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Mothering and Othering: Surrogacy and the Saga of *Yashoda*

V.K. Karthika¹

Film Information:

Yashoda

Directors: Harish Narayan and K. Hari Shankar

Producer: Sivalenka Krishna Prasad

Distributor: Sakthi Film Factory

Year: 2022

Length: 132 minutes

Genre: Sci-Fi Thriller

Hari and Harish's Telugu film *Yashoda*, released in theatres in November 2022, deals with a few noteworthy themes. Framed as a science fiction thriller, the movie focuses on surrogacy, the capitalist agenda of the cosmetics industry, and body politics. Frequently, the film shifts to a melodramatic strain and offers problematic and regressive representations of motherhood, but there are still significant merits to the film in terms of its subject matter. *Yashoda* was released on Amazon Prime in December 2022 in multiple languages, making it popular among those who love thrillers.

An Overview of the Plot

Yashoda has two parallel plots running simultaneously until they converge at a dramatic point towards the end of the first half of the film. The film begins with a high-level investigation of the mysterious death of a Hollywood actress. The murder investigation focuses on the death of a rich businessman and a model who are killed in a strange car crash/blast. Crosscut with this plotline is another based on a pregnant delivery girl named Yashoda (Samantha Ruth Prabhu), who works for a food delivery app Zomato. Shown at the end of her first trimester, Yashoda is a surrogate, bearing a child in order to earn money for her sister's surgery. As she is carrying the baby for an affluent family, Yashoda is shifted from the local maternity clinic to a modern, posh healthcare centre called Eva. Inside Eva, Yashoda meets the strict but pleasant owner named Madhubala (Varalaxmi Sarathkumar) and the benevolent doctor Gowtham (Unni Mukundan). The fellow surrogates in Eva eventually accept Yashoda into their friendship circle and consider her as "cute and innocent." Although there are certain scenes that prove that Yashoda is very smart and clever, she swings between being nice and naïve with her friends. The story takes a turn when one of their friends is taken for her delivery into the restricted zone of Eva and never returns. The baby is reportedly dead in the womb and the surrogate is sent back home after the surgery. When they demand to see their friend, Madhubala warns Yashoda and her friends about keeping no attachments either with the baby or among the other surrogates.

As the murder investigation leads to the cosmetic industry and towards a secret ingredient that a particular cosmetic company uses, inside Eva a broken-hearted but sharp-minded Yashoda begins her probing. She steals Dr. Gowtham's identity card to access the restricted zone and eventually realizes that one of her friends was an agent of Eva. In a violent struggle, Yashoda kills this fellow surrogate, enters a very big mortuary, and finds innumerable

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female bodies inside, including the bodies of her two friends. She walks into another room which is labelled as the Asset Room and gets frightened by the sight of thousands of fetuses preserved in bottles. Then she is attacked by a security guard who attempts to molest her, but she fights and defeats him. Caught by Madhubala, Yashoda realizes that Madhubala, Gowtham, the central minister (who is Madhubala's husband), and the police chief are all involved in the harvesting of fetuses. Yashoda learns that plasma from the fetus is the secret ingredient that the cosmetic company adds to their anti-ageing products. The scam is now exposed, but the honest officers are under siege and Yashoda is captured. In the final sequences, Yashoda bravely leads all the pregnant women outside for the time since they have been transported to Eva. Eva is constructed underground on top of a hill and this revelation shocks the surrogates. Meanwhile, the true story of Yashoda is unveiled.

Yashoda is actually an IPS trainee in search of her sister Brinda (Preethi Asrani), who chose to become a surrogate to earn money so that Yashoda could become a police officer. Dramatically, Brinda goes into labor in the interiors of Eva, and the nurse carries out delivery of the baby without any medical help. The film ends with a tearful Yashoda carrying her sister's baby boy in her arms and naming him Krishna. The credit segment of the film shows newspaper cutting about the cosmetics industry using fetuses for their products and exploiting surrogacy for the purpose of fetus farming. The film could have been a powerful social justice narrative, but unfortunately sacrificed some of its potential to fit into a melodramatic vein which marred its quality.

Surrogacy, Mothering and Othering

Although the film has surrogacy as a theme, it does not reveal the shocking realities of the Indian surrogacy market. It superficially alludes to some emotional and economically vulnerable conditions to which surrogates are subjected but does not go far enough. The focus shifts to the cosmetic industry and their hidden agendas to ensure their monopoly through their anti-ageing cosmetic products. The secret ingredient of the plasma of fetuses and the fetus farming industry developed by a vicious corporation become the link that connects the themes of surrogacy market and the cosmetic industry.

Yashoda does not capture the horrid yet real aspects of the surrogacy industry which treats the female body as a tool to generate money though the surrogate never gets a handsome payment. The film maintains that women willingly walk into the surrogacy market to earn money to resolve various personal issues. Yashoda arrives at the surrogacy market to find her missing sister (though initially she is depicted as a poor woman who becomes a surrogate to find money for her sister's surgery), and another woman chooses surrogacy to save her mother from prostitution and to start a new life. Other surrogates hope to earn a livelihood and live with dignity, while the fake surrogate, who turns out to be the spy of the high tech Eva, claims that her goal is simply to buy an iPhone. Teju (Kalpika Ganesh) who is the gang leader and the most daring person among the surrogates, reveals that she was subjected to gender discrimination at home as her parents wanted a son but not a daughter. This made her rebellious, and she says that she nurtured the habit of smoking "to prove that women can do all that men do." To assert her female agency further, Teju says that she chose to be a surrogate, something that a man can never do. A woman asserting her individuality and her identity through her biological endowment contrasts starkly with the reality of the surrogacy market.

The economically deprived and precarious conditions of women who become surrogates are not discussed in the film. Instead, the film focuses on a group of happy surrogates who are slightly anxious but are enjoying the luxuries that they are given. The dreams of a better life have dragged them into the decision to be surrogates. The reality of the Indian surrogacy market is relatively contradictory to what is being shown in the film. Sheela Suryanarayanan ([2022](#)) who has done extensive research on the surrogacy markets in India

states that “most of the very poor households remained very poor even after surrogacy.” She further says that “Surrogate mothers from a high caste, a specific religion, with attributes such as a fair skin and higher body weight were preferred by the intended parents and hence came at an additional ‘price.’” The group of surrogates who are shown in *Yashoda* are of different ethnic identities, castes, creeds and skin colors, and in the film narrative none of these are featured as an important criterion to select a surrogate. This could be owing to the foregrounding of the cosmetic industry’s appropriation of this surrogacy market as a field to cultivate their desired secret product.

In the film, all babies are unborn, taken out through surgery that inevitably kills the mother. The fetuses are preserved in bottles to extract the plasma from them as per the industry requirements. Had the film showcased this entire episode with a little more realism, it would have evoked a more powerful effect on the audience. The way these scenes are depicted in the film certainly adds to the filmic ingredients of a thriller but lacks realism.

The film discusses, though briefly, the othering of the mothers. The surrogates are not allowed to have any emotional connections between themselves and the babies. They are repeatedly warned and cautioned against forming friendship bonds among the fellow surrogates as well. In the actual surrogacy market, as Sheela Suryanarayanan discusses, the situation is even worse. Many times the mother is not allowed to even see the baby. Discussing the case studies she conducted, Suryanarayanan (2022) states: “A surrogate mother’s interaction with the child she had carried was restricted—she was sometimes allowed to see the child through a glass window but not permitted to touch or hold it.” In the film, while the othering process that the surrogacy agents experience is addressed, a counter discourse also is showcased where the surrogates sing lullabies, tell stories of Yashoda and Krishna, pamper their bellies, and explicitly discuss the quiddity of motherhood. Again, what the film aims to do is to reinstate feminine vulnerability when it comes to motherhood as the women volunteer to give up their vices (be it eating chocolates or smoking or scolding the baby in their womb) when they are reminded about the quintessential relationship between a mother and her baby.

The film is problematic in its treatment of female agency and a woman’s choices. While an emotional connection between mother and child cannot be ignored, the film’s valorization of a woman achieving “completion” through motherhood is a regressive statement harkening back to conservative patriarchal ideals. Repeated references to the Krishna and Yashoda myth are also meant to foster this ideology, and thus the film fortifies the myth of subjugation in the name of motherhood. The final sequence in which Madhubala reveals how she survived her disease using the plasma of her own fetus evokes horror in the other mothers, and Madhubala, the “bad mother,” is punished by the “good mothers.” The scene of childbirth without modern medical support and the subsequent scene of equating the child with Krishna are all part of this conservative discourse that has used motherhood as a blackmailing tool to define roles for women and to domesticate them. There is a clear attempt to engender a stark contrast between the mythic ideas of the Madonna (the ideal, benevolent mother) versus the Medea (the terrible monster mother).

Is Beauty an Indicator of Social Worth?

A flashback sequence shows how the fetus farming business began. When Madhubala was diagnosed with Werner Syndrome, she could not admit it as a medical condition. She began to worry about losing her beauty which was a source of her pride. The fear of losing her physical charms drives her to attempt suicide and when she is saved, we realise that her minister-husband values only her beauty and thus he planned to desert her. Through Gowtham’s innovative medicine, she regains her beauty and returns to her powerful husband, violating the promise to Gowtham. This entire subplot is based on the societal perception of beauty as an important determiner of a woman’s social status and worth. In India, fairness has

unfortunately been historically associated with beauty, and that is why Hindustan Unilever changed one of their most celebrated cosmetic products *Fair and Lovely's* name to *Glow and Lovely*, to avoid racial stereotypes through more inclusive language. In *Yashoda*, aging is seen as a taboo for women. Her aged husband decides to leave Madhubala when he learns about her Werner Syndrome, and this plotline is an example of the prejudiced patriarchal order in India that equates a woman's worth with beauty and youth. In fact, what is being violated here is the basic human right to live with dignity. Madhubala is also a victim of the biocultural politics that defines physical charm as an essential characteristic of a woman's identity. The structural violence and the bioethical violations all stem from the stigma related to illness, beauty, and a woman's identity, but the film does not explicitly condemn these causes.

The Failure of a Sci-Fi Thriller

In fact, the science fiction thread of the cosmetic industry using human fetuses to make their products has some basis in reality. There have been news reports regarding the use of fetal materials in cosmetic products. Richardson (2009) discusses this through the lenses of human rights and biopolitics ([Richardson, 2009](#)). Instead of highlighting these inhumane scientific advancements and capitalist greed for accumulating wealth through unethical business practices using science and technology, this so-called sci-fi film instead resorts to melodrama. One powerful scene that depicted the extremely vulnerable situation of the surrogates was the one in which Yashoda tries to open the window to touch the dove that permanently sits outside her window on the sunshade. She realises that there is neither a window nor a dove but only a smart screen that shows the exterior that the Eva management wanted the surrogates to see. How technology fails to be used for humane purposes is powerfully captured in this scene. Moreover, the capitalist industry's control and manipulation of these vulnerable surrogates' spatial and temporal perceptions is appalling.

Though the film claims to be a science fiction thriller, it lacks transparency. The investigation of the mysterious murders becomes very unscientific in its nature. There is no objectivity involved in the investigation sequences, and the officers often discover the most obvious details. Although the narrative attempts to establish a modern scientific temperament with the avarice that is associated with capitalist ventures, the loose ends leave the work unfinished. In fact, the directorial venture to play between modern perspectives and traditional values, and between a scientific temperament and humane sensibilities fails owing to the sheer absence of focus. As a result, the film ends up as a usual Tollywood melodrama with excellent fight sequences.

The Saga of *Yashoda*

Equating the surrogate mother with Yashoda who is the mythical foster mother of Krishna does not add to the merit of the film. In reality, surrogates encounter inhumane situations and battle many odds when they deliver the baby, but they do not receive sufficient monetary reward. The idea of linking the cosmetic industry's unethical practices with the surrogacy market is a new concept in Indian cinema. The film clearly portrays how human greed leads to the misuse of scientific, technological and medical advancements. The quick narrative, however, fails to capture the catastrophe of women who consent to be surrogates because of their social circumstances. Although the film tries to show some pros and cons of surrogacy, it fails to capture the numerous ways in which this practice affects the surrogate mother.

Despite all the flaws of its screenwriting and direction, *Yashoda* is still a film that is worth watching if one can endure its melodrama. Had it been designed more as a medical thriller, the film might have done justice to its topic. A deliberate attempt to reinstate the patriarchal ideology of good vs. bad mothers overtakes the narrative and significantly erodes the merits of the film.

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