Silent Bodies: Pearl-Producing Bivalves, Surrogate Mothers, and the Naturalization of Exploitation

The edges of oyster shells are sharp, enabling them to seal tightly shut. To open one, you must first use a knife to destroy these sharp edges, creating a notch, revealing a thin gap, before sliding the knife in horizontally. There's no need to consider the integrity of the oyster's flesh - simply force the knife forcefully to one side of the shell, cutting through the muscle that connects the oyster's body to its shell, and it will open easily. When shell and flesh separate, there's a brief "whoosh" - the sound of air rushing into the oyster. Push your fingertips into the gap and force it open; the shell makes another sound. Sharp, but wet, as if something soft was torn apart when the hinge broke - this is the loudest sound an oyster can make.

Then, accompanied by a damp fishy smell and slight bitterness, a sticky transparent liquid flows out from the oyster's translucent, soft body. The membrane adhering to the shell tears apart the moment the shell cracks open, and the densely packed pearls wrapped within the membrane separate from the shell wall like objects floating on rippling water, exposed completely to human eyes. Amid the delighted exclamations of onlookers, the opener uses their fingers to squeeze out the pearls one by one from the oyster's body. After counting them, they'll rinse the pearls in nearby water that isn't particularly clean, then present them to the spectators. The audience will marvel at the pearls' beauty, praise nature's wonder, as if they've witnessed a birth. Meanwhile, the broken oyster lies on the wet cutting board between the opener's legs, its flesh contracting with barely noticeable movement, the part encasing its heart still gently pulsing. Then it's moved away and set down with a kind of thoughtless courtesy, perhaps with a light sound, the sound of its shell colliding with those of other oysters like itself.

Such scenes of pearl harvesting are commonplace in many coastal tourist cities. While visitors cheer at the extracted pearls, most pearl cultivation workers have grown numb to this "birthing" spectacle. I, too, once found myself lingering at these demonstrations, excited by the unknown, while subtle discomfort and questions in my heart were overshadowed by the pearls' fleeting luster, only to resurface much later.

Does it hurt when the oyster is cut open? Does it die after being opened? Why don't people feel the cruelty when watching an oyster being killed? Why do people marvel at the miraculous biological mechanism that produces pearls while simultaneously taking their lives?

Curious about the pearl cultivation industry, I searched for information online. A 2007 documentary by Jewelry Television, "The Pearl Story," revealed a lesser-known aspect of the pearl industry: it takes the deaths of 15,000 oysters to obtain one marketable natural pearl. This explains why 99% of pearls in today's market come from cultivation. While the documentary aimed to showcase the pearl industry's operations and deepen public appreciation for pearl culture and its demanding nature, what caught my attention was the staggering, often overlooked sacrifice. According to the documentary, even in modern cultivation environments, the cost in lives remains shocking: at Japan's largest Akoya pearl farm, less than half of the oysters survive the nucleus implantation surgery, and among the survivors, less than 5% produce high-quality pearls. Though some internet articles mention improvements in nucleation survival rates by pearl-cultivation industries, I found it ironically telling that my first search result about improved survival rates came from a pearl-farming franchise advertisement. When I try to comprehend the magnitude of these sacrifices, my memories of high school visits to jewelry wholesale markets, where pearls of various names filled large baskets, are now overshadowed by images of broken shells and wet, shattered oyster flesh scattered across the ground. Those dead oysters, when discarded, are never categorized and named with the same care as the pearls they produced.

Pearl-Producing Bivalves′ Welfare

Because of a certain "overflowing" sympathy, I began to think about the welfare of pearl-producing bivalves. Utilitarians believe that welfare should be considered based on an animal's capacity for pain and emotion. In fact, pearl-producing bivalves truly have no pain sensation. Even though they respond to external stimuli, such response is essentially a genetic instinct. As invertebrates, pearl-producing bivalves lack a brain and central nervous system, which means they have no self-awareness and cannot perceive suffering in the way more complex animals do. Therefore, from a utilitarian perspective, pearl-producing bivalves should not be granted animal welfare rights.

Deontological theorists argue that life's value is inherent, and every individual with intrinsic value should be respected, not merely used as a tool. But this perspective raised another question for me: if life's value is inherent, why should animals be granted rights while plants, also being living entities, should not? Regarding this doubt, I learned that an important foundation of deontological animal rights theory is the concept of "subjects of a life" (Tom Regan), where beings with self-awareness, preferences, emotions, memories, and future-oriented thinking are considered to have "subject of life" status. Although plants are living organisms, they lack subjective experience and consciousness, and thus are not considered to meet the criteria for rights.

I understand the motivation behind deontological theorists' argument, but for some reason, I could never fully convince myself to agree with their theory. Because if the reason plants are deemed unworthy of rights is their lack of subjective experience and consciousness, then pearl-producing bivalves seemingly should not be granted rights either. However, this explanation did not provide a perfect answer to the subtle discomfort I feel when facing killed pearl oysters, whether from a negative or affirmative perspective.

From an ecological ethics perspective, an individual life's value is not based on its own existence but depends on its function within the ecosystem. If a species' death would lead to ecological imbalance, species extinction, or environmental deterioration, then its death would be considered a moral issue. Conversely, if its death would not cause significant ecological consequences, then it would not be considered "wrong" ethically. The core logic of this perspective is maintaining the ecosystem's overall stability, rather than focusing on individual life's moral rights.

Summarizing these mainstream animal ethics perspectives leads to one conclusion: most mainstream ethical frameworks consider killing pearl-producing bivalves not a serious moral problem unless it affects the ecosystem. This finally made me realize why I could not be convinced by any of these three perspectives.

In the utilitarian perspective represented by Peter Singer, moral judgment is like a mathematical problem of maximizing happiness—deciding whether an animal should have rights based on its capacity for pain perception. I am not certain this theory should be accepted because I am unsure if replacing the

subject from an animal to a person without perceptive abilities would make the theory equally valid. I cannot pass judgment on it, but I am very clear that this is undoubtedly a perspective devised by privileged beneficiaries for convenient decision-making, within which arrogance and privilege are unquestionably rooted.

Ecological feminist scholar Marti Kheel provided a completely different way of understanding relationships between lives. Just as quantum physics tells us, the universe is not composed of mutually separate individuals, but a complex network of relationships where each part is inseparable from the whole. From this perspective, attempting to hierarchically divide the value of different species or individuals appears particularly arbitrary. If we acknowledge that we cannot accurately predict an atom's behavior in the microscopic world, by what right can we determine that one life is more valuable than another?

On this issue, I also cannot agree with the ecological ethics perspective. I believe it is another form of utilitarianism based on ecological context, as it still has not escaped the thinking framework of human-centric privileged beneficiaries. It is well-known that human activities cause the greatest negative impact on ecosystems and the environment. Following ecological ethics' logic, would killing humans to reduce human activities and protect the ecosystem be considered moral? People would certainly counter that ecological ethics is not about reducing humans but limiting human environmental destruction. However, the purpose of "limiting destruction" is still not based on moral obligations to the ecosystem itself but for humanity's sustainable future. As Arne Naess states, "The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes."

The ethical issue of pearl-producing bivalves and the above discussion made me realize that although measuring things by human standards often leads to injustice towards other lives, this standard itself is not entirely without value—the key is whether we are willing to scrutinize our own behavior with the same rigor. Perhaps the ethical problem in pearl cultivation is not about whether these shellfish have pain sensation or whether they are subjects of life, but about human behavior and motivations. While I agree that in our modern environment, where most of us can easily obtain various types of food, meat

consumption is not necessary, it is undeniable that meat-eating can be partially explained by evolutionary theory, as it was once part of human evolution. In comparison, pearls are absolutely not a human survival necessity. Their cultivation is purely for the luxury market, to satisfy human greed and vanity. Therefore, its production logic differs fundamentally from food production. Secondly, human ethics are not equivalent to natural ethics. In nature, predatory relationships between animals are based solely on survival needs—no species would harm another for "needing a pearl brooch" or similar reasons.

As ecological feminist Vandana Shiva pointed out, "Nature is seen as dead, deprived of her vitality and creativity, and the commonality between women and nature is that both are defined by capitalist patriarchy as resources to be controlled, conquered, and used." (Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development, 1988, p. 22)

The pearl industry is a continuation of this type of thinking—it uses living beings in nature as commodities, representing a combination of human-centrism and capitalist exploitation. On the issue of opposing luxury-driven exploitation, many philosophical schools reach a consensus for different reasons.

Kant's "Kingdom of Ends" principle emphasizes treating others rationally, not merely as means: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, 1785, 4:429)

If we accept this, human ethics should not allow exploitation purely for luxury needs. Furthermore, Kant noted: "In the Kingdom of Ends, everything is either a price or has dignity. What has a price can be replaced by an equivalent; what is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has dignity." (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, 1785, 4:434)

Pearl-producing bivalves are priced and traded in the market, their lives instrumentalized rather than respected—precisely embodying the irrational nature of luxury exploitation.

Additionally, weak utilitarian John Stuart Mill warned that if a society defaults to viewing luxury exploitation as reasonable, it might lead to more severe moral decline: "The worth of a nation ultimately depends upon the moral quality of its members." (Utilitarianism, 1863) If luxury exploitation like pearl cultivation continues to expand, it might reinforce the human objectification of other living beings, potentially affecting entire social and moral norms and exacerbating environmental destruction. If meat

consumption can be partially accepted as necessary exploitation, pearl cultivation should be considered pure luxury exploitation, lacking any functional justification. In this sense, I believe pearl cultivation might not necessarily involve fewer moral issues than meat production.

Language, Image, and Ideology

Why didn't we recognize the cruelty of pearl cultivation before? In searching for answers, I gradually realized these questions extend beyond pearl cultivation itself, revealing a deeper issue: when a life cannot express suffering in ways familiar to us, when its existence is reduced by society to a process of producing commodities, we tend to overlook its integrity as a living being.

In fact, similar situations are not limited to non-human species. While thinking about the ethical issues of pearl cultivation, I could not stop connecting it to commercial surrogacy. These are not metaphors for each other, but rather mirror images of how patriarchy oppresses nature and women—the similarities between them are unsettling: both involve bodily invasion and commodification, both are beautified as "natural" processes, both justify the transformation of life through "output" value, and both pearl oysters and surrogate mothers are "voiceless" in a certain sense.

Regarding bodily invasion and commodification, imagine a series of artificial interventions preparing the body into a suitable container, implanting something foreign to itself, compelling it to surrender its vitality to cultivate this growing 'seed' until it acquires its destined value. This is not just the experience of a pearl oyster in the pearl cultivation industry but could also be the experience of a woman in the commercial surrogacy industry.

Medical technologies offering infertile couples the opportunity to become parents do not inherently bother me, as they are merely a means to an end. What makes me uncomfortable is how these technologies, when used unethically, have been degrading bodies, whether of a pearl oyster or a woman, to a tool for creating value.

This simplification of life as a tool is not accidental; it is deeply rooted in our cultural traditions and linguistic systems instead. Therefore, before discussing surrogate mothers, I want to start by exploring the connection between pearl oysters, women, and mothers.

In many cultures, pearls are viewed as symbols of life, purity, and female power. This association stems from the pearl's formation process: pearl oysters continuously secrete pearl layers to envelop foreign objects, ultimately transforming the invasive element into a smooth, brilliant pearl. This transformation from chaos to harmony, due to its similarity to pregnancy, closely connects pearls with feminine qualities.

In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, pearls were considered to be the joyful tears of the love goddess Aphrodite rising from the sea. This imagery is vividly portrayed in Botticelli's masterpiece "The Birth of Venus": the beautiful goddess emerging from a seashell floating on the water.

However, when we carefully examine these seemingly romantic cultural constructions, we discover underlying problems. The term "mother of pearl" may sound poetic, but it actually only refers to the inner layer of the shell that produces pearl layers, not the entire living organism. This reminds me of Stephanie Baran's observation about female representation in advertisements: ads often highlight specific body parts, like an arm holding a perfume bottle or a leg wearing shoes, reducing women to consumable parts. As she said, "The male gaze presented in patriarchal society only sees women as pieces and not whole people."

Moreover, this personification of "mother" applied to a specific part of the pearl oyster's body—its shell (often its remaining body)—emphasizes its functional service to human desire while erasing the life sacrificed behind the pearl's luster. This precisely matches Carol J. Adams' concept of the "absent referent" in her work "The Sexual Politics of Meat." When we change how we talk about animals, using commodity names to refer to them, their existence as individual lives disappears from our conceptualization.

In the Chinese context, "珍珠母贝" (literally meaning "pearl mother shell") is similar to the English "mother of pearl" but refers to the entire shell, sometimes even used to broadly indicate all pearl-producing bivalves. It's worth noting that pearl oysters are not all female, yet they are uniformly given a feminized "mother" designation, which precisely reflects the similar experiences of nature and women under patriarchal systems.

Here, pearl oysters become a cultural suggestion of motherhood: a mother's sacrifice is taken for granted, and the child is the most precious. Norma Benny in "All of One Flesh" (1983) pointed out that "female animals are the most exploited," and I would add that the most exploited animals might also be "female."

This cultural construct's double standard is everywhere in language. When the useful parts of pearl oysters are praised as "mother," their unwanted qualities, like odor, are used to demean women (such as the derogatory meaning of "fishy" in English). Similarly, the Chinese idiom "人老珠黄"(ren lao zhu huang), literally translated as "people age, pearls yellow", uses the yellowing of aging pearls to metaphorically describe the depreciation of a woman's appearance, suggesting a commodification logic where female value declines like a commodity over time.

More subtly, there's the evolution of the term "珠胎暗结" (zhu tai an jie). Literally translated: "pearl" (noun), "embryo/base" (noun), "secretly" (adverb), "form/tie" (verb). Originally from the Tang Dynasty, it was used to describe secret affection between a man and a woman; it later came to imply secret sexual encounters leading to pregnancy. The pearl secretly forming within the oyster and a woman's secret intimate encounter are placed on equal footing, seemingly reflecting the desire of patriarchal ideology to control both natural and female reproductive processes.

The tendency to "naturalize" oppression is particularly evident in both pearl cultivation and surrogacy: on one side, artificial interventions are disguised as natural processes, on the other, socially constructed roles are imposed as natural attributes.

Although academic and scientific understanding of the natural world emphasizes its disorder and lack of purposefulness, popular culture, especially patriarchal culture, still tends to assign specific meanings and order to the natural world, turning a deaf ear to such scientific perspectives. This selective "understanding" of nature precisely reflects how patriarchal society uses the concept of "nature" to justify its control.

Pearls are given the special significance of being the "only gemstone birthed by life," seemingly symbolizing life's magic, but in reality, they symbolize the death of a pearl-producing bivalve. In this beautification process, all artificial interventions are deliberately hidden. The same logic appears in

commercial surrogacy: it claims to be helping infertile couples regain their "natural right" to become parents, ostensibly returning an "unnatural" state to "natural," but actually representing a naked exploitation of reproductive capacity.

Women in Pearl-farming Net

When discussing commercial surrogacy, a common defense is that it becomes acceptable if surrogate mothers receive fair compensation. This reminds me of how people talk about "improvements" in pearl cultivation—as if enhanced techniques and increased survival rates could somehow negate the fundamental exploitation. But reality defies such simple transactional logic, as it assumes that surrogate mothers can receive fair compensation, that the physical and psychological impacts can be offset by money, and that this money will actually be used by the surrogate herself.

Just as the pearl industry tends to establish farms in economically disadvantaged regions, the surrogacy market maintains its own price hierarchy. According to Nalbandian (2025), the surrogacy process in the United States could cost as much as $100,000 to $150,000, whereas in countries like India, the cost drops to $30,000 to $40,000. These price differences reflect more than market variance—they point to how global capitalism often sources reproductive labor from vulnerable communities.

But even within those lower-cost settings, surrogate mothers rarely receive most of that money. Studies show that surrogates in countries like Ukraine and India, only receive $10,000 to $15,000, while the rest usually goes into the pockets of agencies, clinics, and intermediaries (Dzholos & Koshulko, 2022; Lance & Merchant, 2016).

Ironically—and tragically—these already modest sums are not always fully within the woman's control. In many cases, the money is quickly absorbed by urgent family needs, existing debts, or directed by others around her. It's painful to consider, but some women may step into surrogacy not entirely by choice, but under subtle or even direct pressure from loved ones.

Considering the concept of "bodily autonomy," I cannot help but ask: when a person is forced by economic pressure to choose to exchange their body for compensation far exceeding daily income, can we still call this a free choice? This reminds me of those pearl-producing bivalves that died excluded from the "survival rates"—their lives, too, are determined by market logic. Not to mention the risks in surrogacy:

gestational hypertension, post-cesarean complications, postpartum depression, and separation anxiety. These physical and psychological traumas, like the cut flesh of bivalves, silently endure behind the gleaming "product."

Like those pearl-producing bivalves unable to express pain in ways familiar to us, surrogate mothers may be silenced as well. Even when they can speak, under the dual oppression of patriarchy and capitalism, they may not have the opportunity to recognize their situation, let alone change it. This structural exploitation's rationalization remains inextricably linked to the insidious social constructs of "nature" and "instinct."

The essence of this exploitation often reveals itself through subtle details. While researching the operation of the surrogacy industry, I unexpectedly came across a thought-provoking phenomenon that perfectly illustrates how this industry assigns different roles based on gender. As a woman, I have never had the opportunity to enter a men’s restroom, but through a male friend, I accidentally discovered a striking difference in the illegal advertisements found in public restrooms in China. According to his experience, the ads in men's restrooms generally fall into three categories: gambling, sex services, and surrogacy. In contrast, the ads I and my female friends see in women's restrooms are much simpler: paid egg donation and surrogacy.

What is even more intriguing is that the surrogacy ads in men’s restrooms are typically targeted at male consumers, sometimes even including estimated prices. Meanwhile, the surrogacy ads in women’s restrooms are directed at potential service providers, often featuring words like "help" alongside the promised compensation. Additionally, the locations where these illegal surrogacy ads are concentrated are deeply unsettling. My male friend told me that one of the restrooms where he saw the most surrogacy ads was in the obstetrics and gynecology department of a top-tier hospital in Beijing. Meanwhile, my female friends reported that the places where they encountered the most surrogacy ads were university campuses and restrooms in shopping malls frequented by young people. Of course, obstetrics and gynecology departments also had their fair share of such ads, but compared to the surrogacy ads in the

women's restrooms, it seemed that the advertisements targeted at men, promoting prostitution, placed under waiting chairs in these hospitals were more common to see.

If motherhood were entirely a woman's natural instinct, then why do those who post illegal surrogacy ads believe that men's restrooms hold more of their potential customers?

To deconstruct patriarchy's cultural construction of motherhood, we must first recognize a fundamental truth: although women and nature are both subjected to oppression, women are not equivalent to nature. The complexity of human society, shaped by evolutionary development, distinguishes humans from other species, and as such, human women are also distinct. As scholar Adriana Teodorescu pointed out, "women have made a great effort to control motherhood, to separate it as much as possible from natural laws and to disrupt the connection between women and nature, even before the rise of the birth control pill, of the abortion movement, or of the feminist movement." This control over motherhood is particularly crucial on an individual level for women, as it alters the biological predicament they face when they lack autonomy over the possibility of pregnancy.

The imposition of the concept of "nature" onto women is a deeply patriarchal practice. Adriana Teodorescu emphasizes, "envisioning nature in a positive light entails not only a naturalist, but also an idealized construction of motherhood." Within this patriarchal binary logic, motherhood is constructed as an innate female trait, often closely tied to virtue. Consequently, an opposing, deviant, and even immoral image of women is also created—women who do not bear children and mothers who prioritize themselves.

Patriarchal expectations of female motherhood begin the moment a little girl receives her first plastic baby doll. Within this framework, a mother is expected to have an innate affection for her child, a love and self-sacrificing spirit that emerge instinctively from within.

However, scientific research has long disproven this essentialist view. Hrdy (1999) argues that maternal love is not innate but rather a strategic behavior influenced by environmental and social support. Studies by Feldman and Eidelman (1999) further demonstrate that the attachment between mother and child is gradually built through continuous interaction rather than existing from the outset. Moreover, Badinter (2012), in her analysis of modern motherhood culture, points out that the association

of the "good mother" with selflessness and virtue is entirely a social construct rather than an intrinsic female trait.

This naturalization of reproductive ability also gives rise to another issue: when a woman's capacity for childbirth is seen as a self-evident aspect of "nature," infertility—whether congenital or acquired—is labeled as "unnatural." This logic ultimately stems from patriarchal culture's deep-seated interest in reproduction, one that denies both individual differences and the randomness inherent in nature itself. I have no issue with people who genuinely want children at all, but what I find unacceptable is the way women experiencing infertility are pressured into assisted reproductive technologies while the health risks of hormone treatments are dismissed as a "natural" sacrifice of motherhood. Within this framework that equates women with reproductive function, surrogacy is conveniently framed as nothing more than the rational allocation and redistribution of reproductive resources.

This tendency to naturalize exploitation is also evident in the language used to describe pearl farming. When we talk about "pearl cultivation," few people stop to consider the inherent disregard for life embedded in the term itself. The word "cultivation" originates from agricultural production, referring to the process of growing plants. Applying this term to pearl farming implicitly degrades life—reducing living animals to crops that can be sown and harvested. This is no accidental choice: by employing a term that carries pastoral and gentle connotations, the industry effectively obscures its inherent violence.

The impact of this linguistic strategy is profound. When we say "cultivating pearls" instead of "forcing pearl oysters to secrete nacre," or "harvesting pearls" instead of "killing pearl oysters to extract pearls," we participate in a collective act of forgetting. The word "cultivation" conjures images of farmers tending to their crops with patience and care, rather than workers prying open oyster shells with force.

This linguistic strategy has been remarkably successful in shaping public perception. As with the tourists who celebrate pearls without questioning their origins, when we say "pearl cultivation," we envision the formation of pearls, not the death of oysters. We think of human ingenuity refining nature, rather than the extraction of life. This dehumanizing (or rather, de-animalizing) narrative mirrors the patriarchal construction of motherhood: both attempt to mask fundamental violence with a veneer of gentleness, using "nature" as a justification for artificial intervention. Just as the word "help" frequently

appears in surrogacy advertisements in women's restrooms, these carefully chosen terms package exploitation as kindness, turning commercial transactions into moral acts.

This leads me to wonder: in the logic of consumerism, have pearls and "biological" children alike become commodities? Just as a pearl's value is tied to the idea that it is "naturally" formed, the obsession for biological children is largely driven by the same myth of "nature." Under the dual forces of patriarchy and consumerism, biological connection has been socially constructed and commodified into something that must be pursued.

Just as pearls become the justification for the exploitation of pearl oysters, children become the justification for the exploitation of surrogate mothers. But we must ask: is a "biological" child truly so important that it is irreplaceable? Stripping away the ethical veneer, the real question is: why must the child be genetically related?

This obsession seems to be driven by a fascination with "nature." Yet, ironically, the human desire for reproduction is not necessarily "natural" at all. While sexual desire is indeed instinctual, equating it with the desire to reproduce is an oversimplification. In the natural world, many species engage in non-reproductive sexual behavior, and human women, unlike most mammals, do not mate exclusively during ovulation. Human sexuality has long transcended its biological function, evolving into a complex cultural and social phenomenon. If reproduction were truly an instinct, why do some people have no desire to reproduce at all? Why does not having children have no impact on health? Why must societies resort to incentives and penalties to encourage childbirth?

To deconstruct the patriarchal cultural construction of motherhood, we must first acknowledge a fundamental fact: although women and nature are both subjected to oppression, women are not equivalent to nature. Human societal evolution has introduced complexities that distinguish us from other species in the natural world, and as humans have been differentiated from other species, so too have human women.

As Adriana Teodorescu notes, "Women have made a great effort to control motherhood, to separate it as much as possible from natural laws and to disrupt the connection between women and nature, even before the rise of the birth control pill, of the abortion movement, or of the feminist

movement." This control over motherhood is particularly significant for women on an individual level, as it alters the biological predicament in which women find themselves when they lack autonomy over their bodies and potential pregnancies. The imposition of the concept of "nature" onto women is a deeply patriarchal act. As Adriana Teodorescu emphasizes, "envisioning nature in a positive light entails not only a naturalist, but also an idealized construction of motherhood." Within this patriarchal binary logic, motherhood is constructed as an innate quality of women, often closely linked to virtue. This, in turn, creates an opposing image of an "unnatural" or even "immoral" woman—one who does not bear children or a mother who prioritizes herself over her child. The societal expectation of female motherhood begins the moment a little girl receives her first plastic baby doll. Within this framework, a mother must have a natural affection for her child, an instinctive love, and a self-sacrificial spirit.

However, Hrdy (1999) argues that maternal love is not innate but rather a strategic behavior shaped by environment and social support. Similarly, Feldman and Eidelman (1999) found that maternal-infant attachment is gradually established through continuous interaction rather than existing from the outset. Additionally, Badinter (2012) analyzed modern motherhood culture, arguing that the association between the "good mother" and selflessness or virtue is a social construct rather than a natural female instinct. Likewise, when female fertility is perceived as natural, infertility is seen as unnatural, regardless of whether its causes are congenital or acquired. This logic, rooted in the historical patriarchal obsession with reproduction, denies both individual differences and the randomness of nature.

I do not deny that some people genuinely wish to have children, but what I cannot accept is the way the health risks associated with hormone treatments in assisted reproductive technology are so readily dismissed as a natural maternal sacrifice. Under this paradigm, where women are equated with reproductive function, surrogacy is often justified as a mere redistribution of reproductive resources.

Just as pearls become the justification for the exploitation of pearl oysters, children become the justification for the exploitation of surrogate mothers. But we must ask: Is a "biological" child truly so important that they are irreplaceable? Stripped of its ethical veneer, this question ultimately asks: Why must a child be genetically related?

This fixation seems to be shrouded in a fascination with "nature." Yet ironically, human reproductive desires themselves are not necessarily "natural." Though sexual impulses are instinctual, equating them with reproductive intent is an oversimplification. In the natural world, many species engage in non-reproductive sexual behaviors, and unlike most other mammals, human females do not confine sexual activity to ovulation periods. Human sexuality has long transcended mere biological function, evolving into a complex cultural and social phenomenon. If reproduction were truly an instinct, why do some people have no desire for children? Why does not having children have no negative impact on health? Why does society still need incentives and penalties to encourage reproduction?

Even the emotional bond between parents and children is not as "natural" as we imagine. While the symbiotic relationship during pregnancy does create a physiological connection between mother and child, the father-child bond is clearly built through interaction. More importantly, research shows that even without pregnancy, mothers can also secrete large amounts of oxytocin when caring for non-biological children. This emotional bond is not limited to blood relations and can even transcend species—many people experience profound nurturing connections when caring for animals.

So why are people so obsessed with genetic continuity? This fixation may be rooted in deeper societal constructs: an unconscious fear of death leads people to view genetic inheritance as a form of life extension; narcissism and patriarchal traditions reinforce the expectation of lineage continuity; anxiety about social alienation and the pursuit of "normalcy" drive people to seek belonging through reproduction. These motivations have nothing to do with natural reproductive instincts—they are purely social constructs.

In this context, both pearls and biological children become commodities imbued with special value within a patriarchal consumerist society. Just as people are willing to pay more for a "natural" pearl, the label of "biological" carries an artificial superiority. The upper class can rent other women's wombs to avoid the pains of pregnancy, reflecting the intersection of feminism and class power structures. Patriarchy simultaneously glorifies motherhood and treats women's wombs as rentable commodities. What is disturbing about this phenomenon is that it exposes how, under the dual forces of patriarchy and consumerism, even the most intimate bonds of life can be commodified.

As I near the end of this article, I reflect on its opening and imagine the final, faint sound of a pearl oyster being cut open. Perhaps it is not just the shell colliding with its kin but also a metaphor for how life is dissected, priced, and forgotten under the double burden of patriarchy and consumerism. Whether pearl oysters or surrogate mothers, their bodies are reduced to vessels for producing "precious commodities," while their existence as whole beings disappears within the narratives we construct.

Perhaps the real issue is not whether pearl oysters can feel pain or whether surrogacy is fairly compensated. These questions themselves imply a calculable framework for measuring the value of life. What is more crucial is recognizing that when we reduce life to measurable units of value, something deeper is already lost in the process. Neither the luster of a pearl nor the continuity of genes should serve as excuses for disregarding the integrity of life.

Throughout writing this piece, I found myself continuously reflecting: Why do we believe certain forms of sacrifice are justifiable? Why do we accept certain types of exploitation as "natural"? Perhaps it is this act of questioning itself that allows us to break free from the illusions constructed by patriarchal consumerism and rethink our relationships with life, nature, and one another.

Bibliography

Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

Badinter, Élisabeth. *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012.

Baran, Stephanie. "Visual Patriarchy: PETA Advertising and the Commodification of Sexualized Bodies." In *Women and Nature?: Beyond Dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, Sam Mickey 45. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018.

Benny, Norma, and Stephanie Leland. "All of One Flesh: The Rights of Animals." In *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth*, edited by Léonie Caldecott, Stephenie Leland. London: Women's Press, 1983.

Feldman, Ruth, and Arthur I. Eidelman. "Maternal Postpartum Behavior and the Emergence of Infant–Mother Attachment in Preterm and Full-Term Infants." *Developmental Psychobiology* 35, no. 3 (1999): 167–176.

Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet.* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer. *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.

Kheel, Marti, "The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair." In *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader*, edited by Josephine Donovan, Carol J. Adams. Chichester, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Land, Stephen, and Geoffrey Proud. *The Pearl Story.* Jewelry Television, 2007. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/Jewelrytelevision-ThePearlStoryPreview407.

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism.* Edited by George Sher. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001. First published 1863.

Naess, Arne. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy.* Translated and revised by David Rothenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Nalbandian, A. (2025). "India's 2021 Surrogacy (Regulation) Act: From the 'Rent-a-Womb' Capital of the World to an Outright Ban on Commercial Surrogacy." George Washington International Law Review

Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development.* London: Zed Books, 1988.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation.* New York: HarperCollins, 2009. First published 1975.

———. *Practical Ethics.* 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Teodorescu, Adriana. "The Women-Nature Connection as a Key Element in the Social Construction of Western Contemporary Motherhood." In *Women and Nature?: Beyond*

Dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, Sam Mickey, 78. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018.

Teman, Elly. *Birthing a Mother: The Surrogate Body and the Pregnant Self.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.