their disposal. However, this rescue fantasy from desperate poverty, “ultimately reinforces subjection based on race and class”, while investments in “surrogate sisterhood” undermine the surrogate identity as wage-earning workers, but reinforce their primary identity as “selfless mothers”, freezing them in precarious and subjugated relationships (Pande 2014: 99, 101). These dilemmas constitute the tensions set up by the surrogate mothers’ strategies of disrupting the expectations of fertility specialists, surrogacy program managers and commissioning parents to find tractable and ‘needy but not greedy’ sellers of surrogacy. These modes of resistance provide conducive frames for the following analyses of the surrogates’ positions in Desai’s and Syal’s narratives.

### ***Origins of Love (2012)***

Kiran Desai’s crime story has a distinct social activist bent, addressing controversies around womb surrogacy. Moving between London and Delhi, the reader is introduced to a range of intertwined narrative strands of transnational and transcultural relationships revolving around a murder mystery, an abandoned child and a missing woman. In this multi-perspectival novel with an omniscient narrator, Desai’s feminist protagonist has a first-person narrative voice, frequently bringing an ironic perspective to what is an emotionally and politically polarizing debate. Simran’s voice ventriloquizes the writer’s own political stance on surrogacy; her admonitions to her friends Anita and Subash, two of the three fertility specialists running the surrogacy program at the Madonna and Child Clinic are particularly revealing:

‘So why don’t you encourage infertile couples to simply adopt? I know that adoption laws are tough, but things can be managed. Don’t you find something ... very self-indulgent and repellent about the whole business of ART? [...] ‘There are many things you could do for children – just producing them for profit isn’t enough!’ [...] The basic price you charge for the IVF and the surrogates and the international travel of the commissioning parents along could pay for the food and schooling of thousands of homeless, hungry, undernourished children in India.[...]’ This cheap rent-a-womb was,

according to me, a sort of slave trade – and people were willing to pay. I hated every one of those smug parents who came and picked up the baby some poverty-stricken surrogate had carried (*Origins of Love*, 108-110).

Simran's critique of the social injustices endemic to Indian society is juxtaposed against the Indian surrogates' ostensible agency. Despite sympathetic portrayals of the emotional upheavals of the commissioning couples from Europe and diverse motivations of fertility specialists and politicians, the surrogates' focalizations are incorporated, depicting their critical stances. The intersectional characterizations of these otherwise invisible bodies are set against the greater political narratives of official corruption subtended with misogyny, classism and transnational neocolonial capitalist economies of desire. Simran's criticism of the surrogacy industry as a form of 'slave trade' perpetrated on the bodies of poverty-stricken surrogates is mobilized alongside Pande's narrative of the commodification of motherhood in my readings of three surrogate mothers in the novel.

The story illustrates the 'hidden' feelings and interactions of the three surrogates during their periods of confinement at the Madonna and Child Clinic. In-depth emotional detail forms a crisis point where Preethi finds Reena planning to run away from the fertility clinic:

[...] she found Reena hurriedly packing [...]. She was dressed and ready to leave. "Where are you going?" Reena burst out crying [...]. "I can't give him up, didi. I don't have any children, as you know. I would rather have this one than not have one at all."

[...] Preethi sat down on the bed and only held her hand. "You'll be in deep trouble if you try anything like that. They'll come after you and take that child away. You've signed a contract – and don't forget about the money. You'll lose all the money!"

"I don't want the money. This is my child; I know it. He is a gift from God to me. Didi, don't stop me, let me go." [...] in the hospital they had clearly been told that they had to [...] realize from day one that they should have no emotional attachment in their womb. But was that really possible? [...].

[...] Wiping away her tears and feeling like a traitor, she [...] dialed reception. She reminded herself she could not afford to lose her own goodwill in the hospital. Her husband had already decided how the money would be spent. It would mean freedom from menial jobs and better schools for their children (287-289).

Having lost her own child, Reena plans to confound the surrogacy contract by running away with the newborn infant, who she sees as a divine gift sent to relieve her earlier loss. Here socio-economic differences between the surrogate and the commissioning parents are made clear as regards the surrogate's inability to access ART as a means of ameliorating her own childlessness. The contractual relationship between the surrogate and the fertility clinic dictating that the surrogate refrain from emotionally bonding with the child she carries, is disrupted in Reena's desperate bid to fulfill her own desire for a child. Preethi's reflection on the fantastical idea that a child borne of one's own body cannot belong to one, illustrates this disconnect between the surrogate mother's attachment to the child and the contractual expectation that the surrogate

‘delete’ the same from the surrogate equation. Remembering that the parameters of their work are part of the business arrangement, Preethi reflects on the violent self-fragmentation expected of surrogate mothers - and the precarious emotional and financial double-bind they find themselves in. In her betrayal of her friend, this surrogate’s attempt at resisting the role imposed on her is rendered unsuccessful.

Watching from a distance, Sonia ruminates on her own precarious situation: trapped into prostitution in order to provide for her children, she had signed up for surrogacy with a view to escape:

Not too far away from the opposite room, Sonia had watched the whole episode unravel from her vantage point [...] Rohit. He was still taking too much interest in her pregnancy [...]. As though he was doing everything and she was only a puppet. [...] it was Rohit who had pushed her into it. [...] this meant her dreams of going home as a free woman were over, [...]. Already five months pregnant, and waiting for the child. [...] She felt like an animal with no feelings [...] She was also worried that no contract had been signed. [...] the realization was dawning on her that they were all using her. The hospital doctors, Renu Madam, Vineet Bhai and Rohit. [...] The only person who was the total loser was Sonia. And watching what had happened with Reena, she realized she couldn’t even run away. Just like Preethi across the room, Sonia wept. (291-294).

Feeling like a cash cow, constrained in her personal freedom, with no control over her own body, it is notable that Sonia’s surrogate pregnancy was to serve the self-aggrandising agendas of the Brahmin politicians Renu Madam and Vineet Bhai. Renu was going to publicly adopt the Dalit-born child (carried by Sonia), conceived with Vineet’s Brahminical semen, thus manipulating caste observances and taboos in order to acquire the Dalit vote in the Delhi political scene through an altruistic kinship narrative fostered by surrogacy and adoption (250-253). Newly pregnant, Sonia had been coerced by Vineet into performing fellatio on him, thus degrading her (293); this traumatic event equates her surrogacy with sex-work, further exacerbating her abject status as a poor Dalit woman. Sonia’s bid for freedom turns into a form of slavery, with a sense of fragmentation generated by the various demands made on her body. The conflation of surrogacy with sex-work becomes apparent in Sonia’s struggles to use one form of subjugation to escape from another.

These two excerpts evoke the fraught intimacies from Pande’s sociological readings of surrogacy. In both scenarios, the meanings of surrogacy illuminate multifarious shades of patriarchal violence inscribed into financial contractual arrangements for profit and political drives for power, where surrogate bodies provide the commodity and the service, while their citizenship rights and humanity are devalued. Here the different motivations and affective aspects of the surrogate’s own psychological involvement are made more immediate to the reader in imagining what this form of motherhood entails. Decisions that enable them as waged mother-workers, doing care-work for their families, often run counter to personal desires and reservations. In this “house of

hidden mothers” at the Madonna and Child Clinic, the solidarity between surrogates shapes maternal identities (contiguous with their sense of femininity), which conflict with their identities as surrogate mother-workers.

### ***The House of Hidden Mothers (2015)***

Meera Syal’s novel addresses how womb surrogacy practices influence Non-Resident Indians’ relations to the subcontinent as a service-providing space besides its cultural value as ancestral home space. The narrative frames surrogacy against the canvas of South Asian diasporic identities, mixed race relationships, class, women’s agency and financial independence. Intent on pursuing their dream of having a child, Shyama and Toby meet Mala in India – a young surrogate trapped in an oppressive marriage in an urban slum from which she is desperate to escape. The trope of (un)homing through families is a salient aspect in the novel. Aside from the transnational surrogacy narrative, a subplot is Shyama’s parents’ legal battle to get their relatives to return their apartment in Delhi for their retirement. This second story demonstrates how diasporic Indians attempting to maintain two home spaces to facilitate familial and cultural attachments, can be unhomed by their subcontinental investments. Conflicts arise due to resentments and envy about financial and socio-economic advancements, lifestyle standards, inheritance and property transfers, family loyalties and entitlements. Thus the ideas of home and family are destabilized and defamiliarised through Shyama’s parents’ diasporic NRI unhoming in Delhi through their relatives, and by Shyama’s determination to shape her home anew through surrogacy.

Caught in menopause, Shyama’s desire for a child is thwarted by what her gynecologist terms “an inhospitable womb” (*The House of Hidden Mothers*, 10). Thus the novel presents maternity and childbearing in hegemonic gendered terms, as necessary for women to come into their own as homemakers. Shyama extends hospitality to a stranger due to her own inhospitable womb, bringing a “rented womb” into her home. She is conscious of the complicity of her desire in reinforcing the inequalities between surrogate women in India and comparatively wealthy diasporic Indians like herself:

[...] India had fertile poor women; Britain and America [...] had wealthy infertile women. It began with companies moving their call centres towards the rising sun, so what was wrong with outsourcing babies there too, when at the end of the process there was a new human being and a woman with financial independence? It was a win-win situation, wasn’t it? (97-98).

The business aspect of the surrogacy contract serves to assuage any guilt she might feel: justifying the supply-and-demand argument helps Shyama to distance herself from the more questionable aspects of surrogacy. The use of free indirect discourse here ventriloquises arguments by many commissioning parents embracing the ‘mission’ narrative addressed by Pande.

Yet Shyama befriends Mala; both women share similarities in their

pragmatic flair for business and experiences of losing a child (they do not know this last of each other). Witnessing Mala's husband's abuse of his wife, Shyama and Toby take the young surrogate back to England with them and install her as a new member of the family (228-232). When Shyama worries about Mala's two children (a prerequisite was that Mala had at least one child of her own to be eligible for surrogate work), the surrogate placates her, performing the 'pure selfless surrogate' role required of a good mother-worker:

How can Mala leave her two children behind? [...] "Madam," she said softly, "those children ... I didn't ... they are my husband's children ... you understand?" [...]

Shyama registered Mala's uncertainty and continued impatiently, 'Your husband had another wife then? They are her children?' Mala nodded relieved [...].

'Madam,' she said softly, 'those children ... they were mine, but not mine. I loved them, but I can leave them also. [...] I can love this baby, also I can leave this baby when I have to.'

*Vah*, how she had come out with such perfect poetry Mala still did not know, [...] and now she was here in an aeroplane [...] She could not resist one more look at the secret tucked away in [...] her new nylon travel bag. [...] the newness and promise of its leathery smell, the deep blue cover, the shiny gold stamp. "*Theklo*," Mala whispered softly to her stomach. "This is because of you, *baccha*." Mala rested her hands on her ribs, still clutching her passport [...] (253-255).

Clearly Mala has generated fictions in her fertility clinic dossier; she allows Shyama to draw the conclusion that the children are her husband's from a previous marriage, while she herself declares her compliance with the surrogacy contract. Here the reader is party to Mala's manipulation of the situation, and might be tempted to align her with the 'needy and greedy' end of the surrogate maternity spectrum. However surrogacy is also a means for a desperate woman to ensure that the intended parents, who are about to save her from an abusive husband and continued poverty, can still trust her to hold up her end of the contract. Ironically Mala's claims to citizenship and value are made possible by her leaving India – symbolized by the new passport and the unborn child. These function as portals to a new self-perception, previously unthinkable for a poor Indian woman, who may not have otherwise entertained the notion of leaving India, since such a move would not have been possible for her financially or socially. On arriving in London, Mala reflects on the value invested in children and homes:

But wasn't it true that, for rich and poor, your children were your investment for the future? For the rich, it was to pass on kingdoms, for the poor, to have another pair of hands to forage and plough, to have extras because disease and hunger would carry so many of them away. [...], this child would have Shyama Madam and Toby sahib to shower it with every best thing they could afford [...] *Chalo*, it wasn't her business what happened afterwards. What she should be concentrating on was what palace she would buy for herself when she went home. The word 'home' set a tingle of ... what was it? (276).

Mulling over how families are envisioned, Mala notes the differences in the desires and the needs of rich and poor (using Indian frames of reference to

identify these class positions). Again free indirect discourse is implemented to cover up any moral twinges of conscience on the part of the surrogate in having to leave the child she carries to term, according to her contractual obligations. The idea of home takes on aspects of uncertainty in her current status as a temporary member of Shyama's South Asian British family; Mala is confronted with an unfamiliar cultural perspective – that of a South Asian diasporic woman (365). The novel ends with a surprising twist, working in favour of Mala's desire for her own home: she wins Toby's affections and discovers that the child she is carrying is from one of her own donor eggs – she is the biological (genetic) mother of the child that she had carried as a surrogate (392-401). As a member of a newly aligned nuclear family in a mixed race relationship in England, Mala finally acquires the respectability she has yearned for (416-418): the surrogate claims her son and acquires a new partner. The novel thus resists the capitalist and neocolonial narratives of altruism imposed on surrogates to discipline them as service-providers to secure the desires of those in more privileged circumstances.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Both novels show that surrogates can experience shifts in their self-perceptions - from objectified 'victims' to 'knowing' subjective 'agents' of control over their bodies and their lives (see Pande, 2010: 293). Desai's text shows how women of impoverished rural backgrounds recruited for surrogacy are exploited, victimized and silenced. While not averse to couples from the global North realizing their desires to have children, the novel's critical stance clearly advocates adoption rather than surrogacy. Syal's text proffers an ambivalent representation of womb surrogacy in India, with intersectional explorations of the complexities of South Asian diasporic female identities, class and agency. Here the surrogate's own desires are realized at the expense of the intended mother's efforts at solidarity. In both narratives, the surrogates have been characterized as negotiating surrogacy in a range of precarious subjectivities oscillating between the two narrative extremes of the 'pure and selfless' surrogate mother and the 'needy but greedy' surrogate worker.

Meanwhile, recent discussions of the 2016 Surrogacy Regulation Bill in the Indian Parliament have ruled that surrogacy will be forbidden to homosexual and heterosexual couples (domestic or transnational), single parents and NRIs (see Timms, 2018).<sup>15</sup> The ruling which bans commercial surrogacy while permitting altruistic surrogacy, is critiqued by Simran Aggarwal and Lovish Garg as: "a regressive law embedded with overtones of Indian patriarchal mindset, which is bound to push the surrogacy market underground and escalate the oppression faced by Indian women" (2016, 1). Ostensibly meant to protect poor Indian women against exploitation by the surrogacy industry, the new policy may generate new narratives of abjection through the criminalization of desperate women.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Amrita Pande provides an overview of the reasons of development and the characteristics of reproductive medical tourism in India: “cheap costs, large numbers of well-qualified and English-speaking doctors with degrees and training from prestigious medical schools and India and abroad, well-equipped private clinics, and a large overseas population of Indian origin who often combine cheaper treatment with a family visit. [...] Package deals aside, clients are also drawn by the complete absence of regulations in India. Although commercial surrogacy was legalized in India in 2002, there are currently very few laws regulating surrogacy in clinics” (2014, 88).
- <sup>2</sup> In her study of the Indian indenture labour diaspora in South Africa, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and Fiji, identifying common patterns and concerns in writings from these regions, Miriam Pirbhai observes: “the coolie stereotype is not a simple marker of difference but a far more insidious linkage between race and class, which [...] ensures the continued racial and social subordination of the descendants of indentured labourers and ethnic Indians generally” (2009, 84).
- <sup>3</sup> Amrita Pande maps out diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of Indian surrogates, noting how the remittance of their wage labour supplements their precarious incomes in ways previously unimaginable (2014, 90-91).
- <sup>4</sup> See “Aamir, Kiran get a son through IVF”. *Times of India*, December 6, 2011.
- <sup>5</sup> See “Shah Rukh Khan speaks on the surrogacy bill”. *Times of India*, November 3, 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> Bailey notes how intersectionality provides complex frameworks for marginalized groups to articulate new realities from complex locations that reflect more accurately women’s diverse social experiences (2011, 54). This builds on the premise set out by Black US feminist lawyer Kimberle Crenshaw that intersections of identity vectors produce positions where hegemonic discourses exert power to reinforce oppressive systems, and also where counterhegemonic discourses work to challenge, disrupt and subvert hegemonic positions, effecting changes towards forms of social justice (see Crenshaw 1993).
- <sup>7</sup> Karen and Barbara Fields’ seminal 2012 study defines ‘racecraft’ as efforts to fit actual human beings into ostensible measurements of phenotypical characteristics (e.g. skin colour, hair textures) that have bearing on postcolonial societies’ readings of themselves as racialised groups, and their own evaluative self-perceptions (16-17). Bailey addresses a mode of racecraft in the surrogates’ physical appearances, producing the discourse of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of surrogacy: “It appears that the racial markers that have historically marked light-skinned women as good mothers and dark-skinned women as bad mothers have been extended to mark ‘good’ and ‘bad’ wombs” (2014, 28). Desai addresses the implications of the effects on racecraft on the surrogate mothers themselves: “Perhaps [...] it was all the more difficult when a beautiful white baby emerged from between their dusky thighs, as though they had given birth to a god or a goddess” (*Origins of Love*, 74). From the surrogates’ perspectives, the children they birth in these business arrangements may lead them to read white babies as miraculous signs, thus reinforcing the narrative of ‘good’ wombs.
- <sup>8</sup> These technologies include e.g. IVF (in vitro fertilization), ICSI (Intra-Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection) and IUI (Intra-Uterine Insemination), ET (Embryonic Transfer). The SAMA Resource Group for Women and Health in New Delhi, define two types of surrogacy: genetic or traditional surrogacy (where the surrogate provides the oocyte, and the fertilization process occurs within her body) and gestational surrogacy (embryonic transfer into the surrogate’s uterus follows an IVF procedure outside her body; the surrogate does not provide any genetic material) (*Surrogacy information Brief*

2014, 4). SAMA is engaged with research and activism around ART, raising concerns about existing practices, in efforts to comprehend the intersectional complexities of surrogates' lived experiences. SAMA's work has been especially important in generating discussions around the necessity for the production and implementation of a comprehensive legal framework (see Nayak, 2014: 5). In a recent critique of a 2016 draft of the surrogacy regulation bill, SAMA furnishes analyses of insufficient clauses and suggested changes (see, n.a. 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Surrogacy has fulfilled many gay and lesbian couples' desires to have children from their own genetic material, without engaging in heterosexual intercourse. One high-profile case concerns the German gay couple Jürgen and Axel Haase, who acquired their three daughters through two rounds of surrogacy – the oldest daughter was born of a surrogate mother in India, while the younger set of twins were born of a surrogate in California. Surrogacy is illegal in Germany. (Schmitz, Thorsten 2013, n.p.). While families may thus be in the realm of the possible for gay couples in North American and European contexts, non-normative partnerships are policed, constrained, censured and forbidden on the subcontinent, as the adherence to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (an 1860s British colonial law criminalizing homosexuality) has demonstrated (see also Withnall, 2018). SAMA has critiqued the 2013 Draft Bill for surrogacy regulation effectively barring separated and gay couples from ART in India as: “a violation of rights to equality, freedom and reproduction” (*Surrogacy Information Brief* 2014, 7-8).

<sup>10</sup> While it is notable that many Indian women gynecologists and fertility specialists are involved in the Indian commercial surrogacy, the industry itself is marked as a heavily patriarchal enterprise that evinces intersectional power structures in place regarding class, education and caste categories, working in conjunction on the surrogates' limited decision making processes. Here the discourses of female sexuality as subject to patriarchal forms of regulation and policing with regard to family and community; shapings of home and community spaces have currency in the financial and commercial complexes involved (Madge 2014, 45-66).

<sup>11</sup> In light of recognising Indian surrogates as a heterogenous group, the two novels describe surrogates and gamete donors who are often located at the lower ends of the social spectrum, whereby caste, familial hierarchical structures and rural agricultural or urban living spaces also affect access to education, jobs and other forms of social capital. Notably commissioning parents labour with the myth that if a surrogate or a donor holds a degree and is beautiful, this will affect the pregnancy and the child in a positive manner- a fallacious notion ironically commented on in Syal's novel (178-179).

<sup>12</sup> The surrogates' relationships to their husbands bear scrutiny, in that the men allow the breaching of certain family boundaries through the use of their wives' bodies, and decide on how their wives' earnings are to be disposed of for family needs – and whether the wives are coerced or are complicit in the decision-making process. The effects on subcontinental working class and subordinate caste masculinities would merit detailed scrutiny concerning gender relations, family structures and behaviours as well as economic patterns in sociological, literary and cultural studies frameworks; this would however exceed the scope of my contribution here.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey describes this form of discursive colonization, wherein western feminists impose western normative and moral tenets in surrogacy work onto subcontinental women's lives (2014, 29). Analyses concerning this aspect have been furnished by scholars like Pande, and Das Dasgupta and Dasgupta.

<sup>14</sup> The Madonna and Child – a mother-child dyad redolent with Christian symbolism denoting the Virgin Mary's form of surrogate motherhood through impregnation by the Holy Spirit and birthing the Son of God – allows for further consolidations in

reading surrogacy as an altruistic spiritual experience, engendering bonds between the surrogates and the commissioning parents.

- <sup>15</sup> The Minister for External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj has noted the necessity of providing templates for ethical practices for surrogacy, to prevent exploitation of poor women. See *Indian Express* (n.a. 2016a). Opinions among women activists e.g. Archana Bajaj (fertility expert), Nandita Rao (lawyer and activist), Karuna Nundy (international lawyer and human activist), while taking decided stances for and against surrogacy, have pointed out difficulties in a complete ban for homosexuals, unmarried partners and single parents, due to the diverse questionable political agendas which transport moral judgements and cultural ethos, which is seen as contrary to Indian's constitutional ethos. Women's rights and lack of entitlement and voice with regard to their social positioning are the main pivots of these debates. See "Why is India Banning Commercial Surrogacy", *Inside Story. Aljazeera* (n.a. 2016b).

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