



# Powerful Or Powerless: Representation Of Surrogates In Selected Bollywood

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**Abstract:** The obsession of society with reproduction is undeniable. Infertility halts its very basis. Therefore, many social measures and medical interventions have been employed to cure this issue. Surrogacy has been an effective recourse, with assisted reproductive technologies at its forefront presently. This paper studies different forms of commercial surrogacy, associated issues, produced dilemmas and their representation in selected popular media. It, also, examines the implications of substituting an altruistic act to a commercial one. Through a critical analysis of the selected Bollywood films (*Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* and *Mimi*), the paper aims at exploring the multifaceted landscape of surrogacy across decades, un-supported by varied legislative frameworks, within the Indian state.

**Keywords:** Motherhood Studies, Film Studies, Surrogate Motherhood, Commercial Surrogacy, Bollywood

## INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, Surrogacy stems from the Latin word “Surrogatus”; meaning “put in another's place” or “to substitute”. Conventionally or traditionally, it was enacted by inseminating the surrogate with the intended father's sperm; either naturally or surgically through intrauterine insemination (IUI). It is to be noted that in this case, the surrogate remains the biological mother of the child. The intended mother post-delivery legally acquires the status of the mother of the child. With further scientific exploration and innovations, a new method was conceived referred to as gestational surrogacy. This method is based on an assisted reproductive technology (ART) which uses in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) as a means to get the surrogate pregnant. Here, the intended parents remain the biological father and mother of the child, and the surrogate only contributes in nurturing the already formed egg. This method also, “highlights the disaggregation of the concept of motherhood into a series of biological, genetic, embodied, and social processes” (Harrison 26). The types of surrogacy is also differentiated on the basis of the motivation behind the same: the first, known as altruistic surrogacy, is fueled by a personal/ethical/moral responsibility and is a mere act of service. The second type, called commercial surrogacy, locates the two parties (the intended parents and the surrogate) involved in a financial transaction. The growth of commercial surrogacy has made it a multi-billion dollar industry connecting different nations, castes, and genders. The relatively favorable economic, biological, social and legal notions related to India made it one of the leading hotspots of commercial surrogacy.

Films have long been used as medium to provide an experience of either lived or imagined reality to disseminate preferred ideologies or foster impactful public discussions (Allen 1993, Fiske 1999 [1987]). The inseparability of the Indians and Cinema is reflected through the social impact and cultural influence movies have on audiences' basic perspective and attitudes; with effect ranging over pivotal issues (like educational system through *3 Idiots* or feeling of nationalism provoked by *Uri, Rang De Basanti* etc.) to trivial topics (common hairstyle; as seen post-release of Salman Khan's look in *Tere Naam*). While motherhood has been a major theme in Indian films, surrogacy was introduced as subject only in 1980s. The evolution of surrogacy in real life has been paced with its cinematic representation. The importance, the issues, the complexities associated with surrogacy in the films have widened overtime to

provide an inclusive and multilayered expanse. This paper analyses two films with diverse perspectives based on similar context.

The first selected film, *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke (CCCC)* or *Stealthily and Silently*—released one year prior to the regularisation/legalisation of commercial surrogacy i.e. in 2001—revolves around three main characters Raj (played by Salman Khan) and Priya (acted by Rani Mukherjee) the intended parents and Preity Zinta as Madhubala; the surrogate. The newly married couple Raj and Priya face a miscarriage post which Priya loses her ability to get pregnant. The familial expectation of providing an heir motivates them to experiment with other methods to attain parenthood. They excitedly opt for a traditional method of commercial surrogacy (compensating Madhu with a sum of Rs.10 Lakhs), however not everything unfolds smoothly. Filled with certain complications the film addresses issues of infertility, commercialisation of body, unregulated surrogate market, emotional attachment of the surrogate with the child and family, and the question of kinship.

The other film was released a year prior to the ban of commercial surrogacy in India (through Surrogacy Regulation Act of 2021, in force from January 2022) due to its exploitative nature. A Hindi adaptation of the National Award Winning Marathi film *Mala Aai Vhhaychy* ("I want to be a mother"), *Mimi* (2021) is a film based upon trans-racial/national gestational surrogacy; directed and co-written by Laxman Utekar. Kirti Sanon, in and as Mimi, portrays the role of a 25-year-old show performer/ dancer who is approached by Bhanu Pratap Pandey (a driver) to be a surrogate to John and Summer, an American couple who are unable to conceive a child. Mimi's dreams and ambitions to make it big in films pushes her to accept this nine-month role in lieu of Rs. 20 Lakhs. The unforeseen turns and twists, hereon, leads Mimi to a position where she is either has to abort the child (as suggested by John and Summer) or nurture him herself; as the tests indicate the possibility of the child having down syndrome. She continues with her pregnancy and births Raj, a white-baby boy with no genetic defaults. The American couple travel back to India, post coming across the video surfacing on the internet of Mimi and Raj dancing, to claim their right over the child. Mimi is left dejected. Her family, her friend Shama and the driver Bhanu supports her to fight a legal battle; if needed. However, John and summer adopts a brown-baby girl Tara and assures Mimi of being the rightful mother of Raj. The film acts as a representative model of the complexities associated with surrogacy; whether emotional, physical, psychological, social or legal etc.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research involves an interdisciplinary qualitative study of the films as it bridges the theories of motherhood (Lane 2003, Markens 2007, Pande 2010, Bailey 2011, Harrison 2016) with that of cinematic representation and interpretation (Fischer 1996). It, also, uses Fairclough's (2001) critical discourse analysis (CDA) which is further rooted in semiotic analysis (through visual images or body language) of the sources. The paper studies various discourses and thematic concerns rooted within and originating from the motherhood model of surrogacy; such as multilayered consideration of surrogacy as a gift, a site of oppression, a question of kinship and an understanding of the involved power dynamics —by placing the selected films as a foundation of the analysis.

## A GIFT

Each society is based upon the act of procreation. The general understanding of the reproductive process has been based on certain “social rules and expectations, and these norms influence how individuals go about imagining the possibilities for family formation” (Harrison 2). Fairclough, too, states that the “social practices networked in a particular way constitute a social order” (Fairclough 124). Thus, to change a social order the practices need to be tweaked. Infertility has been a huge issue throughout mankind’s existence and it was not until recently that the taboo and secrecy around infertility was laid off. Some forms of infertility that were historically seen as untreatable; can be now be handled through numerous reproductive technologies. ART poses a considerable challenge to traditional/ conventional constructs of family life and identity (Harrison 27).

The introduction of surrogacy, thus, is seen as a gift to: the intended parents, the surrogate, and also to the economy at large. The popularization of surrogacy stems from the biological connection and genetical similarity it provides to the intended parents. In *CCCC*, Raj and Priya deal with an unfortunate accident that snatches away their capability to conceive naturally. However, their own desires and also, the internalized pressure stemming from Raj’s grandfather’s expectation of a grandson pushes them to seek other options to achieve parenthood. Although, they initially think to adopt a child or use IUI, they realize the risk their well-known family name might catch. This, highlights the taboo and the lack of acceptance such models of motherhood had in public during that period. Priya eventually, comes across a magazine publication related to “surrogate mother” and decides to use it for their benefit. They opt for a conventional

surrogacy method as IVF was not that commonly known and used back then. In *Mimi*, too, the intended parents (John and Summer) challenge their adversity with the help of technological advancements to experience their unfulfilled desires as they opt for trans-racial commercial surrogacy through IVF.

The surrogate too benefits from involving herself in such a process. Both the surrogates (Madhubala and Mimi), in the selected films, get monetary compensation for delivering the child. While Madhu requires it for her normal functioning as she has no family whatsoever; Mimi is in dire need of money to not only create a portfolio (professional photographs) but also make it big in movies. Thus, surrogacy not only fulfills the dreams and aspirations of the intended parents but also of the surrogates involved.

The film *Mimi*, is based on transnational surrogacy. The economical ease and exceptional medical infrastructure combined with commercialisation of surrogacy in India in 2002 led to a great influx of concerned parties opting surrogacy; to the country. The “reproductive tourism” (Harrison 13) has been quite advantageous to the Indian economy overall.

Therefore, the transformative role of such a process has indeed benefitted the society on an individual and collective basis (public perceptions and attitudes).

## A SITE OF EXPLOITATION

Whether central to the narrative or not, the cinematic mother has historically been presented as a site of crisis (Fischer 30). Knoppers in the 1999 published article “Commercialisation of Genetic Research and Public Policy” discusses the human genetic material’s journey to commercialisation. The process of commercialisation sprouts out numerous concerns; dilemmas related to the economical, physical, emotional, social, legal, ethical and other exploitation.

The trans-national/racial commercial surrogacy has been debated as site of economic exploitation. The third-world countries; which are medically sound and economically cheaper with inexpensive surrogates in comparison to European or White-dominated countries are subjugated to inappropriate compensation. However, the poor status of the surrogates makes them accept the sum of money to aid their living.

The physiological being of the surrogate is one of the primary concerns of the intended parents. While in traditional surrogacy the superiority of the trinity of heart-mind-body was prioritized, with the evolution of ART the surrogate’s involvement in the baby-making process reduced drastically; thus, only the capability to carry a child was appraised. The character of Madhu, in *CCCC*, has internalized her dehumanization that comes as a cost that her profession (a bar dancer) charges; her body as a commodity. But the respect and familial love she receives from Raj and his family dismantles her thought process. Mimi, however, is not introduced as a dehumanized surrogate. She holds complete agency over her reproductive choice; and confirms her consent to the doctor when inquired. She overturns the exploitative notions of the conventional motherhood to her own benefit and provides an alternative gaze to view the burdens forced by the society. It is only later in the film that she feels exploited when left unattended; and realizes the objectification her womb was subscribed to.

This journey also challenges the surrogates on an emotional level. While they understand the technical part of this contractual obligation, they are hardly ever prepared for the emotional turmoil that the span of nine months might make them experience. Madhu and Mimi both grow attachment to their conceived child at some point in their pregnancy and posit the challenges the physical contact with the child induces.

Social perceptions and acceptance surrounding surrogacy places the surrogate and the intended parents at a tough spot. It is a double-edged sword where the couple is judged not only for their infertility but also for opting surrogacy. The surrogates, too, are looked down upon and subjected to a lot of shame. It makes them hide their pregnancy from family by eloping to a different location (Pande 2010, Bailey 2011). While Raj, Priya and Madhu leave for Switzerland; Mimi, also, decides to temporarily reside at her Muslim friend Shama’s place when she gets pregnant and thus, fabricates a story informing her parents about a film schedule that would last for nine months. The highlights how societal stigmas and judgments presses the engaged parties into isolation/alienation.

The lack of legal aid too puts the surrogate in the hold of exploitative techniques. There is hardly any accountability of the intended parents to fulfil their promises and not trick the educationally and financially challenged surrogate.

While there is no written contractual agreement between Raj and Madhu; Mimi although signs one but is hardly aware of its use at the time of crisis. This issue has caused the initiation of banning commercial surrogacy; which came in force in January 2022.

The commercialization births many ethical issues (Lane 122); involving not only exploitation and dehumanization of surrogates but also, manipulation of fetus (creating designer babies). The bioethical dilemma related to commercial surrogacy is given due importance in *Mimi*. The films explore the implications of discarded pregnancies once the intended parents realize about the potential disabilities that

their child might have post the result of genetic test. It satirically highlights the need of demanding perfection and choices in selection criteria of surrogates and the child while possessing limited choices in their own reproductive life. They treat their differently-abled children as defective (Suryanarayanan 2021); ironically. This unethical-commercial world harms both; the surrogate and the unborn child; on multiple levels.

The song "Rihaayi De" (Grant Freedom) from the film *Mimi* truly encapsulates the emotion that surfaces due to such multifaceted exploitative acts. Thus, the mainstream media representation indicates how poor the preparedness strategy is in general situations that are either internally or externally sourced during the surrogacy.

## A QUESTION OF KINSHIP

The complex nature of surrogacy challenges the belongingness of the child.

The multiplicity of factors and perspectives associated with the birthing of the child raises the question of kinship; both in real life and in cinematic representation. "When motherhood is separated into biological, gestational, and social components, new opportunities for pregnancy and parenthood are created that put the very "nature" of race and kinship into question" (Harrison 2). The long physical connection with the child and the blood and sweat involved in bringing the child to life; provides a sense of authority to the surrogate over the child. The contractual engagement is overpowered by their emotional attachment to the child. Madhu demands Priya to either provide her the rights of the child or give her Raj. She attests that she is both biologically and physically attached to the child, and thus holds maternal right over it. But, such is the dilemma that is induced from a conventional surrogacy and where surrogate belongs to the same race. However, the trans-racial intended parents easily discard any such contentions made by the surrogate on kinship through production of genetic and racial dissimilarities. *Mimi* continues with her pregnancy even despite John and Summer asked her to abort the child (due to the possibility of genetic disorder) and births a healthy-normal white child, whom she named Raj. However, post four years of his birth; his biological parents reunite with him upon learning about his normal birth and leverage *Mimi* to give him over to them; citing his racial, biological, genetic ties to them. The helplessness of *Mimi* due to physical and legal complications shows the immunity the biological parents hold despite abandoning their child.

Who truly is the mother? How is the mother defined? Where is it promised; in the womb or outside of it? Does biology overpower intent?

## THE POWER DYNAMICS

The power differentials in the setup of surrogacy is quite prominent. Although, contended to be a "women helping women" act; the financial desperation of the surrogates and the exploitation by the intended parents is either implicitly or explicitly reproduced. The power imbalance is prevalent socio-economically, nationally or racially; wherein ART contributes to the reinforcement of historically prevalent hierarchies (Harrison 37). Despite of the attempt at balancing out the economically-advantaged intended parents with reproductive disadvantage; the power imbalance sustains itself. The issue of informed consent of the surrogate (Bailey 2011) depicts the politics involved within the reproduction. The constant assertion of documentation, questions over consent in *Mimi* to *Mimi* by the doctor at multiple steps (before pregnancy, during continual of pregnancy), and repeated reconfirmation by her friend at different stages demonstrates that *Mimi* has agency over her reproductive rights and is consciously a part of this process. But, the very basis of her participation stems from her financial incapacity, highlighting her powerlessness. *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* skips the legalisation or consent assurance from people outside the engaged parties, neither does it depicts the conversation between the surrogate and the doctor. Madhu is hardly ever positioned with any substantial power. This web of the power relations, as addressed in both the films, is reflective of the overlapping and unstructured dynamics entailed within surrogacy.

Susan Markens in her 2007 text "Surrogate Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction" brings to forefront the right not only of the reproductive bodies but also right of the child to have knowledge about its existence. Both the films fail to address this topic and signifies how neglected and unexplored this entire world of surrogacy stills remains.

## CONCLUSION

This paper, thus, radically demonstrates the public consciousness and its direction through an analysis of the commercialised markets of reproduction and films. Surrogacy, if utilised adequately, makes one experience one of the most sacred aspects of human existence. Coupled with set boundaries of the engaged parties, a protective legislation and an ethical handling of this commercialised industry can help it challenge the patriarchal order built on "natural" reproduction by a heterosexual couple. Also, the production of updated, inclusive and empathetic media narratives can be fruitful in dissemination of

information to produce a healthy environment and non-stigmatizing surrogate motherhood.

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