



Consensual Violence against Surrogate Mothers in Kishwar Desai's *The Origins of Love*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to analyse critically the topical issue of surrogacy in India where poor and illiterate women deliberately opt for surrogacy to improve their economic condition. The paper aims to explore how the surrogate mothers get themselves treated as child producing machines by the unscrupulous medical fraternity and commission agents. Desai's novels deal with the current social conditions in which women have been shown as the scapegoats of male hegemony. Her novel *The Origins of Love* aims to explore the topical issue like surrogacy in India, a country that has become a safe haven for commissioning parents who come from various parts of the world to realize their paternal dreams. The writer, through this novel, makes us aware that the concept of motherhood has undergone a huge change in twenty-first century where the body of the mother has been commoditized to serve both the commercial and altruistic purposes. The concept of 'consensual violence' makes the life of gestational women all the more vulnerable because they cannot raise their voice directly against the unjust order. The paper aims to focus that India has become one of the most important places for outsourcing wombs where an army of Indian surrogates produce children for the Indian couples and most of the times for the Western part of the world.

KEYWORDS

Consensual Violence, institutionalised violence, emotional violence, surrogacy

Almost all of Desai's novels deal with the current social condition in which women have been shown as the scapegoats of male hegemony. Her debut novel *Witness the Night* brings to light the malaise of female infanticide and foeticide that reminds the sensible people of Amreya Sen's statement that 'thirty million' women are missing in India. Her novel *The Origins of Love* deals with the topical issues like surrogacy in India, a place that has become a safe haven for commissioning parents who come from various parts of the world to realize their paternal dreams. The writer, through this novel, makes us aware that the concept of motherhood has undergone a huge change in twenty-first century where the body of the mother has been commoditized to serve both the commercial and altruistic purposes. In the twenty first century, we have entered the phase of 'throwaway culture' where everything is disposable and the womb of a surrogate mother has become a disposable commodity for the commissioning parents.

The writer has tried to show the bitter fact that mind and body of a gestating mother are both colonised for nine months. The novel presents a fine example of the commoditisation of a female's body where her filial affection has been transformed into a commercial activity. The ladies like Radhika, Preeti and Reena can do anything for their bare survival and they play the role of stopgap mothers with absolute dedication and conviction. Radhika had been hired by the gay French couple Ludi and Nicolas to once again make her realise the emotional bond of umbilical cord. She gives birth to twins after a lot of physical as well as mental strain. The moral fibre seems to have been shattered by the medical fraternity as they make Radhika undergo labour pains only after the minimal gap of six months after the completion of her first delivery. The doctors like Ashok Ganguly can do anything to swell their bank accounts. These so-called doctors of ethical values make beastly experiments on their patients in the name of scientific development.

Surrogacy has changed the concept of motherhood in a big way. The rich ladies have found the option of not to disfigure their bodies for the motherly act of begetting a child. Simran Singh, the mouthpiece of the writer, a staunch feminist, opines "Anita was careful to steer me out of the room whenever I saw a rich wannabe mom who perhaps could have got pregnant normally but chose a surrogate in order to preserve her figure or her career" (110). Simran Singh has utter disregard for the malpractices in the profession of surrogacy because it has reduced a woman to the level of a commodity. She expresses her anger "Why can't a woman be anything more than a vagina or a womb" (110).

The writer strongly puts forth her point of view that children only enter this world as a part of business plan. Everything is not hunky-dory with surrogate mothers. Gone are the days when a new addition to the family was supposed to be the height of emotional and parental jubilation. Today, a new born child is not necessarily the mother's eagerly awaited offspring. The commoditisation of motherhood has brought in a strange situation where the child is born to a woman who is not related to his 'parents'. She is usually a poor woman who needs money for her own children or her family or may be for herself. The other surprising fact about surrogates is that they become mothers for others children but fail to find time to become biological mothers of their own children just because of poverty and the lack of free will. They are undernourished at their homes but are very well taken care of when they are in the hospitals as surrogates.

The novel reveals the state of India to be caste conscious even in the selection of sperms that are taken from the sperm banks. Simran Singh remarks "I know that in south India, there are sperm banks only for Brahmins" (173). Sonia, a low caste surrogate, becomes all the more important than other surrogates because she is going to give birth to the political heir of Renu madam and Veneet Bhai. They leave no stone unturned to keep her in good spirits both physically as well as

mentally. They plan to select a Dalit woman for the act of surrogacy for their own political purposes as they want to keep everyone under the illusion that they have adopted the dalit child. However, it would be their own biological child because the sperm and egg would be taken from Reenu madam and Veneet Bhai respectively. They even express their wish to have a male child because women politicians have a very difficult time in India (251). This maid experiences the dream world of being in a position of total authority, power and comfort for nine months in whose homes she had once been a garbage collector. Sonia has also been shown to be the victim of both casteist and emotional violence. She is spurned for being low caste but her womb is used by the Brahmin couple to gain the political mileage. Her biggest sorrow and predicament is that she is going to give birth to a Brahmin child in spite of the fact that she is not his biological mother. She can be taken as the most exploited surrogate in this novel because all the people around her, like Renu Madam, Vineet Bhai and Rohit were using her without taking her interests into consideration.

Simran Singh knows the fact that the business of surrogacy most of the times trespasses the boundaries of moral code of conduct and surrogate mothers are deemed as child producing machines. The gynaecologists, like Subhash and Ganguly hope that medical advancements would certainly shorten human gestation period. The stipulated period of nine months could be reduced to three or four months and as a result wombs could be used with greater frequency, increased profit and less discomfort (285). Simran Singh is well aware of the fact that surrogate mothers are exploited especially when they are administered cycles of hormones to produce donor eggs, and persuaded to carry multiple embryos (111). This utter disregard for these underprivileged women makes them the part of the business activity that debases and destroys their individual self. This extreme form of violence on a mother's womb takes us close to the process of deification and the material world where even the womb of mother is for sale. The ruthless violence inflicted on surrogate mothers becomes all the more beastly and savage when they have to go through unnecessary caesareans just to fit in with the busy schedule of the commissioning parents (112).

The process of surrogacy is a form of violence that is legitimised through the consent of the exploited. The violence that is inflicted on the surrogate mothers, is both consensual and coercive. The legitimised form of violence does not let them protest openly and raise their voice. The 'ideological machinations' in the form of technology are so strong that the stifling oppression on gestational mothers continues to be perceived as normal. Derrida, one of the most celebrated theorist of the twentieth century, points out that the violence that appears in legitimised social structures is one of the most mechanised and dangerous form of violence. This institutionalised violence is perceived to be the most significant as it reveals the violence "perceived by social and moral consciousness as the proper, the reassuring seal of self-identity" (*Of Grammatology*: 112). As patriarchy does not rule by merely applying force similarly power and violence do not operate through coercion and repression alone. Saugata Bhaduri, in Derridean fashion, avers "A system of power does not operate through repression alone, because coercing everybody into submission is a rather uphill task. The only way in which a system of power can sustain itself is with the consent and complicity of the objects of exploitation themselves" (*Translating Power*: X). In this novel under critical analysis, we see that women have consented to be surrogate mothers and it is their consent that enables them to hire their wombs. It has to be kept in mind that their consent does not ensure that no violence is inflicted on their emotions.

The surrogate mothers kept in the surrogate clinics, come across emotional violence after the gestational period is over and no one is around them to give them emotional therapy. The commissioning parents make them false promises that after the delivery, they would visit her frequently. But all these promises are never meant to be kept (111). The only comfort-

ing factor for them is that the hired mothers become economically stronger but they are not aware of the fact that they do all this not for themselves but for their families and children. The gestating mothers like Radhika, Sonia, Reena and Preeti have been shown as the victims of emotional violence. Preeti was used for a British couple, Mike and Susan Oldham who gave birth to HIV positive child by the name of Amila. Sometimes their unflagging love and passion for the new born babies would prove to be a huge wrench for them because they were not allowed to meet the child again. Their desire to possess the baby was all the more stronger when the dark ladies gave birth to snow-white babies. Dr. Anita points out "...it was all the more difficult when beautiful white baby emerged from between their dusky thighs, as though they had given birth to a god or goddess" (74). One of the gestational mothers forgot the pain of her delivery when a child starts sucking milk from her dark breasts. She only got a sense of consolation from the fact that her breasts have started producing milk and her milk yielding breast will serve as a link between her baby and her. Her milk was very protectively sent off to Australia where it would nourish the child for at least three months. Sending the women for the act of surrogacy was like a 'family enterprise' because the surrogate mothers had to leave the house with the consent of her husband for a stipulated period of nine months. This consent was simply because of the fact that "After all, she would bring in more money with just one pregnancy than her husband would earn in his entire life" (31).

Radhika was entrapped by Sharmaji, an agent, into an endless cycle of surrogacies. After being passed over to Dr. Ganguly's clinic, she becomes an object of experimentation. This sixteen year old girl was made to undergo surrogacy with only a gap of six months (454). Reena, another surrogate mother has been shown to be the victim of emotional violence. Surrogate mothers from the very beginning of their pregnancy had been given the lessons that "...they had to divide their heads from their hearts, and realize from day one that they should have no emotional attachment to the child in their womb" (288). Reena became extra emotional just because of the simple reason that she had fed the child with her blood. She had to pass through a difficult pregnancy. The post-partum depression makes Reena all the more emotional because she has given birth to a baby boy.

The 'New Life Fertility Clinic' established by Dr. Ganguly allures the surrogate mothers because of its amenities and state-of-the-art infrastructure. Ben feels that this place also is a site of exploitation for gestating mothers. He states "But this is the nuts and bolts place. This is how women are really treated here and why don't we just join the exploitation" (369). The words of Ben made Kate less interested for a surrogate mother. Kate knows some of the rules and regulations that have to be abided by. Kate also knows the fact that the norms set up for surrogacy are generally flouted in India. She knew that only those women who already had complete families were permitted by law to participate in surrogacy, but she also knew that women could be tempted by the money to forgo their own children (373).

The novel, thus draws our attention to one of the new forms of violence against women, especially surrogate mother who not only become the victims of patriarchal violence but more subtle forms of violence in which they have to be mute spectators and bearers of violence. This form of violence, generated through the use of technology, is facilitated by creating a protective blanket of silence and impunity because surrogate women deem silence as a remedial force to deal with coercion. All the surrogate women described in this novel, from Radhika to Shobha bear violence by maintaining silence that is considered to be the weapon of the weak in this unjust social order. So, apart from the traditional form of violence of patriarchy and its other allied forces, the violence generated through the help of technology on the womb of the mother, is the cult of violence by practising non-violent ideology.

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