

Public Recognition of Surrogacy in the Handmaid's Tale and the Reality

Xinhui Ye

Nanjing Yuhuatai High School, No.8, Sixiang Lane, Qinhuai District, Nanjing City, China

Abstract: Published by Canadian author Margaret Atwood in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale*, her first dystopian novel, depicts a near-future patriarchal society practicing the legal and sacred form of reproductive surrogacy, the so-called "handmaid" system. The whole system is centered on the male Commanders- male founders of Gilead: they rape the handmaids every month, on the Ceremony, in front of their wives and servants; they dispatch the handmaids to another Commander's family once the newborn infants wean; they push this inhumane torture and autocratic trading of handmaids' wombs to the extreme edge of ethics.

Keywords: Public Recognition; Surrogacy; Handmaid's Tale; Reality

1. Introduction

Suffering from infertility due to deteriorating environmental pollution, the totalitarian theocratic Republic of Gilead coerced working-class fertile women to regard human reproduction as the top priority, even the only meaning, of their lives: the new government categorizes these women into aunts, marthas, and handmaids based on their previous "sins" (such as abortion and second marriages).

In Atwood's novel, the republic of Gilead is practicing reproductive surrogacy¹ with force; reproductive surrogacy in reality for exchange of money has been often praised to be an opportunity for infertile ones to be parents and for the lower class female to change their lives by renting their bodies. Nevertheless, as Esther Munoz Gonzalez argues, women and even the surrogate infants are just irrelevant chess pieces in the patriarchal game called surrogacy. Whereas Angela Michelle Gulick suggests the massive frustration the new republic organization has brought to Offred, and how she survives and gets used to Gilead. Reproductive Surrogacy, in reality, wanders in the gray area of ethics and laws in many countries; countries such as China had officially forbidden commercial surrogacy but have their eyes half shut on the practice of altruistic surrogacy between relatives. The conception and practice of surrogacy in *The Handmaid's Tale* are revealing and give feminists in 2021 much to worry about, especially the public recognition of surrogacy as a viable form of reproductive practice today.

2. Literature review

In her perspective essay "*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood: examining its utopian, dystopian, feminist and postmodernist traditions", Angela Michelle Gulick examines the feminist elements in the novel and claims that the protagonist Offred has experienced three stages as she integrates into her world. "During the first stage, Offred has been defined in terms of her female self, her ability to have sex and bear children. These compulsory activities determine her value as a 'female' in Gilead." (Gulick, 45-46)² In Gilead, the male Commanders initiated the Ceremony, pardoning powerful ones raping the handmaids at will while defining others betraying laws and the God if they have relationships with the handmaids. Limiting that the fathers of surrogate children must be the Commanders, this type of surrogacy is rather a display of the Commanders' powers, stepping on women's blood and dignity. Carrying out Gilead's divine organization logic that "[the handmaids] are for breeding purposes" and "it is forbidden for [the handmaids] to be alone with the Commanders" (Atwood, 148), Waterford overthrows it by secretly dating Offred, thereby showing off his powers. Women's reproductive capacities are never their choice; rather, rich men make reproductive decisions

¹ Reproductive surrogacy, an arrangement whereby a woman (the surrogate mother) agrees to bear a child for another person or persons who will become the child's parent(s) after birth, often occurs in two main ways. One way (altruistic surrogacy) aims to be profitable and one is undertaken because of a close emotional relationship and usually does not consider profit.

² Only the first step Gulick suggests is discussed here.

for all the women in the novel. The only and limited liberation that might be brought by surrogacy would belong to upper classes desiring “a complete and happy life.” For Atwood’s handmaids, surrogacy proves to be pure exploitation because women are losing dominance over their wombs; in reality, surrogacy is still exploitation of the lower classes. “If your body really belonged to you, it would surely lead to the exploitation and bullying of the weak by the strong.” (my translation) (Luo)³ In real society, if one fully owns their right to control, sell, or rent their parts of bodies, the rich would be able to buy any organs, including infants from surrogate mothers, as long as they offer a monetary price that the lower ranks have fantasized about. Further, commercial surrogacy gives individuals chances of making money from others’ wombs, in cruel ways. Anyone with wombs can be assaulted and become the commodity of trafficking while shopping or even on their way home alone; naïve and innocent girls can call the surrogacy agency from their ads in ladies’ rooms for money that does not deserve them risking health and life. While the surrogacy in Atwood’s novel has become a national custom in a coerced form, it is a trade between the handmaids and the “parents”, as Serena Joy warns Offred when she first came into Waterford’s, “As far as I’m concerned, this is like a business transaction.” (Atwood, 27) The handmaids would live in a rather comfortable physical environment and are taken care of by the marthas, resonating with the modern reproductive surrogacy.⁴ Not only the organs but also their owners are being commoditized. Without cultured education received and full acknowledgements on natural pregnancy or egg donation, which most citizens lack, the diffusion of surrogacy conception grinds female down to the second sex- worse, baby machines and animals. If surrogacy has been extensively advertised, women will continue walking towards “two legged wombs” (Atwood, 132).

3. Analysis

Esther Munoz Gonzalez asserts the real patriarchal philosophy behind surrogacy in *Two Legged Wombs: Surrogacy and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*, that “it is the most genuine patriarchal thought that leads Gilead’s commanders to desire the preservation of their own genes” (Gonzalez, 236); that who would be the biological mother does not matter. While offerring the new law, Serena Joy (Mrs. Waterford) is willing to take the risk and let Offred try with Nick since she is running out of her time in Waterford’s house. Comforting Offred that “Women do it frequently. All the time” (Atwood, 217) Serena accepts a baby from neither her nor her husband; all she wants is to become a mother during the age of infertile diseases. However, Commanders refuse to receive any child from another man, even though they would grow up in handmaids’ wombs rather than those of their wives. For Gilead’s fertility rate and future, they proclaim, the Commanders are addicted to owning not only women’s productive rights but also new generations biologically. Shadowed by racism and eugenics, reproductive surrogacy both in Gilead and in reality has been questioned regarding what is really inherited during this pregnancy. In reality, reproductive surrogacy is still the rich’s games, ruled by men. Compared to males and sperms, women and their eggs are the ones being weighed and cautiously considered, not only because of better chromosomes but also due to them being treated as “natural containers”. Whereas the intended father often appears to be the biological father, for the sake of family lineages. It is also notable that the surrogate mothers’ personalities, which should be a component of the children, are often neglected during the whole process. Rather, surrogate mothers would earn more for diplomas in famous colleges. Indeed, for “a better combination of genes”, women with higher education background and better health can be labeled with a higher price; but this is the exact prejudice and persecution on women, not only for the health and opportunity costs but also the plunge of female status. Women are officially treated as merchandises, and intended mothers are neglected by others and by themselves, for there is too little difference from which women will be the mother. Through surrogacy, females are only containers of children rather than real humans.

4. Conclusion

Not only women but also children are the chess pieces in these games. In 2020, Chinese actress Shuang Zheng and her husband Heng Zhang had decided to have two surrogate babies in the U.S. in order to keep her shape. However, Zheng ended up not wanting the infants after their birth and was disclosed attempting to abandon the infants. Abused by Chinese web users, she lost her position in the

³ LUO, xiang. *Criminal Law Explained*.2021.

⁴ Unlike altruistic surrogacy, during commercial surrogacy, the intended parents or intermediary agency would provide monetary compensation for the surrogate mothers.

entertainment businesses and any chance to come back. Rather, Heng Zhang (her husband) was praised for keeping the infants while earning more. Recognizing these essences only as a desire to enjoy the love of a complete family and propagating surrogacy are suppressing women and shackling them under patriarchy, regardless of how much, or if they get any money for surrogating. If one really desires some companionship and joy of having descendants, why not adopt children from the orphanages and save more juveniles from being abandoned?

Margret Atwood's 1985 novel is a tuning fork that rings the alarm of the feminists' even decades after its publication. The loss of female identity, the flaunt of patricentric powers, and the diffusion of eugenics during the surrogate motherhood have been slowly normalizing and being accepted by the public. Implicitly neglecting women as human beings and employing them as containers should never be a viable choice.

References

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