

# AMULYA MALLADI, *A HOUSE FOR HAPPY MOTHERS*

(SEATTLE: LAKE UNION PUBLISHING, 2016).

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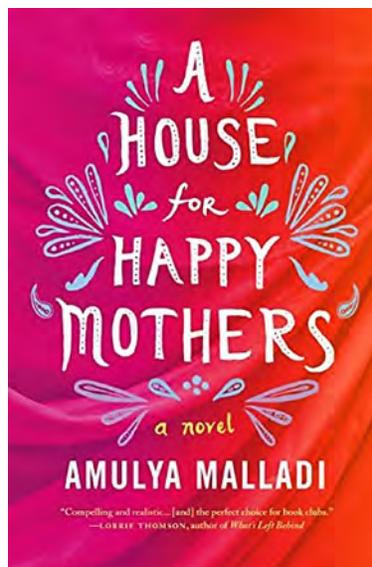
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**A** *House for Happy Mothers* is a novel about women who are neither happy nor mothers. This is a story about women who are resigned and resolute child bearers for hire: women renting their wombs and, in the process, subjugating their emotions and their relationships. These gestational surrogates are required to live in the Happy Mothers fertility and surrogacy clinic for the last four months of the pregnancy. Though not written as a tome on the bioethics of global surrogate motherhood, the author does cover the relevant issues in varying depths, making this an appropriate text for bioethics/global medicine courses.

The book chronicles the experiences of Madhu and Priya, a Silicon Valley couple, unable to conceive and carry a child to term, who utilize Asha, a woman from the clinic in India to be impregnated with what would be their biological offspring. The story is told in vacillating narratives of the surrogate mother and the hiring mother, and is arranged by sections corresponding to the stages of pregnancy: conception; first, second, and third trimesters; and labor and delivery. That these are considered stages for the hirer as well as for the surrogate emphasizes that both the surrogate and the contracting couple are affected by ‘the arrangement’ (a term that diminishes the impact of surrogacy). Giving equal narrative voice to both hirer and surrogate may lead one to suggest the surrogate is equal to the hirer; however, Malladi skillfully uses provocative dialogue to suggest that economically, physically, and emotionally, this is not the case. This is illustrated in the following dialogues.

Obviously this was not the ideal way to have a baby. The easiest way would be to get knocked up—but

that hadn’t quite worked out for them. And now after three miscarriages and three failed IVF treatments, each costing about \$10,000, surrogacy had become the only way out. The only way to have a child, a family. “Priyasha, don’t be stupid; if you can’t have a baby, maybe you’re not meant to have a baby,” her mother had said. “Have you thought about that instead of running around impregnating some strange woman with your child?” (2)



These early dialogues bring up issues of reproductive technology costs and divine sovereignty. The desperation of the hirer is demonstrated:

Come on, Madhu, this is our last chance. . . . Our only, only, last chance. I want this. “No,” Madhu had said. “Priya, this isn’t some handcrafted Indian sari you buy at the fair-trade store. This is a baby. You can’t just rent a body.” But Priya had sent him e-mail after e-mail with information about how safe it was, how effective it had been for others like them, and most important, how the money they would

give the surrogate would help her family and improve the quality of her life. (3)

Malladi also shows the emotional struggle involved:

They didn’t see it as exploitation of the poor, as Sush did; they saw it as a way for them to have a grandchild while helping another family have a better life. (8)

One hope was giving hope to another hope; there was something inevitable about it, as if the universe had planned it. (10)

Asha wondered if there had ever really be a choice for her. Could she have said no? (19)

It seemed wrong to do this for money, but Asha wouldn’t do it if their finances were better, would she? . . . they needed money, and this was an easy—or, say, viable—way to earn it. . . . That had been Asha’s mother-in-law’s argument. “It’s for a good cause, and it’s better than selling a kidney, isn’t it?” (22)

The decision to use a surrogate and the resultant relationship is presented as a win-win situation, with both parties somewhat harmed, but the outcome outweighing those harms. The story gives voice to the challenges of being barren and saddled with all the emotions that come with that label, such as feeling like a failure or of dealing with the expectations of family. The surrogate, in addition to the emotions that come from the expectations of being the economic savior of her family and the anticipation of giving up a child she has carried to term, also has the hormonally-based emotions of pregnancy. Economically, the surrogate has little voice, not feeling empowered to ask for more money when it is clear the physician owner of the clinic is

making lots of money.

Malladi deftly introduces all of the relationships that cannot be ignored with a decision to use a surrogate. In addition to the husband-wife relationships of both the hiring and the surrogate couples, the book shows the relationships between the hiring woman and childbearing woman; the childbearing woman and her existing children, in-laws, community/society, the clinic physician, and the other women in the clinic; and the hiring woman and her mother, in-laws, friends/community, and the clinic physician. Additionally, relationships of both husbands with their parents and siblings, as well as the relationships among the women in the clinic during their required stay of the last four months of the pregnancies are included as this story unfolds. As described, this house is more comfortable than the women's homes. The poverty of their lives and the hard work necessary to navigate

it make the unhappy house attractive by comparison. They do not have to work during their stay, are given massages on demand, are provided adequate nutrition without having to prepare meals for themselves, and have a television to watch. Additionally, many of the women receive gifts from the hiring couples.

The 'nurture versus nature' argument is raised as the narratives explore the decision to use a surrogate: "You can adopt, but God knows what you bring into the house. . . . It takes years. It costs so much money. And you don't know what blood you bring home." (27) This argument is between members of the same culture, as is the surrogacy arrangement. Even though the surrogate is from India, the hiring couple is also from India (though they live in the U.S.) and ethnically from the same Indian culture but from markedly different social and economic cultures. Thus, the author shows that a

surrogate can be exploited by a member of their own ethnic culture. The entire story is told against the backdrop of the normalcy of everyday life: married-life arguments, problems with in-laws, job layoffs due to area economy and their subsequent effect on relationships, and parties/gatherings with friends.

Malladi has created a real 'page-turner' where, depending on your bent, you may side with the surrogate or the childless woman. "Nine months of carrying a baby against a lifetime of *immense joy*: it was no contest." (30) ●●●

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