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Mother Machine: ‘*Not the true parent is the woman’s womb*’.¹

Margaret Atwood’s
The Handmaid’s Tale

Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.²

Money talks. If you have money, you’re going to have a baby. I believe in this type of science. I believe in family balancing, gender selection, selecting out abnormal embryos, using egg donors, sperm donors, this is what I do. I love what I do. The ultimate goal here is bringing happiness for someone.³

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) describes how fertile women are imprisoned and forced to give birth to children for the ruling class in the theocratic republic of Gilead. In 1985 this hypothetical scenario seemed to be an exaggerated and spectacular horror story. We recognise many of the government-sanctioned traditions in Gilead as amplifications, parodies or literal interpretations of stories and prayers in the *Old Testament* in the *Bible*. Atwood uses several fascists, fanatical and religious systems from history in the structure of her fictive society and bases the novel’s questionable activities on historical religious and ideological practices found in various parts of the world.⁴

The Handmaid’s Tale could be read as social criticism, where women are oppressed in the cruelest of ways. However, the actual context when Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* was that President Ronald Reagan ruled the White House and conservative Christian morals were on the rise throughout America. Atwood stated in an interview that: “*The Handmaid’s*

Tale seemed to gather additional credibility with the subsequent rise of the Moral Majority there, the Presidential candidacy of Pat Robertson and the sexual and financial imbroglios of various television ministries.”⁵ This conservative movement, which evangelical personality Jerry Falwell dubbed the ‘moral majority’, opposed such expressions of personal freedom as an individual’s right to practise homosexuality or a woman’s decision to choose a career rather than a family and life at home.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood exaggerates and projects these conservative values and combines them with the puritanical ethos of Gilead to create an authentic and immediately forthcoming society. The actions carried out in Gilead, such as the hangings and manner of dress, are inspired by those of the puritanical colonies. The crimes for which people are punished in the novel, such as homosexuality or performing abortions, were inspired by the opinions of the ‘moral majority’. The novel could also be read as criticism of the totalitarian and fascist systems of the past, placed in a surrealistic American context. It is a novel that portrays misogynous conditions and women’s situations that have become increasingly problematic. At some point, society has reverted to a cruel oppression of women, where a functioning uterus is their only hope and their greatest curse. On some occasions the protagonists ask themselves how they could have missed the signs and the preparations.⁶

The Handmaid’s Tale became an important feminist novel in the 1980s and 1990s. Read as a metaphor it is a strong story and regarded as one of Atwood’s most important novels. However, in 1985 it was not obvious that the novel could or would be read as a serious criticism of a possible future condition. But something happened to bring the novel back to a new time and a new reality. When cable television company HBO produced a TV series based on the book in 2017 (Season 2, 2018, Season 3, 2019, continuation follows) the socio-political reality had changed, in that women around the world were now being paid to function as artificial wombs.

When *The Handmaid’s Tale* became a successful TV series it also became an iconic story of misogyny. Women started to wear similar outfits as those in the series – the handmaids’ red uniforms – when demonstrating and protesting in courts about the right to free abortion. Almost in an instant, the red uniform and white hat – with wings to narrow the field of vision – became iconic. The idea is that most people will recognise what the uniform represented, and the kind of oppression that women are protesting against.

Surrogate motherhood that has been systematised by the state is at the

core of Atwood's fictional world of Gilead. Fertility has decreased dramatically in that society and the men of Gilead rule the roost in an old-fashioned, patriarchal way. The male leaders matter-of-factly assume that infertility is due to female deficiencies and that wives who are barren must become mothers in order to fulfil their life's calling. The solution is to force young and fertile women to become slaves to the ruling patriarchs so that they can bear and give birth to their children and, in so doing, benefit the system.

I discuss commercial surrogacy in relation to a mindset I call *male pseudo-generation*.⁷ I argue that behind some of the debates concerning modern reproductive techniques as well as surrogacy, uncomfortable, old, misogynic ideas are reappearing with a new technological twist that fits modern society. Arguments based on previous mindsets are activated and updated by for example changing the content of words like 'mother', 'father' and 'parenthood', which in turn changes the importance of parental relationships in discussions about surrogacy. Above all, the connections between biology and human individuals dissolve into nothingness in pro-surrogacy debates.

Erich Fromm's statement from 1956 in *The Forgotten Language* can be an interesting thought to take into account during this journey into thoughts about surrogacy in fiction, theory and reality:

In order to defeat the mother, the male must prove that he is not inferior, that he has a gift to produce. Since he cannot produce with a womb, he must produce in another fashion; he produces with his mouth, his word, his thought.⁸

Some of the thought patterns that have run through history and up to today are studied in relation to the ideas in Atwood's novel.

When we talk about surrogacy, we mean the practice of paying a woman to have an embryo transferred to her womb and bear the child for someone else. The practice, known as gestational surrogacy, has been growing steadily over the last decades, although in many countries it is still illegal. The text examples provided in the chapter come from religion and literature and show how different writers from a wide range of historical periods have envisioned other forms of reproduction than what is regarded as a 'normal' procedure by a man and woman. As the range of fertility options that are open to clients have diversified, so have their requests.

Commercial surrogacy is the ultimate outsourced labour. The female body has again become a commodity on a worldwide scale and so have

babies. It should go without saying that it is poor(er) people who provide services to well-off people: “Women of the South [...] are increasingly reduced to numbers, targets, wombs, tubes and other reproductive parts by the population controllers”, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva wrote in the early days of IVF.⁹

Hence, the third millennium is the time when an ancient male dream has finally become reality: “Birth may from fathers, without mothers, be”, Aeschylus described.¹⁰ I analyse the perspectives of female writers, philosophers, and novelists in order to discuss the dreams, fears and hopes that are played out in theory and fiction concerning ideas about the reproductive practices that are now part of our everyday reality – and are spreading. That is, a mindset that imagines it possible and/or desirable to separate women and childbirth.

Old thought patterns are thus brought into the future. What takes place today can be seen as the result of an enduring male dream, a specific mindset called male pseudo-generation, and I want to discuss how ideas forego reality in the area of reproduction. To do this, surrogate motherhood is considered a business in the area of consumption, and as a product of a long, historic, male pseudo-generative dream and fantasy.¹¹ The intention is to emphasise that women’s bodies have been considered as possible assets in economic and social trade transactions throughout history. Women give new life to families and societies and simultaneously, there is this long history of depriving women of actual, social and mental rights in connection with the same. In debates about surrogacy, women’s existential, physical, and mental experiences of carrying and giving birth to a child, are consequently ignored, excluded, under-described or distorted.

The Handmaid’s Tale

The totalitarian state Atwood created, is based on various elements from extreme Christian sects, and an old story from *Genesis* is resurrected and reproduced. One of the most important cornerstones in the state of Gilead is a story in *Genesis* chapter 12, in which the patriarch Abraham is childless because his wife Sarah is barren. Sarah’s solution to the problem is to allow her handmaid, Hagar, to conceive a child with her husband and ruler Abraham:

16:1 Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. 16:2 And Sarai said unto

Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I maybe obtain children by her, And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai 16:3 And Sarai Abram's wife took her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. 16:4 And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw she that had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes¹²

Gilead's regime legitimises and motivates the captivity and slavery of women with reference to the Bible, which is regarded as the Word of God.

Many aspects of a handmaid's imprisonment in Gilead materialise as rituals manifesting her special status as a potential childbearing woman. The most important ritual is the procreation ceremony, which takes place in the marital bed, where Offred stretches her hands high above her head and the wife, Serena Joy, holds her hands: "each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control of the process and thus of the product. If any".¹³ During this ceremonious ritual, the connection is designed to demonstrate Serena Joy's control, even pin Offred down if necessary, and ascertain that if Offred conceives, Serena is the real mother to the child. Offred just happens to be the vessel to make it happen.

The reproductive system in Atwood's novel also echoes the mindset in Nazi reproductive programme 'Lebensborn'. This was a Schutzstaffel (SS) programme devised to propagate Aryan traits:

As early as December 13, 1934, I wrote to all SS leaders and declared that we have fought in vain if political victory was not to be followed by victory of births of good blood. The question of multiplicity of children is not a private affair of the individual, but his duty towards his ancestors and our people. The SS has taken the first step in this direction long ago with the engagement and marriage decree of December 1931. However, the existence of sound marriage is futile if it does not result in the creation of numerous descendants. (...) serves the SS leaders in the selection and adoption of qualified children. It is the honourable duty of all leaders of the central bureau to become members of the organisation 'Lebensborn e.V'.¹⁴

This programme became a reality and resulted in untold suffering for many people, mothers as well as their offspring. One of the ideologies behind the Lebensborn programme was the view that some human beings were inferior to others and that superior people could therefore treat inferiors as they wished, usually for their own benefit.¹⁵ The uniforms of the

secret service in the TV series *The Handmaids Tale* are clearly designed to make us associate with the Nazis. The men in the secret service are called 'the Eyes' and are obviously God's prolonged arms and sight – and the ruling patriarch's Eyes: 'Under His Eye' is a well-used phrase of greeting in this community.

Since the novel's release in 1985, Margaret Atwood has been repeatedly asked "the same question about *The Handmaid's Tale*: 'how did you come up with this stuff'? Her answer has always been the same, that the terrifying events of the novel all have their precedents in some of the darkest chapters in world history".¹⁶ Previous ideas, values, approaches, world views and ideas about women, men, children, families, societies and hierarchies are all visible in Atwood's novel.

Something happened in our societies that made the almost 40-year-old novel distressingly relevant. As a result, we can no longer read Atwood's novel or watch the film adaptation as imaginative horror fiction. We now know that there are enormous economic forces in reproduction companies and that important moral and philosophical questions have emerged in the wake of these. One of the many problems that arises when discussing commercial surrogacy is that the focus tends to be on whether those women who bear and give birth to rich people's babies are treated well or paid well. To show how some ideas regenerate and adapt to new technique, I discuss the concept of male pseudo-generation, because it is important to understand how old arguments and values are transformed into new times, techniques, and new generations.

Male pseudo-generation

In order to understand some of the problems with the practice of paying women to bear and give birth to children for other people, some intertexts may shed a little light in the darkness, especially when we consider that a long misogynist history has made the current situation possible. The starting point is thus earlier mindsets that have made many historical and contemporary ideas possible to realise. Male pseudo-generation is a thought tradition with deep roots, where it was imagined that men could create their own offspring and where women were simply regarded as containers.¹⁷ Perceptions that man alone can create conscious life, or an image of himself, are found in several mythological stories. In the Greek mythological tradition male gods produced offspring, which was

an argument that the mother was only a container for the man's seed. In accordance with an ancient Jewish tradition, rabbis were able to create a golem – an anthropomorphic being – that acquired bodily form and consciousness when the creator used the four basic elements and wrote God's name on its forehead.¹⁸

The gods in Greek, Judah-Christian and Norse myths, who were thought to be the creators of everything, are defined as male spiritual beings who used their words or thoughts to create and organise the world. In the Greek tradition, we have Plato's term *chora* from *Timaios*. This means that the woman is considered a container, or vessel, that passively allows the man's seed to develop inside her and become a human being.¹⁹ The same idea is communicated in *Eumenides*, written by Aeschylus in 458 BC. The order of genealogy as it is formulated emphasises that there is a substantial difference between the generative capacities of the sexes. The convincing argument is taken from the stories about gods and goddesses:

Not the true parent is the woman's womb/
That bears the child; she doth
but nurse the seed/
New-sown: the male is parent; she for him,
/As stranger
for a stranger, hoards the germ/
Of life; unless the god its promise blight./
And proof hereof before you will I set./
Birth may from fathers, without
mothers, be:/
See at your side a witness of the same,
/Athena, daughter of
Olympian Zeus,/ Never within the darkness of the womb/
Fostered nor
fashioned, but a bud more bright...²⁰

This quotation from Aeschylus, written in the 5th century BC, shows that the important message is to cut women short in the reproductive process. Mothers are simply regarded as a *chora*, where offspring can grow until they are ripe and then be born into the world and its father.

According to the Judah-Christian tradition, God formed the first human beings out of dust. Interestingly, according to *Genesis* chapter one, God created man and woman at the same time.²¹ But it is the story told in *Genesis* chapter two that has been of more theological interest.²² It was relatively easy to build patriarchal structures and lean against these ancient lines, especially when the assumption was that the words in the text were formulated by God himself. According to chapter two, Adam is created in God's image and Eve is created in Adam's image with the purpose of serving the man. When Eve comes into being, Adam has already named all beings and plants and has been taught by God how to act and behave in the new world. It is Adam who teaches Eve, and we all know how that story goes.

The woman is created by God for Adam's advantage, which means that she is inferior, and he is the one who decides what her part in the play will be.²³

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), the tradition and mindset in Genesis is both re-established and developed further. One possibility for Milton could have been to extrapolate the first chapter of *Genesis*. He does not do that, though, and the myth about the origins of mankind are reinforced with implications relating to human (read female) life. According to Milton, Adam emerges from the earth through God's ideas about him. Later, Adam dreams about Eve, wakes up and there she is next to him in paradise.²⁴ His dream has become reality. The difference between coming into existence for the male and female is similar to the description in *Genesis* chapter 2, although Milton takes the myth a step further. In Milton's narrative, God has nothing to do with Eve's coming into the world: Eve is a being completely of Adam's making. That makes her an inferior being in relation to the First Man, who is God's creation. Eve is the result of the man's desire and creative act – she does not even exist in God's imagination.²⁵

In its most extreme form, this mindset leads to the idea that a woman's "role is mainly to be a kind of incubator for the fetus, created either by the father or by a male Deity" as Margaret Clunies Ross states in *Prolonged echos*.²⁶ In a similar way, old Norse male gods were capable of creating offspring without the help of goddesses. "He be called Allfather: because he is father of all/the gods and of men, and of all that was fulfilled of him/and of his might. The Earth was his daughter and his wife;/on her he begot the first son".²⁷ This is another example of the thought manoeuvre that implies that the mother's part in creation is denied or diminished.

In science's earliest visions of what can be accomplished in laboratory experiments, male pseudo-generation is a major ingredient. One of the great projects of science was to create life without the participation of a female counterpart, and an embryo with great intelligence also emerges in the glass flask in Faust's laboratory, Homunculus.²⁸ J. W. von Goethe's *Faust II* was published in 1832 (part I in 1808). In this famous play, Wagner succeeds in creating a Homunculus as the first test-tube baby in our literary history: an intelligent being made by man. A kind of preformation theory is the basis for the idea in Goethe's play. Embryological 'theory' was presented in the 17th century by Malpighi and Leeuwenhoek, was predominant in the 18th century and later replaced by the competing idea of epigenesis. The story of Homunculus does not end there though. The end is an unexpected fusion with Galathea, a man-made woman.²⁹ However, the interesting ending of

Homunculus' existence belongs to other discussions about artificial beings. These old mythological and fictive male dreams about creating sons without being dependent on women's contributions or involvement can be said to be a dream about freedom: Men's freedom from women. Cutting off the emotional string between child and woman is essential in this process as well.³⁰

With the novel *Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus* (1818), Mary Shelley wrote what historian John Turney appoints "the governing myth of modern biology".³¹ Turney writes that Frankenstein will "remain a powerful symbol of our hopes and fears of a truly effective applied biology's ability both to break down old categories and to offer new ways of shaping our bodies, for good or ill".³² Shelley takes the narrative of the scientific male dream even further and depicts male dreams to conquer both the geographical world and the female body. Margaret Homans states that Victor Frankenstein's creative act

violates the normal relations of family especially the normal sexual relations of husband and wife. Victor has gone to great lengths to produce a child without Elizabeth's assistance, and in the dream's language, to circumvent her, to make her unnecessary, to kill her, and to kill mothers altogether.³³

The continuation of the tradition of male pseudo-generation is at the novels core: the overall goal of the scientist/male protagonist is to create life without women and as a result, women close to him dies. Homans writes that in *Frankenstein*, "women's role is to be that silent or lost referent, the literal whose absence makes figuration possible".³⁴

Anne K. Mellor argues that by removing the female body from the process of reproduction, Victor "has eliminated the female's primary biological function and source of cultural power" and in doing so reinforced a patriarchal devaluing of women's role in society.³⁵ Mellor argues that the novel is Shelley's critique of a system that encourages such a separation and results in the death and destruction of women. Frankenstein's "fear of female sexuality is endemic to a patriarchal construction of gender. Uninhibited female sexual experience threatens the very foundation of patriarchal power", Mellor argues.³⁶

Strother writes in *Speculative Sexualities and Futuristic Families: Representations of Reproduction and Kinship in Science Fiction* (2017), that Frankenstein can represent nineteenth century fears as well as contemporary fears regarding technology and the constructed body "because of the ways in which the mythology challenges the concept of 'human' which remains

in flux as continued advances in technology further blur the lines between human and machine”.³⁷ Strother claims that “*Frankenstein* has become more than just a seminal work of science fiction; it is a mythology that is ingrained into contemporary culture”.³⁸ Mary Shelley’s novel – among many other analytic possibilities of this complex novel – is an important example of possible consequences of the mindset male pseudo-generation.³⁹

History, with the help of science, has caught up with fiction, hopes and nightmares. An important novel when it comes to reproductive alternatives is Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). Here, new human beings are produced in ‘test tubes’ or, more correctly, in artificial wombs, and are scientifically engineered to fit into different parts of society’s machinery. People in this society live contented and peaceful lives and we understand that this is due to the consumption of a soothing, happiness-producing drug called *soma* that keeps people in a contented state with no desire to ask critical or existential questions.

As can be gathered from the fragments from the ancient and contemporary texts mentioned, the dream of reducing the connection between women and childbirth has been constant in our culture. When it comes to commercial surrogacy, the problematic situation accelerates. In Huxley’s novel no-one comes to any harm if we only look at the reproductive process. The artificial wombs and glass tubes make it possible to produce new people without exploiting or misusing female bodies. This also opens towards future visions about reproduction in other ways, such as narratives portraying different techniques in order to free women from the ‘reproductive burden’.

An emancipatory project or a new trap?

The idea of alternative reproductive techniques has played an important role in defining the more central aspects of gender inequality. It is constantly stated that bearing, birthing, and fostering children are unceasing obstacles for women.⁴⁰ Writers of science fiction use the genre for hypothetical thought experiments: the possibility of extra-polating and exploring alternative social structures and biological probabilities. Can new or other reproductive strategies play important roles in an emancipatory project?

One question is whether biological or technical surrogacy is a way of liberating women and sharing parenthood in ways that are not possible in a ‘normal’ reproductive sense. This is an underlying idea in science fic-

tion from women experimenting with alternative family structures and reproductive techniques. Being pregnant, bearing a child and giving birth are important activities that imprison women in their bodies and gender. As Donna Haraway writes: “Ontologically always potentially pregnant, women are both more limited in themselves, with a body that betrays their individuality, and limiting to men’s fantastic self-reproductive projects.”⁴¹ As I highlight in the introduction chapter,⁴² gender, gender structures and bodily constitutions have been debated and negotiated for several decades in terms of power, patriarchy, history, and religion. Reproduction, on the other hand, is believed to belong to the personal realm of family life. Individualistic politics strengthen the idea that families and reproduction belong to our individual and personal lives.

Female philosophers and authors have written theory and fiction as a means to propose and discuss new solutions, new possibilities and new directions for family life and reproduction. One important issue has been to investigate new and possible ways of liberating women from what is considered to be the difficult trap of reproduction. But will new family structures and/or social structures do the trick, or will we need to liberate women from reproduction altogether?

The protagonist in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* reflects over many of the problems women have faced over time. Her name as a handmaid is ‘Offred’ which is a simple way to determine which man she belongs to: His name is Fred, and her name naturally becomes ‘Of-Fred’. Offred sits naked in the bath and compares how she used to think about her body to the way she thinks about it now. Before, she experienced her body as an instrument, an extension of herself. In this passage she reflects on her body as a prisoner:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.⁴³

Offred no longer matters, even to herself, in this captivated circumstance. Her body is important only due to the ‘central object’ of her uterus, which enables her to bear a child. She reflects that it is best to “avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that

determines me so completely”.⁴⁴ Offred’s thoughts show – in an alarming way – that she has internalised Gilead’s attitude toward herself, women and their bodies. In Gilead, women are not individuals, but objects for their owners and the children they may bear. Women’s uterus are seen by the state as a ‘national resource’, using language that dehumanises women and reduces them to “a cloud, congealed around a central object, which is hard and more real than I am” as Offred puts it.⁴⁵ Hence, under difficult circumstances it may be logical to accept otherwise unacceptable conditions. It is rather like someone offering a poor woman relatively good pay for nine months of childbearing and childbirth. Under difficult circumstances it may seem a good option in spite of risks.⁴⁶

When Atwood’s novel was published, science had made great strides in areas that many women feared were serious setbacks in the progress gained and victories won during the 10-15 years previous to the novel’s publication.⁴⁷ The ongoing development in societies today, which Atwood somewhat hypothetically discussed in the 1980s and presented as difficult scenarios, have become today’s reality. In an article entitled *Problems in commercialized surrogate mothering* (1994), R. Alto Charo states that commercialized “surrogate mothering is an unworkable arrangement for helping infertile couples to have children”.⁴⁸ Charo stresses that many problems arise in this area and writes that the arrangement “requires a woman to undergo artificial insemination, to sustain a pregnancy and to relinquish the child upon birth to the genetic father”. During the pregnancy, the arrangement calls for restrictions on the surrogate mother’s behaviour and authority to make medical decisions about herself and the foetus. Such restrictions are unenforceable under contract law and the usual social mechanisms to induce compliance are absent:

Due to the large sums of money involved and the growing industry of surrogate mother brokering, efforts have begun in many state legislatures to regulate the arrangements, and in particular the behavior of the surrogate mothers, in order to increase the predictability and workability of the arrangements. If passed, these state laws could set a dangerous precedent for regulating all women during pregnancy and standardizing the behavior and medical care of pregnant women. Noncommercialized surrogate mothering does not pose these same threats and is likely to continue for many years to come.⁴⁹

Now that surrogacy has become big business, the problems that Charo highlights are also widely discussed today.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are enslaved in order to give birth for the ruling class. Fertile women are not paid in this slave society, but they avoid being killed or transported to the terrible working districts. The child-bearing women are treated extremely badly mentally but are 'cared for' when it comes to nutrition and rest because they need to be in good physical condition to give birth to healthy children.

Michele M. Moody-Adams discusses surrogacy from linguistic, legal, moral and philosophical points of view in her book *Morality, Markets, and Motherhood* (1991). She notes that some "basic reflection on rudimentary biological facts could have revealed the shortcomings in the notion that a pregnant womb is just a 'surrogate womb'".⁵⁰ Moody-Adams stresses that our discussion about the process reflects an attitude that is deeply embedded in many cultures. In the contract

a woman who signs a surrogacy agreement, some have argued, is not a surrogate *mother* at all, but rather a 'surrogate womb' or a 'surrogate uterus': In both structural and functional terms, Mr. and M parents to Baby M was achieved by a surrogate uterus and not a surrogate mother.⁵¹

It is obvious that a womb cannot have claims to the child, legal or otherwise. As long the differentiation is possible to withhold, the discussion about law and rights can be in focus. Moody-Adams finds this to be a dangerous path, yet one that is possible due to language and traditions. She also strongly emphasises that surrogacy for pay is not just another kind of reproductive technology. It involves other people and claims that the needs of those who are unable to conceive are more highly appreciated than another person's needs. Moody-Adams argues that the idea that the woman's contribution to a child's being is somehow unimportant is problematic. She writes that in these contexts it is "grossly subordinate to the man's contribution in cases of routine pregnancy, certain linguistic conventions may make it difficult to take the woman's contribution to the child very seriously".⁵² For instance, in English the word 'father' is often used as a verb to describe the consequences of one relatively brief physical act. "The verbform of the word 'mother', on the other hand, is commonly reserved only for the ongoing activity of actually nurturing the child after it is born."⁵³

This strengthens my idea that the mindset imbedded in the long traditions in religion, myths and literature has paved the way for our current situation. Myths and literature about male pseudo-generation show a surprising

degree of conformity when it comes to ideas about the roles of women and men in relation to their place in the creation hierarchy and the reproductive process. Even though women may be necessary in the bearing and birthing of new individuals, this is of secondary importance in the process. The mindset continues to argue that it is the man, the father, who is the important actor.⁵⁴

What at first sight could have been an emancipatory project now actually seems to be new traps for lots of women in our world. These traps were highlighted by Gena Cora in *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs*. She extrapolated what she saw in the mid-1980s and warned that commercial surrogacy would be the next step.⁵⁵ Maria Mies writes during the same time about the dangers connected to surrogacy she can see for poor women – and women of colour – in “New reproductive technologies: Sexist and Racist Implications” (1987).⁵⁶ Maria Mies predictions about the future have become a reality for many women some decades later.⁵⁷

In the introduction to the 2016 edition of her novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy asks: “Why write a novel like *Woman on the Edge of Time* set in the future? The point of such writing is to influence the present by extrapolating current trends for advancement or detriment.”⁵⁸ When the book was republished 40 years after the first edition, she gave a review of feminist ideology and history from the 1970s to 2016 and claimed that in the 1970s female utopias and optimism were possible and that certain changes were made. Equality on many levels of society seemed possible, and women pictured and described possible changes in society. One significant change related to the question of reproduction, given that this is one of the most important events in a woman’s life. Regardless of whether they wanted children or not, women were trapped when they became pregnant and gave birth.

Marge Piercy claims that the reason why women no longer write utopias is that 40 years later she and many other feminist writers are occupied with the struggle to defend the victories that have been achieved in earlier decades.⁵⁹ Inequality has increased when it comes to gender and class, both socially and economically, and the victories that have been won are not secured for the future. Free abortion is threatened in several states in the USA and in other countries – a frightening backlash that strikes women hard.

“Money talks: If you have money, you’re going to have a baby”

Surrogacy is big politics and big business in our time. Since there is a demand for babies, entrepreneurs make sure their customers get what they want – at a price they can afford. Exclusive goods cost more and are not for everyone. This is perfectly normal capitalism. However, and not surprisingly, it is poor and uneducated women who contribute so that production and demand can work for these special business transactions. It turns out that babies are expensive – and exclusive – goods. Surrogacy has become an important part of the modern visions of family-making and reproduction and is no longer fiction. The reproductive market and the entire enterprise are based on mindsets emerging from patriarchal ideas that can be traced back in history and literature and to ideas about reproduction, family, women’s inferiority and subordination.⁶⁰ In *Sex Robots & Vegan Meat* (2020), journalist Jenny Kleeman investigates the world of those who “are changing what it means to be human.”⁶¹ She focuses on “the central pillars of the human experience – birth, food, sex, and death”.⁶² Kleeman examines the people who are driving the innovations and claims that we are:

[...] on the brink of seismic changes in the ways we live and die, from babies grown in artificial wombs to lab-produced meat; from sex robots able to hold polite conversation (and otherwise) to being able to choose to end our days with the perfect, painless, automated death. Our journey from cradle to grave is developing in ways which involve more and more technology, and less and less human interaction. Might these advances in technology serve to rob us of our humanity?⁶³

Kleeman places scientists at the core of the problem and asks what is driving and motivating them. She finds that it is men who are behind the dreams and science and concludes that it is “a habit that’s as old as the hills”.⁶⁴

Jenny Kleeman’s article in *The Guardian* (2020), “Having a child doesn’t fit into these women’s schedule: is this the future of surrogacy?”, is an interview with Dr. Vicken Sahakian who specialises in surrogacy. According to Dr. Sahakian, a growing number of women turn to his clinic for what is called ‘social surrogacy’. Dr. Sahakian claims to see an “increase in patients avoiding pregnancy or time off work by paying someone else to carry their baby – with no medical need to do so.”⁶⁵ There is no medical reason for them to use a surrogate, they simply choose not to be pregnant. They conceive by means of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and then hire another woman to gestate

and give birth to their baby. “I don’t have issues with it,” says Dr. Sahakian smiling at the journalist: “If you’re a 28-year-old model or an actor and you get pregnant, you’re going to lose your job – you *will*. If you want to use a surrogate, I’ll help you.”⁶⁶ If his clients are open to using other people’s eggs, sperm or uteruses and are prepared to pay, anything is possible. Dr. Sahakian’s clients have one important thing in common: they can afford his services. The price tags are related to the financial status of the surrogate mother and the financial and technological status of her home country.

Companies specialising in surrogacy have access to a massive advertising industry to sell their products. They both promise and reassure their potential customers that surrogacy is a totally safe transaction and that it is financially possible to achieve the dream of a family. In several articles published in *The New York Times* we can read heartbreaking stories about couples and their problems with surrogacy, bureaucracy and how it all went wrong.⁶⁷ These articles describe one of the main reasons for my concern about surrogacy: “Those able to pay [...] often turn to an American agency in a state where surrogacy is legal and fairly widely practiced. Those with less money often go to India or to Mexico [...] that advertise heavily and charge less than half the American price.”⁶⁸ What is upsetting in this article is that couples often become victims of fraud, that the surrogacy agency lacks accountability and that the agency’s “ability to prey on vulnerable clients who want a baby so badly that they do not notice all the red flags”.⁶⁹ The possible difficulties for the surrogate mother, due to economic or other results of the fraud, are not mentioned. Why should they even mention her? The surrogate mother is only a vessel to fulfil the needs of people paying for a service. Jenny Kleeman states:

We are on the brink of an age when technology will redefine ... the fundamental elements of our existence. [...] you are left dismayed not so much by what lies ahead as by the current reality of the men with planet-sized egos vying with one another to control birth, food, sex and death. It’s a habit that’s as old as the hills.⁷⁰

Once again, poor women are mainly considered as reproductive entities that can be used or exploited by rich people from countries that already have a considerable history of colonialism and exploitation.⁷¹ It is the ultimate in outsourced labour.⁷² Dr. Sahakian stated that a few years ago he presided over a handful of social surrogacy cases a year. Now, he sees at least 20: “More and more every year. And if I’m seeing that, there are so

many reproductive endocrinologists in the area who are very competent fertility specialists – I’m sure they are seeing the same.” It costs \$150,000 to have a baby this way. Dr. Sahakian continues: “If social surrogacy was more affordable, more women would be doing it, absolutely. There’s an advantage to being pregnant, the bonding, I understand that, and from experience I can say that most women love to be pregnant. But a lot of women don’t want to be pregnant and lose a year of their careers.”⁷³ Some decades ago, this would have been classified as science fiction. While the price tag is much higher than that for babies bought in developing countries, it is still rich men and women who buy the bodies of women who are much less well off.

The old dream of creating life without the help of women has thus changed in our time. The dream is now shared by women who also see the possibility of ‘having children’ without the need to be pregnant or give birth themselves. Some women argue that it is a way of finding paid work. Amrita Pande, an Indian sociologist, feminist ethnographer, published the first detailed ethnographical study of the transnational surrogacy industry in India. Her book *Wombs in Labour* was published in 2014, Pande analyses surrogacy from all conceivable angles in order to explain and understand what is going on in this difficult business where female bodies and babies are the goods traded. Pande uses the term ‘mother worker’ to explain how women are trained and recruited into the surrogacy industry.⁷⁴ In an article, “Commercial Surrogacy in India: Manufacturing a Perfect Mother-Worker”,⁷⁵ she writes that the “perfect surrogate – cheap, docile, selfless, and nurturing – is produced in the fertility clinics and surrogacy hostels”. The perfect surrogates are not ready, but can be produced:

When one’s identity as a mother is regulated and terminated by a contract, being a good mother often conflicts with being a good worker, which makes the perfect surrogate subject rather difficult to produce. It requires a disciplinary project that works both discursively—through language and metaphor—and through the materialization of discourses in the form of enclosures, or surrogacy hostels. By bringing together insights from feminist literature on factory work and global production, I argue that through the various stages of the disciplinary process a new mother-worker subject is produced, a subject similar to a trained factory worker but one who is simultaneously a virtuous mother. At each stage of the disciplinary process, the mother-worker duality is manipulated in ways that most benefit the mode of production, from the recruitment of guilt-ridden mothers to the disciplining of poor, rural, uneducated Indian women into the perfect mother-workers for national and international clients.⁷⁶

The struggle for surrogacy takes place in the narratives and in the language. What is interesting in this text is that Pande wants the reader to associate surrogacy with factory work, or other kinds of labour. The choice of words and metaphors are important parts of Pande's argumentation and narrative: the 'good worker', 'disciplinary project', 'disciplinary process', 'a new mother-worker subject', 'similar to a trained factory worker' and 'simultaneously a virtuous mother'. Finally, she reaches the point: which is to 'benefit the mode of production'. Pregnant bodies, birth-labour and blood are not visible in the narrative.

Kutte Jönsson uses a strategy similar to the one described by Pande in his dissertation, namely "through language and metaphor"⁷⁷ make the reader forget what is at stake. In *The Forbidden Motherhood: A Moral Philosophical Study of Surrogacy* the following question and answer form the main topics of the study: "Can a legal prohibition of surrogacy be morally justified? My answer is simple – no".⁷⁸ One of Jönsson's main arguments is that

in favour of permitting surrogacy is based on the idea that the state should be value neutral when it comes to adult persons' life choices. It means that every adult member of the society has a right to decide what to do with his or her body without state interference, as long as the actions do not interfere with the equal right of others. In not allowing surrogacy, the state impedes the principle of self-government.⁷⁹

Jönsson argues that commodification does not imply degradation: "I argue that paid surrogacy can favour many women. Moreover, for many women paid surrogacy can be a manoeuvre for transcending traditional gender roles. In fact, one can argue that there is something antipatriarchal about paid surrogacy." In his dissertation, it is clear that who defines the words also defines the outcome of the surrogacy debate: Jönsson defines pregnancy as a job among other jobs and argues that this is not necessarily a bad thing: "On the contrary, a more liberal reproductive ideology would widen our liberty".⁸⁰ He also attempts to describe surrogacy as a possible act of female liberation.

In *Being and Being Bought: Prostitution, Surrogacy and the Split Self* (2010), Kajsa Ekis Ekman decodes an alarming new language in which children become a commodity or a 'product'. Conceptual shifts and abstractions turn oppression into freedom and the female body is (again) a commodity.⁸¹ Ekis Ekman continues the argumentation that Gena Cora started in her book *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial*

Insemination to Artificial Wombs (1986). The difference is that during the decades between Cora's warning about a possible outcome of the technology she investigated, it has become a reality that Ekis Ekman can discuss based on real practice.

The debate in Sweden has become highly polarised. Paediatrician Inge-mar Kjellmer claims that the wishes of childless adults have been taken too much into account. Apart from the risks of custody disputes and an uncertain legal status for the child, the claim that it is good for children to be born through surrogacy is exaggerated. The reasoning about the difference between altruistic and commercial surrogacy has been simplified. Furthermore, Kjellmer argues that "through insidious language"⁸² the reader of the report is led "towards an overly permissive attitude towards new ways of manipulating the way of 'having children'".⁸³

"Faith in the creative powers of the imagination"⁸⁴

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it really isn't about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing.⁸⁵

Rosa Braidotti writes that human embodiment and subjectivity are "currently undergoing a profound mutation".⁸⁶ She writes that "like all people living in an age of transition, we are not always lucid or clear about where we are going, or even capable of explaining what exactly is happening to and around us".⁸⁷ Braidotti argues for what she calls a 'post-human ethics', and claims that "faith in the creative powers of the imagination" is decisive and that conceptual "creativity is simply unimaginable without some visionary fuel".⁸⁸ Based on this assumption, she argues for a posthuman ethics that departs from the conception that our bodies and lives are constantly under negotiation. Braidotti writes that as humans, "all too posthuman, these extensions and enhancements of what bodies can do are here to stay. [...] This is a new situation we find ourselves in: the immanent here and now of a posthuman planet".⁸⁹ Braidotti balances her theory and analysis between positive and negative effects, discusses the possibilities as well as the risks and, above all, is concerned about the global effects of the actions taken:

Prophetic or visionary minds are thinkers of the future. The future as an active object of desire propels us forth and motivates us to be active in the here and now of a continuous present that calls for both resistance and the counter-actualization of alternatives.⁹⁰

Braidotti argues that the yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present and that this is not “a leap of faith, but an active transposition, a transformation at the in-depth level.”⁹¹

Throughout history, as we can see in the examples used here, women’s bodies have been at the centre of countless social, political, economic and moral battles. Today, the female body is once again at the centre of political, economic and moral dilemmas, with the focus on personal and socially challenging options. Once again, we need to define what motherhood is and what carrying and birthing new life requires of the woman and what it is worth. When we discuss commercial surrogacy, motherhood is defined in cash terms and, as we know, the freedom and fulfilling of some people’s dreams always seem to come at a high price for other people. Debates about free abortion are once again a focal point in politics around the globe and highlight a battle that seem impossible to win once and for all.

At the same time, IVF techniques are debated from numerous perspectives. The raped, abused and exploited bodies of women will have to carry and give birth to these children due to the patriarchal religious doctrines and traditions of many countries – where the law and constitution are based on such values. Simultaneously, a new reproductive practice enters the stage in the name of personal freedom and possibilities for a privileged few. The possibility to use poor women’s bodies as surrogacy vessels for rich people in the west take place in the logic of a market economy. History tells us that imperialism has had long-term effects, and that commercial surrogacy is imperialistic in every sense of the word.

The novelists and theorists covered in this chapter extrapolate techniques and ideas that are topical when writing texts, fiction and facts, and discussing the implications for individual and social life. These writings have a purpose: “The point of creating futures is to get people to imagine what they want and don’t want to happen down the road – and maybe do something about it”, Marge Piercy states.⁹² The ideas presented in fiction as well as theory, say something about womanhood, parenting and how we value women, children and human life. The next generation of human beings ought to be society’s concern to a much greater extent. A society cannot continue to exist without new citizens.

In Atwood's novel the pain of the women forced to be surrogacy mothers are at the heart of the narrative. In debates about surrogacy, women's existential, physical, and mental experiences of carrying and giving birth to a child, needs to be highlighted in a way that has not yet been done in debates about surrogacy. Is it, for example, impossible to imagine how debates about surrogate motherhood would have been conducted if it were not for the ideas, we can still trace in old mindsets mentioned here? Would the discussion look different without the consistent male dream of cutting women off from the reproductive process in symbolic ways? In Margaret Atwood's novel, *Offred* wishes this for herself:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and a real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left of.⁹³

After all, the creative power of imagination can take us anywhere. The hypothesis and thought experiments of both authors and (female) theorists pondering about possible outcomes of surrogacy seem to agree that it is a difficult road to embark.

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