

'You are barren and have borne no children,
but you shall conceive and bear a son' -

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Fertility in prehistory, history and contemporary culture - Part II

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The tendency for cultural scripts to underplay fostering and adoption, thus avoiding any of the above hazards, is also pointed out, along with the legal issues that arise out of infertility treatments, such as the problematisation of what constitutes a natural parent in the setting of egg and sperm donation, surrogate motherhood and same gender families, a notion prefigured in Piercy's famous novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).¹⁹ The legal controls and punishments inflicted by the state in the setting of mothers who abuse alcohol or recreational drugs that may result in teratogenic effects on

the unborn child are also elucidated, along with the impunity which males are afforded despite being partly or totally responsible for the environment that promotes such abuse, and often supplying these substances.²⁰ Interestingly, little is made of male problems leading to infertility, although this still results in the female bearing the brunt of invasive and potentially hazardous treatments in order to bear her chosen partner's children.

Impotence has also been the target of writers, and for example McLaren's *Impotence: A Cultural History* (2007) guides readers through 2,500 years of impotence and attempted cures in various cultures, cures which are as varied as they are bizarre, including urinating through a church keyhole, whipping, flagellation, electric shocks to the testicles, and countless modern gadgets and drugs that may be bought

over the Internet.²¹

Infertility in non-Western cultures has also been extensively addressed by Michie and Cahn, including the more extreme modulations of the impact of infertility in overtly patriarchal cultures on women, who seek help not only from Western medicine, but also from indigenous practitioners of traditional medicine, sometimes simultaneously, to their detriment.²² More specifically, for example, Bharadwaj argues that the rapid transfer and assimilation of infertility treatments to India is only part of the indigenization of Western technoscience and biomedicine in India, and contends that the success or failure of said techniques, when framed by the Hindu faith, becomes 'a powerful critique of the incompleteness of the "Western" science of conception'.²³

Conversely, Kahn discusses the ways in which orthodox Jews

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use traditional strategies and new media, such as the Internet, to cope with infertility in the presence of new reproductive technologies by establishing networks that provide support, information and education, along with unique frameworks that permit close collaborations between rabbis, doctors and other clinic personnel. These ensure that fertility treatments are conducted with strict attention to Jewish legal concerns, particularly with regard to incest, adultery, and traditional practices regarding bodily emissions, becoming 'a set of tools and strategies that can be readily appropriated and harnessed to a particular set of individual and collective goals'.²⁴

At this juncture, it must be pointed out that the Internet has become a key source of all sorts of medical information (including that regarding pregnancy and infertility) but must be viewed with extreme caution, as shown by Okamura, who reviewed 197 infertility-related websites using the *Journal of the American Medical Association* minimal core standards for responsible print. Only 2% of these websites met all four recommended standards, and the authors naively concluded that women's health clinicians should assume the new responsibility of information monitor, an unlikely prospect when one considers the rate with which new websites mushroom all over the web.²⁵

This paper will now briefly review some fictional works that deal with infertility, and it is intriguing to note from the outset that most narratives also deal with the aforementioned middle-class stereotype, implying a normative progression of heterosexual marriage, fertility, pregnancy and childbirth, unlike Science Fiction, which, as we shall see, perhaps due to its multicultural and intertextual nature, deals with infertility in much more diverse scenarios, such as infertility in aliens and in inhuman creations.

It appears that the first fictional narratives to foreground centrally the treatment of infertility are P. D. James's, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972)²⁶ and Barbara Vine's, *A Dark Adapted Eye* (1986),²⁷ and both deal

with an infertile woman and surrogate motherhood.

More specifically, Mary Higgins Clark's, *The Cradle Will Fall* (1980)²⁸ and *I'll Be Seeing You* (1993),²⁹ both deal with the idiom of misplacement, the covert and illicit transfer of ova from the body of one woman to another, with resultant confusion in the identity of the offspring. Both narratives involve parents who recognise other parents' children as their own solely by visual resemblance, with the first story also involving a doctor who heads a fertility clinic and kills to keep secret the fact that he transferred aborted but still living embryos whose abortion he coerced, harking back yet again to the mad/criminal fraudster scientist. In more populist vein, Danielle Steel's, *Mixed Blessings* (1992) narrates the events that overcome five infertile characters, one of which undergoes fertility treatment, miscarries, and in an even more normative ending becomes pregnant with twins, without any medical intervention, despite being well past forty years of age.³⁰

In conclusion, overall, current Western texts that deal with infertility, both factual and fictional, uphold a rhetoric that promotes the middle-class progression of heterosexual relations, marriage, fertility, pregnancy and childbirth, and fail to account for more liberal attitudes, such as same-sex couples – or even more extraordinary phenomena, since ...

'[n]ew reproductive technologies have split apart categories that were previously coterminous - birth mother, psychological mother, familial father, sperm donor, egg donor, and so forth - transforming the relations of kinship that used to play such a fundamental role in the rhetorics and practices of identity formation.'³¹

Moreover, many medical options, while seemingly science fictional (and several of these advances were actually prefigured by science fiction) are now considered routine in the field of advanced reproductive techniques, which has come a long way from the first test tube baby in 1978,³² to the extent that Chris Hables Gray opines:

'In the future, many different sexes

are likely to be produced, driven by desire (to create and live) and fear (of death and sterility) [...]. Cyborgism could well be a bridge to different types of posthumans, some with male bodies, others clearly female, others yet who are hermaphrodites, and still more people who will be quite genderless. And there will be new sexes.'³³

Conventional stances will undoubtedly stumble when confronted by circumstances that do not conform to formulaic and stereotypical viewpoints. Conversely, it behoves the scientists to exercise extreme caution in this modern age, where ongoing work in genetic engineering, biochemistry, eugenics and advanced reproductive techniques have given us the opportunity to manipulate life at a fundamental level, 'something previously exclusively reserved to nature and chance.'³⁴ S

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