

# “THIS IS A BUSINESS TRANSACTION, FUNDAMENTALLY”: SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD IN MEERA SYAL’S *THE HOUSE OF HIDDEN MOTHERS*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Meera Syal’s latest novel, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015), depicts the current practice of international surrogacy and raises questions about this form of reproduction which commodifies babies and constructs poor women’s bodies in India and elsewhere as sites of reproductive exploitation. Nonetheless, Syal’s novel challenges an initial reading of Indian surrogate mothers as mere passive victims of western capitalist demands and depicts a surrogate mother, Mala, who constantly subverts her position as a disempowered, ‘third world’ woman. I shall argue that the novel bridges the discursive western-constructed gap between ‘poor and disempowered’ Indian women and ‘rich and empowered’ British ones explicitly through its ending, but also implicitly by engaging with gender concerns related to the perception, (re)presentation and exploitation of women’s bodies in the United Kingdom and India alike.

**Keywords:** *The House of Hidden Mothers*, Meera Syal, surrogacy, reproductive outsourcing, Asian-British Literature.

## **Resumen**

La última novela de Meera Syal, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015), se centra en la práctica de la gestación subrogada internacional y plantea cuestiones sobre esta

forma de reproducción por la que los bebés se convierten en artículos de cambio y a través de la que los cuerpos de mujeres pobres en la India y otros países se tornan en espacios de explotación reproductiva. No obstante, la novela de Syal pone en entredicho una única lectura de las madres subrogadas como meras víctimas de las demandas capitalistas occidentales y presenta a una mujer, Mala, que continuamente subvierte su posición de mujer desempoderada del ‘Tercer Mundo’. Este artículo propone que la novela de Syal salva las distancias que discursivamente se construyen entre las ‘mujeres pobres y desempoderadas’ en la India y las ‘mujeres empoderadas y ricas’ de occidente de manera explícita al final de la novela pero también implícitamente a lo largo de la misma al abordar cuestiones de género relativas a la percepción, (re)presentación y explotación de los cuerpos de las mujeres tanto en la India como en el Reino Unido.

**Palabras Clave:** *The House of Hidden Mothers*, Meera Syal, maternidad subrogada, externalización reproductiva, literatura británica asiática.

Meera Syal’s latest novel, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015), approaches the controversial theme of international surrogacy through the experiences of an Asian-British couple, Shyama and Todd, who embark on the journey of motherhood/parenthood through surrogacy in India. The novel explores a breadth of topics —surrogacy, corruption, family conflicts, gender oppression and ageing processes, among others— and this wide thematic scope has brought about conflicting literary reviews. Some literary critics admire Syal’s ability “to pull it off with panache” (Elkin 2015) and the novel has been praised as “a delicately written, profound study of the female condition in the rich world and the poor” (Alibhai-Brown 2015), while others consider it “a cautionary tale about inter-racial surrogacy and late parenthood” (Daftuar 2015) which “struggles to weave its narrative and thematic strands with sufficient dexterity into the rich tapestry the story yearns to be” (Beckerman 2015). Regardless of the narrative successes or failures in terms of plot and structure and its fairytale-like ending in which Mala, the surrogate mother, succeeds in keeping the baby and winning Todd’s heart, *The House of Hidden Mothers* undeniably approaches a present-day issue, surrogacy, both in India and the United Kingdom. Moreover, Syal’s novel examines it from various points of view: from the lived experience of the surrogate mother to that of the intended parents, involving as it does the ethical and commercial justification of the doctor involved in the procedure and the reactions of close family members and friends.

Meera Syal made a name for herself as an actress and comedian in the popular TV programs *Goodness*, *Gracious Me* or *The Kumars at No 42*. The former was initially aired on BBC radio 4 and later broadcast on BBC 2 from 1998 until 2001 (with a special show televised in 2015 as part of the BBC’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary), and defined

as “the ground-breaking British-Asian comedy show” (Hogan 2014) which was “a cathartic way of dealing with racism” (Abbasi 2015). The latter has been described as “an indirect spin-off from *Goodness, Gracious Me* devised by its star Sanjeev Bhaskar, along with his partner Meera Syal and executive producer Anil Gupta, as a way of adding life to the increasingly tired chat-show by placing it in the heart of a family sitcom” (“The Kumars at No 42” 2014). *Anita and Me*, published in 1996, was Syal’s debut novel. Set in the early 1970s, it centers on the young Meena as she grows up in a fictional ex-mining village in the north of England; it won a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for the Guardian Fiction Prize. This novel was followed, three years later, by *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*; it concerns the lives of three young women, Chila, Sunita and Tania, daughters of Punjabi immigrants whose rebellious youth “threatens to undermine the carefully preserved Indian culture their parents had ironically sacrificed, and then attempted to rebuild in order to make a better life for their children” (Campbell-Hall 2009: 209). The novel thus follows these three young women’s growing process from being defiant teenagers, embarrassed by their parents and their heritage, to becoming adults who accept their roots and cultural legacy. According to James Procter, “[Syal’s] work in fiction and on screen is exemplary for the way in which it uses humour to both challenge the limits of political correctness and to contribute to a politicised understanding of British Asian culture” (2002). Likewise, in *The House of Hidden Mothers* Syal makes use of a humorous tone and a fairytale-like style to approach a multi-edged and current matter in an insightful and thought-provoking way. In this paper, I shall argue that Syal’s novel not only raises questions about the ethics behind reproductive outsourcing but also challenges an overly simplistic interpretation of the depiction of Indian surrogate mothers as passive victims of western capitalist demands. Moreover, I shall state that the novel addresses topics related to gender oppression such as ageing and sexual abuse suffered by women both in the United Kingdom and in India. These issues contribute to the problematization of female liberation and gender equality rights in the United Kingdom relative to India.

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## **Approaching Surrogacy: India and the UK**

*The House of Hidden Mothers* engages with a legally and socially sensitive topic both in the UK and India. According to statistics given by MP Jessica Lee in a Westminster Hall debate there are “an estimated 1,000-2,000 children born to surrogates for UK-based IPs *per year*, with ‘up to 95%’ of these being born overseas” (Horsey et al. 2015: 13, emphasis in original). This kind of surrogacy is known as ‘international’ or ‘cross-border’ surrogacy, though in this paper I shall

refer to this as reproductive outsourcing. The term ‘reproductive outsourcing’ has been used by Jones and Keith in the context of medical tourism to refer to “a special form of medical tourism in which pregnancy is initiated in one location, and where parturition typically occurs at another, typically the home region of the patient” (2006: 252). This definition circumscribes outsourcing to one aspect of the fertility treatment undertaken by the couple. Nonetheless, in this paper I would like to expand the usage of this term and apply it to international surrogacy—as the outsourcing of overseas wombs—in order to emphasize the connections between this form of reproduction and economic globalization.

Through surrogacy, women agree to become pregnant, gestate a fetus “genetically unrelated to the surrogate” (Robinson 1994: 205) and to then “relinquish their parental rights and responsibilities” (Robinson 1994: 205) at birth and recognize the couple who commissions the pregnancy as the legal parents. Surrogacy is carried out through a fertilized egg being implanted into the womb of a surrogate mother. The sperm usually derives from the intended father and the ovum comes from a donor in order to minimize the complex legal implications and “redefine the concept, mother, and subsequently decrease the saliency of the gestational role in that definition, thus altering the mother-fetus relationship” (Robinson 1994: 205). Surrogacy, therefore, attempts to establish a clear-cut distinction between a gestational and a genetic mother. This division is guaranteed to the intended parents through the fact that the ovum is obtained from a donor and not from the gestational mother. This practice is incorporated in *The House of Hidden Mothers* when the doctor explains that the ovum is selected from a “data base of egg donors [sic]” (Syal 2015: 210) in order to “find as near a physical match” (210) to the mother. Yet, in a twist of the narrative, Syal questions this sharp conceptual distinction by allowing Dr. Passi’s malpractice in using Mala’s own ovum in the process: “Mala was called back to receive the embryo that would settle and burrow and feed and become the child that would be half hers, half Toby’s, all of Dr. Passi’s creation” (214). Mala, unbeknownst to her and the intended parents, is therefore both the gestational mother and the genetic one, consequently validating her motherhood’s genetic rights and her relation to both the baby and the father and, ultimately, leading the reader to a nuanced understanding of the novel’s ending.

Surrogacy is on the increase and “bourgeoning surrogacy markets have emerged in various countries, notably e.g. parts of the US, India, Thailand or Nepal—or are beginning to emerge (e.g. Mexico, Cambodia, Greece)” (Horsey et al. 2015: 11). India is one of these bourgeoning surrogacy markets that Syal depicts in *The House of Hidden Mothers* to raise questions about the ethics behind reproductive outsourcing and force readers to reflect upon surrogacy as a neo-colonial practice

which constructs women's bodies in India as sites of reproductive exploitation. As Meera Syal's puts it in the novel:

this was a business transaction, fundamentally. Money made it possible, money was the incentive. Supply and demand, the basis for all successful trading. India had fertile poor women; Britain and America and most places west of Poland had wealthy infertile women. It had begun with companies moving their call centres towards the rising sun, so what was wrong with outsourcing babies there too, when at the end of the process there was a new human being and a woman with financial independence? It was a win-win situation, wasn't it? (2015: 97-98)

This description of the relatively new Indian surrogacy market reminiscent of the long-established practice of outsourcing call centers in India firmly endorses the concept of international surrogacy as a form of reproductive outsourcing and undoubtedly points towards surrogacy as a demand/supply-driven service within which those couples in a position of (financial) power—in a similar way to global companies—choose the best available supplier. Conjointly, surrogacy has been criticized for commodifying women's bodies since the late 1980s when the Baby M case in North America received considerable media attention and proved to be a case in point that foregrounded for the first time the legal and social challenges posed by this form of reproduction. Opponents of this practice stated that "surrogacy unfairly exploited poor women who unwillingly entered contracts that they would come to regret. Critics also claimed that surrogacy degraded children and women by treating children as commodities to be exchanged for profit and women's bodies as childbearing factories" (Scott 2009: 112).

With the free flow of people and capital, the dissolution of boundaries and the global mobility of consumers brought about by globalization, a growing number of infertile couples are resorting to this form of reproduction transnationally—mainly in developing countries and countries where there is an absence of legislation. The appearance of these new markets raises questions about the benefits of globalization and, as the Indian Research Unit for Political Economy has stated, it is a reminder that "the great range of actual measures carried out under the label of globalization [...] [are] not those of integration and development. Rather they [are] the processes of imposition, disintegration, underdevelopment and appropriation" (in Loomba 2005: 219). India is one of those countries where the negative effects of globalization are particularly significant in relation to surrogacy, for it has become an attractive destination for couples due to its "modern medical infrastructure" (Witzleb and Chawla 2015: 168). Clinics and medical tourism agencies which provide surrogacy services for the so-called "fertility tourists", together with "packages of services with a bonus of sun, sand, and sea or other holiday attractions" (Gupta 2012: 26) have increased in the country. *The*

*House of Hidden Mothers* includes a passage with the marketing strategies used by clinics which incorporates a detailed description of the promotional video for the clinic Shyama and Todd select:

[T]he music snapped off and the face of a fine-boned, almond-eyed Indian woman filled the screen. [...] Dr Passi's dulcet tones narrated the story of how she had resigned from her previous post as a consultant obstetrician at one of Delhi's leading private hospitals to found the Passi Clinic. [...] "This is a life-changing experience for everyone involved: for the couples who long for a baby, and for the women who carry the child for them. The fees that our surrogate mothers receive enable them to transform their lives: to buy their own homes, educate their children... it gives them financial independence they could not get any other way. [...] As for the couples, who visit us from all over the world, because India is now the world centre for ART, they do not only get the gift of a longed-for child, but also they know that their money is going to help the woman who has given a new life to them". (Syal 2015: 91-92)

The clinic's promotional video acquiesces in processes of commercial promotion and, as part of its marketing strategy, incorporates carefully combined elements such as music and the mellow voice of an alluring Dr. Passi. These elements are inscribed with an orientalist nostalgia and patronizing references to the benefits of surrogacy for Indian women; the reference to the payment of fees as an almost philanthropic deed on the part of the western couples could be said to read as a renewed 'white (wo)man's burden'. Dr. Passi assures surrogacy is a life-changing event and *The House of Hidden Mothers* presents, indeed, a nuanced account of the transformation entailed in the experience of surrogacy for four different women: namely Mala, Seema, Shyama and Tara.

The promotional video that reaches intended couples across transnational borders contrasts with the fact that, although located at the center of main urban enclaves, the gestational houses which provide surrogacy services remain, as the title of the novel suggests, simultaneously hidden from the eyes of others: "virtually every woman was there in secret, only their husbands knowing the truth about their confinement" (Syal 2015: 252). The clinic's gestational and birthing factories, where babies are produced and women's commodified bodies are safeguarded, are perceived by Shyama as surreal locations; as a child's make-believe playset; as an estrangement experience by which her femininity is detached from that of other women: "standing outside this building was like seeing the female world in miniature, a living doll's house. Shyama could imagine swinging open the whole frontage like a door and discovering all the women inside, incubating in the heart" (193). Shyama feels detached from these women; yet at the same time, being a second-generation Indian woman in Britain, she has an emotional attachment with the country which, together with the accessibility of the service, underpins her choice of location to find a surrogate mother for her child.

Syal's novel does not fail to make direct reference to the lack of regulation regarding surrogacy in India through Priya, Shyama's friend, who undertakes the initial research on the clinic for her: "Basically, surrogacy is unregulated in India right now, that's why it's cheap. There are guidelines laid down rather than laws, so it varies from clinic to clinic. I chose this one because they seem to be long-established and well-organized" (2015: 92). In order to regulate the practice of surrogate motherhood, the Indian government has been working on a draft of a law known as "The Draft Assisted Reproductive Technology Regulation Bill and Rules" (2008) which has still not been passed. The Draft is undergoing revisions and "thanks to pressure from women's groups the draft was placed on the web site of the Indian Council of Medical Research for comments" (Qadeer and John 2009: 10). In theory this law will regulate the industry of surrogacy, but according to critical voices:

The Draft Bill tends to regularise and promote the interest of the providers of these technologies rather than regulate and monitor the current practices. The Bill is also inadequate in protecting and safeguarding the rights and health of the women who undergo these procedures, surrogates and egg donors and of the children born through these techniques. The Bill also actively promotes medical tourism in India for reproductive purposes. (Sarojini and Sharma 2009: 36)

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*The House of Hidden Mothers* includes an allusion to this bill and the ways in which it will affect Dr. Passi's successful business: "Here in India, the largest democracy in the world, famed for its tolerance and mix of so many different religions, the parental doors were open to all. But it looked as if that was about to change" (Syal 2015: 127).

In the UK, for its part, a conference entitled "Surrogacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Rethinking Assumptions, Reforming Law" took place on May 6 2016 in London. It was designed "to test and challenge the assumptions that underpin the existing UK law on surrogacy, showing how and why it has become out of date, in a variety of different contexts, and how it fails to protect the interests of children and families created via surrogacy" ("Surrogacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" 2016). The Conference plenary speakers included Professor Margot Brazier and Baroness Mary Warnock, responsible for chairing government inquiries into surrogacy which were published in reports in 1984 and 1998. November 2015 saw the publication of a report about the state of surrogacy in Britain entitled *Surrogacy in the UK: Myth Busting and Reform* undertaken by The Surrogacy UK Working Group on Surrogacy Law Reform. The group carried out a survey on surrogacy in the UK in an attempt to analyze the diversity of information on surrogacy available to UK residents. The report records different sources such as government agencies and diverse organizations with the aim of making recommendations on surrogacy

law reform since the law regulating surrogacy in the UK, the Surrogacy Arrangement Act 1985 (modified by the 1990 Act), has been in place for thirty years. As is stated in the foreword of this ground-breaking document:

This report seeks to highlight the reality of the practice of surrogacy in the UK in 2015, while recognising the problems that international surrogacy arrangements may bring. It recommends the careful formulation of new legislation on surrogacy which recognises the value of surrogacy as a way of having children and helps to protect and facilitate the altruistic, compensatory nature of surrogacy in the UK while preventing commercialisation and sharp practice. (Horsey et al. 2015:)

The Report Committee's recommendations state that the "new Act will continue to reflect the *altruistic, compensatory model* of surrogacy in the UK, while *removing unnecessary barriers* standing in the way of those seeking to use surrogacy or become surrogates and better representing how domestic surrogacy arrangements actually work in practice" (Horsey et al. 2015: 38, emphasis in original). The law in the UK forbids third parties to benefit financially from this exchange. This is a fundamental idea which lies behind the acceptability of the practice of surrogacy around the world, and especially so in the UK: it is altruism. The binary distinction of altruistic versus commercial surrogacy underpins gender stereotypes and reinforces socially-constructed gendered stereotypes, which is the reason why "some surrogacy arrangements are more acceptable than others, that is, some deviate from gender norms whereas others conform" (Roach Anleu 1990: 64). Thus, for instance, altruistic surrogacy arrangements between sisters are generally accepted and even praised, since they conform to "female gender norms of altruism, affection, self-sacrifice, and concern for others' needs" (Roach Anleu 1990: 68). Commercial surrogacy, on the other hand, is construed as being unnatural, as "agreeing to become pregnant for money is seen to reflect pragmatic, selfish, mercenary and instrumental motives—the antithesis of the female role" (Roach Anleu 1990: 71).

I would like to draw on this distinction in my reading of *The House of Hidden Mothers* and the ambivalent responses that the novel has received from critics—as previously mentioned. Syal refuses to openly condemn commercial surrogacy in India and this might be behind some of the adverse responses the novel has received. Indian women who resort to surrogacy as a means of survival are constructed in the western collective imagery as mere victims. Their depiction as self-assertive women who opt for surrogacy goes against presuppositions and becomes a deviation of gender norms. Yet, *The House of Hidden Mothers* challenges an initial reading of Indian surrogate mothers as passive victims of western capitalist demands by presenting a surrogate mother, Mala, who subverts her position as disempowered and ends up, in a fairytale-like twist, winning Todd and occupying Shyama's place. In fact, at the end of the novel Shyama contemplates her former



partner and the child who should have been hers happily living together with Mala: "And then she [Mala] joined them, a sudden brushstroke of colour on the dun landscape in a sari of pink and blue, a basket under her arm. An exotic flower transplanted to this harsh soil, but she seemed to have taken root and thrived" (Syal 2015: 417).

Such a vision of a thriving Mala who has perfectly adapted to her new surroundings, while managing to preserve her identity, as her sari proves, is an adequate ending for a novel which constantly reinforces the connections between India and the UK.<sup>2</sup> These materialize through a depiction of the similar experiences of both Indian and British women in terms of female exploitation and are not only present in the main plot but feature as an undercurrent throughout the novel. This does not entail that this paper should fall into a Eurocentric reading of the novel by which the oppression of women in India is fully equated to that of women in the UK, thus overlooking other factors such as class and power (im)balances. On the contrary, I propose to read the novel as one of the literary reviewers mentioned at the beginning of the paper described it, as "a profound study of the female condition in the rich world and the poor" (Alibhai-Brown 2015). In this light, I read *The House of Hidden Mothers* as a literary effort to bridge the western-constructed gap between 'poor and disempowered' Indian women and 'rich and empowered' British ones. Said gap is explicitly bridged through the novel's ending but also implicitly by the author's engagement throughout the novel, with gender concerns related to the perception and (re)presentation of women's bodies in the United Kingdom. In particular, the novel addresses topics related to beauty ideals, the ageing process and sexual abuse.

## **Female Bodies under Abuse**

Shyama and her best friends, Priya and Lydia, are coming to terms with their ageing process. From the very beginning the novel describes them as well-off and educated mature women: "women *d'un certain* âge, maturing like fine wine or expensive cheese, ripening into what might be regarded in some cultures as their prime years, when the children had flown the nest, the husband had mellowed" (Syal 2015: 5, emphasis in original); yet, the three of them are struggling to accept their bodies and not to fall prey to western demands of beauty. It is not by chance that Shyama owns a beauty salon where women, as she reflects, undertake beauty treatments not for themselves but in order to please their partners and perform according to social demands: "Who is this for? For someone who has not seen my worth for many years? For myself? How can I justify spending money on apricot scrubs and French manicures when I willingly lay my face in the dirt as soon as he

walks through the door?” (84-85). Priya is undoubtedly trapped by the beauty myth, as she is “vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air” (Wolf 2002: 14); so much so, that she opted for elective Caesareans at the time of her two children’s birth and lied about the real reasons for her choice: “Shyama suspected the real emergency had been Priya’s panic at the thought of having her vaginal cavity as big as a bucket. ‘Too Punjabi Princess to push’ should have been written on her admittance form” (Syal 2015: 86). For her part, Shyama praises Lydia’s slender body and associates it with the fact that “she’d never endured the irreparable car crash of childbirth” (73). Lydia’s childlessness and Priya’s birthing decisions are shown not to be the result of free will, but the consequence of socially-motivated pressures on the female body. Moreover, Shyama’s own feelings of failure stemming from her regret that “she had ended up not giving birth naturally” (86) further point to the unceasing pressures and scrutinizing control women are subjected to: “certainly her NCT teacher had made a point of congratulating all the mummies who’d managed to squeeze their babies out without medical intervention” (86). This control regarding every aspect of their female bodies is particularly exacerbated in relation to women’s (un)reproductive roles.

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Syal’s novel constantly reminds the reader of the textuality of the body, of the subtle and direct ways in which women’s bodies are continuously inscribed with meanings, of how “one and the same message, inscribed on a male and female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text” (Grosz 1994: 156). *The House of Hidden Mothers* unveils corporeal social inscriptions that particularly affect women and in so doing opens up the possibility of tracing, questioning and subverting their oppressiveness. Furthermore, the novel examines ageing discourses by recounting the ways in which Shyama’s clients and friends ineffectively attempt to fight the passing of time, as they perceive ageing in negative terms; moreover, the novel suggests that “women are more affected by agism than men” (Falcus 2013: 19). The space of Shyama’s salon becomes a trope which reinforces discourses on ageing as a decline (Gullette 2004: 37) that has to be feared and countered. Ageing is constructed as a loss or a deprivation through “descriptions of the ageing body as a frail, leaky and unbounded body and assertions that old age is characterised by non-productivity and increasing passivity and dependency” (Sandberg 2013: 11). Lydia’s jokes about the fact that they “were passing into [their] next and maybe most important phase of life —the powerful matriarchal elder, the badly behaved granny, take your pick” (Syal 2015: 6) read as a refusal to accept her ageing process. As is stated in the novel: “nowadays no one had to have a real menopause. You could just ignore it, take the drugs which keep a woman’s body in a permanent state of faux fertility and parade around in hot chick’s clothing, long after the eggs had

left the building" (6). Yet, Shayma's frantic attempt to become a mother and present herself to the world as still fertile and young displays her will to counter the loss that is associated with ageing menopausal female bodies which are "linked not only to the loss of reproductive capacity but also to the assumed loss of both sexual desirability and sexual desire" (Sandberg 2013: 28). Shyama's maternity search is presented in the narrative as another form of gender oppression, an undeniably more subtle form of oppression than that to which poor Indian women are subjected through surrogacy yet another instance of subjugation whereby women's bodies are alienated and re/constructed to fit the demands of patriarchal capitalism.

A clear example of the gender oppression suffered by women in India and the United Kingdom alike is evident in the sexual assault experienced by Shyama's daughter, Tara, in England perpetrated by her friend. This assault prompts her going to India to film a documentary about the New Delhi-based women's activist group called Shakti for her dissertation (Syal 2015: 328): "for Tara, this trip was some kind of absolution. She needed to purify herself and the only way to do it was to give something pure back, balance the abusive act she had endured by fighting abuse elsewhere" (329). The constant references to the sexual abuse of women both in the UK and in India culminate in Syal's inclusion of the horrendous gang rape of Nirbhaya, also known as India's Daughter, on a New Delhi bus on December 16, 2012 and her eventual death in Singapore on December 29. These instances of sexual abuse reinforce one of the main motifs in the novel: the physical violence endured by women at different levels both in the United Kingdom and in India: women who fall prey to beauty ideals, women who undergo physically and emotionally exhausting fertility treatments, women who are objectified as wombs, as commodities to be bought within a capitalist mode of production in a globalized economy.

It is not arbitrary, then, that Mala compares the procedure by which her body is going to be examined to make sure it is viable for surrogacy to a previous sexual assault experienced on a bus:

Mala lay stiffly on the examination couch, watching anxiously as the doctor woman picked up thin latex gloves, flexing her fingers in preparation. Then she understood those fingers would be going inside her, tapping, pushing, probing. Would it feel as bad as being on the crowded bus to town? The last time Mala had undergone that journey, to buy some *barfi* for Pogle sahib's newborn grandson, she had been shocked by the level of violation. Not just above her clothing but under it, pincer fingers pinching her nipples, fingers so determined and angry they pushed inside her, dragging her trouser material with them, sending hot darts of pain through her trembling legs. She had screamed out and looked around, at the circle of men around her. (Syal 2015: 169, emphasis in original)

Mala's female body is a site of gender exploitation portrayed by Syal as being exercised by men and women alike; first by Dr. Passi, the female specialist who makes a business out of the exploitation of other women and displays no empathy or qualms about the fact that she is participating in the gender oppression of her peers and, thus, catches "herself sometimes regarding the surrogates almost as an alien race, their lack of education and opportunities, and their diminished status as women so far from her own experiences" (123); secondly by Indian men; finally by the western couple who will eventually violate her body-space with the seed of their union.

As Syal depicts it in *The House of Hidden Mothers*, Toby feels uneasy about Dr. Passi's approach when shown the available surrogate mothers' catalogue and Shyama displays a pragmatic attitude: "Did she [Dr. Passi] really say 'browse'? Like we're going shopping?' 'Yup'. Shyama sighed, already surfing the Indian Donor section and wondering if ticking the Graduate Only option made her a fascist or a realist" (2015: 180). While still in the United Kingdom, Shyama is worried about the criticism she might receive for resorting to this form of motherhood and sees herself as a neo-colonial agent who exercises a new form of oppression on Indian soil parallel to that of Imperial Britain: "What would they think of her now, her old lefty student friends, coming back as a fertility tourist? Was she now the colonial memsahib? The benevolent bringer of bounty, or the ruthless trader, smiling her way back home?" (118). Yet, through Tara's views regarding her mother's decision, Syal exonerates Shyama and offers an ambivalent description of western intended mothers: "'it's women once again exploiting other women!' Tara hissed back. 'Mainly because they want to keep some man happy. Mum is not doing this because she wants another kid, she's doing it so Toby won't leave her for somebody younger'" (296). With this statement, Syal is challenging a perception of western women who resort to surrogacy as oppressors and presents them as victims of gender stereotypes and social pressures regarding motherhood, thus presenting surrogacy as a multi-layered matter.

## **Reproductive Outsourcing as Female Exploitation in India**

In the novel, Shyama, aged 48, is unable to conceive children with her partner Toby. Her male doctor, Mr. Lalani, describes her womb as "inhospitable" (Syal 2015: 10) and objectifies her from the very beginning by perceiving her as a container rather than a subject. This description of Shyama as a being who has lost her subjectivity forces the reader to question any preconceived ideas about the position of superiority in which the western intended mother is located in comparison to the Indian surrogate one. It places both women as objects of male

scrutiny, and of (male) medical discourse, while portraying them as mere containers of life. As Iris Marion Young argues: "pregnancy does not belong to the woman herself. It is a state of the developing foetus, for which the woman is a container; or it is an objective process coming under scientific scrutiny; or it becomes objectified by the woman herself as a 'condition' in which she must 'take care of herself'" (2005: 46). In this case, Shyama is a hostile container and, as such, she is objectified as the woman who cannot bear life. Mala, for her part, will become the objectified being to whom the couple resorts in order to 'produce' their child, thus decentering the subjectivities of both women in a parallel way.

*The House of Hidden Mothers* opens in a fertility clinic in London and condemns stereotypes about India and the UK from the very beginning. Shyama enters the clinic and, while queuing, observes the woman in front of her, whom she describes as wearing a perfume which is "woody and expensive, blended with a scent she recognized intimately, a musky aroma with a bitter undertone: the familiar smell of desperation" (Syal 2015: 1). This reference to a desperate woman is a direct connection to the main elements of the plot, Shyama's futile quest to become pregnant and Mala's frantic efforts to leave India, which she eventually achieves by deceitfully playing the western-fitting image of the abused Indian woman in need of rescuing.

Shyama's description of the receptionist, for its part, points further towards the connection between India and the United Kingdom that pervades the whole novel, thus helping readers from the start to question clichés associated with the East versus West debate:

Then Shyama spotted her earrings: silver discs with the Hindu symbol 'Om' engraved on the surface. [...] There was a moment of hesitation while Shyama considered commenting on those earrings. But that would spark a conversation about where Shyama came from and yes, she was Hindu, but no, born here, and no, she hadn't been to half the ancient sites that Miss Cupcake had visited, and yes, isn't it humbling that the Indian poor have so little yet they would give you their last piece of chapatti and, despite living knee-deep in refuse, how on earth do they always seem so happy? (Syal 2015: 2)

For Indian women living in rural villages accepting to be surrogate mothers becomes a life-changing event; not only on a physical level, but also on a material and economic one, due to the money they are given from the intended parents, the care they receive in clinics while pregnant and the 'respect' of their husbands who now perceive them as valuable breadwinners. This is the case of Seema, the first woman in Mala's village who mysteriously disappears when there are early signs of pregnancy and returns back from the city, months later "in a taxi, she and the children in new outfits, still with the price sticker on the soles of their chappals.

[...] Days later, the first of the expensive treasures began arriving” (Syal 2015: 38). As portrayed in *The House of Hidden Mothers*, the economic advantages of accepting surrogacy are huge: surrogate mothers can not only afford new clothes but also a “tip-top luxury silver fridge that got tongues wagging again, soo-soo-soo, all over the village” (33). Yet the experience brings about consequences in Seema’s case: “Mala could see that Seema had left something of herself behind, as if the city had nibbled quietly, softly at her plump corners, and everything fat and *free* about her had been swallowed up” (38, emphasis added). Seema is no longer free, as she is trapped by the services of her fertile body which is well able to fulfil the capitalist demands of western intended parents.

Nonetheless, Syal’s novel challenges a reading of Indian surrogate mothers as passive victims of western capitalist demands. More than that, *The House of Hidden Mothers* presents a surrogate mother, Mala, who constantly subverts her position as a disempowered, ‘third world’ woman. Non-arbitrarily, Mala is presented from the very beginning of the narrative as a resourceful woman who is able to play the role imposed on her to her own advantage. It is Ram, Mala’s husband, who makes the initial decision to resort to surrogacy and, consequently, forces Mala to be photographed with Seema’s children as if they were their own: “Only when Ram made Mala do the photograph did she know it was going to happen. He had borrowed a cell phone from Pogle Sahib’s son and made her stand outside their house with Seema’s children under each arm, their little chicken faces staring out from under her wings” (Syal 2015: 164). The photo becomes the proof of her alleged previous motherhood: “And I look like a mother, their mother, thank God” (167); moreover, it allows Mala to cheat the system. After taking the photo, they both improve the fake narrative of their false parenthood by adjusting Mala’s age. But from then on, it is Mala who displays the courage, level-headedness and witticism her husband notably lacks:

They had worked it out, so she could have been seventeen when she gave birth to Seema’s eldest. Ram was more nervous than her, his leg jiggling beneath the desk. Mala kicked him, catching his ankle. God, *chalo*, be a man and stare straight back at her, what can she prove? Everyone knows we don’t have paperwork where we come from and she needs us to make money for her, understand? (167, emphasis in original)

Mala is well aware of the business transaction they are undertaking and of the fact that she is a much needed link in the commercial chain: “She [Dr. Passi] needs us to make money for her” (Syal 2015: 167). Mala’s strength is reinforced through the way in which she perceives her husband once she is already pregnant with Toby’s child: “she saw nothing she did not expect: not anger, not violence, but a fearful sorrow. A man burnt by the sun and thinned by hard labour, staring at this

wife, knowing he would never understand her and could not control her, so what else remained?" (226-227). The answer to this rhetorical question is Mala's subsequent action; playing the role of the victimized woman, Mala makes Toby and Shyama believe that Ram behaves violently towards her: "Ram never meant to hit her. In fact, he still wasn't sure that he actually had. [...] One minute his hand was in the air, the next Mala was lying curled up on the floor, clutching herself and screaming loudly enough for the red-hair woman and her blond *chamcha* to come running" (228). Toby instinctively protects Mala in a scene that reproduces the well-known quotation from Spivak's seminal article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in relation to the practice of sati: "white men seeking to save brown women from brown men" (1988: 305), which Syal also incorporates in her narrative through the character of Dhruv, the young man Tara befriends in India (2015: 342). As Spivak goes on to state, "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation the figure of the woman disappears" (1988: 306). *The House of Hidden Mothers* might be read as a literary exercise by which the figure of the surrogate woman, as a subject, does not disappear in this economic transaction, nor is she rescued by white men and women or by legislation, but presents herself as an agent who (re)acts and implements change from her own initial position of perceived enforced 'subalternity'.

Mala epitomizes the transition from being an object controlled by others to becoming a subject of her own life. Mala travels to England with Shyama and Todd, displays an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, further improves her English, though in India "she [already] could read and write [...] so well, top of her class everytime" (Syal 2015: 68), and perfectly adapts to her new environment: "it was surprising how quickly Mala settled into the routine at Surya Beauty Salon" (307). Mala helps Shyama in the salon creating natural beauty products in the form of facial scrubs and body lotions and realizes her potential freedom from the moment she clutches her passport, wanting to "press it to her nose and inhale the newness and promise of its leathery smell" (255). It might read as problematic that Syal chooses to present the United Kingdom as the land of opportunity for Mala, since this could be interpreted as a return to a representation of the western world as the location which offers the possibility of advancement and progress —were it not for the fact that the novel presents India as the place where Shyama's daughter, Tara, fully recovers from her experience of sexual abuse, and forecasts a promising future in India for Tara, Dhruv and their soon-to-be-born baby.

*The House of Hidden Mothers* crosses Tara's and Mala's lives over thus offsetting the "West versus East" moral balance. The United Kingdom is not portrayed as a liberating place where women enjoy freedom and equality; neither is India portrayed as a gendered oppressive location. In fact, Syal's narrative presents both

places as spaces where experiences are “still to come, unknown and unnamed, waiting to be lived” (2015: 419). Through this final last sentence, the novel provides an open ending in which India and the United Kingdom alike offer the female protagonists the possibility of starting anew and firmly rooting a sense of identity and belonging. The novel undoubtedly raises questions about surrogacy in India as a neo-colonial practice by which women’s bodies are used as sites of reproductive exploitation and babies become commodities to be exchanged in a globalized market economy. However, Syal’s narrative forces readers to challenge both preconceived ideas about surrogacy and, by addressing themes such as ageing and sexual abuse, the novel also calls into question a supposedly achieved female liberation in the United Kingdom, while simultaneously problematizing the duality First-Third World woman. Throughout the novel, Syal deploys a humorous tone to push moral and ethical boundaries with the aim of unsettling and redrawing them and, in so doing, aligns her new literary accomplishment with her previous achievements as a comedian and actress. On the whole, the novel emphasizes the impending need to consider surrogacy as a multi-layered and multifaceted matter when passing judgment on this form of motherhood/parenthood.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. The research for this article was conducted as part of the research project “The Politics, Aesthetics and Marketing of Literary Formulae in Popular Women’s Fiction: History, Exoticism and Romance” (FFI2016-75130-P) (AEI/FEDER, UE).

<sup>2</sup>. This reference is reminiscent of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2004) which ends with Nazneen ice-skating in a Sari (492), a powerful trope for her negotiation of a new hybrid British-Asian identity.

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