

Surrogacy and the Preference for a 'Normal' Child: An Analysis of Parenthood Representation in the Hindi film *Mimi*

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Abstract

Surrogacy is an effective fertility treatment using *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF). There are two types of surrogacy—traditional surrogacy and gestational surrogacy, and the latter involves monetary rewards for the surrogate mother. Many Indian films have dealt with the theme of surrogacy. One of the most recent ones is the Bollywood film *Mimi*. The film portrays the remarkable bond between a surrogate mother and her son. This research paper is an attempt to analyse how the preference for a 'normal' child gets represented in the film.

Keywords: *Disability, Surrogacy, Motherhood, Normalcy, Ableism*

Many Indian films have dealt with the theme of surrogacy. One of the most recent ones is the Bollywood film, *Mimi*, released in 2021. The film revolves around the bonding of a young woman named Mimi with her surrogate child Raj. This paper analyses the popular infatuation for normalcy represented in the film.

Surrogacy is an effective fertility treatment using *in vitro*

fertilisation (IVF). This method has helped many women attain motherhood—women without a uterus, women with uterine issues, etc. The term ‘surrogate’ originated from the Latin verb *subrogare*, which means “one appointed to act in place of another” (Merriam-Webster). It denotes a woman who conceives and delivers a child to give it to a couple who will be its parents. There are two types of surrogacy—traditional surrogacy and gestational surrogacy. In the traditional one, the surrogate mother is subjected to artificial insemination with the intended father’s sperm, making her one of the child’s genetic parents (Patel *et al.*). However, in gestational surrogacy, the surrogate mother has no biological or genetic bond with the baby she delivers. Commercial surrogacy involves monetary rewards for the surrogate mother. “Whereas in commercial surrogacy the intending parents offer a financial incentive to secure a willing surrogate, in the altruistic one the surrogate mother agrees to gestate a child for intended parents without being compensated monetarily in any way” (Voda 3).

Commercial surrogacy has been declared illegal in countries like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Before the formulation of the Surrogacy Regulation Act 2021, there was no legal restriction on surrogacy in India. Since the surrogacy procedures cost approximately five times less than the amount charged in the United States of America, many foreigners used to come to India for surrogacy (Bindel). Nevertheless, the latest Act has put restrictions on commercial surrogacy within India. According to the Surrogacy Act (2021), only a couple of Indian origin with a certificate of recommendation from the Medical Board can be eligible for surrogacy. Before the Act came into existence, couples from different parts of the world used to go to India to hire women for surrogacy.

The Hindi film *Mimi* (2021) portrays the story of the eponymous character who becomes a surrogate mother for a foreign couple. Here, we can find commercial surrogacy. Mimi Rathod is a talented dancer in Rajasthan. She aspires to be a Bollywood actress. To get the heroine’s

role in films, she wants to go to Mumbai. But she cannot afford the financial means required for fulfilling her dream. That is when the taxi driver Bhanu Pratap Pandey introduces her to John Roger and his wife, Summer Roger, from the United States of America. The American couple offers her twenty lakh rupees for being their surrogate. Though hesitant initially, Mimi finally agrees because she wants money to pursue her dream career in Mumbai. She lies to her family and stays with her friend Shama until the completion of the surrogacy contract. But in one of the medical tests conducted after five or six months, the doctor finds the probability of the baby having Down Syndrome. This information shatters the couple, particularly Summer. Immediately, they return to their country, leaving Mimi at a crucial phase. “Surrogacy cases are replete with competing interests and changed minds, leaving some infants abandoned when intended parents walk away from the contract and other infants without a gestational mother who has deeply bonded to the child” (Lahl 292). However, Mimi refuses to abort the baby. She finally gives birth to a boy who is named Raj. The film then revolves around the bond that Mimi and other people in that locality have with the four-year-old Raj.

Commercial surrogacy has always been a matter of debate in many fields—feminist, legal, ethical, and so on. In the Global South countries, surrogacy becomes a source of income for many women in the lower economic sections. It becomes “a survival strategy and a temporary occupation for some poor rural women” (Pande 5).

Surrogacy is criticised by the Marxist and feminist groups in the context of exploitation associated with surrogacy agreements/contracts and medical procedures and the power relationship existing between the parties associated i.e. the IP (also known as the contracting couple, the compounding couple) and the surrogate mother. The primary concern of the feminist critique is the exploitation of the female body. It challenges the concepts of informed consent and reproductive autonomy in the context of a patriarchal society. The feminists are skeptical about the

new reproductive technologies and argue that these technologies, rather than curing infertility, create a ‘technological fix’ to address the issue. On the other hand, the Marxist critique comes from a class analysis of the relationship between the surrogate and the IP and criticises the liberal framework of the right-based approach which hides gender and class issues (Arathi 29).

In the film, Mimi is forced to be a surrogate mother to make her dream career in Bollywood a reality. Since she has no patron to support her, surrogacy becomes the only immediate option for her. India is a country where the act of giving birth to a child is regarded as pious. Commercialising it challenges all the dominant moral codes associated with motherhood. “Keeping their engagement in surrogacy hidden from friends and family is the most common practice among surrogates” (Bailey 2). In the film, Mimi and the people around her are initially unaware of surrogacy. That is why Mimi slaps Bhanu when he tells her that the American couple wants her to conceive and deliver their baby. Later, she decides to stay away from her family until delivery. She makes them believe that she is going to perform in a big movie project that will take nine months.

The risks a surrogate woman faces extend beyond her physiology. In a society where surrogacy is still highly stigmatized, the psychological underpinnings of a surrogate’s vulnerability is high. Since reproduction and childbearing are considered private matters and confined to the institution of marriage, anything infringing on the sanctity of this normative social structure immediately becomes suspect. Surrogacy, by redefining and reconfiguring filial relations, challenges this unidimensional and linear understanding of reproduction and family (Nayak 11).

As an unmarried young woman, Mimi finds herself forced to tell a lie to her parents, who will find it difficult to understand what surrogacy is. Later, with great effort, she finally convinces her parents about how Raj was born.

Lennard J. Davis (2006) has explained human beings' penchant for the idea of normalcy. Traditionally, there was a propensity to romanticise the human body in ancient Europe. An ideal human body was treated as perfect and healthy. This 'perfect', 'normal' body was modelled on the idealised figures of mythological characters like Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty, love, and pleasure, and her Roman equivalent, Venus. However, they are only impossibly perfect forms that can be imagined. An ideal human body image is generally regarded as an impossible goal that requires superhuman effort. The words 'ideal' and 'normal' stand for something followed (or expected to be followed) by most of the population. The ideal human body image was forged from perfect figures and manifested in art and culture. The Roman author Pliny describes how the Greek artist Zeuxis attempted to paint Aphrodite using beautiful women in Crotona as his models (Davis 4). As a result, the perfect human body that everyone desires will persist as an ideal of celestial shape that is either non-existent or impossible to reach for the average individual.

In many communities, being fit and active has been regarded as the ideal, normal state pursued by most of the population. Individuals who do not adhere to social expectations are branded as deviants. As a result, the notion of 'normalcy' governs how people with disabilities are regarded in societal structure. Erving Goffman (1963) was the first to identify disability as a deviation from the social convention. There are no distinctions between normal and abnormal because everyone has some physical imperfections. The term 'normate' has been used by Garland-Thomson in her work titled *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) to describe an idealised position that has dominance and authority in society.

In *Mimi*, Summer gets emotionally devastated upon hearing from the doctor that the check-up results show early symptoms of Down Syndrome. This condition, also known as Trisomy-21, is characterised by "increased protein expression of genes & chromosome 21", which

leads to a series of effects on the growth of the brain (Torre and Dierssen 2). Summer declares she does not want to bring up a child with intellectual impairments. She insists on returning to America despite her husband's attempts to convince her. Summer does not think about what will happen to Mimi. She asks Bhanu to inform Mimi that she has the freedom to abort the baby. Mimi is extremely shocked to learn that the American couple abandoned their baby growing inside her womb. In 2014, there was news about an Australian couple leaving one of their twin children born through a surrogate woman in Thailand. The doctors had discovered that one of the twin babies would have Down Syndrome, so "she was told to abort the affected twin. She refused on religious grounds and, after the twins' birth, the Australian couple left with only the healthy girl" (Allan). Finally, she decided to raise the child who is named Gammy. According to Renu Addlakha, "commissioning parents cannot be allowed to abandon a child in the event of a disability" (Marwah and Nadimpally 216).

Attempting to abort a disabled foetus and abandoning the disabled child born through surrogacy reveal ableism. These activities are part of the eugenics movement. The idea of eugenics was that "only certain people had the right to perpetuate their genetic materials through reproduction and, therefore, reproduction should be regulated based on an individual's characteristics and endowments" (Jaeger and Bowman 34). As a result, there arise "donor pools in various places of the world deeming some genetics superior and desired and others as undesired" (Saravanan 40). The Social Darwinists postulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that human life in society was a battle for existence characterised by the survival of the fittest. According to them, the process of natural selection among humans would improve the quality of future generations. Eugenics derived its main principles from Social Darwinism. It aimed to reduce the number of individuals to be eliminated through the process of natural selection. Eugenics thus focussed on the genetic improvement of human generations. It is

a “powerful politics of normalization” (Rembis 87).

Eugenics can be divided into Positive and Negative Eugenics (Wilson, ‘Eugenics’). Positive eugenics involved public education and voluntary abstention. It was negative eugenics to which persons with disabilities were subjected. Disability was relegated as a degenerative and anti-social element. Eugenics provided “a systematic framework for averting these threats” (Wilson and St. Pierre 94). The eugenic practices included restrictions on immigration and marriage, institutionalisation, and sterilisation. Through scientific and medical methods, the non-normative bodies of disabled people were marked, measured, and classified.

In the film, Summer states that she wants a ‘normal’ baby with all the desired traits. That is why the couple rejects dark-skinned thin-bodied rural women. They find Mimi apt to be their surrogate in all aspects. Their social and cultural understandings of ability, disability and difference determine their understanding of the binaries of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ (McKinney and Lowenhaupt 316). “The American public has apparently accepted these screening technologies based on the “commonsense” assumptions that prenatal screening and selective abortion can potentially reduce the incidence of disease and disability and thus improve the quality of life” (Saxton 105). But we find Mimi as one of the “pro-lifers” who regard the foetus as a human being (Camosy 42). She goes through all obstacles and gives birth to a baby boy without any impairment. The test result could have been an example of a false positive result. Despite the rarity, 6.2% of participants in at least one study aborted their pregnancies based solely on NIPT without going to wait for conclusive invasive testing. In one case, even after an amniocentesis revealed that a foetus did not have Down syndrome, a woman was still forced to terminate the pregnancy because the false NIPT results indicated that the foetus did have Down syndrome (Own et al. 292).

Mimi gives up all her Bollywood acting aspirations to bring up her

son Raj. He becomes the apple of the eye for Mimi, her parents, Bhanu and his wife, Mimi's friend Shama and her father, and many others in the local neighbourhood. However, his white skin often made him an outsider in that locality. His friends sometimes bullied him for being different from the other children in that region. Raj and his dancermother, Mimi, get featured on social media. It catches the attention of the American couple, who then come to India after four years. John and Summer are elated and relieved that their biological son does not have Down Syndrome. Now, they want to have him back. They are not concerned with the trials and tribulations Mimi has faced to bring up the boy. They have internalised ableism.

The ableist perspective regards any impairment as unfavourable and must be cured or eradicated. According to Simi Linton (1998), ableism "includes the idea that a person's abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to non-disabled people" (9). It is a kind of oppression. As a set of values, beliefs, and practices based on abilities, ableism "reflects the sentiment of certain social groups and social structures that value and promote certain abilities, for example, productivity and competitiveness, over others, such as empathy, compassion and kindness" (Wolbring 253). We can say that ableism constitutes the failure to accept differences in ability and disability. It has often been associated with other -isms, such as racism, sexism, classism, and casteism. According to Wolbring (2008), it has been used for justifying the "hierarchies of rights and discrimination between other social groups, and to exclude people not classified as 'disabled people'" (253). Instead of accepting and celebrating disability, the ableist perspective tries to put up with it. It celebrates and privileges the idea of ability. It refers to more than just bad attitudes toward disabled people. Ableism "is a trajectory of perfection, a deep way of thinking about bodies, wholeness, permeability and how certain clusters of people are enabled via valued entitlements" (Campbell 9). Because of the influence of the ideology of ableism, John and Summer

are initially terrified to know about the possibility of their baby having an intellectual disability. But seeing Raj on social media, they are relieved from all ableist fears.

Mimi, who is not genetically connected with the child, has no legal right over him. According to the present Surrogacy Regulation Act, what John and Summer have done is an offence – the intended parents should never “abandon or disown or exploit or cause to be abandoned, disowned or exploited in any form, the child or children born through surrogacy” (Ministry of Law 15). However, towards the end, they realise the fact that genetic relations alone will not make one a parent. They do not go to court for the custody of Raj. Instead, they adopt a rural orphan girl named Tara from an orphanage. They understand the significance of social parenthood and that adoption is the best option for being a social parent (178). According to Rothman (1989), “Parenthood is a social relationship, not a genetic connection. Adoption is not a second-best, almost-your-own way of making a family. Adoption is what all parenthood is: an intimate social relationship” (82). Here, genetics is not very important in determining the worth of parenthood.

Mimi is not Raj’s biological mother, but she nurtured him with her milk and love. Even if he had a disability, she was prepared to care for him. To ensure Raj’s safety, she even prepares to return him to his birth parents. As a result, she deserves the justice she obtains at the end of the film. Despite its flaws, the film *Mimi* was able to shed light on the various socioeconomic, philosophical, and ethical issues raised by surrogacy. It portrays how society operates within the eugenic framework, leading to the denial of a disabled child developed through surrogacy. Disability Studies questions and challenges the reductionist definitions of normalcy that generate otherness and dehumanise those who do not conform to those definitions.

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