# Violência reprodutiva e dramaturgia feminista em *Bodies* de Vivienne Franzmann

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**Resumo:** O presente artigo investiga as múltiplas formas de violência presentes na prática da barriga de aluguel transnacional, a partir da análise da peça *Bodies* (2017), de Vivienne Franzmann. A narrativa acompanha a decisão de Clem, uma mulher britânica, de recorrer à gestação de substituição na Índia, expondo as interseções entre desejo reprodutivo, privilégio e desigualdade global. O texto explora como a dramaturgia fragmentada da peça articula a crítica feminista, evidenciando formas de violência estrutural, simbólica, afetiva e epistêmica. Por meio da personagem "Daughter", a peça mobiliza estratégias do teatro épico para interromper a identificação passiva do espectador e promover o distanciamento crítico. O simbolismo das aves reforça as tensões entre fantasia e realidade, agência e dominação, visibilizando o apagamento das gestantes nos discursos reprodutivos do Norte global. Assim, *Bodies* propõe uma reflexão sobre justiça reprodutiva e a função política do teatro contemporâneo.
**Palavras-chave:** violência reprodutiva; dramaturgia feminista; barriga de aluguel.

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**Abstract**: This article examines the multifaceted forms of violence embedded within transnational surrogacy practices through an analysis of Vivienne Franzmann's play *Bodies* (2017). Centered on a British woman's decision to pursue gestational surrogacy in India, the play reveals how reproductive desire intersects with global inequality, race, and privilege. Through its fragmented dramaturgy, the play stages forms of structural, symbolic, affective, and epistemic violence, dramatizing Clem's internal conflict through her imaginary dialogues with her daughter and the nearly voiceless surrogate, Lakshmi. The character "Daughter" functions as an epic theatre device that interrupts narrative immersion and generates critical distance. Bird symbolism is employed to expose conflicting narratives of motherhood and ownership. Ultimately, *Bodies* critiques the commodification of reproduction and challenges audiences to reconsider the ethical and political implications of reproductive outsourcing.
**Keywords:** reproductive violence; feminist theatre; surrogacy.

## 1. Introduction

Theatre has long served as a powerful medium for confronting systems of power and making visible the often invisible violences embedded in everyday life. Feminist playwrights have used the stage to denounce structures of oppression that affect women

across intersections of race, class, and nationality. Vivienne Franzmann's *Bodies* (2017) is one such work. Centering on the story of a British couple who pursue surrogacy in India, the play explores the asymmetrical power relations underpinning transnational surrogacy, revealing how desire, privilege, and globalized reproductive technologies intersect to produce multiple forms of violence, structural, symbolic, affective, and epistemic. *Bodies* (2017) engages directly with themes of violence against women because it portrays how reproductive desire can function as a vector of violence when mediated by race, class, and global economic disparities. The play does not frame violence as a singular, physical event but rather as a multilayered system of harm enacted through structural inequality, symbolic erasure, and the commodification of women's bodies.

The World Health Organization defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power… that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (2002, p. 5). Furthermore, Jinee Lokaneeta (2011) extends this notion by identifying structural, symbolic, and epistemic violence, categories that are deeply entangled in the transnational surrogacy arrangements dramatized in *Bodies* (2017). The play refuses simplistic moral binaries. Instead, it constructs a critical and affective space where power, complicity, and agency are interrogated through Clem's imaginary dialogues with her future Daughter, and Lakshmi's near-silent presence as the gestating surrogate.

Vivienne Franzmann is not the only writer to engage imaginatively with the complexities of surrogacy. Jenifer Maisel's *There or Here* (2008), Jane Cafarella's *E-Baby* (2015), Meera Syal's *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015), and Satinder Chohan's *Made in India* (2017) also explore this terrain, as do documentary and television works such as *A Mother's Dream* (2013) and the BBC series *The Nest* (2020). These works vary in focus but share a concern with how reproductive labor is managed, commodified, and negotiated in unequal global contexts. As Feinberg and Maisel note about their own play, "A piece of theatre can simultaneously address the personal and the global," creating a "more nuanced understanding of gestational 'outsourcing' than provided by data, statistics, or even a third

person narrative" (FEINBERG in DASGUPTA and DASGUPTA, 2014, p. 197). In this tradition, *Bodies* (2017) stands out for how it compresses time and space: rather than juxtaposing settings, Franzmann collapses them, allowing past and present, UK and India, to co-exist through dramaturgical rupture. At the heart of *Bodies* (2017) lies the question: how does one represent the human costs of transnational surrogacy onstage? Through its fragmented structure and spectral character of Daughter, the play stages an ethical confrontation between Clem's privileged position and Lakshmi's vulnerability. This confrontation is not merely interpersonal, it is systemic, invoking histories of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy.

To understand how *Bodies* (2017) functions as feminist critique, it is essential to also grasp the material realities behind its narrative. Transnational surrogacy is intimately tied to Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs).ART has enabled the dissociation of reproduction from biology, turning ova, sperm, and wombs into commodities. While the cost of such services in the Global North remains prohibitive, countries like India became hubs for "reproductive outsourcing," offering world-class medical services at lower prices (DASGUPTA AND DASGUPTA, 2014, p. ix). Yet, the absence of legal frameworks and protections in these regions has opened the door to exploitation.

India legalized commercial surrogacy in 2002, but it was not until 2003, when Dr. Nayna Patel facilitated a surrogacy for her British daughter, that the practice garnered global attention. Since then, the industry has flourished, structured less by rights than by demand. As Dasgupta and Dasgupta explain, class, caste, religion, and educational background increasingly influence client choices, reinscribing eugenic ideals even in ostensibly post-colonial settings (2014, p. 17). Surrogates, though not biologically related to the fetus, are scrutinized for the imagined "social traits" their bodies might transmit, a modern form of biological essentialism grounded in market logic. The ethical terrain is deeply contested. Critics highlight the exploitative nature of the arrangement, where clinics, agencies, and commissioning parents exercise control while surrogates are denied agency. Others argue that surrogacy offers women economic opportunity, asserting that they make

rational, autonomous choices. *Bodies* (2017) is situated precisely in this polarized discourse, not to resolve it, but to make it visible.

Franzmann's play engages with this debate by weaving the global and the intimate, the political and the personal, highlighting how reproductive violence is not limited to physical harm but extends into emotional and symbolic registers. The play's rhapsodic structure (RYAN, 2011) disrupts linear storytelling, fragmenting time and causality in a way that mirrors the fragmented nature of responsibility and accountability within transnational surrogacy. By collapsing geographic and temporal boundaries, juxtaposing India and the UK, past decisions and future consequences, Franzmann reveals how historical and systemic violences reverberate through the bodies of women in the present. The character of Daughter becomes central to this temporal dislocation. As an imagined presence and spectral figure, she functions not only as a projection of Clem's desires and anxieties but also as a moral compass that confronts Clem with the human cost of her decisions. Daughter is a ghost of the future, a product of privilege, biotechnology, and displacement, who refuses to remain silent or complicit. Her haunting declaration, "You made her into a room. A room with a door you could lock" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 53), encapsulates the violence of objectification and the erasure of the surrogate's subjectivity. Through this line, Franzmann confronts the audience with the brutal reality of commodified reproduction, transforming the metaphor of the womb into an image of incarceration. In doing so, the play demands that viewers grapple not only with Clem's choices but with the broader social systems that render such choices viable, legal, and even desirable.

This paper asks how the play stages the violences, both visible and invisible, embedded in reproductive arrangements shaped by global inequality. These violences include not only the overt exploitation of women's labor, but also more insidious forms such as epistemic silencing, symbolic erasure, and affective dispossession. *Bodies* (2017) brings these layers to the surface through its complex dramaturgy and character dynamics, especially in the fractured interactions between Clem, Daughter, and Lakshmi. Rather than presenting a straightforward moral judgment, the play exposes how individual decisions,

like Clem's choice to pursue surrogacy in India, are entangled within larger systems of power that render certain bodies vulnerable, and others entitled. It argues that *Bodies* (2017) does not condemn individual choices but reveals how those choices are shaped by coercive structures that privilege personal desire over social justice, emotional satisfaction over ethical responsibility, and market-driven solutions over collective care. In doing so, the play destabilizes the narrative of reproductive autonomy, reframing it within a transnational economy where agency is unevenly distributed and where freedom of choice is often an illusion reserved for the privileged.

## 2. Violence, Power, and Representation in *Bodies*

Structural violence, as conceptualized by Lokaneeta (2011), refers to the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals. In *Bodies* (2017), this violence is rendered visible through the economic and social conditions that compel Lakshmi to become a surrogate. Her decision is not born out of genuine choice or desire, but rather emerges from financial necessity, a reality faced by many women operating within precarious global economies. The surrogacy arrangement becomes less a contract of mutual agreement than a response to structural coercion.

Clem's pursuit of motherhood, facilitated by a surrogacy agency, underscores the commodification of reproductive labor. Within the framework of the global fertility industry, Lakshmi's body is rendered serviceable, her labor abstracted into a biological function purchasable by others. This commodification is expressed poignantly when Clem's imagined daughter confronts her: "You made her into a room. A room with a door you could lock" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 53). The metaphor transforms Lakshmi from subject to space, reducing her existence to utility and highlighting the ethical bankruptcy of turning human bodies into gestational vessels.

Layered upon this structural dynamic is symbolic violence, which manifests through internalized social hierarchies and the legitimization of inequality. The racial and cultural

disparities between Clem and Lakshmi are not incidental; they are central to the architecture of the play's conflict. Lakshmi's marginal presence and limited speech reflect the broader marginalization of women from the Global South in dominant reproductive discourses. Clem's interactions with her are mediated through Dr. Sharma, allowing Clem to remain distant from the emotional and physical realities of the surrogate's experience. This mediated distance permits Clem to sustain a narrative of ethical responsibility while remaining entrenched in a system that benefits her at Lakshmi's expense.

These layers of marginalization converge in the form of epistemic violence. Drawing on Spivak's (1988) foundational question, "Can the subaltern speak?", the play dramatizes the silencing of Lakshmi as a representative of the subaltern woman. Her voice is structurally excluded; her motivations are inferred but rarely heard. *Bodies* (2017) unfolds largely through Clem's point of view, which centers the ethical dilemma of the privileged while obscuring the lived complexity of the disenfranchised. Lakshmi becomes a presence without subjectivity, a body whose pain, desire, and agency are sidelined in favor of Clem's moral reckoning.

This reckoning is not solely ideological, it is affective. *Bodies* (2017) probes the emotional labor demanded by surrogacy arrangements from both surrogate and client. Clem's guilt, anxiety, and ambivalence are externalized through hallucinations and her imagined conversations with Daughter. These exchanges reveal the affective contradictions at the heart of her maternal longing: the simultaneous disavowal and dependence on another woman's suffering. While Lakshmi's emotional world is less explicitly rendered, the expectation that she remains emotionally detached from the child she carries foregrounds the dehumanizing logic of commercial surrogacy. Her labor is not only physical but emotional, and yet it is neither compensated nor acknowledged.

Franzmann amplifies these complexities through her rhapsodic dramaturgy, which fragments time, destabilizes linearity, and blurs the boundaries between memory, fantasy, and present action. The rhapsodic structure, non-linear, episodic, and deeply subjective, resists the rationalizing impulses of realism (RYAN, 2001, p. 100). Clem's imagined

dialogues with Daughter function as a form of self-fiction: dramatizing her conscience, unraveling the tidy narrative of choice, and exposing the affective dissonance between ethical intent and material consequence. In this regard, *Bodies* (2017) echoes other feminist texts that use theatrical rupture to interrogate systems of violence. Plays such as *There or Here* (2008), *E-Baby* (2015), and *Made in India* (2017) also examine surrogacy, but Franzmann's innovation lies in her temporal compression and emotional layering. Rather than narrating the consequences of transnational surrogacy, she stages its affective landscape, showing how violence circulates not only through bodies, but through silences, fears, dreams, and projections.

By situating *Bodies* (2017) within this larger sociopolitical and aesthetic field, we can appreciate its contribution to contemporary feminist theatre. The play does not resolve the contradictions it presents; instead, it insists on them. It demands that audiences recognize the structural inequalities that underpin seemingly personal choices and reflect on the ethical costs of global reproductive economies.

**3. Daughter as Epic Theatre Device**

The character Daughter operates as one of the most potent dramaturgical devices in *Bodies* (2017), embodying the political purpose and formal strategies of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. Central to this approach is the Alienation Effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), a technique designed to prevent the audience from becoming emotionally absorbed in the narrative, thereby encouraging critical reflection rather than passive identification. As Brecht explains, the goal is to transform the spectator into an observer who can analyze and question what is presented on stage, rather than consuming it as natural or inevitable (BRECHT, 1964, p. 91). Daughter exemplifies this strategy: through her imagined conversations with Clem, she interrupts the illusion of realism and disrupts the continuity of time and space, forcing the audience to confront the ideological tensions and moral contradictions inherent in the surrogacy arrangement. Her role is not simply to advance the

plot but to challenge the narrative from within. As Barnett notes, political theatre does not consist merely in addressing political themes, but in "making theatre politically" (BARNETT, 2005, p. 32). Daughter performs precisely this function by inserting political critique into the intimate and psychological spaces of Clem's conscience.

From the outset, Daughter challenges Clem's self-perception as a morally upright woman. Clem believes her actions are benevolent, she is a caregiver to her ill father and a victim of infertility. However, Daughter becomes the voice of unease, inserting ruptures into Clem's narrative and linking her personal journey to broader global structures of inequality. She serves as a bridge between the UK and India, and even invokes Russia, where the egg donor originates, thereby highlighting the transnational, multi-sited construction of Clem's reproductive project. Feinberg and Maisel emphasize that drama allows for the simultaneous staging of complex issues that academic discourse must treat in isolation. "In theatre, all of these silos can be viewed at the same time from the same vantage point, by multitudes of people" (FEINBERG & MAISEL, 2014, p. 205). Daughter exemplifies this dramatic convergence. She gives voice to overlapping discourses on kinship, guilt, genetic belonging, and ownership, all while maintaining her spectral status as a not-yet-born, imagined child.

Daughter's presence transforms the stage into a transnational arena where past, present, and speculative futures coexist. Her knowledge of Tarragon, a plant with no logical link to her context, hints at a bodily connection to Lakshmi and disrupts the primacy of genetic kinship. Clem's fear that the surrogate may have passed on more than just blood reflects anxieties about racial purity, maternal legitimacy, and ownership. This is further underlined in Clem's horror at Daughter possibly tattooing her skin, what begins as a discussion about bodily autonomy quickly devolves into anxiety over defiling the whiteness of skin that Clem had effectively purchased.

Through these dialogues, Franzmann questions who owns the body of the child and, by extension, the mother. Daughter's repeated assertion, "It's my body" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 8), serves as a double echo: of the surrogate's right to bodily autonomy and of the

child's assertion of independence. Yet, Clem's unease reveals her implicit belief that both the surrogate's and the child's bodies are, in some sense, hers. As the play progresses, Daughter continues to function as both conscience and critic. Her interventions are not just psychological, they are epistemological and political. Scene eight, where she overlays Clem's memories with Lakshmi's lived reality in the clinic, collapses time and distance to make Lakshmi's suffering felt. In scene eleven, Daughter and Lakshmi sing in Hindi and Russian, while Clem remains confined to English, dramatizing the child's hybrid heritage and Clem's emotional disorientation. Daughter becomes not only a projection of Clem's guilt but a composite symbol of globalization: assembled from genetic, cultural, and emotional fragments.

Later scenes drive the critique further. In scene thirteen, Daughter forces Clem to confront the absent egg donor, revealing Clem's ignorance and discomfort with the genetic lineage of her child. Clem's inability to answer questions about the donor reveals the transactional nature of the relationship and the reduction of the donor to mere genetic material. Scene fifteen marks a turning point. Clem's delusions are shattered by the appearance of Boy, Lakshmi's son, looking for his sister. The theatrical logic collapses entirely, bringing together hallucination, memory, and real-time tragedy. Lakshmi's monologue, in which she tells of tying her children together with a piece of string before leaving, offers a heartbreaking counterpoint to Clem's curated vision of surrogacy. This moment grants Lakshmi the stage, breaking the epistemic violence of her earlier silence.

Even here, Daughter remains the intermediary. She urges Clem to listen, to stop rationalizing, to stop talking. Lakshmi finally says, "I ran away because I knew she was illegal" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 108), acknowledging the material and legal precarity she faced. This moment transforms Daughter from a private projection into a political mediator, forcing Clem to reckon with what she has repressed. Franzmann's use of Daughter transcends traditional theatrical devices. She becomes a narrative threshold: between guilt and accountability, fantasy and reality, privilege and exploitation. By using Daughter to

orchestrate these collisions, Franzmann breaks with naturalist conventions and instead mobilizes the strategies of epic theatre to politicize the audience's gaze.

In the end, *Bodies* (2017) is not merely about a surrogate arrangement, it is a play about global systems of violence, mediated through the bodies of women. Daughter ensures that the audience cannot consume the narrative passively. Her presence unsettles, interrogates, and reframes, making visible what is often obscured. In doing so, Franzmann turns theatre into a site of feminist resistance, an arena where the personal is always already political. Daughter's interruptions also serve to emphasize the psychological weight that Clem carries. Throughout the play, Clem attempts to maintain control over her narrative, convincing herself that she is doing the right thing. Yet Daughter continuously destabilizes this narrative, reminding Clem, and the audience, of the unseen consequences of her choices. The ruptures Daughter causes in Clem's imagined future open space for doubt, for reckoning, and for the acknowledgment that the surrogate's suffering is not a distant fact, but a present, ongoing condition sustained by Clem's decisions.

This dramaturgical strategy aligns closely with Brecht's principles of historicization and estrangement, as Brecht explains, "nothing is self-evident, everything has to be socially and historically explained." (1964, p. 86). By situating Daughter outside of linear time and geographic specificity, Franzmann universalizes the ethical dilemmas embedded in surrogacy while preserving their cultural specificity. Daughter is not simply a child-to-be; she is a function of Clem's privilege, a living consequence of a system that extracts labor and life from the marginalized to fulfill the desires of the privileged. She is a critique that cannot be dismissed, even if she exists only in Clem's imagination. Additionally, the repeated presence of Daughter forces Clem into a relationship of responsibility, not only to the unborn child but to the people and systems that make that child possible. In this way, Daughter is not just a figure of conscience, but of accountability. Her questions are not neutral; they are accusatory, insistent, and ultimately transformative. They dismantle Clem's moral comfort and challenge the narrative of surrogacy as an uncomplicated act of generosity.

Franzmann's staging further enhances these dynamics. The minimal set and temporal fluidity of the play create an environment in which memories, projections, and hallucinations coexist without hierarchy. This aesthetic mirrors the psychological complexity of Clem's experience and foregrounds the emotional dissonance that underlies her rationalizations. The stage becomes a site of ethical confrontation, where characters, and audience members, must reckon with the full weight of what has been outsourced. The use of Daughter as a disruptive figure also enables Franzmann to highlight the inherent contradictions in contemporary narratives of choice and empowerment. Clem insists on her agency in pursuing surrogacy, yet Daughter's presence continually reminds her that such choices are only available to those with economic and geopolitical power. Lakshmi's agency, by contrast, is heavily constrained. This asymmetry is laid bare not through exposition, but through dramatic interruption.

Ultimately, Daughter is more than a character; she is a formal device that collapses borders, temporal, spatial, and moral. Through her, Franzmann (2017) stages the violence of transnational surrogacy not as a singular event, but as a sustained, relational dynamic. Daughter's voice ensures that no character, and no spectator, can remain untouched by the ethical fissures she brings to light. Her presence lingers as a reminder that the future is shaped not only by our desires but by the costs we are willing to ignore in pursuit of them.

**4. The Bird Symbolism**

Throughout the play, 'birds' become a topic in a conversation or in passing. Franzmann (2017) uses birds as symbolism, creating different meanings behind the various uses of birds in her writing. Bird symbolism has appeared in literature on numerous instances, ranging from the *Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, a play written by Christopher Marlowe and initially published in 1604 (ROWLAND, Introduction xiii), to Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* (1845), and continuing into *Bodies* (2017). Symbolism regarding birds has also been utilized by authors such as Shelley and

Wordsworth. The animal often represents "the poet's muse" (WORMHOUDT, 1985, p. 180), and contrasts between soul and body, ethereal and earthly. Birds have also been linked to motherhood and breastfeeding, symbolizing "the maternal breast, the life-giving milk" (ROWLAND, Introduction xiv). When used in poetry, the bird symbol can carry layered meanings tied to femininity and maternal identity, especially when interpreted through unconscious associations between bird and breast (WORMHOUDT, 1985, p. 176).

Birds, unlike many animals, "can be domesticated to serve as pets or processed to supply food and other practical needs" (LUTWACK, 1994, p. 233), which ties them directly to questions of ownership and domestication, central themes in *Bodies* (2017). The surrogacy arrangement at the heart of the play is intertwined with the language of capitalism and ownership. Clem's claim over Daughter is not only legal or emotional but also economic. In their conversations, Daughter describes herself as a crow, a bird that Clem associates with impurity or undesirable traits. This leads to an exchange where Daughter insists, "It's my body" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 8), challenging Clem's implicit belief in her ownership. Later, Clem asserts, "You're not her baby… You're mine" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 37), revealing the possessive language that governs the surrogate relationship. The bird becomes an apt symbol for commodified motherhood, purchased, claimed, and domesticated.

Finches, by contrast, offer an idealized and sentimental counterpoint. Clem tells Daughter that her favorite bird is a finch, a species historically associated with joy, vitality, and domestic peace. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the bird becomes a metaphor for innocence and moral clarity, while in *Bodies* (2017), Clem's preference for finches reflects her longing for a controllable, sanitized version of motherhood, one free of the messiness that Lakshmi represents. "You're all I've ever wanted," she tells Daughter (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 11), attempting to stabilize her identity as a mother through this imagined future, symbolized by a delicate, hopeful finch.

However, Daughter's fascination with crows undermines Clem's vision. "Crows are cool… There's something about crows, isn't there? They're sleek, and their eyes shine, and

their feathers are beautiful like oil" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 7). Her admiration contrasts sharply with Lakshmi's later description of the baby as a ravenous crow, "clawing at my skin… Screeching for more food. Her beak wide open" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 109). Lakshmi experiences the baby not as a blessing but as an invading, consuming force, symbolizing death and disintegration rather than life and joy. Here, the crow becomes a symbol of burden, exploitation, and colonial residue. Franzmann stages this contrast to expose the vast chasm between Clem's abstract desires and Lakshmi's embodied suffering.

The symbolic weight of the crow extends to the other surrogates in the clinic, who begin to shun Lakshmi after her attempted escape. She becomes "full of bad luck, and they all know it" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 112). This transformation reflects the dehumanizing effects of the surrogacy process, where Lakshmi is no longer seen as a woman but as an omen, an animal marked by failure. Her story is a cautionary tale to the others, and her body becomes a site of contamination, deserving of quarantine. In linking this imagery to colonial frameworks, Franzmann suggests that the surrogate's identity is determined not by her own narrative but by the projections and needs of those with power.

Birds also play a symbolic role in Clem's relationship with her father, David. Once an avid breeder of finches, David has become immobilized by illness. His aviary is a remnant of his past vitality, and Clem tries to reconnect with him through references to the birds. She asks, "How are the birds?" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 24) and proposes they "go out to the birds" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 49), only to be met with evasive responses. David's reluctance signals a dissonance between past and present, between the life he lived and the one he endures now. The birds, once symbols of joy, become ghosts of a former self.

In the play's final act, Clem learns that the finches have escaped. "Evka left the aviary door open… The birds flew out" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 120). Clem is devastated and insists on replacing them, only to be met with David's refusal. His grunts, though inarticulate, express a firm boundary: he no longer desires the birds. "But he loves the finches… Daddy, you love those finches… I'm sorry" (FRANZMANN, 2017, p. 121),

Clem pleads, her voice filled with regret. The birds' escape marks a turning point, the symbolic loss of connection, of innocence, and of the idealized past Clem so desperately clings to. The gesture functions not only as a moment of mourning but as a reckoning: Clem's efforts to fix what has been broken are futile. The birds, like Lakshmi's agency, are no longer hers to manage.

Ultimately, the bird symbolism in *Bodies* (2017) is not ornamental, it is foundational. It allows Franzmann to juxtapose privilege and precarity, motherhood and loss, hope and violence. Birds that once symbolized freedom and joy, like the finch, become tools of emotional manipulation, while birds associated with death, like the crow, speak the truth of exploited bodies. Through this dual symbolism, *Bodies* (2017) frames surrogacy not only as a reproductive transaction but as a site of contested meanings. Whose life is being celebrated? Whose body is being consumed? And what does it mean to fly, if only one person is allowed to escape?

Beyond individual symbolism, the thematic opposition between finches and crows reflects the broader tension between fantasy and reality in *Bodies* (2017). Clem idealizes the process of surrogacy as a path toward healing, family, and completeness, much like the image of finches flying free and singing. Yet, Lakshmi's experience reveals the darker, embodied consequences of that fantasy, captivity, loss, and trauma. This contrast speaks to the differing affective economies surrounding reproduction: one marked by hope and imagined joy, the other by suffering and invisibility.

The symbolic divergence also gestures toward questions of narrative control. Clem imagines Daughter as a finch-like creature, light, beautiful, desired, whereas Lakshmi experiences the gestated fetus as a crow, parasitic and consuming. This disjunction illustrates how reproductive narratives are fractured along lines of power. Those with the resources to define the story, like Clem, invoke hopeful, sanitized metaphors. Those whose bodies are implicated in the labor of reproduction, like Lakshmi, bear the weight of metaphors they did not choose. Thus, the birds in *Bodies* (2017) are not just literary symbols, but tools for mapping narrative ownership.

Additionally, the bird imagery underscores the transitory nature of care and connection in the play. Birds can be kept in cages or allowed to fly free, much like the surrogate's emotional experience can be confined or disregarded depending on the demands of the commissioning couple. Lakshmi's emotional detachment is institutionally expected, yet her dreamlike reflections and sorrowful monologues expose the impossibility of such emotional regulation. The play suggests that care, like birdsong, cannot be bought or commanded; it emerges organically or not at all.

There is also a feminist genealogy to bird symbolism that *Bodies* (2017) quietly invokes. In many literary traditions, birds have been used to signal women's entrapment and longing for escape. From the caged bird in Maya Angelou's memoir to the nightingales of Romantic poetry, birds have long served as metaphors for female agency, constraint, and resistance. Franzmann (2017) draws on this lineage while recontextualizing it within the globalized economy of reproductive labor. Lakshmi's transformation into a crow reclaims that trope not as romantic suffering, but as a visceral indictment of structural violence.

Finally, the open aviary at the play's conclusion offers a quiet allegory of potential liberation, both literal and symbolic. The finches escape not by design, but by accident, paralleling the inadvertent ruptures in Clem's ethical framework. David's refusal to replace the birds acknowledges that some connections, once broken, cannot be restored. This moment subtly invites the audience to reflect on the limits of repair in systems built on exploitation. It poses a haunting question: in a world that cages some so others may soar, what does it mean to set anything free?

## 5. Conclusion

Vivienne Franzmann's *Bodies* (2017) serves as a poignant exploration of the multifaceted forms of violence embedded within transnational surrogacy arrangements. Through its intricate narrative structure and compelling character portrayals, the play challenges audiences to confront the ethical, emotional, and societal implications of

commodifying reproduction. By highlighting the often-overlooked experiences of surrogates and critiquing the systemic forces that perpetuate inequality, *Bodies* (2017) contributes to a deeper understanding of reproductive justice and the role of theater as a catalyst for social change.

The play's rhapsodic dramaturgy, its temporal fragmentation, its hallucinatory dialogues, and its refusal to follow a linear narrative arc, disrupts conventional storytelling to reflect the complex intersections of personal desire and structural violence. This fragmentation resists catharsis or resolution, instead compelling the audience to sit with discomfort and ethical ambiguity. Through this structure, Franzmann mirrors the incoherence and instability that often define real-life surrogacy arrangements across global borders.

Daughter's character is central to this structure. As both narrator and interlocutor, she serves to unearth buried contradictions and moral tensions. She breaks the fourth wall not only theatrically but ideologically, intervening in Clem's rationalizations, asking questions the audience might themselves wish to pose, and making visible the suffering that privilege tries to forget. Her presence embodies the haunting of the future by the unresolved injustices of the present.

Bird symbolism further deepens the play's critique. Through finches and crows, Franzmann maps contrasting affective and material conditions: the finches representing a sanitized, idealized motherhood that Clem aspires to, and the crows symbolizing Lakshmi's trauma, loss, and erasure. The birds' escape near the play's end evokes a failed attempt at restitution, a moment of uncontrollable rupture that neither Clem nor the audience can ignore. It marks the collapse of Clem's fantasy and the uncontainable residue of violence she can no longer suppress.

*Bodies* (2017) ultimately refuses the comfort of narrative resolution. It does not offer solutions or reconciliation, but instead invites sustained reflection on complicity, accountability, and justice. By placing transnational surrogacy within a dramaturgical framework, Franzmann's work exemplifies the power of theatre to challenge not only what

we see, but how we see, affirming that representing violence onstage, especially reproductive violence, is not merely an artistic act, but a political one.

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