VEDA'S
JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)
An International Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal
Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.002 http://www.joell.in

Vol.13, No.1
(Jan-March)
2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE IMPERIAL WOMB : BIOCAPITAL AND THE COLONIAL HANGOVER IN CONTEMPORARY SURROGACY FICTION

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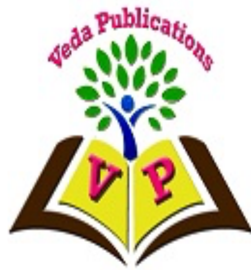
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13114



Article history:

Received on : 18-02-2026
Accepted on : 19-03-2026
Available online: 28-03-2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how commercial surrogacy functions as a contemporary form of colonial extraction. Through a comparative analysis of Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers* and Joanne Ramos's *The Farm*, this study maps the geography of biocapital across both transnational and domestic supply chains. Malladi's text illustrates a globalised extraction, where Western capital harvests the biological labor of the Global South under the guise of a maternal "rescue narrative", whereas Ramos' novel demonstrates how identical biopolitical hierarchies are replicated domestically within the United States, utilising racialised and immigrant bodies. Grounded in Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Karl Marx's theory of alienated labor, and the sociological framework of stratified reproduction, this paper argues that the "free market" of commercial surrogacy is an illusion relying on systemic economic coercion.

Keywords : *Biopolitics, Commercial Surrogacy, Stratified Reproduction, Bio-colonialism, Biocapital, Alienated Labor etc.*

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Assistive Reproductive Technologies (ART) have changed how we view pregnancy completely. What was once a strictly natural process, now involves third parties and precise science. Although a blessing for many who have dreamed of parenthood, it has given rise to the deeply exploitative field of commercial surrogacy. Rooted in capitalism, and by extension patriarchy, commercial surrogacy relies on the economic inferiority of women, to fulfil the dreams of a healthy baby for the wealthy and privileged. Often celebrated and marketed as a feminist choice that fosters sisterhood, the industry can't exist without the surrogate's need for money. More often than not, the choice is based not on the desire to help another woman, but the need for money that can't be earned through their everyday jobs. Pregnancy, once considered a blessing, has now become a commercialisable service, through ART like IVF.

Yet, reducing commercial surrogacy to just patriarchy and "market logic" seems inadequate. The extent of the exploitation can't fully be understood without the discussions of race, class, and colonialism, or rather colonial hangover. More often than not the ones who hire surrogates are either rich, white, of the upper class, or a combination of the three and the ones who are surrogates, are poor, women of colour, belonging to the lower class, or a combination of the three. This outsourcing of pregnancy to women of colour, feels reminiscent of the *aayas* of colonial period who acted as wet nurses to white children so that the difficult and unpleasant parts of motherhood did not fall on their mothers.

Both Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers* and Joanne Ramos's *The Farm* expose the commercial surrogacy industry as a modern mechanism of colonial extraction when analysed through Foucault's concept of biopolitics and Marxist feminist theories. By analysing surrogacy in both global and domestic contexts, these texts demonstrate how the biological energy of marginalised women is systematically harvested under the guise of a "free market" to secure the reproductive futures of the global elite, ultimately cementing a system of stratified reproduction (Colen 1995).

The industry relies heavily on the colonial hangover to function, a dynamic that is painfully clear in Amulya Malladi's *A House for Happy Mothers*. The novel traces a deeply familiar colonial route where raw biological energy is extracted from the Global South to enrich the reproductive futures of the Global North. At first glance, Malladi complicates the traditional colonial dynamic by centering an Indian-American commissioning mother, Priya, and an Indian surrogate, Asha. However, this shared ethnicity only serves to highlight how nationality, class, and access to Western capital effectively slide into the role traditionally occupied by race in Western narratives. Priya's American identity creates power hierarchy, allowing her to purchase Asha's reproductive labour at a fraction of the cost. She chooses to travel to Hyderabad because the biological energy of lower-class Indian women is cheaper and highly exploitable.

To further alleviate the discomfort of buying another woman's bodily labour, Priya and the clinic staff actively reiterate a "rescue narrative," where they frame the surrogacy contract as a charitable intervention for Asha's family, as she needs the

money to pay her son's school fees. This psychological defence mechanism is what Daisy Deomampo defines as the "racial reproductive imaginary" (Merleau-Ponty 2018). Through this imaginary, Western commissioning parents view Indian surrogates not as equal contractual partners, but through a paternalistic lens as poor, hyper-fertile women in desperate need of salvation. The language of benevolence and the "gift of life" smooths over the violent power imbalance. It allows Priya to view herself as a generous benefactor rather than a participant in a brutal, extractive supply chain. She pacifies herself by reminding her that, "She was paying Asha to have this baby. It was a business transaction, pure and simple, but she was also giving Asha the money to change her life... She was doing a good thing."

Asha's internal narrative, however, constantly punctures this illusion. She understands that to the intended parents, she is more incubator than person, and is completely reducible to her ability to carry a foetus. They don't care about her, or her life outside the clinic walls, and thus she reminds herself that the baby is work. Her reality is a haunting manifestation of Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that under patriarchal capitalism, "woman is womb" (Beauvoir 2011).

The imbalance of this cross-corder arrangement becomes undeniable once the child is delivered. Priya returns to the United States with a new family member who will grow up protected by their wealth and American privilege, while Asha remains in Hyderabad, physically worn and emotionally altered in ways that can't be compensated for by money. The "Happy Mothers House" provides meals, vitamins, and medical care, but only while Asha carries the baby that the system deems valuable. The moment it is born, that flow of resources ends (Malladi 2016) proving that the care was never unconditional. Malladi lingers on what Vora describes as "biological depletion". The free market exchange leaves the surrogate depleted, proving that commercial surrogacy doesn't circulate freely as a "gift," but rather operates as a ruthless mechanism of neo-colonial extraction.

This colonial dynamic isn't just something that happens across international borders. In Joanne Ramos's *The Farm*, we see the exact same extractive hierarchies replicated domestically within the United States. The novel brings in Shellee Colen's concept of "stratified reproduction," which describes a global system in which the reproductive labour of marginalised women is actively exploited to protect and celebrate the pregnancies of the elite (Colen 1995).

At Golden Oaks, the luxury surrogacy facility in *The Farm*, race and class directly dictate a woman's worth and compensation. The surrogates are divided into strict tiers. The "Premium" tier consists of white, college-educated women who fit traditional Western beauty standards. They receive significantly more compensation and are treated with a baseline of respect and deference. Their whiteness and class background function as a form of market insurance for wealthy clients who want a certain aesthetic and intellectual image associated with their future child. On the other hand, women of colour, like the Filipina immigrant Jane, are placed in lower tiers. They are paid less, subjected to harsher biopolitical surveillance, and treated as completely replaceable

(Ramos 2019). The underlying logic of the clinic is that being white has inherent value, while being non-white is seen as biologically useful but socially invaluable.

The title of the book, *The Farm* describes how the facility manages the women exactly like livestock. The white, Premium hosts are treated like prize horses, protected, and given minor freedoms, while the immigrant women of colour are treated like draft animals, expected to endure the physical toll and risks of pregnancy without complaining (Ramos 198). Jane's body is vital for the facility to turn a profit, but she as a human being isn't important. The wealthy client who hired her gets to bypass all the physical dangers of pregnancy, outsourcing the biological burden entirely to a marginalised body.

Jane's situation is dictated by extreme economic hardship that arises due to her immigrant status, and forces her to undergo the exploitation of commercial surrogacy. Her situation perfectly illustrates what sociologist Rhacel Parreñas calls the "global care chain" (Parreñas 2001).

In this system, a deficit of care is manufactured in the Global South or among lower class families so that a surplus of care can be enjoyed by the Global North or wealthy elites. Jane has to leave her own daughter in the Philippines to carry a baby for someone else. She gives up the ability to mother her own child, severing her own familial bonds, to ensure that that same child's financial future is secure. The entire commercial surrogacy system depends on this sacrifice. It requires a racialised, economically vulnerable lower class to function. If economic equality existed, the commercial surrogacy market would cease to exist, because the primary driving force for the surrogacy industry, like any exploitative industry, is the desperation of the Janes and Ashas of the world.

When read together, both novels reveal a deeply entrenched pattern. The industry is designed almost exclusively to help Western, white, or rich people build families at the direct physical and emotional expense of marginalised women. The clinics in both texts focus heavily on ensuring the baby shares absolutely no DNA with the surrogate. Framed as a legal and medical necessity, this insistence feels extremely close to the historical colonial and upper class Indian obsessions with racial and class purity, reminding one of social and legal practices that treated Indians or lower class Indians as sub-citizens.

Sayantani DasGupta describes this transnational surrogacy as the ultimate "commodification of motherhood" (DasGupta 2014). Asha and Jane are asked to give up their pregnancies, a process that takes a massive toll on them in every way possible. They are required to perform the emotional labour of a healthy pregnancy, yet must sever that connection without any human reaction the moment the child is born. Employing Sharmilla Raudruppa's metaphor of the assembly line, one can say their wombs are rented. But the psychological emptiness and physical exhaustion that stay with them long after the contracts are terminated and the intended parents have gone home has no room in that factory-like setting. Both novels demonstrate that the "free market" can't possibly compensate for this "alienated labour" (Marx 1988).

Ultimately, reducing commercial surrogacy to a matter of free market enterprise or a triumph of feminist bodily autonomy ignores the violent realities

of how the industry actually operates. *A House for Happy Mothers* and *The Farm* strip away the medical vocabulary and marketing to expose an industry built entirely on the economic coercion of vulnerable women. Whether the supply chain crosses an international border into India or a domestic socioeconomic boundary into an immigrant community in New York, the biopolitical reality remains exactly the same.

The flow of reproductive capital strictly moves from the marginalised to the privileged with the bodies of lower-class women and women of colour being acquired as biological frontiers and their energy harvested to secure the futures of the global elite. Commercial surrogacy doesn't happen in a vacuum of mutual, sisterly help, but rather follows the strict patterns of global power. When we look at who usually becomes a surrogate and who usually hires them, the borders are reminiscent of colonies. The commodities may have changed from spices and silks to a new form of bodily labour, but the routes of extraction remain familiar.

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