

Surrogacy: from Commodification to Empowerment. A Literary Perspective

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Abstract: *This article deals with aspects of surrogacy presented in the novel ‘The House of Hidden Mothers’ by Meera Syal (Doubleday, 2015). Surrogacy is explored within a postcolonial feminist framework circumscribed to the issue of power in the private and the public domains. The author asks all the relevant questions related to it, among which ownership of woman’s body (as a whole and its parts), ownership of the fetus and the born child, heteronormativity and patriarchal relations as opposed to de-linking reproduction from marriage and heterosexuality by making it available (for a price) to LGBTQI individuals, possibility of abusing Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) in order to create ‘perfect’ individuals of one’s choice, possible or necessary regulation, and the medicalization of women’s experiences (pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, birth, menopause). The evolution of the feminine characters revolves around their empowerment, seen as a learning process: Shyama, the ‘employer’, comes to accept her age as a normal stage in life, Mala, the surrogate mother, moves away from a commodified self and learns to speak in her name, while Tara finds her feminist voice and a new/old country where to exert it. Meera Syal’s view on surrogacy is many fold and not very definite; she asks questions and attempts to answer them, and manages that, up to a point. Nevertheless, the final idea is of optimism: although surrogacy involves so many unanswered questions, its main value lies in the possible empowerment of the surrogate mother. Given time and the right environment and the right human material, which more often than not in real life is not the case.*

Key words: surrogacy • postcolonialism • commodification of women’s bodies • empowerment

Introduction

“Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What confronts us, now the excitement’s over, is our own failure. Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.” It is by this quotation from *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood that Meera Syal decided to begin her latest novel, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015, Doubleday). The connection is obvious: Atwood’s dystopia (first edition, 1985) dwells on the issue of forced motherhood and on the power relationships between the childless wife, the barren husband and the maid appointed to bear them children, the story being set within a totalitarian theocratic state which has overthrown

the United States government. Surrogacy was at its very beginning at the writing of the novel¹, but the idea of (non-voluntary) impregnation of the woman is present as part of a totalitarian future in which conceiving your master's child – as well as separation from your own - was punishment for seeking freedom.

The House of Hidden Mothers, in its turn, deals with issues of power relations within the postcolonial framework, among which an important one revolves around power in the private and public spheres, regarding claims over *woman* and her body, as well as over her child. Some of the subthemes include ownership of woman's body, ownership of the unborn child, issues of the medicalization of woman's body, the aging woman's body, etc. All of them are explored in connection with the topic of surrogacy as an option for what is usually called a 'cello tape baby', i.e. a baby made to stick together an otherwise bound to separate couple: Shyama and Toby form a couple, she is in her late forties, he is much younger and wants a baby; she already has a nineteen year-old daughter from a previous marriage. As her own feminist daughter aptly puts it, "Mum's not doing this because she wants another kid, she's doing it so Toby won't leave her for somebody younger"².

Although the conflict mainly explores issues connected with surrogacy, Meera Syal throws in a bit of every other issue that has been debated over and over in the postcolonial context: Indo-English dialogue, the insider-outsider view over the Indian/English lifestyle, race and racism, language (Indian dialects vs. English), centre-periphery and shifts in the paradigm, creation of multiple centres, balancing between traditions and modernity, the trip to London, as the centre of the Empire and back to the land of origins and ancestors, etc.

¹ In 1985 the first successful gestational pregnancy was carried to term. In 1986 Melissa Stern (otherwise known as 'Baby M') was delivered in the US and her birth was followed by a trial, as her surrogate mother refused to give her away to the couple with whom she had made the surrogacy agreement. The courts decided that the surrogate was the child's legal mother and invalidated the surrogacy contracts. Also they decided that it was to the child's best interest to award custody to the child's biological father and his wife. (Haberman)

² The other option considered was adoption. But Sita (Shyama's mother) discards it: "We are modern, but not stupid. What happens if you adopt a baby and your Toby runs off with someone younger? Someone more like him? You want to be a fifty-year-old on your own and with a little one?" (Syal 2015, 41). Indeed her words are somewhat premonitory as Toby will run off with the surrogate mother, a younger version of Shyama, also a version of Shyama "more like him".

Postcolonialism and feminism.

Postcolonialism offers Meera Syal the appropriate framework for the surrogacy story: an NRI¹ woman, Shyama, and her (younger) partner Toby go back to her country in order to acquire a baby. In the postcolonial context, NRIs, as well as generally Indians not living in India, have their multiple and diverse voices and cannot be easily contained, as the Indian authorities have tried to. According to Homi Bhabha, giving way to the vox populi – colonials, postcolonials, migrants, minorities – they “will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation (...) They articulate the death-in-life of the idea of the 'imagined community' of the nation; the worn-out metaphors of the resplendent national life now circulate in another narrative of entry-permits and passports and work-permits that at once preserve and proliferate, bind and breach the human rights of the nation” (Bhabha 1994, 145).

The trip back to India is regarded as an ironic reverse journey in search of happiness and fulfillment, in the same way in which Shyama’s own parents had done the original one, to London. In fact, Indian migrants more often than not nowadays do this return journey either to uncover their forgotten ancestry or as a safe haven in old age. In the novel itself, Shyama’s parents had planned to go back when they retired and to this aim had bought some property “Back Home”. Syal very aptly describes this situation through the musing of her main character, Shyama: “Ironic, she mused, that she was making the same optimistic pilgrimage in reverse that had taken her own parents to Britain fifty years ago. For them, until recently, India had remained Back Home, the very reason they had invested in the flat: it was the place to which they would return to warm their old bones until the day when their ashes would be scattered on the Ganges, joining all their ancestors before them, reunited in the river that reputedly sprang from Lord Shiva’s flowing hair” (Syal 2015: 110).

In fact, nowadays the reverse trip is done in search of another centre, the centre of a new modern world, in the same way as London used to be for Shyama’s parents in the previous century. While driving through New Delhi, she can see signs of this new thriving modernity and understands the shift in the power paradigm. It is a reverse

¹ NRI (Non Resident Indian), a name given to a person of Indian origin and a whole category created by the Indian authorities to include a diversity of people with this common denominator. This is in fact part of a larger set of categories – such as, for example the PIO, Person of Indian Origin - imagined by the Indian authorities to name their citizens.

*Orientalism*¹, to a certain extent, as Shyama regards this new India as an empowered version of the 'exotic' one which she had shown to her English friends when she was in college: "But something felt different. The shame had gone, realized Shyama, the weight of the colonial yoke, the embarrassment at the dust on your feet and the things that don't work or break down or just look second-best, eyes always raised towards England, the West, those who got it right and had it all" (Syal 2015, 113). Moreover, it is the reverse gaze that India (this time through the eyes of a mannequin in a shop window turns upon the Indian visitors from England: "The mannequin seemed to regard her with blank superior eyes, telling her, You can't fob us off any more with your bargain-basement lipsticks bought for your aunties and your Marks and Spencer socks for your uncles, expecting us to ooh-aah at your exotic foreign gifts. Now you are coming to us, nah?" (Syal 2015, 113). Thus we learn that exoticism works both ways and that England has become a not so desired 'exotic' in the postcolonial context.

Whereas in his well-known *Orientalism*, Said describes the way the Orient is seen by the Occident through metaphors of depth, secrecy and sexual promise: "the veils of an Eastern bride", "the inscrutable Orient", in *The Book of Hidden Mothers* we can see the Orient through Toby's eyes as a place where his dream of having a child can become reality. Also Mala (the surrogate mother) is perceived by Toby (a typical English country boy) through his realistic almost naturalistic, agricultural gaze: "There is something ripening about her: the about-to-turn ear of wheat, the almost bursting bud. She reminds him of late spring, when the land and shrubs seem to vibrate with suppressed sap, life waiting to be unleashed" (Syal 2015, 142).

According to Said, for the Europeans, especially the British and the French, the Orient is simultaneously the place of Europe's oldest and richest colonies and its cultural contestant, where one of its deepest and most recurring images of the *Other* is placed. The subordinated, peripheral, dominated nation(s) have to be represented as the "Other", different and evil, so as to offer the ground for a discourse of power enforced upon it by the dominant and central West. While European identity was seen as superior in comparison with non-European nations and cultures within a hegemonic relationship of Europeans vs. non-Europeans, the Oriental identity had to be represented as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a

¹ Orientalism was presented by Edward Said as an academic tradition and a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.

curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The resulting image was that of the irrational, depraved, fallen, childlike, different, as opposed to the European who was rational, virtuous, mature, *normal*. The power discourse could be imposed due to this very constructs of the two identities. The alternative of Orientalism today, in the new context given by postcolonialism, in the view of Edward W. Said, is that of “decolonization”, in the process of which scholars have to try to free themselves from the old ideology, as so far Orientalism has failed both humanly and intellectually because the West could not identify with the human experiences of the Orient.

This process of decolonization can be decrypted in the novel through the return of Tara (Shyama’s 19 year-old daughter) to her grand-parents’ land to heal after the trauma provoked by her rape. Her return and the way she imagines ‘India’ as her country/nation are her “optimistic pilgrimage” (Syal 2015, 110), her way of fighting her struggles and of finally finding her peace – through feminism and motherhood. Also part of this process is her Indian cousin’s perspective of England and London as former centre. When questioned whether he would like to come to London, he replies: “No, no, *didi!* America. Everyone wants America only right now” (Syal 2015, 125).

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, the relationship of power is placed within the debate over who has the right to name native (Indian) *woman* and to construe her through the act of saving her. Kavita, an Indian feminist activist, re-iterates Gayatri Spivak’s words over and over again: “It’s just we don’t need white men saving brown women from brown men”¹. Which is obviously what Toby does with the surrogate, Mala. He saves her from her husband (whom he believes to be violent, although he admits he hadn’t actually seen punching her – in the restaurant scene) and he saves her from her environment through surrogacy and – later – through their relationship.

Woman’s Body. Embodiment and experiences

Women’s bodies are explored from a multitude of perspectives in *The House of Hidden Mothers*. Meera Syal seems to have the ambition to cover all possible aspects regarding women’s bodies and their experiences: the body beautiful, the mature body, the old

¹ The sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men” was used by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak? and it “indicates a collective fantasy symptomatic of a collective itinerary of sadomasochistic repression in a collective imperialistic enterprise” (Nelson, Grossberg 1988, p. 296). Her analysis is based on *sutee/sati* (the self-immolation of widows on their husbands ‘pyre) and it is placed within a discourse of colonial critique, connected to the issue of the subaltern learning to speak (Nelson, Grossberg 1988, p. 295-305).

body, the slim body due to eating disorders, pregnancy and all its aspects (avoiding pregnancy, expecting pregnancy, miscarriage, lack of pregnancy, abortion, surrogacy), the medicalization of the female body, menopause, infanticide of baby girls, rape (date rape and gang rape), sexual harassment, the male gaze over female bodies, the female gaze over the same and own body, etc. At times, it seems too much; it is as if Syal was trying to cram all her beliefs into one novel, and to prove her point regarding them all.

One such experience is pregnancy, as the novel focuses on its different aspects, and Syal describes them with subtle irony and a lot of humour. Avoiding pregnancy and expecting pregnancy come together with age: one avoids pregnancy when too young and wishes for it when it becomes impossible: “All those years spent avoiding getting pregnant, all those hours of sitting up on cold plastic toilet seats in student digs/shared houses/first flats, praying for the banner of blood to declare that war was over, that your life will go on as before. And then the later years, spent in nicer houses on a better class of loo seat (...) – still waiting. But this time praying for the blood not to come, for a satisfied silence that would tell Shyama that her old life was most definitely over as, inside her, a new one had just begun” (Syal 2015, 9).

Pregnancy is a life changing experience for Shyama, and so it is for her daughter, Tara, who at the end of the novel is expecting a child and will make Shyama a grand-mother, a situation which is more appropriate for her age (she had been previously mistaken for one by a shop assistant). In this situation, Tara’s pregnancy symbolizes her complete healing, the fact that she is ready to go on with her life.

In the case of Lydia, Shyama’s friend who is a therapist, refusal of pregnancy came due to her rational decision as she was a reformed alcoholic. It is a decision that she imposed to her husband and that she looks back upon doubtfully.

Loss of pregnancy is another aspect covered in the novel: Shyama had had a miscarriage when she tried to conceive with Toby. Mala, the surrogate mother, had had a miscarriage before the surrogacy, which in fact would not recommend her for the process, had she and her husband not lied about it and provided two false children as proof of her motherhood. The description of the actual miscarriage is very realistic, as if Syal was trying to underline women’s connection with nature: “the blood and clots plopped and pooled out of her as she was squatting on the river bank with ropes of wet saris coiled around her arms, waterlogged iridescent snakes. (...) she became like the river, an unstoppable tide flowed from her, the banks of her womb too weak to hold it

(...) the too-tiny baby curled in on itself, a bloody comma, a pause in the paragraph of her life” (Syal 2015, 37). Mala’s attitude to her miscarriage is perhaps surprising, and would not have brought her any points on the surrogacy waiting list; it is an attitude which basically underlines the idea that motherhood does not come automatically with being born a woman, it is not a given, as the patriarchal mindset would have us believe: “But Mala had not been crying with grief, just relief” (Syal 2015, 37).

Shyama can’t have children as she has “an inhospitable womb” (Syal 2015, 13), as her gynecologist proclaims right at the beginning of the novel. It is not surprising, as she approaches menopause, a normal stage in a woman’s life, but a stage which nowadays women are trying to postpone as much as possible, as a result of social pressures to stay young and present a body beautiful to the others. In more ‘exotic’, archaic societies, this is celebrated, as Lydia tells Shyama: “Did you know that some Native American tribes actually used to hold menopause ceremonies? A sort of party to celebrate the end of the slog of childbearing?” (Syal 2015, 10). The friends themselves had decided to celebrate menopause when time comes, “once the hormonal watershed had been crossed. Find a leafy spot on Wanstead Flats, gather a tribe of fellow crones – the three of them plus a few of the game birds from their Body Zone class – choose a full moon night and chant defiantly at the skies, ‘What do we want? Respect! Adoration! Our right to exist as non-fertile yet useful attractive women! When do we want it? As soon as someone notices us, thanks awfully sorry to bother you’. Or something more snappy” (Syal 2015, 10). But this impetuous celebration of menopause is placed in opposition with the medicalized reality which transforms the mature female body into a version of its former self: “Besides, nowadays, no one had to have a real menopause. You could just ignore it, take the drugs which keep a woman’s body into a permanent state of faux fertility and parade around in hot chick’s clothing, long after the eggs had left the building. A whole phase of life wiped away, glossed over, hushed up, for as long as you could get away with it. And given how society treated older women, why the hell not?” (Syal 2015, 11). The implication, of course, is that society puts pressure on women to behave in this way and to try to push their own bodies to an impossible limit. So the question, once again, is related to the power balance in society.

However, Shyama herself – as well as her younger partner - realizes this is a futile exercise and we witness from the very beginning of the novel her thoughts regarding the relationship between women’s inner selves and the appearance they project: “They

[Shyama and Toby] both knew that it didn't matter how many sit-ups and seaweed wraps and nips and tucks a woman went through to pass herself off as a decade younger. In an age where you could cougar your way around town with a wrinkle-free smile, inside you were not as old as you felt, but as old as you actually were" (Syal 2015, 15).

Shyama's choice of profession is another indicator of her decision to cling to youth and appearance for as long as she can: she is the owner of a beauty parlour, a place where women's appearances are dealt with (even if sometimes this involves pain, as in the episode of Priya's trip to the salon). Mala will eventually join Shyama's team and will – predictably enough – bring natural remedies from an exotic place, coveted and sought after by Western women. Her empowering dream was at a certain moment to have a beauty parlour of her own in India, but later she realizes that the invisibility of skin or caste which she faces in London will no longer be the case "back home", thus the impossibility of this dream.

Mala, however, comes from another type of culture, one that is closer to the normal cycles of life, so she envies Shyama for being old. This, in her view, means she has reached a certain balance in life, a point in which the gaze of others does not affect her: "They [older women] didn't have to pretend and they didn't care what people thought of them because an old woman is almost invisible anyway, henna?" (Syal 2015, 163). It is this very invisibility that gives older women protection from the surrounding society. But also it is this very invisibility that Shyama still fights throughout the novel to find its acceptance eventually.

Marriage as an institution is also presented in opposites: the Western-type free union which does not take into account differences of age, race, skin colour, social group or class (as in the case of Shyama and Toby) or gay and lesbian couples in the West are presented in opposition with the Eastern patriarchal marriage in which the woman is always silent and "hidden", as the title of the novel suggests. In Mala's case, Ram, her husband "would take pity on fatherless Mala with her cursed widow of a mother and unmarried sister. Mala didn't feel she could complain. He was taking her on with virtually no dowry, just a wooden trunk full of second hand saris and stainless steel pans" (Syal 2015, 33). Her father's sudden death meant for Mala abandoning her dream of going to college and accepting any marriage that came her way.

Sexual harassment and infanticide of baby girls (together with abortion of girl fetuses) are other instances of exerting power over the female body. Vivid descriptions of both

create strong emotions, whereas the play between the private and the public and the confusion between the two deserve a special note. Sexual harassment is done in full view and with the complete understanding and acceptance of everybody. Mala “had been shocked at the level of violation. Not just above her clothing, but under it, pincer fingers pinching her nipples, fingers so determined and angry they pushed up inside her, dragging her trouser material with them, sending hot darts of pain through her trembling legs (...) all becoming the same man with many eyes and hands” (Syal 2015, 138). Once again, it is the victim’s fault: “Stupid woman, coming on this bus at this time, what does she expect?” (Syal 2015, 139). It is some sort of anticipation of the gang rape episode described later in the novel, which is a real life episode and which also happened on the bus and for which the victim was also blamed.

Infanticide of baby girls is also a private/public affair: it is a family’s own problem, but it is also a problem of society. For, together with the general discrimination against women, it is at the bottom of India’s great unbalance in the numbers of the two sexes¹. The description is very realistic: “She [Mala] had stopped counting the bodies she found on her stolen solitary walks, abandoned in dried-up wells or washed upon the riverbank or hidden like death presents in thorn bushes, the hours-old baby girls still with the stump of their mother’s cord on their tiny bellies, their mouths sometimes packed with sand or dirt, or their eyes and skin bleached and pinched with whatever poison they were given instead of Mama’s milk” (Syal 2015, 57-8).

Surrogacy. Commodification of women’s bodies

Surrogacy, also called ‘reproductive tourism’, ‘wombs sans frontiers’, ‘cross-border reproductive care’, ‘cross-border reproductive labour market’, poses primarily a series of power questions. Among those: who owns women’s bodies and who controls them? To what extent do patriarchal family relations dictate the surrogates’ selection? Does surrogacy reinforce heteronormativity or, on the contrary, does it de-link reproduction from sexuality, marriage and heterosexuality, as it makes parenting available (for a cost!) to LGBTQI individuals? Who owns the embryo(s)? Who owns the child/children resulted from surrogacy? How is the nationality of the baby of the child decided? Who decides it? Who has the power and the right to regulate surrogacy? What is/should be

¹ According to the Population Census of India from 2011 the ratio is 940 females per 1000 of males (<http://www.census2011.co.in/sexratio.php>)

regulated? Over whom? If it is circumscribed to a power framework, then is surrogacy about women getting power over their own bodies and selves? Is surrogacy about women's freedom, as in the case of contraception, abortion and pregnancy?

All legitimate questions. *The House of Hidden Mothers* attempts to answer them. The effort is enormous, and the result doesn't live up to the expectations: the author tries to do too much and it is unjustified from a literary point of view. A good example of this is the episode in which a possible Bill to regulate surrogacy was close to be introduced in the Indian Parliament – The Assisted Reproductive Technology Bill - and Dr. Passi, the owner of the surrogacy clinic, muses over all the difficult cases encountered throughout the years. The text of the Bill-to-be would exclude many (or most of the) categories of actual and potential clients, as “surrogacy will only be open to heterosexual couples married for two years minimum and only those from countries where surrogacy is legal, and surrogate children will be given automatic citizenship” (Syal 2015, 108). We could interpret this Bill as an attempt to regulate the surrogacy market in a more conservative sense; consequently surrogacy would become impossible for more diverse couples, such as gay or lesbian couples, or career women, who haven't got the time and the disposition to have their own children, although they are perfectly capable of having them, the ones who are “too busy to breed” and have a “baby as accessory”, from a “Baby mother”, “Rent-a-Womb” (Syal 2015, 170, 193 & 194), or “mummy-as-microwave: it calls us with a ping when it's ready and we can take it home”(Syal 2015, 171).

“India's fertility industry is an integral part of the country's medical market and medical tourism industry, within which commercial surrogacy is often portrayed as a win-win situation, seen to give “desperate and infertile” parents the child they want, and poor surrogate women the money they need” (Marwah, “Commercial Surrogacy in India”). This quotation just about sums up everything there is to say about surrogacy in India, plus, of course, the postcolonial nuance, i.e. the idea of saving Indian women from the post-colonial oppression of their own kind. The justification of surrogacy has many aspects, all dealt with in the novel. Doctor Passi at the surrogacy clinic knows this is pure business, and so do the women. They have signed a contract (or rather, their husbands signed the contract for them) by which they gave up all claims to the goods delivered (the child or children) in exchange for money. Also it is a business exchange between the West and the East, based on supply and demand, an old economic principle. Her words mirror the quote above almost word-by-word: “This was a business transaction.

Fundamentally. Money made it possible, money was the incentive. Supply and demand, the basis for all successful trading. India had fertile poor women; Britain and America and most places west of Poland had wealthy infertile women. It had begun 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?" (Syal 2015, 83). A more detailed explanation of surrogacy in India and its multiple advantages are also dealt with (in an unsustainable episode from a literary point of view) later in the book (pages 106-107), when Dr. Passi is confronted with the imminence of passing the regulatory surrogacy Bill.

Moreover, it is to the benefit of the Indian economy, therefore to the benefit of everybody: "A 2.5 billion-dollar industry at the last count, all of it helping the Indian tiger economy to stretch its jaws, flex its flanks and leap even higher, snapping at the sun" (Syal 2015, 103). By this the doctor and the lawyer try to justify surrogacy as an action benefitting everybody, not just themselves.

The economic argument is present not only regarding surrogacy, but also the choice people make of abortion or infanticide in case of female babies: "Girls cost money, no matter what they may give you back in kind". However the supply and demand rule does not work in the case of India, with its scarcity of women: "Even though their numbers went down, somehow their price got lower. And so she was still finding the bad investment dumped in the bushes, to save their parent the price of a crippling dowry. Maybe better than letting them grow up and get married into one of those snake-eyed families who would torment them for years or burn them in an unfortunate kitchen accident" (Syal 2015, 59-60).

There is also the evidence brought forward by Dr. Passi regarding the Hindu religion and the Hindu upbringing to justify surrogacy both to herself and to the surrogates. When she is accused of playing God, she wonders whose God, as her "reference points were the amoral deities of their Hindu upbringing, blue-hued and smiling, constantly reminding humanity to accept and endure joy and pain equally, as both are temporary, and neither can be ordered or controlled (...). Take action without presuming to know, to remain static and undecided, was the worst sin of all" (Syal 2015, 171). The Hindu

religion is referred to in front of the women in the clinic¹: “Surrogacy is even blessed by our holy books. You have heard about Lord Krishna’s own brother, Balarama? He was transferred from the womb of Devaki to the womb of Robini to ensure his safe birth! (...) remind yourself that what you are doing is approved by the gods...”(Syal 2015, 306). *Birthing a Market*, the Sama report on surrogacy in India, also refers to this type of justification from the part of surrogates (Sama 2012, 16).

The traditional Indian lifestyle justification is also present in the novel, i.e. a type of surrogacy has always existed in India, as Sita describes it to her daughter: “Well, in our day, if you couldn’t have a baby, your sister or brother would give you one of theirs. Except of course there was none of this taking a bit from here, and a bit from there. Like cooking with leftovers” (Syal 2015, 99-100). So present-day surrogacy would be some sort of continuation of the same tradition; it is the private brought in the public domain. The same kind of justification comes from Priya in an attempt to explain the choice to Shyama’s daughter: “in India this ... process has been going on for centuries, family members having kids for each other” (Syal 2015, 195).

These justifications are necessary as the actors involved in the surrogacy process are aware of the stigma it involves: in the novel, the first surrogate – Seema – does not disclose the source of all the money she and her family has stumbled upon, as she is afraid the village folk would not understand: “I know people must be saying dirty things about me” (Syal 2015, 92). In order for the surrogates not to consider the stigma, the “good deed” pedal is pushed to the floor: in the clinic presentation film, the doctor talks to a surrogate in the kind of language one uses for a baby, which is of course derogatory and degrading, “They were so happy. You have done a wonderful thing. You should be very proud. We are all proud of you, Gowri” (Syal 2015, 87). Mala takes over this discourse, before she finds a voice for herself: “No problem for us. We like to help you” she tells the family who hired her womb.

On the other hand, Tara, as a feminist, is the one who considers surrogacy immoral (85), exploitative for the women forced into it by poverty: “We both know this is fundamentally wrong. This is no different to the old crones who cut off girls’ labia in the name of tradition or the mothers who insist their daughters have their feet bound or marry their fat old cousins or stay in violent marriages because if they had to suffer, why shouldn’t all the others who come after them? (...) It’s women once again exploiting

¹ In the same way, The Bible is used sometimes by Christian surrogates to the same purpose.

other women". And, at Priya's argument that Mala didn't strike her as a victim, as nobody forced her to be a surrogate, Tara answers: "Maybe no one did (...), but her poverty did. Her lack of choices." (Syal 2015, 232 - 233).

Even Shyama has doubts at the beginning of the process: "What about the woman's right to choose, own her body and all that?" But her doubts are scattered by her friend Priya, who blames it on traditions and even mentions that it is to the surrogates' benefit : "It's India, darling. And most of these women are from rural areas (...). It's for their protection, at the end of the day" (Syal 2015, 80).

Women's bodies are commodities to be bought and sold, as well as their body parts. The vocabulary used is a specific one, and Meera Syal wants to make absolutely sure her readers got this message – as in the episode when Shyama and Toby are searching the database for an eggs donor "Did she really mean "browse"? Like we're going shopping?" (Syal 2015, 146).

Seema's husband tries to convince her she is just a surrogate, not a real mother: "you are just the nest, not the egg. The bird gets strong and then flies away" (Syal 2015, 92). Ram's gaze over his wife's body demonstrates the same idea, expressing not his ownership but his intention of commodification: "not seeing her breasts and belly as his, but as valuable treasures for hire" (93). Mala also thinks in terms of a business transaction at the beginning and regards her body as if it were up for hire: "I am just a safe house until you hatch, little chick" (283). The women at the clinic, too, are aware of the existence of the contract and of the fact that the child has to be "returned" to the parents (Syal 2015, 82).

The surrogacy process takes place at the clinic, which is a site of surveillance and control for the surrogates. However, this is seen by Mala as a possibility of escape, a way to find some freedom, a holiday; she pictures herself "reclining on a soft bed, leafing through a *filmi* magazine and eating cake off a china plate (...) balanced on her proudly pregnant belly. To be paid to rest and eat well, it would be her first-ever holiday – and in Delhi itself" (Syal 2015, 140). It is so good that it is worth deceiving the buying couple: Mala and Ram lie about her having given birth to two healthy children and about her age. The doctor herself forgets to examine her and then conveniently lies to Shyama and Toby about the eggs donor, by using Mala's. So the criteria that the clinic was so much advertising about were not at all met. The clinic had advertised as "pretty strict in their parameters: all the surrogates have to be married, have a clean bill of health and medical

history, to have had two healthy births themselves, agree not to have sexual relations during the pregnancy (...). And they have to have a signed permission form from their husbands to offer themselves up for surrogacy at all” (Syal 2015, 79-80).¹

The clinic itself looks to Shyama as “a female world in miniature, a living doll’s house” (156), the very “house of hidden mothers” from the title. But in fact it is a well-guarded (although open to a small bribe) prison-like building, where visitors are not allowed “without permission”. For the surrogates (I almost called them inmates) there is a strict self-imposed hierarchy, based on whether they had been surrogates before (and how many times) – and these women received the spots in the shade, based on their religion and more significantly, based on caste. There are a couple of Dalit women, who were avoided by the other Hindu ladies (they refused to use the same toilets or eat near them). This difference becomes significant when the subjects of the contract are considered, as the Hindu women “privately wondered if the poor *firengy* couples realized their expensive offspring were being grown inside an impure vessel” (Syal 2015, 167).

The product of this process – the child – poses problems of ownership (whose baby is it (102), citizenship and belonging (described in the novel on page 107), or simply as damaged goods it could be returned or discarded, as in the case of disabled children (169). Meera Syal also raises the question of genetic selection of the child: to what extent can this be acceptable, as medically it is possible. Doctor Passi reflects on the evolution (or involution) of these choices over time: it had started with choosing the sex of the child, it continued with discarding disabled children, “But then as time went on, the demands and requirements became more specific, the boundaries of what could be done more elastic”(Syal 2015, 171).

But there are other problems related to surrogacy (or ART) explored in the novel. For example, that of the age of the mother: the case of a woman who had a daughter in her sixties to die soon after of a form of cancer, presumably triggered by the amount of drugs and hormones she had had to absorb (Syal 2015, 19).

¹ This is clearly similar to what can be read in the surveys and studies on surrogacy clinics in India. For more information, see Sama group’s publication, *Birthing a Market. A Study on Commercial Surrogacy*.

Surrogacy. Empowerment

Another perspective over surrogacy is that of empowerment of the surrogate mother. *The House of Hidden Mothers* explores this very issue, as Mala, the native Indian woman, is empowered through the very act of surrogacy. There is also the empowerment of second and third generation Indians in England (Shyama and her best friends, Lydia, a psychotherapist and Priya, a successful business woman, as well as her daughter, Tara, a feminist activist) and the model of sisterhood they put forward to Mala.

Mala moves from “My body. His child” (page 182) to “I think I have always known. He is mine” (page 306). This is in parallel with Shyama’s words “I think I have always known. He was never mine” (307). Empowerment starts with her awareness of the power she holds over her husband, the moment she realizes she had become meaningful and useful to him. Her words “now you need me more than I need you” (Syal 2015, 95) show the beginning of the process of becoming a really independent and well-rounded person. Surrogacy is thus cleverly used by Mala as a means to reach the state of coveted independence.

Mala takes ownership over her body and appropriates the state of pregnancy to eventually take over Shyama’s place in both the private and the public. In this respect we could say, Shyama acts both as a mentor and as a role model. At the beginning she was just an employer – and here we can discuss surrogacy as a way of bringing the private state of motherhood into the public sphere by construing it as work – she employed Mala as a surrogate. Then she employed her, although unofficially, at her beauty parlour by getting from her old traditional recipes for beauty products made of natural ingredients. Eventually, Toby draws Shyama’s attention towards Mala’s role in the business, by prompting her to offer Mala a share of the profits from the new products. So it is a double exploitation, or as Tara put it “women exploiting other women” (Syal 2015, 232). Mala is aware “she carried his son, not through an act of love, but for money” and she tries to convince herself that the maternal feelings she has for the baby are not real: “Just because he ate what she ate, pissed with her, laughed with her, missed the smell of ploughed fields with her, made her jump when he got hiccups, made her wince when he turned over, fed on her blood and her breath, that didn’t mean he was hers. I am just your safe house until you hatch, little chick” (Syal 2015, 283).

Seema, the surrogate in the village, from whom Mala had found out about surrogacy in the first place, had had the same maternal feeling. This is in fact one of the most

controversial aspects discussed in specialist literature over surrogacy (see *Birth of a Nation*, 22, 57, 96). In the novel it is also through Mala's eyes that we take notice of Seema's condition due to lost maternity: "But Mala could see that Seema had left something behind, as if the city had nibbled quietly, softly at her plump corners, and everything fat and free about her had been swallowed up" (Syal 2015, 36). Then Seema gets a voice of her own and can speak for us: "He told me not to tell anyone (...). Afterwards I felt glad. But also too sad, crying all the time. Stupid, hah? (...) When I was crying afterwards, my husband said, you are just the nest, not the egg. The bird gets strong and then flies away. What is there to be upset about? (...) But how would he understand? He did not feel her knees making bumps in my belly. He did not see his skin jump like the river when the rain falls on it, when she got hiccups. He did not feel her flip like a fish under my ribs whenever Pogle sahib sang one of his loud wedding songs. He did not have to push her out with legs so far apart that one foot is in life and the other in death, did he?" (Syal 2015, 92-93).

In the house, Mala takes over Shyama's role, first by offering to help in the kitchen, to cook, to clean. She is aware of this: "As I climb, she is falling, Mala realized. It made her feel powerful and also sad" (218), and so does Shyama's friend: "it was the way she seemed to glide around Shyama's kitchen as if she lived there" (219).

Mala's empowerment comes with another revelation: "that you didn't work just for the money, you worked for the freedom work gave you, for the chance to be a stronger, more interesting version of yourself" (Syal 2015, 282). This realization is at the basis of her decision to refuse Toby's offer for more money to give up the child when she eventually decides to keep it. She explains her decision in commercial terms of buying and selling, but also she emphasizes her complete empowerment and the role Toby and Shyama had played in it: "All my life I am a thing bought and sold. I thought this is all I would ever be. But you and Shyama Madam have shown me another kind of life. Where honey costs more than gold (...). You won't believe me when I say I don't care about the money because that is what you think I only understand. Here I am someone. And so can my son. You have a price for that? (...). You have given me so much. But now we are equal" (Syal 2015, 307).

Tara is witnessing Mala's empowerment and this changes to some extent her strong position against surrogacy: "I'm still not sure it's right, what you're doing...but I can see it's going to change Mala's life so much and she says anything's better than what she had

before” (Syal 2015, 251). In fact, Tara and Mala’s lives are described somehow in parallel, they are of approximately the same age, had been through similar experiences (rape in the case of Tara, sexual harassment and forced marriage in the case of Mala) and they eventually find their fulfillment partly in the family and with children. Moreover they both undergo a journey of initiation and/or empowerment: from India to the UK or the other way round.

Toby’s feelings for Mala also evolve from his first gaze (discussed above) to his thinking of her when he needed to give a sample of semen for insemination (as some sort of sexual act) to his saving her from her husband (in Spivak’s words, reiterated in the novel, the white man saving the brown woman from the brown man). This episode brings some confusion to Toby’s mind and he reflects upon ownership over her body, the idea that she owns herself never crossing his mind: “We are just cavemen swinging our clubs, he thought to himself. We are both only doing what we are programmed to do, somewhere deep down. We are, in fact, fighting over the same woman. And who has the bigger claim over her now?” (Syal 2015, 183). Toby’s confusion is growing even bigger, with Shyama’s sudden departure to India to fulfill another womanly duty, that of caring for her father: “When Shyama was here, he knew who they all were: the couple and their surrogate, Mummy and Daddy waiting for their employee to safely deliver their son. But since Shyama had gone, all the boundaries and definition had faded to nothing but watermarks” (Syal 2015, 284). Toby’s falling in love came with the moment he saw his son for the first time, during a scan (246). Eventually Toby and Mala and their child will form the *family*, in its traditional sense, departing from alternative types, previously explored throughout the novel.

Conclusion

The novel ends with an extra chapter, one year after the events. Shyama and her friend Lydia visit the happy parents and their son, but have no interaction with them – Shyama chooses to cast her gaze over them and leave a present for the child. The final thought summarizes the conflict: “It was just a baby after all. Just another every day miracle” (Syal 2015, 318). Life goes on as usual, with surrogacy just the means to reach an objective, but eventually order is restored.

Surrogacy is similar to postcolonialism in that it silences women, they are only vessels to carry somebody else’s fetus to term and to fulfill other people’s hopes and dreams.

Postcolonialism does the same; in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Spivak tackles this very issue. She refers to learning to speak rather than listen to or speak for in the case of the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman. In so doing the postcolonial intellectual systematically “unlearns” female privilege; this involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse and not simply to substitute the lost figure of the colonised (Spivak 1988, 295). In “Questions of Multiculturalism”, Spivak and Gunew (During 1994, 194) raise two questions: “who should speak?” and “who should listen?” The question of “speaking as” involves a distancing from oneself; when one speaks as an Indian, a feminist, a woman, etc., one tries to generalize oneself, to make oneself a representative. When the hegemonic, dominant people talk about listening to someone “speaking as” something or other, we have a problem: they make some kind of homogenization, they want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, etc. (During 1994, 194). One gains the right to criticize, according to Spivak, when one wants to learn through language, through the specific progress of study, and at the same time through a historical critique of one’s position as the investigating person: “The person who knows has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is known, somehow seems not to have a problematic self (...). Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complications” (During 1994, 202).

The Handmaid’s Tale (which offers the quotation at the beginning of the novel under discussion) is the oral narration of the surrogate mother in the dystopian patriarchy of Gilead, whereas *The House of Hidden Mothers* is the story of gaining a voice, of learning to speak. From the simple commodification of her body, at the beginning sold/hired by her husband to the couple desiring children, the surrogate mother learns to speak as herself and for herself and her child. In this way, Meera Syal has a rather optimistic view upon surrogacy. A literary view, obviously, which does not necessarily have an equivalent in reality.

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