

The Redefined Stature of Motherhood

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Abstract: The 21st century, as an age of knowledge or technology is in absolute contrast with the advancements toward human reconciliation and harmony, particularly towards the treatment of women and their generative powers. Though the elements like Earth, Nature, Nations, and Rivers are personified as Mothers, the very nature of motherhood is commercialized with the scientific advents. The study attempts to analyze the various forms of exploitation of impoverished women in the process of recreating motherhood in the contemporary world. The paper explores the rich versus poor business on the name of altruism that is spread into selling eggs, embryos and breast milk. Obviously, this commercialization of motherhood is more prevalent in many poor and under developed nations. The much considered ‘divinity’ has been transformed into many forms of trade, often ignoring the medical, legal, social and ethical aspects. The classic stature of woman is redefined by her fertile features in this digital age.

Keywords: Commercialization, Motherhood, surrogacy, liquid gold.

INTRODUCTION

The progress of a society is often measured by its social, moral and spiritual standards and the respect it gives to its women. Many civilizations in the world honor woman for her natural generative features and also consider nature and earth as the mother.

The personification primarily glorifies women’s sexuality and their nurturing powers. Various scholars have studied the logic and ideology of female personification and its historical or literary dimension attributing mainly to its generative capabilities. Though, there are some different and even conflicting views on personifications, most of the prophets refer countries to feminine as mothers, goddesses and maidens. The references to national symbols mostly include classic examples of Roman Empire taken from Latin.

For instance, ‘Terra firma’, a Latin word means earth, or solid ground which is considered feminine. Therefore, because of its Latin origin, and also due to rich and fertile earth that is a natural source of food, the planet is known as Mother Earth. The most common personification of nation is a maternal or goddess figure, like Mother Albania, Mother Armenia, Italia Turrata for Italy, Bharat Matha (Mother India), Ibu Pertiwi (English: Mother Earth) represents to Indonesia. And, some countries have symbols of the magnificent wisdom and war goddesses like Minerva, Athena, Marianne, and the Statue of Liberty. For example Columbia represents to USA, Britannia to Britain, Germania to Germany, the Virgin of Guadalupe refers to Mexico, Polonia to Poland, Zealandia to New Zealand, The Effigy of the Republic represents Brazil

and its group of South American nations and the Maiden of Finland is the national personification of Finland [1]. The list goes endless! Therefore, most of the nations are viewed as organic, rich fertile lands with water and energy, encompassing a feminine body and spirit.

While the nations are personified and respected as mothers, the modern age, along with its scientific inventions changes the very nature of motherhood. The 21st century can be proudly called as age of knowledge or technology or digital age. But, the technological growth is in contrast with the advancements toward human reconciliation and harmony, particularly in the treatment of generative powers of women. There is a saying from the previous century about the human qualities - “Now that we have learned to fly the air like birds, swim under water like fish, we lack one thing—to learn to live on earth as human beings”, by the famous playwright George Bernard Shaw. Sadly, human beings have to be reminded of human qualities especially while treating women and the motherhood, the very source of life gets exploited more than the nature or earth. Ridiculously, there are various international summits concerning to protect Mother Earth, but not on Motherhood and its stature. As ages passed by, it is now witnessed a

worsened condition of motherhood not only in India, but across the world. In this backdrop, the paper focuses on the exploitation of motherhood around the globe.

The technological advancements promote surrogacy, Assistive reproductive technology that is primarily supporting infertility treatments and fertile couple's genetic disorders. It is also helpful for couples who have certain contagious infections and diseases like HIV, hepatitis, tuberculosis etc. to reduce the risk of infection when a pregnancy is desired. The scientific advances are so enormous that have enabled pregnancy even in 'transgender men'. Genetically modified human embryos, Gene editing and 'designer babies' [2], as desired by the couples are some of this century's achievements.

On the other side, numerous women who are 'natural mothers' throughout the world suffer from poverty. Their motherhood is at stake and their stories are considered very routine and no one pay any attention as compared to the stories of delivery of a transgender man. Consequently, the technological adverts paved a way to transform natural mothers into 'altruistic mothers'. The natural generative powers of these women are exploited, imported and exported not only in the form of surrogacy and Assistive reproduction, but also in the form of 'eggs, embryos and mother's milk'. Obviously, this commercialization of motherhood is more prevalent in many poor and under developed nations. However, many times it is a rich versus poor business on the name of altruism.

Among the many societies in the world, it is said that the most venerating regard for the status of mother has been found in Indian Vedic culture. The Vedic tradition has held a high regard and treated mother as a supreme form of Guru. It is also acknowledged by Bhishma Pitamaha, who says, "There is no greater guru than mother", in Mahabharata, Shantiparva, 30.9. Ironically, this very nation has become a reproductive tourist destination till the recent years, since India allows commercial surrogacy by law. Every year, a good number of infertile couples visit India which has become one of the most sought-after tourist destinations for surrogacy-related fertility and international surrogacy. It is basically due to low costs in India, the childless couples from western countries choose Indian surrogates. An international non-profit surrogacy organization, "Families through surrogacy" has projected an average costs in various countries. The cost includes fertilization procedure, hospital bills, the fee of the surrogate, delivery and other medical expenses. The estimated cost is \$100,000 in the USA, \$52,000 in Thailand, \$49,950 Ukraine, \$49,950, Georgia and in India it is \$47,350 [3]. No wonder, India to be opted by many westerners due to the low costs. However, in October 2015 Government of India banned clinics from surrogacy arrangements for foreigners, to

check unethical practices. But there are several groups fighting against government's order in the courts.

Thomson Reuters Foundation, in April 2017 estimates that India's commercial surrogacy, as an industry is worth as much as \$3.7 billion per annum. It also warned that India's "proposed law to regulate the commercialization of surrogacy industry and to control the exploitation of impoverished Indian women will result in more foreign women being trafficked into the country to rent out their wombs" [4]. The much discussed bill is to ban commercial surrogacy allows infertile Indian couples to "altruistic" surrogacy, where the surrogate must be a relative to the couple and should not accept money in return. However, the bill is not yet cleared in the Indian parliament.

However, some argue that surrogacy in India, finds its way back to 'Mahabharat' age, where Gandhari is said to be used Assistive reproductive technology to get 101 Kauravas. There are many cases found in Indian mythology, stating that surrogacy existed in ancient times. Further, it is socially accepted and well respected. Recently, the medical journal of Gynecological Endocrinology publishes the research findings of the first infertility diagnosis made 4000 years ago. An ancient Assyrian clay tablet discovered by Turkish researchers is now on display at the Istanbul Archaeology Museum. The clay tablet contains prenuptial agreements in a script that discusses infertility and a solution for it [5]. The scripture states that if the Assyrian couple fails to conceive a baby two years after the marriage, the wife can allow her husband to hire a female slave, to serve as a surrogate. Later the female slave will be freed after delivering the first male baby. Sadly, not only surrogacy, but also the desire for a 'male' child exists 4000years ago!

Pinki Virani, who has spent a decade on her research on the 'baby factories' and the author of "Politics Of The Womb – The Perils of IVF, Surrogacy and Modified Babies", says the bill "In its current form, if passed as law, India's surrogacy bill could exacerbate human trafficking." Despite the law and other regulations, some Indian women, mostly from North East, are now rushing to Indian clinics for their final chance to be a surrogate mother and to make around \$6000 i.e. approximately Rs.4lakhs [6].

However, there is no strong institution or establishment in India and in many other countries to take care of the aftermath conditions of these surrogates after delivering the 'goods'. Further, most of the 'natural and altruistic mothers' do not know that there are many risks of deadly diseases, deformities and disorders. The IVF centers play all sorts of schemes and programs to attract patients only to make money. They only advertise their success rate, never the risks involved. Neither the perils in process nor the unfortunate cases are revealed. Further, the medical

boards maintain secrecy on misbehaving doctors. The victims get little help from consumer protections and the surrogates who are not aware of the hidden risks can be easily fooled [7]. In a country like India, no wonder that women least know about medical and legal aspects of entire process since the surrogates are mostly impoverished and uneducated. Further, the patriarchal society though allows surrogacy in greed of money, always hides what is done to the surrogate mother and her turmoil is unheard. There can be added form of violence to make her silent, in most cases. Thus the final outcome in the condition of a surrogate is physically, psychologically and emotionally drained. In such cases, the same IVF centers or hospitals have to be made accountable for the health condition of surrogate mothers by the States.

In this context, it is worth to be reminded of Barbara Katz Rothman's words, a Professor of Sociology at the City University of New York, who says, "Birth is not only about making babies. Birth is about making mothers: strong, competent, capable mothers who trust themselves and know their inner strength". Rothman's work encompasses child birth, bio ethics, the new genetics, reproductive technologies, issues in disability, adoption, midwifery etc. In her award winning book "Recreating Motherhood", she demonstrates the impact of the new reproductive technologies on the institution of the family with real examples. She examines the medical, legal, and ethical aspects of current medical advances and pros and cons of it.

Another form of exploitation is making poor and vulnerable mothers to sell their milk. It is exposed

that a company called Ambrosia, installed a shop near the capital of Cambodia and started business by "milking money", collected from local women. Ambrosia has paid \$0.50 per ounce to the Cambodian mothers and sold the milk for eight times of it in the USA. However, in March 2017, Cambodia banned the practice which encouraged many poor mothers to sell their breast milk. However, some countries run milk banks, where women who have excessive milk can donate their milk to needy babies [8]. Through websites, private, online networks and black markets breast milk is sold and considered as "liquid gold" despite their country's restrictions.

The Daily Mail illustrates the prevalence of the white gold's sales, in February 2017. It exposes that the mother's milk is sold at \$200 to \$500 per liter in Australia. Ironically the consumers are not only babies, but also cancer patients, fetish men and elite athletes! The Daily Mail says, that a mother reportedly rejects when a fetish man "wanted her to sit in his house with her breasts out to pump for him, she said it was a really uncomfortable situation, and these guys will pay anything for the milk" [9]. The news reveals the fact that selling breast milk is not legal in Australia, but there are many secret online groups through which the 'white gold' is marketed.

There is no wonder when the poor women try to sell their milk, naturally there will be number of buyers. The pictures below are taken from local newspapers that reflect the sympathetic condition of Indian women.



Fig-1: (source: Eenadu, Telugunewspaper, Vijayawada edition, 9 March 2017)

The newspaper reports a real story of the poor woman on the very next day of Women's Day, i.e. on March 8th!

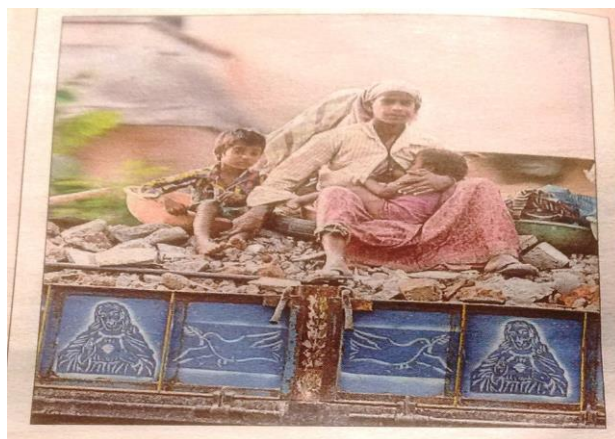


Fig-2: (Source: Eenadu, Telugu newspaper, Vijayawada edition, 15March2017)
The above pictures show the pathetic conditions of women and their struggle for survival.



Fig-3: (Source: Deccan Chronicle, Hyderabad edition, 11May2017)

The above picture shows the member of Australian Parliament, Larissa Waters who is the first politician to breastfeed in the parliament. The news is at once sensational and gone viral when Ms. Waters is feeding her two-month-old daughter Alia Joy. However, she describes it all silly, saying “It’s frankly ridiculous, really, that feeding one’s baby is international news. Women have been breastfeeding for as long as time immemorial.” In 2009, the same Australian Parliament has forced another MP- Sarah Hanson-Young, to remove her two-year-old child from the chamber, an incident described as “humiliating”. Eventually, the Parliament has changed its rules and allowed mothers to breastfeed in the chamber [10]. Significantly, the struggle for survival of the poor women in the above pic 1 and 2 can be compared to the Australian woman in pic-3. This is obviously related to the ‘power’ of women who can change the fate as well. It is also noted that the same Australia has breast milk sale in blackmarket! The natural compassion in mothers allow to share their breast milk as in the case of Hao Lina, a Chinese police officer who has touched the hearts of many after breastfeeding the four-month-old baby of a suspect [11]. The police officer nurtures the baby while the infant’s mother is undergoing a trial and her baby is left crying!

To conclude, in countries like India, women suffer from poverty, malnutrition, maternal mortality, female infanticide, divorce, ill treatment, lack of education and power. Though, the governments are striving to empower women through education and self-reliance, some people try to empower themselves by commercializing motherhood. The classic divine stature of woman is redefined by her fertile features in this digital age. To any woman, it is one of the most life challenging decisions to be a surrogate. It is not only carrying somebody’s child, which is an emotionally taxing process, but also comes along with all the risks and trials of a natural pregnancy and complications from social, legal and IVF contracts. Altruism is invited only when the States and hospitals ensure surrogates and babies to remain hale and healthy in post-delivery phase. Both men and women have to be sensitized, especially on pregnancy related matters and everybody in the family has to be supportive of the women. The motherhood will be in crisis if circumstances force mothers into performing hardships as seen in pictures. Further, women cannot be forced into sacrificing their natural generative powers on the name of ‘altruistic donation of milk or eggs’ without complete understanding of the entire process. Facilitating such methods is appreciated when the entire resources are invested only in making of ‘strong,

competent, capable mothers who know their inner strength’.

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