

WOMB: Property inside Body in Meera Sayal's *The House of Hidden Mothers*

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Abstract:

The cultural beam starts with the light of women's body, which is often seen as the entity of male gaze, commodified object and as the subject of voyeurism. The presentation and representation of women's body throughout centuries have been the objects of erotic absence. The Womb connotes the phenomenological reality of woman which is the source of reproduction or new life. The postmodern era has erased the pious relation of mother-child with the producer-product. Women being the product of patriarchal society has always been suppressed, exploited and used for their own purposes. The birth of the surrogate was the strangulation of her own self, womb which gets rented for other. The ostracized witch, *banz* and infertile women who once were the victims are now saved by these surrogates. The womb of the woman is boon when it produces the child and bane if it remains childless. Thus, the social construction and the psychological phenomenon tend to release the change which carries the key of choice. Therefore, the paper tries to suspect the immolation of women's body by unveiling the market set for objectifying the body through the channels of surrogacy.

Keywords: Body, voyeurism, suppression, objectification and surrogacy.

Introduction:

Women and her body have created the historical standpoint where the cultural, social, economical and political structures are rebuilt in the awakened form of feminism. The eastern and western thinkers have different opinions when the politics of body is viewed through the philosophical and intellectual realities. The oppression, suppression or hegemonized state of women is driven by the patriarchal society who ruled the body throughout centuries and still continues. Discourse on body starts with material and realistic function of male gaze, as for male

the female body is the part of celebration and the object of repression. Women's body has played a crucial role throughout the history of cultural power residing the relationship of man and woman. Moving from the western tradition to the biological theory which defines body in different light, as the body is consumed by the male members of the society. Women who were not slaves typically but were the soul property of their father before marriage and after marriage they were hand-over to their respective husband. Rose Weitz in the article "A history of Women's Bodies" (2017) explains the situation of the submissive bodies who move from and for the male, because the bodies are controlled by them.

"Beginning with the earliest written legal codes, and continuing nearly to the present day, the law typically has defined women's bodies as men's property. In ancient societies women were not slaves typically belong to fathers before marriage and to their husbands thereafter. For this reason, Babylonian law, for example, treated rape as a form of property damage, requiring a rapist to pay a fine to the husband or father of the raped woman, but nothing to the woman herself" (248).

Likewise, the women become the part of the contract in between men of both the party. This practice was in the ancient society which is also followed in the present society. Rose Weitz has also discussed about the Aristotle's scientific standpoint on the women's body which depends on the concept of heat. "According to Aristotle, only embryos that had sufficient heat could develop into fully human form. The rest becomes female. In other words, woman was, in Aristotle's words, a "misbegotten man" and a "monstrosity"- less than fully formed and literally half baked" (249). The women were never her own subject as she was generally the subject of study, suppression and gaze only for men. It's been centuries that the women were created and erased according to the male members, as the society rules in the patriarchal palm. Feminism was the attempt to relocate the identity and individuality of the female who were submerged in the garage of misogynist society. The culture of the society never helped women to read and educate themselves to know their own rights. They were baffled to see the increasing number of women who were considered frail being entered into the education and employment which rejects the strong echoes of religious and Aristotelian view to disdain women and her bodies. Vern Bullough and Martha Voght in the article "Women, Menstruation and nineteenth-century

medicine” (1984) explicates that the educated and employed women have difficulty in producing the child.

“ The president of the Oregon State Medical Society, F.W.Van Dyke, in 1905, Claimed that hard study killed sexual desire in women, took away their beauty, and brought on hysteria, neurasthenia(a mental disorder), dyspepsia (indigestion), astigmatism (a visual disorder) and dysmenorrheal (painful menstruation). Educated women, he added, could not bear children with ease because study arrested the development of the pelvis at the same time it increased the size of the child’s brain, and therefore its head. The result was extensive suffering in childbirth by educated women” (32).

The educated and employed male might have a suffered from the same problems but the consideration is shown towards the women which claim the difference in sex. Despite all the differences which are considered ideologically challenging for the woman’s body and her social status she creates her own history. Susan Faludi in the text *Backlash: The Undeclared war Against American Women* (1991) has taken many forms which includes, the increasing pressure to maintain the body in perfect shape, the women as ill in her premenstrual and postmenopausal and rising for the fetal rights and anti-abortion movements.

The second sex in the contemporary era are being more inclined towards the beauty myth which is also controlled by the patriarchy as Imelda Whelehan in the text *Modern Feminist Thought From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism’* (1995) explains that even the successful women are the victims in the world cosmetic surgery. To match the western standards of fation and beauty women are moving towards the perfection in the body size and calculating the beauty through surgery and use of silicones. Particularly in media the exposed body of the women becomes the market strategies for consumerism. This body shaming questions the other female and the demand increases for being white and slim. Rather being bodily fit the women started cutting the fat for being in the slot of slim and distorting their diet. Jean Kilbourne in article “Beauty and the Beast of Advertising” (2017) traces the advertising policies which the industry invest according to the body and skin to influence the consumers with the creative artificiality.

“The aspect of advertising most in need of analysis and change is the portrayal of women. Scientific studies and the most casual viewing yield the same conclusion: women are

shown almost exclusively as housewives or sex objects. The housewife, pathologically obsessed by cleanliness and lemon-fresh scents, debates cleaning products with herself and worries about her husband's ring around the collar"(184).

Beauty becomes the highest achieving object for the women as her whole body signifies the objective of being young. From the long slim legged to the wrinkles which indicate that the females should remain forever young. The perfect bodily figure and beautiful woman in movies, adds and on posters regardless of the products the aim becomes to be what is shown to the audience. To emulate these ideal figures women are constantly exhorted and feel ashamed, down and guilty if they are unable to achieve. They had made the criteria that are contingent upon the bodily perfection which is mostly desirable and lovable. There are more than millions of beauty products which enhance the artificial beauty and despite knowing this many females move far for manipulating and changing their faces and bodies. The conditioning of every woman is such that she feels embracement or dissatisfaction for her own natural look if it's not perfect. The constant need of the hour is the makeover with new looks, alteration and improvements according to the latest fation. These struggles create mask out of the face of the women and the bodies are in disguise which is the object or thing for the men.

Exploitation through womb:

Moving to the land of baby farm where the women are hired to give birth for the other women which is the laboring for making the product. The surrogate who produces the child gets attached to the baby but the child belongs to the intended parents, the sensitization of the issue clearly exploits the victim which is the surrogate. Money is seen as God who can help us buy anything, as it becomes the boon for intended parents and surrogate. The anxiety of surrogacy can see in different frames like the feminist issues on the exploitation, the women can take her decision on the basis of her choice and the distorted sense of motherhood. Amrita Pande in *Wombs in Labor Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India* (2018) says "Feminist Scholars have previously used the analogy of "labor" and/or "production" for surrogacy, very often to condemn the commodification of women and motherhood in the process of this labor. Anthropologist Emily Martin discusses medical metaphors whereby the uterus becomes a machine and the woman becomes the laborer that produces the baby" (6). The women as surrogates clearly adopt the work of mothering wherein, she becomes the producer and the child

is the product. Commodified womb which is considered as an object or machine to produce what is injected. Meera Sayal in *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015) talks about the condition of Mala who becomes the surrogate leaves behind what she never wanted and move ahead with the surrogacy which she chooses with the consent of her husband Ram. Shyama's and Mala's family doesn't know about the surrogacy as it remains the stereotypical notion among the parents. "She had insisted on keeping their IVF a secret from her parents for the last four years, so why choose to tell Sita now when it wasn't going to happen?" (44) In- Vitro Fertilization is a kind of injection which is injected in surrogate which carries the sperm of the intended father. When the woman has some complexities during pregnancy which can be either regarding the ovum, the undeveloped egg or in fertilization then the woman takes the help of surrogate. Assisted reproductive technology which Varada Madge in "Infertility, Women and Assisted reproductive Technologies: An Exploratory Study in Pune, India" explains about its methods and complications. But at the same time, it's helping women to be independent and even helping the couple who wants to have child but are unable to have because of the medical complexities.

"There are several procedures that fall under this category, but for the purpose of this study there are following methods:

1. Intra-Utrine Insemination (IUI) which is the introduction of semen into vagina or cervix of a female. IUI is a treatment that is usually carried out for male sub-fertility.
2. In-Viro Fertilisation (IVF) which involves collecting eggs and sperm and placing them in laboratory dish for fertilization. Later, the embryos are transferred into the uterus where implantation and pregnancy will hopefully occur, as in normal pregnancy.
3. Intra-cytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI). A single sperm is directly injected into each egg. ICSI is carried out when the man has an extremely low sperm count" (5).

These procedures have lot of risks involved, but might sound simple. Due to the hyper stimulation of the ovaries during IVF increases the risk of ectopic pregnancy, in which the fetus develops outside the uterus usually in fallopian tube. With all risks in pregnancy a woman tries to give birth to a child. "ART, they not only get gift of a longed-for child, but also know that their money is going to help the woman who has given a new life to them" (92). Commercial surrogacy nowadays is a great business and it's increasing like a plague with all the risk

involved. Preeti Nayak in “The Three Ms of Commercial Surrogacy in India Mother, Money and Medical Market” (2014) explains the risks of surrogacy “along with the possible physiological harm as a direct outcome of the drugs and medical procedures, the very context and factors ‘pushing’ a woman into surrogacy arrangement also constitute risks for her” (6). Mostly surrogate comes from the rural areas in need of money they have reasons like their husband doesn’t earn, they want to send their children to school, they want to make their house and there are women whose in-laws are involved so that they can have money. Even Sayal explicates in the novel that “it’s bit dodgy, isn’t it? What about the women’s right to choose, own her own body and all that? It’s India, darling. And most of these women are from rural areas” (93). Different narratives of surrogates explain varied conditions from which they go through and finally give away the child with which they create a bond while making it knowingly for others. J. Warner in “Outsourced Womb” (2008) enlightens that the surrogates are willing to carry for the sake of their own children. “Indeed one of the ways that surrogacy survives here (US) is under cover of the fiction that the women who bear other women’s babies do so not for the money-which would be degrading-but because they love to be pregnant”. Surrogacy is boon for the women working in houses for 12 hours a day, women who labour everyday with her husband but paid less comparatively and women who are illiterate cannot go out for good jobs tries to help the needful couple to make their children’s future. As one of the surrogate women explains herself in Sayal’s novel she says

“this is my third time here, one woman with an enormous golden nose piercing told the camera. It is not allowed to give more than three babies so I feel sad I cannot come again. Dr. Passi is so kind to us. And after this baby, my own three children will be safe for the rest of their lives” (95).

Surrogates who help the other women to become mother is a kind of precious gift which they adore throughout life. In every country there is a child of India which becomes the transnational surrogacy as mostly couples prefer Indian mothers because they are more fertile and easily accessible for the client parents. Sharmila Rudrappa in *Discounted Life The Price of Global Surrogacy in India* (2015) examines that Surrogacy is the happiness filled in the life of couples who really needs the child. She discusses various cases of surrogates who have a great

bound with the intended parents, inspite signing the procedure that after the child birth there will be no contact of the mother with the child and their parents to avoid the further complexities.

“Adrinne Arieff, a thirty-six-year-old marketing specialist in San Francisco and author of a book on surrogacy, says that when she first met her Gujarati surrogate mother, Vaina, who birthed twins for her, Arieff wanted them to operate as social equals engaging in a business transaction. But when she returned for the delivery of the twins, the business relationship transitioned into something more. She says we’d do things like braid each other’s hair, do each other’s makeup. We don’t speak the same language so the relationship was based on these basic human principles and exchanges” (143).

The human everywhere loves their children and when they are unable to carry due to medical problems then they can be helped through surrogacy. But the woman who becomes surrogate by choice was never her choice as circumstances helps her to be numb. Sayal says through her novel that again and again women are being exploited. “Come on, we both know this is fundamentally wrong. This is no different to the old crones who cut off girl’s 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 other women!” (296). In the name of helping and being helped the bodies are suffering which can useful to other works. The numbness of the women’s body sometimes never realizes its own functioning and when awaken self realizes the body as the part everything ends. Even Jean-Paul Sartre in *Letre et le neant*(1943) elucidates that the opportunity when overused can be resulted in the worse effects.

“Something different happens when we humanity as whole. When we say: enough is enough, I don’t want to play games, I don’t want to hide, I am not a whore, I am not a Virgin Mary either, I am a person, and I have the right to feel. I am not either/or, I am both-and. I have a right to the children I give birth to. I don’t need to go and meet up with men I don’t like. My body is alive and I am going to listen its signals. It is not my possession, it is not an object for me to use-it is my opportunity to be in the world. Our legs are not first and foremost ‘things’; they give us opportunity to walk. Our eyes are first for seeing and only second for being looked at” (344).

The process of surrogacy which is second and cannot claim the child which she herself gives birth to as she being paid for that but the question is how the emotion and feeling can be commercialized? The wound of the separation of a child from the mother cannot be healed. We own the property inside the surrogate's body for the growth of the child and then after paying the amount the relation ends.

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