



Contents lists available <http://www.kinnaird.edu.pk/>

**Journal of Research & Reviews in Social Sciences Pakistan**

Journal homepage: <http://journal.kinnaird.edu.pk>



## **SURROGACY: AN EXPLOITATION OR LIBERATION OF WOMEN? An ANALYSIS OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

Sumaira Majeed<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kinnaird College for Women Lahore, Pakistan.

### **Article Info**

\*Corresponding Author

Tel: +92 333 8201248

Email Id: numliansumei@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This study examines the hardships associated with surrogacy in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. This research aims at the hardships of surrogacy in the light of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale* is the story of life in the dystopia of Gilead, a totalitarian society in which was formerly the United States. Facing environmental disasters and a plunging birth rate, Gilead is ruled by a twisted fundamentalism in its militarized "return to traditional values." As one of the few remaining fertile women, Offred (Elisabeth Moss) is a Handmaid in the Commander's household, one of the caste of women forced into sexual servitude as a last desperate attempt to repopulate the world. In this terrifying society, Offred must navigate between Commanders, their cruel Wives, domestic Marthas, and her fellow Handmaids--where anyone could be a spy for Gilead--all with one goal: to survive and find the daughter that was taken from her. This research paper uses a feminist theoretical lens and investigates the exploitation of one female by the other female(s). The division between the radical-liberation feminists and radical-cultural feminists are keenly looked upon being one school condemning even child birth and other school being its admirer. The study looks at the social place of an individual in the society. Qualitative research is the method used to examine and the famous TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* which is analyzed in the light of surrogacy. In other words, the question could be asked if surrogacy is an exploitation or liberation for women. Thus, it is obvious from the work of Margaret Atwood's that surrogacy is a kind of liberation for the upper strata of the society while it is a new kind of exploitation for the lower class in the society.

### **Keywords**

Surrogacy, Exploitation, Totalitarian, Feminism, Servitude.

@Kinnaird College for Women. All rights reserved.

## 1.INTRODUCTION:

*The Handmaid's Tale*, a new TV series, by Hulu productions, has brought the surrogacy back in limelight. The Hulu show, based on the cautionary novel of the same name by Margaret Atwood, follows Offred, a woman who is isolated and confined for the sole purpose of bearing children for the people who keep her. This is fate for all the handmaids in the fictitious Republic of Gilead, where their value depends on the viability of their ovaries. Women have no other purpose on this earth. The series challenges the notion about females as mere breeders. The mere purpose of (a) woman is to give birth to babies hence in which ever condition they are residing, Janine one of the character(s) in the series gets punished for being rude and gets her eye scorched. It is assumed that the handmaids do not need complete body part as they only have a reproductive function to perform. Atwood talks about the theocratic totalitarian State governed by a Protestant Evangelical sect where rape is ritualised as a religious ceremony, babies with disabilities are nicknamed "shredders" because they are subjected to euthanasia, torture is a daily occurrence and women are not even permitted to read. If a surrogate is raped by another individual it is considered as a sin and he is beaten to death but the commander has the license to rape the handmaid. Holy references such as Bilah and Rachel are given to institutionalize the rape.

Surrogacy — a process where a surrogate (or gestational mother) carries a pregnancy for someone else often in exchange for money — is an important option for many who cannot become parents. This includes people dealing with infertility and other health problems that affect the ability to get pregnant and those facing legal barriers to parenting due to their sexual orientation and marital status. Yet the practice often raises complicated ethical questions, regardless of whether arrangements are between gestational mothers and intended parents living in the same country or in different countries. The reasons may vary country to country such as being religious, economic and health etc. The intended parents pay to the complete strangers in other countries to carry and give birth to the

children. Now this kind of birth gives rise to many issues. Surrogacy has become a new trend for the exploitation of the women. Surrogate mothers are often not paid on time and in some cases they are not paid according to the contract. Even if they are paid it is the male member of the family who seizes all the money from them and spends it the way he desires. Women are not only exploited mentally and physically but as well as financially. Exploitation stemming from surrogacy in underdeveloped countries like India is worth noting as it leads to poverty. The cost and benefit analysis portrays that the cost of surrogacy is incalculable. A country which is developing like Thailand and India has to face a plethora of cost, giving rise to ethical and financial issues. A country having corruption on massive scale and inefficient law enforcement has less chances to prosper and give their people a better future. In order to alleviate from poverty people engage themselves in the acts of prostitution and surrogacy. Women are just a mode of production for this patriarchal world. (Manjari & Kare)

Surrogacy is of two types—Gestational Surrogacy and Traditional Surrogacy. The implanted embryo is created with eggs and sperm from the intended parents or donors and this form is known as Gestational surrogacy and traditional surrogacy, where the embryo is created from the gestational mother's eggs.

## 2.Literature Review:

Children are among the best gifts given by God for married couples. Babies could be regarded as the fulfillment of the aspiration of complete married couple, and children even in some of the cases become a reason for the survival of the female member. Having no children becomes a problem for females and in many cases they have to give up their marriages. The development in medical science has increased social awareness and acceptance have made it easy for the infertile couples to have their own babies. But this conception has brought many problems with it. The number of surrogate mothers is increasing and countries like India are becoming a major centre for surrogacy due to

availability of surrogate mothers and legal flexibility. (Womb on Rent, 2018)

Technological breakthroughs in science and medicine have reintroduced the ancient practice of surrogate motherhood into the modern age. The Bible speaks of barren women being provided with sons by surrogate mothers. Abraham's wife, Sarah, said to her husband, "Behold now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go into my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. Similarly, Rachel, the barren wife of Jacob, said to her husband, "Behold my maid Bilah, go into her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." Today, the procedure is less personal than in Biblical times, but the objective, impregnation of a surrogate to bear a child for the natural father and his wife rather than for herself, has not changed. (Morano, 2016)

Abby Brandel in one of his articles named as "Legislating Surrogacy: A Partial Answer to Feminist Criticism" illustrates that the state should prohibit the surrogacy because it destroys and degrades the society as a whole. Surrogacy is a polarized power struggle between women and women, males and females. The feminist criticism on surrogacy states that surrogacy is a kind of prostitution and slavery. Some observe surrogacy as a personal freedom of women on their reproduction ability. Others view surrogacy as a kind of conspiracy of males to oppress the women and control their bodies and reproduction. Although feminist criticism is not monolithic, the rationales fall into two related, general categories: the symbolic harm to society and the potential harm to individual surrogates. (Abby, 1995)

Lawrence O.Gostin a leading law and economics expert in one of his articles, "Surrogacy from the Perspectives of Economic and Civil Liberties" discusses, Joseph Posner another economist who views surrogacy as a liberation. Both the parties negotiate on the issues of money. In some cases of surrogacy there is a proper bargaining about the money. Gostin focuses on civil liberties rather than the economic liberties and thinks that surrogacy should not be banned or prohibited. Gostin favours the personal liberty rather than the economic liberty. He argues that the nation should not interfere in these matters it is entirely the decision of a couple. Surrogacy is

a process of personal will rather than being a national affair. Some of the countries ban the contracts of surrogacy. States such as Columbia and Arizona ban surrogacy contracts. Florida, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia ban payments to the surrogates but they allow the payment of expenses. In Arizona, North Dakota and Utah, the surrogates and her husband are the legal parents. In Illinois, unless the child is genetically that of the contractual couple, the surrogate and her husband are presumed to be the legal parents. Illinois law also allows the contracting couple's name to be placed on the birth certificate. (Gostin, 1999)

Stephen Wilkinson in his article "Exploitation in International Paid Surrogacy Arrangements" states about surrogacy as a type of exploitation for both the parties i.e. (that is) the gestational mother and the barren mother. The agency involved in this process often charges more from such barren parents and pay less to the gestational mothers. And in some of the cases the gestational mothers exploit the barren parents by pretending a fake miscarriage. Such disputes, between the surrogates and the commissioning couples become a serious issue, sometimes and receive a great publicity. Paid surrogacy becomes another medium of exploitation. (Stephen, 2016).

### 3. Research Methodology:

The study investigates a TV series from the feminist lens by comparing the views of both the radical liberation feminists and radical cultural feminists. Radical-cultural feminists critique that reproduction is the only trump card women have to gain power. If men create technology that voids the need for women to bare children, then women's oppression will not be reduced, but become more explicit and worse for them. Atwood counters Piercy's utopia with the anti-utopia seen in *A Handmaid's Tale*. Radical-cultural feminists are against the advancement of reproductive technologies. They are for biological motherhood, critiquing radical libertarians for disregarding what the experience motherhood could be, if it were not shaped and molded by patriarchy. They are against gestational motherhood, stating it commodifies the process of giving birth. (Tong)

Radical-libertarian feminist are for reproductive technological advances. Furthermore, radical-libertarians argue that women do not need to be biological mothers, that the idea of women as nurturers is a social construct. Women who would not, if left to their own devices, choose to be mothers are pressured socially to be mothers. They are for gestational mothers, women who bare embryos for other couples, because they see this as people sharing and spreading out the difficulty of raising children, rather than leaving it all on the genetic mother of the child. radical-libertarian feminist are for reproductive technological advances. It is a qualitative research and different events would be discussed of the season which strengthens the concept of surrogacy as a mode of exploitation. The season would be analyzed in the feminist lens concluding whether surrogacy is a mode of exploitation.(Tong)

#### 4.Analysis:s

Margret Atwood wrote the novel, *The Handmaid Tale* in 1985 and it addresses the issues of female reproduction and exploitation. But at that time this seemed as an uncanny echo of contemporary issues. Atwood talked about a state known as the Republic of Gilead where the tyrannical leaders subjugated women and devoid them of their rights. Tyranny and oppression was very common. Rich people exploit the poor ones on the basis of fertility. Poor women who are still fertile are put into sexual servitude as "handmaid" who have to give birth to child(ren) for the upper class. In this state the birth rate decreased to a drastic level and poor women are caught for this service. There were no laws for the women and exploitation was quite common. Offred, the protagonist in the play tried to fly away with her husband and daughter was abducted. Her husband was killed and her daughter was taken away and offred had to pay his servitude to the master. A woman has no right to own her own family if she was poor. Had Offred been a wife of a rich person like the commanders wife she would not have to undergo through this turmoil. Offred had to sacrifice her own family for the sake of making (a) family for the rich strata. The play starts with Offred wearing a white bonnet covering her hair and a red gown. This

dress clearly depicts that she was ready to obey the rules made for the handmaid. Offred murmurs at one point in the series "Praise be", and shows a placid face to the powerful people. Phrases such as "Under his eyes, praise be," are used again and again by Offred in the season to depict the servitude behaviour of Offred and other handmaid. Had she not shown a placid face she would have been in more trouble. But in the series she bluntly speaks out what she was really thinking about, she hopes to meet her daughter one day and she still thinks herself as the independent woman who is being controlled by mad and fanatic powerful people. Offred often thinks about the good times spent with the family, hence, the director has successfully juxtaposed the flashbacks of Offred's past with her current conditions. For example, in Season 1 Episode 2, Janine gives birth to a baby girl named Angela who after the birth no more belongs to Janine. The Commander's wife held the baby in her arms and starts caressing her. Janine looks at her in an anger who being the mother of the child is not given the right of holding her baby even once. Women have no position and existence in such Gilead Republic. For, example, Offred watches one of the Marthas in the kitchen working with the starch for making bread – Marthas, older female servants who can no longer bear children are used as the servants in the home. The series gives an overview of three kinds of women. First are the kind of women who are at the higher rank known as surrogates(.) (The) second being the Marthas who have a sole purpose of working in the home. Women who are very rude and rebel against the authorities are sent to the colonies where they clear the waste and toxins. The weather conditions are too harsh in the colonies and the skin of the body sheds off. Women are assumed as a commodity whose mere purpose in this world is to serve the male members of the society. (Reed, 2016)

"That's the kind of thing they like, A return to traditional values." (Reed, 2016)

When a woman is no more fertile she is cornered by the society and all of her life is spent in the traditions roles-cooking, washing and rearing up a family. A female even when old has no life of her own. Her supreme duties are to the family. She was born into the

world for the mere purpose of servitude. Is not this a worse form of exploitation to a living being?

Exploitation could be of multiple types but *The Handmaid Tale* clearly depicts that female had no choice over their reproductive ability. Either it is the property of the male member or the property of the rich class. Women are enslaved breeders. The series, created by Bruce Miller (was) based on the 1985 novel by Margaret Atwood, is full of similar dialogue and imagery. In the new dystopian society, women are enslaved and categorized into groups: Wives, housekeepers and breeders known

as "handmaids." Offred is repeatedly raped by Commander Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) in an attempt to conceive a child for him and wife Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski). He is hit by the crisis of infertility that helped the new government gain power. Hence a woman has no choice to raise a child. The desire of women doesn't matter at all. Surrogacy could be a liberation for the upper strata of the society where they are able to enjoy the pleasures of a complete and happy life but the hardships through which a poor woman has to undergo is exploitative. Moss's (Offred's) makeup-less face is a mask of submission and deference as Offred navigates her tenuous place in the new society. There is no joy and happiness on her face. An affecting voice-over underlines the internal

struggles she goes through every second in her role as "a womb with two legs." The blessing to reproduce becomes a manoeuvre for the exploitation. Handmaid are throughout the series dressed in red gowns whereas the upper-class wives are wearing the shades of blue. There is a stark symbolism in the whole series which shows the exploitation of the rich class by the lower class. The situation is made worse as the females are being oppressed by the other females. For example the wife of the commander warns Offred never to meet the commander alone. She is very brutal and warned Offred, to never give her tough time. *The Handmaid's Tale* is something unique, with an adult take on the dystopian genre and a somber and relevant story about the lives and fears of women. (Reed, 2016)

Surrogacy in many cases can turn out to be the liberation for many females. Financial stability can be procured by giving birth for the infertile

parents. In this series it is clearly evident that surrogacy is not a liberation for the females rather a worse form of exploitation. The forced reproduction cannot be a liberation. It may be a liberation for the upper strata but the way poor class is oppressed is hard to imagine.

Surrogacy is termed as a type of prostitution by many people. Mary Wamock cites a similar objection, supposedly expressed by a doctor: surrogacy is described as 'a form of exploitation similar to prostitution'. (M, 1985). (Include surname) Andrea Dworkin, the well-known American feminist, states that: '[m]otherhood is becoming a new branch of female prostitution with the help of scientists who want access to the womb for experimentation and power .... Women can sell reproductive capacities the same way old-time prostitutes sold sexual ones but without the stigma of whoring because there is no penile intrusion. It is the womb, not the vagina, that is being bought. The commanders whom the surrogates serve even not dare to touch them. A specific distance is maintained by them. It is a penile intrusion without the involvement of any emotion. (A, 1983) (Include surname) Prokopijevic notices the following: 'In both cases one's physical service is being offered, in both instances a deep personal or emotional relationship is not required for the transaction to be completed, in both cases material compensation is offered for the physical services provided. And in this case, *The Handmaid Tale*, there is no compensation at all rather it is a worse form of slavery. (M P, 1990) (Include surname) The above statements could be easily related to Offred as no one cared for the personal or emotional relationship. Women are being exploited for their ability to reproduce without their consent. Many events in the season depict the fatal process of surrogacy being institutionalized and naturalized. For example all the women in episode 1 gather in a hall where they are given a presentation on the process of surrogacy and about the benefits of this process. It is highly not able that such women are called as the "Lucky ones" who have been picked up by the GOD to serve mankind. They are the blessed ones who would serve the barren husbands and wives. Women are brain washed for their own benefits. *The Handmaid Tale* is a series which depicts the hypocrisy of the Gilead Republic. The commanders rape the

handsmaid everyday but if an ordinary person rapes the handsmaid it is considered as a sin and he is beaten to death. The season challenges the notion of hypocrisy which is a dominant feature in Gilead Republic (Morano, 2016)

Offred is always thinking about her past and tries to link the present events with the past when she was happy and contented. Offred works as a chief editor for an agency where she edits the travelogues and articles. Offred is a successful and responsible working woman. If we keep in mind the cost and benefit analysis it can be clearly observed that Offred is no more a productive figure of the society. Her mere purpose is now the servitude towards the higher authorities. She goes to the market everyday for buying household stuff for the family. She serves the commander and her wife. She is not allowed to read or to wear any colours and her life is very marginalized. Surrogacy is dangerous for the society as a responsible individual is no more worthy for the society. She is adding nothing to the financial benefits of the country rather she has become a burden on the economy of the developing countries.

#### 5. Conclusion:

Surrogacy in most of the cases is (a) worse form of exploitation. Moral and physical needs of a woman are not catered at all. She is an enslaved breeder. If a woman doesn't have an ability to reproduce it is assumed that her hardships could be rendered. Radical-libertarian feminists believe that the root of all female oppression lies in women's ability to bare children. If the children are produced in artificial brooders women could be free of such exploitation. They favour the technological advances in reproduction. *The Handmaid tale* negates this concept and criticizes that reproduction is not a token of freedom for women rather it has become a shackle for the female. Reproductive females have to bear children for the barren wives of the commander and fulfil the needs of the commanders. Reproduction becomes a source of slavery for the surrogates.

Whereas Radical-cultural feminists critique these ideas, stating that reproduction is the only trump card women have to gain power. If men create technology that voids the need for

women to bare children, then women's oppression will not be reduced, but become more explicit and worse for them. Martha's the women who have grown old and cannot reproduce have to work all day in kitchens. Women who cannot reproduce are not free from this oppression rather they face worse circumstances. Some of the women are sent in the colonies where they are supposed to clean the toxic materials.

Women have to rise up for their rights and launch campaigns against this patriarchal as well as split up society between haves and have not. Otherwise this oppression would continue.

#### References

- A, D. (1983). Right-wing women: the politics of domesticated females. *The Women's Press*, 4-10.
- Abby, B. (1995). Legislating Surrogacy: A Partial Answer to Feminist Criticism. *Maryland Law Review*, 488-491.
- Gostin, L. O. (1999). Surrogacy from the Perspectives of Economic and Civil Liberties. *Georgetown University Law Center*, 429-431.
- M, P. (1990). Surrogate Motherhood. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 169-181.
- M, W. (1985). *A question of life: The Warnock report on human fertilization and embryology*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Manjari, R., & Kare, P. (n.d.). Why Ban Commercial Surrogacy? *Journal of Legal Studies and Research [VOL.2 ISSUE 4]*, 46-49.
- Morano, R. (Director). (2016). *The Handmaid Tale* [Motion Picture].
- Reed, M. (Director). (2016). *The Handmaid Tale* [Motion Picture].
- Stephen, W. (2016). Exploitation in International Paid Surrogacy Arrangements. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 4-10.
- Womb on Rent*. (2018, April Monday). Retrieved from Opera: [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=womb+on+rent](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=womb+on+rent)