

## **Womb-on-Rent: Surrogacy and Ethical Dilemmas in Madhavi Mahadevan's *Bride of the Forest***

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### *Abstract*

*The paper focuses on Drishadvati (also known as Madhavi), a character rooted in the Indian epic Mahabharata and arguably the earliest instance of 'womb-on-rent.' Analysing Madhavi's journey as a surrogate mother offers a thoughtful commentary on the emotional and psychological challenges faced by those who choose to become surrogate mothers. The paper integrates real-life experiences documented by scholars and highlights the commodification and devaluation of women in surrogacy. By juxtaposing emotional strains, dehumanisation, and objectification with narratives of love and intimacy articulated by some surrogates, the article advocates for ethical considerations and the establishment of robust support mechanisms for womb renters.*

**Keywords:** Surrogacy, ethical dilemmas, autonomy, motherhood, challenges

### **Introduction**

Becoming a mother after marriage is an established norm in a patriarchal society. People freely express their opinions on a woman's decision to postpone, delay, or forego motherhood. Parenthood is accepted to ensure social security and aids in maintaining the propagation of family, caste, lineage, and even social prestige. The belief persists that motherhood is a woman's most important role and that a woman is incomplete without a child. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, reflects on the notion of motherhood:

The child is her happiness and her justification. Through the child she is supposed to find self-realization sexually and socially; through childbearing, then, the institution of marriage gets its meaning and attains its purpose...this supreme stage in woman's life history (501).

Narratives of non-biological parenting are rarely incorporated into prevailing models of motherhood. The dominant societal perception adheres closely to an essentialist perspective of motherhood. Nadimpally and Venkatachalam outline factors contributing to a recent surge in the infertility care industry:

The growth of the huge, privatised infertility care industry in India can be attributed to

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a culture loaded with stereotypically defined gender roles, which defines childlessness as ‘abnormal’ and stigmatises infertility, as well as to the lack of infertility care in the public health system. The private infertility care market capitalises on existing patriarchal normative cultural norms and values (87).

The commodification of motherhood today not only imparts temporary power to the maternal body within a capitalist system but also reveals an economic power structure that shapes maternal experiences. The idea that distress of childlessness and desire to have a child through technological means deserve empathetic understanding rather than outright dismissal is increasingly being promoted. Capitalist society actively sustains surrogacy agencies. Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya define ‘surrogacy (both as reproductive transaction and caregiving) as a culturally promoted trope under capitalism’ (149).

On one hand, surrogacy offers valuable option for individuals or couples struggling with infertility, providing a pathway to parenthood. On the other hand, it introduces a dynamic in which reproductive capacity of women is treated as service, potentially exposing them to exploitation or overlooking the complexities of their experiences. France Winddance Twine, in her book, *Outsourcing the Womb: Race, Class, and Gestational Surrogacy in a Global Market*, shares the woes of surrogate mothers. She states that:

The same women [surrogates] who sell their reproductive labour and become reproductive service workers, carrying pregnancies to term under labor contracts may not be able to afford basic health care for themselves once their labour contracts expire (3).

Therefore, society needs to assess the ethical dimensions of surrogacy carefully and consider the rights and well-being of all parties involved. Focus should be to protect the autonomy and dignity of women who choose to become surrogates.

### **Madhavi/Drishadvati and the Ancient Roots of Surrogacy**

Madhavi Mahadevan, in her fiction *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati’s Daughter*, has dealt with the concept of ‘womb-on-rent’ through the character of Drishadvati aka Madhavi, arguably the first mythical character to undergo surrogacy. The Myth of Madhavi is part of the largest Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. The author revises the myth and breathes new life into the age-old canonical story.

The story of Madhavi appears in the ‘Udyoga Parva’ of the *Mahabharata*. Sage Vishvamitra, upon completing his disciple Gaalav’s education, demands an unusual *gurudakshina*: eight hundred white horses, each with one black ear. Gaalav, burdened by this request, falls into despair and ultimately arrives at King Yayati’s court. Yayati offers his daughter, Madhavi, renowned for her virtue and beauty, to assist Gaalav. Madhavi is blessed with a unique boon: a prophecy revealed that she would bear only sons and would regain her virginity after each birth. Yayati advises Gaalav to rent Madhavi’s womb to childless kings to fulfil his guru’s demand. In this arrangement, Madhavi is reduced to a mere vessel or incubator—a surrogate mother—tasked with producing offsprings for various kings. While Gaalav’s effort to meet his teacher’s demand is lauded in the patriarchal narrative, Madhavi’s story, despite being instrumental to this quest, is unexplored and unheard. Her experiences and perspective are overshadowed by dominant patriarchal views.

## Literature Review

Surrogacy, while offering hope to childless couples, presents a complex emotional and psychological journey for surrogate mothers. Various studies have investigated the motivations, experiences, and mental health outcomes of surrogacy and have reflected on the diverse sociocultural settings and evolving legal frameworks.

Jadva et al., in their paper “Surrogacy: The Experiences of Surrogate Mothers,” share the results of a study conducted in the UK that examines psychological well-being of thirty-four surrogate mothers approximately one year after childbirth. The researchers find that most surrogate mothers do not face significant psychological distress or difficulty in handing over their babies to commissioning couples. While some experienced emotional challenges immediately, such as postpartum depression, these tend to subside with time (Jadva et al. 2196–2204).

A more recent paper, “The Psychological Well-Being and Prenatal Bonding of Gestational Surrogates”, based on a study conducted in India by Lamba et al., highlights culturally specific stressors affecting Indian gestational surrogates. The study finds that low social support during pregnancy, hiding surrogacy, and criticism from others are predictive of higher levels of depression post-birth (Lamba et al. 646–653). Additionally, the researchers observe that “living in uncertainty about whether or not they would meet with the baby and the intended parents, even a few months after the birth, appeared to be psychologically stressful for the surrogates” (652). These findings highlight the emotional complexities faced by Indian surrogates within a cross-border surrogacy framework.

In Iran, a qualitative study by Tehran et al. reveals that surrogate mothers frequently encounter emotional turmoil, including attachment to the unborn child, stress due to societal judgment, and tensions with both family and the commissioning couple (Tehran et al. 471–80).

Exploring the legal and ethical issues surrounding surrogacy in India, Wasal notes the gaps in understanding the emotional and legal rights of surrogate mothers. Many surrogate mothers report feelings of fear, sadness, and occasional resentment. Moreover, legal uncertainties, such as those related to the citizenship of the child and lack of awareness regarding contracts, increase the vulnerability of surrogate mothers (Wasal 70–74).

Helena Ragone, in her review “The Gift of Life: Surrogate Motherhood, Gamete Donation and Constructions of Altruism,” notes that the trend toward elective gestational surrogacy potentially (re)constructs surrogate mothers as vessels. They are not usually regarded as generous individuals who dedicate nine months of their lives for the sake of the childless. Elly Teman, in her book *Surrogate Motherhood: International Perspectives*, reveals that in Israel, commissioning mothers, doctors, and nurses come together to render the surrogate body absent. They celebrate the intending mother’s newborn, even though the child is not biologically hers.

In her chapter “Body Map Get Access Arrow”, Teman explains that surrogate mothers draw both physical and psychological boundaries—what she calls a “body map”—to distinguish between biological ties, motherhood, and the natural processes involved in surrogacy. To uphold these separations, they adopt both mental strategies and bodily practices of distancing.

Together, these studies emphasise the need for culturally sensitive policies, thorough psychological screening, and holistic support systems to protect the emotional well-being of surrogate mothers. Yet, strikingly absent from current research is any exploration of Indian mythological figures who opted for surrogacy. This paper addresses that gap by discussing the story of Dri-shadvati in detail, which in turn will highlight the experiences of surrogate mothers in India

across time.

### Discussion

The narrative of Drishadvati unfolds against the backdrop of a society that evaluates a woman's value based on her ability to procreate. Drishadvati's mother proclaims about her daughter's womb, "She will be fruitful. Her womb will bring forth males. Four sons" (Mahadevan 27). She further elaborates, "It is what your stars say, Yayati. When the time comes her sons will ensure your safe passage into the next world" (Mahadevan 28). Her mother's declaration presents Drishadvati as a source of male progeny, makes her eligible for becoming a womb renter. Yayati asks Gaalav to use his daughter as he thinks best:

My daughter Madhavi. This daughter of mine is a gem. For her beauty alone, devas, asuras, and rajas have solicited her. Moreover, she is well-trained in the household arts and has a sweet adjusting temperament. But what makes her truly invaluable to Kshatriya families is a prediction in her horoscope- that she will have sons who are destined to become Chakravarti samrats. Four, no less! Thus, she will enrich four royal lineages (Mahadevan 162).

Drishadvati lacks agency and has no choice but to follow the instructions of her father and young Gaalav, whom she loves dearly. The boon bestowed upon her and her mother's predictions makes her suitable for surrogacy. Women in modern times, too, driven by economic reasons, eagerly participate in surrogacy. Asmita Naik Africawala and Shagufa Kapadia, in their 2019 paper "Women's Control Over Decision to Participate in Surrogacy: Experiences of Surrogate Mothers in Gujarat", share that women play an active role in decision-making to participate in surrogacy (Africawala and Kapadia 13). Eligibility criteria for selection of surrogates are the same. Dr Nayana Hitesh Patel, along with her co-authors, share details involved in selection of surrogates:

As per Draft Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Bill, 2014, a surrogate is generally 23–35 years old (25–35 years as per the Surrogacy Bill, 2016) married woman having one child of her own and of minimum of 3 years old, with not <2 years interval between two deliveries. Consent of the surrogate's spouse is mandatory for her to become a surrogate mother. A typical screening process involves an extensive medical and psychological assessment as well as thorough criminal and financial background checks (Patel et al. 213).

Gaalav in Mahadevan's retelling never seeks Drishadvati's consent before bartering her to different kings. Although Drishadvati repeatedly protests, but her pleas go unheard. She secretly hopes that Gaalav will marry her one day, and that she will bear sons for him alone while enjoying marital bliss. The dehumanisation of Drishadvati intensifies when she expresses her reluctant consent to become a surrogate in Haryashva's kingdom. The king inspects her as one would scrutinise goods before transaction. Every part of Drishadvati's body is meticulously examined by a royal astrologer to ensure her suitability as a royal womb. Haryashva's criteria for acceptance go beyond her physical appearance and dive into the fine details of her anatomy—nose, eyes, ears, nails, breasts, and neck. Her body is dissected and appraised like merchandise, and it emphasises the transactional nature of exchange.

This portrayal of Drishadvati's objectification resonates deeply with real-life narratives of commercial surrogacy. Just as Drishadvati is reduced to a reproductive vessel in royal transac-

tions, modern-day surrogates like Salma are compelled by poverty and social vulnerability to commodify their bodies. The physical scrutiny and emotional detachment in both cases reveal how economic desperation strips women of agency and renders their reproductive labour as a matter of survival rather than choice.

Who would choose to do this? I have had a lifetime's worth of injections pumped into me. Some big ones in my hips hurt so much. In the beginning, I had about 20-25 pills almost every day. I feel bloated all the time. But I know I have to do this for my children's future. This is not work, this is *majboori* (a compulsion). Where we are now, it can't possibly get any worse.... we don't have a hut to live in or crops in our farm to fill our stomach with. This surrogacy is not ethical—it's just something we have to do to survive. When we heard of this surrogacy business, we didn't have any clothes to wear after the rains—just one pair that used to get wet—and our house had fallen down. What were we to do? (Pande 248).

Zsuzsa Berend, in her essay "The Romance of Surrogacy", observes that many surrogates desire affection and emotional connection with the Intended Parents (IPs). However, these relationships often end in disappointment when IPs sever ties after childbirth, leaving surrogates feeling abandoned. Through shared experiences, surrogates increasingly come to believe that love—even when unreciprocated—is a noble act, one that justifies repeated emotional labour. Many turn to online communities for affirmation, where the act of giving life is celebrated as a profound moral good (Berend 1).

When Drishadvati becomes a surrogate mother for the first time, she experiences loneliness in the very place where she is meant to continue the royal lineage. Unlike other members of the household, she is not treated as a family member, but rather as an outsider with a singular purpose—to bear a royal heir. The role of Drishadvati as a surrogate mother is strongly conveyed in the narrative:

During the initial months of my stay in Haryashva's palace, though I was not ill-treated, the royal women avoided me. I ate alone and spent all my time on my own. The clothes I was given to wear were rough and simple like a *dasi's*. My status was ambiguous. I was neither queen nor concubine nor slave (Mahadevan 220).

Concerns for unborn children and fear of their being born with abnormalities or bodily distortions often haunt surrogate mothers. The heart-wrenching scenario of a baby not surviving in the womb carries immense emotional weight, stirring feelings of grief and loss. In their qualitative study, Hoda Ahmari Tehran and her co-researchers describe fear of an abnormal baby through real-life experience of Zahra, a uterus donor, who expresses her concern:

I was always worried that this child would be retarded. My sister said that, "Don't worry because your child is healthy," but actually that was not my child. That was the child of someone else. I thought if the baby was abnormal, maybe his/her commissioning couple didn't want him/her. Thereafter, what could I do with a retarded baby (Tehran et al. 475).

When the royal midwife confirms Drishadvati's pregnancy, an unexpected shift in treatment and perception envelops her existence. Previously relegated to a solitary life in the royal chambers, Drishadvati finds herself at the centre of attention. Loneliness dissipates, and her attachment to the unborn child blossoms. Transformation in the behaviour of others towards her is conspicuous. The once-lonely chambers now buzz with activity as news of Drishadvati's pregnancy spreads. The three queens of Haryashva, previously indifferent to her presence, make their first

appearance to bestow blessings not for Drishadvati but for the royal heir growing within her:

Haryashva's three queens came to bless me. They made a ceremony of this too, slipping a pair of ornate gold bangles on my wrist and gifting new garments of the finest cloth...they kept looking at me with a predatory curiosity, never directly, but in swift, sideways glances as if trying to assess from the glow of my skin and the shape of my belly whether the consignment within was the promised one or not (Mahadevan 221).

After the baby's birth, king and queen choose a name for the newborn, leaving Drishadvati out of decisions related to her offspring. Similarly, the emotions and maternal feelings of a surrogate are often ignored. S Senthilkumari, in her article, elaborates on the identity of a surrogate: "She is just a vessel to carry the baby for a while. Without any relationship, either blood or a love relationship, the baby grows in her womb till it is born" (1400).

Surrogate mothers sometimes develop an emotional bond with unborn babies as they grow inside their womb, knowing full well that they must give up the child after delivery. The nurturing period allotted to them lasts only nine months. Jyoti Chaudhary, in her article "Consequences of Surrogacy on Surrogates in India", states that:

The most primary socialisation is with respect to managing their emotions; that requires them to draw a timeline for loving and nurturing the child they are carrying. Not just this, they are also expected to juggle and strike a balance between two emotionally opposed stands of attaching and detaching with the surrogate child at the same time (99).

In Mahadevan's novel, soon after birth of the royal heir, spotlight shifts entirely to the newborn. Everyone eagerly discusses every facet of the baby's existence—from his physical features to his uncanny resemblance to his father and grandfather: "The shape of the baby's head shows that it is meant to wear a crown; he has strong limbs just like his father, but his ears are his grandfather's" (Mahadevan 228). Drishadvati who carried and nurtured the child for nine months, is forgotten and pushed to the fringes.

Surrogate mothers despite their significant roles in bringing life into the world, always find themselves erased once their biological contribution is complete. Drishadvati's journey is reflective of the challenges faced by surrogate mothers. The protagonist, upon being marginalised after delivering the baby, contemplates:

Though born of my flesh, I know he is not mine. His eyes are edged with kajal. Someone has tied a black thread on his wrist. No, he is not mine. I will never see him again. The first word uttered, the first tooth, the first step...and he too, will not know my name. Who will tell him of this fierce love that I feel right now, or how hard it is for me to leave him? (Mahadevan 229).

Surrogate mothers are taken care of by intended parents only because every couple aspires to have a healthy child. Many intended parents accommodate surrogates in their homes or provide accommodation facilities to ensure better care. In her 2010 article "Commercial Surrogacy in India: Manufacturing a Perfect Mother-Worker", Pande shares the experiences of a surrogate named Tina, who became a surrogate mother for a couple from Dubai. Tina describes her stay in the surrogate hostel as akin to living in a home, where she enjoyed various activities during her pregnancy, such as watching TV and learning languages. She elaborates:

As long as we are inside the house, we can move around freely, watch TV, and sleep. We even have a prayer room where we all pray in the mornings and evenings. Everything works like clockwork. We wake up at 8 a.m., have tea, take our medicines and

injections, and go back to sleep. Then we wake up at noon, bathe, and eat lunch. We basically rest. That's what is required of us (983).

Drishadvati is bartered a second time to Divodas, King of Kashi; a third time to Ushinar; and finally to Sage Viswamitra. Her journey—marked by objectification, dietary restrictions, and a transactional understanding of the child's purpose—echoes the timeless struggles of surrogate mothers: “They have all used me. I have ceased to exist in everyone's eyes. I am nothing other than a mare to be bred” (Mahadevan 252).

Labelling surrogates as womb-renters and appreciating their altruistic gesture helps sustain surrogacy agencies and is an accepted patriarchal practice. Raymond argues that glorifying women's selflessness is another way of reinforcing their inequality, as the association of altruism with femininity and its contrast with self-interest devalues the importance of reproductive labor (Raymond). Similarly, Nair and Kalarivayil highlight that surrogacy in India is a \$2.5 billion industry. They contend that the Surrogacy Bill of 2016 fails to safeguard surrogate women, instead promoting an idealized image of the “good woman” — someone willing to bear a relative's child as a moral duty to preserve the family name.

### Conclusion

Surrogate mothers are forgotten almost immediately after the wish fulfilment of intended parents. Drishadvati, after bearing sons for four childless kings, feels dejected due to strategic exploitation by her father and Gaalav. She rejects the comforts of palace life. She seeks solace and makes a fresh start in the embrace of the forest. Her emotional and moral dilemmas reflect how compulsion to undertake surrogacy arises from deep societal injustices.

The world needs to celebrate the resilience of surrogate mothers in the face of adversity and offer them the support and resources they deserve. Surrogate mothers must be given centre stage for their nine-month-long sacrifice, allowed to voice their choices, and reclaim their autonomy. Surrogate mothers should be free to transcend the rigid binaries of mother and non-mother. They should have liberty to create an alternative space shaped by their unique maternal aesthetics—a space imbued with warmth, respect, and care for these so-called womb renters.

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