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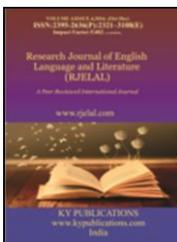
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THE MYTH OF MOTHERHOOD AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF FEMALE BODY

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ABSTRACT

The project tries to analyse the theme of motherhood, which is culturally positioned on a pedestal, as a social construct over a woman's psyche rather than a biological instinct with special reference to the novel *Origins of love* by Kishwar Desai. The argument is on the pretext of the booming fertility treatment and surrogacy clinics in India where reproduction is not a mere natural biological activity but a commodity, a flourishing business where agreements are signed between parties, and deals, if broken, can be met with devastating consequence.

The project will try to analyse motherhood and reproduction from a religio-cultural context tracing the roots of the ideals and standards existing in the society regarding the same. Understanding the characters in the novel is also significant in perceiving the phenomenon of surrogacy from the points of view of various people involved in it. This will throw a light on how the society ingrained the 'motherhood mystique' in the minds of individuals who mistakes their biological inability as a curse from God. Rather than accepting the fact, they desperately put their complete trust on these clinics and find their vulnerability being exploited to the core.

KEY WORDS: - Motherhood mystique, Infertility, Surrogacy, Body commodification, Social construct.

INTRODUCTION

Reproductive consciousness in man is hard wired in his psyche, right from the age of his cave dwelling. The thirst for immortality has always drawn man into a plethora of innovations; be it scientific, ritualistic, literary or cultural. The desire to produce offspring is therefore more of a tendency to expand his clan and to pass on his material properties before he falls prey to the test of time. Every possible phenomenon, finds a convenient and justifiable interpretation over this natural tendency. Our patriarchal and pop-Darwin culture believes that even rape is an advantageous reproductive

strategy because it is said to increase the male's individual fitness early in our evolutionary history.

Women on the other hand, a contrary entity rather than a complementary one; are considered a step lower and her endemic instincts and desires are mired or complicated, as she is not acknowledged to have the capability to think or decide. A caveman's attitude is obvious and can be traced back while that of a cavewoman's has to be analyzed to arrive at a conclusion. Women can thus be seen as deprived of an objective projection of their instincts because there are layers of social conditioning attached to it.

The issue of reproduction has come a long way from a biological phenomenon as in the other species. In the case of man it has been elevated into a higher realm of associating gender efficiency and esteem to it. A woman or a man is defined in accordance with their ability to reproduce. The reproductive responsibility lies primarily with the women who are believed to play a major role in the process. Hence, the inability will often be attributed to the 'her' in a couple which leads to further social and cultural implications like societal exclusion or labeling the individual as a bad omen. It was far from a married woman's discretion to decide whether to reproduce or not to. In fact it became a unwritten societal law which nailed the necessity of clan expansion on the heads of the females in the society.

The facts regarding infertility cleverly divides the responsibility bread among both the genders, acts no redeemer to women in the society, which believe, "Motherhood is the keystone of the arch of matrimonial happiness" (Thomas Jefferson). The barren women are degraded in the ancient society quite explicitly while they are treated with a subtle contempt in the modern times.

India and its booming medical tourism attracts the prime focus of the world critiques. Debates and discussions are fuming around our infertility clinics and surrogacy industries which are sprouting like mushrooms. Many childless couples are hopefully looking forward to India and their cravings mostly bear fruit; thanks to the lenient legislative framework of the country and low currency rate. The numbers of couple, who get financially and physically exhausted in their tireless effort to attain the so called divine happiness of bearing a child, are no less.

The theme of Motherhood has always been a favourite subject in literature. The writers have come a long way from describing and glorifying the ideals of mothering to acknowledging and accepting them as an individual entity. The recent issues of infertility and the upcoming trends in its cure are widely being depicted in the popular fictions of today, exploiting all its potential perspectives.

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Kishwar Desai's *The Origins of Love* was a critically acclaimed novel, published in the year June 2012. The novel features different angles of the phenomenon of surrogacy; the most recent trend in the field of infertility treatment, through different characters involved in it. The book questions the identity of a child born from a mother's womb and its contribution to the identity of its mother.

The concerns of this project are two major characters in the novel Kate and Malti, and also poor young women of rural India whose bodies are exploited in the process of surrogacy.

Malti, like Kate are those two characters who fit into the frame of self-castigated womanhood, due to their inability to reproduce. Though portrayed in two extreme cultures of the East and West, they share the common feelings of inadequacy and mitigation. "Infertility is often immediately blamed on the women, while their husbands do not even get tested to determine if they are in fact culpable", says Dr.Firuz Parikh, Director, IVF center, Mumbai (Sharma *The Week* 10 June 2012). Malti's case is one such. It's only towards the end of the novel it is revealed that the actual reason behind Malti's so called fruitless wedlock was her husband's impotency. But Malti was more than willing to bear the blame on herself, without doubting her husband even once. "She knew that she must have committed some horrible crime in her past reincarnation that meant she could not even have one child" (Desai 212).

Kate is the western counterpart of Malti who is also going through a traumatic phase of not having a child. Here, the societal ties are least and her husband is supportive of her. Kate's case is little different from Malti on the grounds that she has aborted two children whom she conceived when she was not ready for it. However, she had to undergo miscarriages after miscarriages when she actually craved for an offspring. She is emotionally strangled of the guilt of aborting the two children and attributes her present state as a curse of her sin.

She desperately goes through all the pains of the treatment which turns out to be futile. Though her husband is tired of the attempts, Kate

refused to give up. Surrogacy was the ultimate way by which she could accomplish her dreams of becoming a mother. Understanding the multitudes of medical tourism in India the couple sets for India, Kate being determined to find the right womb for her child. Laura Agustin points out that, this “generalized victimization stems from a neo-colonial idea that all women from poorer countries are tremendously disadvantaged: poor, oppressed, coming from violent societies, have no choice” (Agustin *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* 179).

Sonia and Radhika are those women who hail from the outskirts of India who are forced into rendering their bodies for surrogacy experiments to fetch money for earning bread for their families. They are totally unaware of the health hazards that they are prone to, as the agents and doctors involved are only concerned about ensuring their profit and view these women as mere commodities to serve their purpose. “The term commodification of female body refers to a form of critique, that feminists have long made, of certain kinds of representation of female bodies—as objects of male desire or as saleable in the market” (Menon *Seeing Like a Feminist* 177).

“After all, that woman, though she does not know it, worth at least twenty lakh rupees” (Desai 30). Once into this business, the price tag for each woman is set by the doctors as well as the commissioning agents. The women were also led to multiple surrogacies against policy, to ensure steady income to the middle men. This is highly detrimental to the women’s health. If she dies during her pregnancy, the family only gets a compensation of one or two lakhs. That was the price of their lives; after all women’s lives in India worth much less than that. The priority is always to save the child. No wonder that only the delivery of the desired commodity ensures income. This issue also gets addressed in the novel as:

“After all in a country where thousands of women die every year in normal deliveries who would question the death of a surrogate mother? From another perspective, what about the children created as per the orders? Anyone can come to the country and commission a child. What if some of

them are pedophiles? Again what if an error occurs during the process of baby making and the child is born with serious disorders?” (Desai, 173).

CONCLUSION

The project attempted to analyse one of the major assisted reproductive technology of the modern day; surrogacy. The present scenario of reproductive health is studied in detail and the alarming increase of fertility problems shows the relevance of the project and throws light upon the theme of ‘motherhood’. The novel *Origins of Love* by Kishwar Desai opens up a window into the lives of various characters drawn from reality and pictures the conditions of their life and expectations. The women characters in the novel are particularly significant as they unfurl the multi-facets of surrogacy.

The surrogacy industry booming across the world particularly in India is a business with a promising future as long as the craving for the ‘motherhood mystique’ remains ingrained in the humanity. The socio-religio-cultural construction of ‘motherhood’ is so deep rooted that there is no room for the infertile women in the society. The lifestyle has altered the normal health concepts of the man and infertility issues are more prevalent than ever.

Surrogacy- a highly propagated term serves as the ultimatum of infertility treatments, hides behind the façade, the actual scenario of the people involved in the process. It brews a wide range of criticism starting from ethical points to feminist concern. The infertility clinics exploit the child obsession of women who are marginalized in the society because they are unable to bear a child of their own. The clinics can easily persuade these couples by promising to realize their ever cherished dream. The money mire involved in the well planned system is not intelligible to the couples and they surmise to it. The couples do not realize themselves being financially exploited till they are literally out of funds. And the more fortunate, will be blessed.

The poor women writhing in poverty on the other hand come forth to give their body for medical experiments and rent their womb for nine months. The payment given to them in comparison with the charge lured by the clinics from the commissioning

parents is minimal. The extent to which their bodies undergo physiological exploitation is again a major issue to be addressed. They are made to enter the gestational contract time and again without a medically instructed interval to satisfy the money avarice of the corporate. The commoditization of a female body is on its heights in the process of surrogacy. The psychological effect on the surrogate mother is never a point of discussion at all. The health of the surrogate mother is no- where in the contract and hence there is no after care given to the women unless they are wanted further. Poor women in Indian villages are also being forced into renting their womb by men around them for their personal financial benefits. Therefore there is no surety that effort put in by the ladies serves them and alleviate their and their children's hunger.

The over emphasis of the greatness of the ideal of motherhood gives the infertile couples an inferior self esteem and they starts considering themselves as lesser human beings. The society and the religions have asserted the ideal too deep into the psyche of man that any deviation from it is considered an aberration of the mind and physique. This notion has to hold the sole responsibility for the numerous couples falling prey to the infertility industry and getting exhausted. The understanding that infertility is no curse from the Gods will resolve this mental bondage and free the couples from leading a life of guilt will call them forward to turn their life fruitful in many other ways or to help any helpless orphan child.

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