

BOOK REVIEW

“Commodification of Body Parts in the Global South: Transnational Inequalities and Development Challenges” by Firouzeh Nahavandi

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INTRODUCTION

People say money can buy anything and everything has a price. Nowadays with our increasingly interconnected world— a world of ‘universal commodification’ (Radin, 1996 in Nahavandi, 2016, p. 1)— this statement has never been more true. In a world where everything is traded, it was just a matter of time before even human body parts are commodified and enter into the international market. Thin, dull locks with no volume? Get hair extensions. Unable or unwilling to carry a child? Surrogates are available for a fee. You need a new kidney due to an accident or chronic disease? Not a problem: with enough money, the solution is a transplant away.

Taking off from these commodification processes, Nahavandi's book takes a development-related perspective. Nahavandi states that "the pattern is clear: providers are *mainly* from developing countries and beneficiaries are *generally* wealthy individuals from developed countries or wealthy countries themselves," she states (2016, p. 3, emphasis in original text), making an allusion to our shared colonial past, during which the exploitation of the Global South was considered normal and good. Nahavandi argues that a parallel phenomenon is occurring now, not with the systematic appropriation of natural resources, but instead with the normalization of appropriating body parts from the poor and marginalized for the benefit of the wealthy.

Nahavandi's stated objective is to focus on an additional dimension of inequality in transnational relations: which is derived from the growth of new phenomena induced by remaining poverty alongside the progress of science, increased interconnectedness of the world, and market-oriented economy in the field (p. 6). While the study of the cases she considers in her book—hair trade, surrogacy, kidney transplants, and migration—have been written about before, this is an approach that has not been considered by mainstream theories of development nor in the discussion on the commodification of human body parts. Nahavandi's specific focus on the transnationality of the cases combined with her sociological analysis through the lens of development make the book a new and valuable addition to the literature.

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Firouzeh Nahavandi specializes in the study of globalization, development, and developing nations. She is currently a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and is the director of the Centre d'études de la coopération internationale et du développement (CECID). Prior to this, she has taught at the Senghor University in Alexandria, Egypt, the Université Mandé Bukari in Mali, and the Vietnam National University of Agriculture.

Nahavandi's first area of research related to the issues surrounding the Iranian revolution of 1979, before specializing in the study of

developing countries— Muslim countries in particular. Since then, she has focused more and more on gender issues and topics related to inequalities in development. At present, her research focuses on issues of gender in developing countries, specifically countries of Islamic faith. The book draws from Nahavandi's three decades of experience in development research and fieldwork in Asia and Africa.

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

The book is divided into three parts. First, Nahavandi defines the concept of 'commodification of the human body' that she uses in her book and gives the reader a brief survey of the literature. The main portion of the book is dedicated to four case studies: namely, the transnational hair trade, transnational surrogacy, transnational kidney transplants, and the transnational brain drain. Each working case represents a different type of commodification, from the simple (hair trade), to the more complex (surrogacy and organ transplants), to the symbolic (brain). Emphasis is put towards highlighting the transnational market within the discussion, a key facet of Nahavandi's neo-colonial argument. The case study chapters are respectively divided into three parts: a short introduction, a survey of demand, and an overview of supply. Finally, the book concludes by discussing the facts presented in the central chapters through a development lens, highlighting the core of Nahavandi's argument, that of the new form of resource appropriation from the Global South.

KEY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The book's key strength beyond its novel approach to the theme of commodification, is in Nahavandi's sensitive handling of complex topics. When dealing with neo-colonial parallels and in particular when the discussion turns to the power imbalance inherent in such goods transactions as purchased wombs or the selling of a kidney in order to earn enough to feed a family, it is easy to slip into binaries— for instance, vilifying rich consumers for vanity (hair trade) or laziness (surrogacy) or overindulgence in luxury (kidney transplants). Nahavandi however

does not treat the sources as victims nor portrays the consumers as evil and shows that taking a development-related perspective does not necessarily dictate choosing sides. Indeed, Nahavandi's years of experience in the development world and her feminist perspective come into play in how she handles the complexities of the issues that she chose to feature in her book.

The best example of this is found in Chapter 4, where Nahavandi discusses transnational surrogacy. Alongside the factual elements of the global trade, Nahavandi is careful when discussing issues of fertility, acknowledging the emotional burden and social stigma of infertility (pp. 44, 47) as well as the socio-political difficulties faced by single, elderly, or gay couples who otherwise may not be good candidates for adoption (p. 45). In the same chapter she also discusses the she profound intensity of the desire for a child (pp. 46-47), giving the reader an overview of this evolving concept from the 19th century to the present. That said, Nahavandi does not delve into sentimentality, she clarifies that "surrogacy is not just a sentimental search for any child to love, but the deliberate manufacture of a particular suitable child." (p. 47) From there she presents the different aspects of a surrogate's decision-making process, most often financially-motivated, as well as the social and religious pressures surrogates may be put under and the powerful discourse by the surrogacy industry in India, such as it being a 'gift of god' and 'god's to needy but not greedy women' for mothers who cannot carry their own child, as well as surrogates being described as 'heroines' for fulfilling this purpose (pp. 51-52). Nahavandi also presents a glimpse into the lives of Indian surrogates, at least those hosted by the commercial gestational surrogacy businesses, which involve hostel stays, repetitive daily routines, constant surveillance, and no sexual relations (p. 50). This chapter makes it clear that while a multi-billion dollar business, transnational surrogacy cannot be reduced to economics or simple exploitation.

The main weakness of the book is in its depth, in that that it does not possess the capacity to develop the discussion and is forced to select some cases to the exclusion of others. Case in point: Nahavandi's chapter on surrogacy focuses on India with only a brief mention of Thailand at the end of the text. The previous has praised the richness of the

discussion of Indian surrogacy as well as the skillful handling of the complex gendered issues by Nahavandi, but it is important to note that while India certainly has a well-organized and well-documented surrogacy industry, it is difficult to refer to it as the sole example in a book on global transnational commodification especially considering the different circumstances surrogate mothers have in other Global South countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Nepal. Nahavandi mentions that Thailand is considered the 'Womb of Asia' (Head, 2015 in Nahavandi, 2016, p. 53) but only mentions that surrogacy is a lucrative business in Thailand and the passage of a recent law banning commercial surrogacy with the exception of married Thai couples or couples with one Thai partner. It would have been interesting to hear her perspective on this, considering that allowing surrogacy but criminalizing 'foreign' access has certain implications both in a development- and postcolonial- perspective. She further mentions that because of this law, Nepal has become a destination of choice for surrogacy services for foreigners, but that it is illegal for Nepalese women to be surrogates, thus inspiring Indian women to cross the border for this purpose (Drennan, 2015 in Nahavandi, 2016, p. 54). Finally, it would enrich the chapter to have a deeper discussion on South-South surrogacy circulation, as infertility does not only affect the wealth in the Global North. A large number of women and families in the Global South are seeking services and this would have provided a notable point of comparison.

The same criticism can be applied to the chapter for hair trade (Chapter 3), India is once again used as the sole example citing that the majority of the hair comes from India (Pomfret, 2003 in Nahavandi, 2016, p. 35) but only giving the example of 'temple hair,' virgin hair shaved at Hindu temples by pilgrims for whom hair is the only thing of value they have to offer (p. 36). Nahavandi later acknowledges that "Indian temples together contribute only 20 out of every 100 locks of premium hair sold abroad," (McDougall, 2006 in Nahavandi, 2016, p. 36) but then only briefly mentions the price per kilogram of hair in Vietnam and Myanmar— \$45.00 to \$250.00 per kilogram in Vietnam and up to \$400.00 in Mynamnar, depending on the quality of the hair (p. 37)— notably much lower than premium Indian hair which could go up to \$4,000.00 (p. 35).

These two chapters' selectivity and likewise brevity are unfortunate as Nahavandi's balanced approach to the issues surrounding commodification would have been better highlighted in a longer volume. That said, the book's chapter on transnational kidney transplants offers vignettes from the cases of Pakistan, the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh (Chapter 5) and the chapter on brain drain offers a broader view not based on country-of-origin (Chapter 6).

CONCLUSION

"Commodification of Body Parts in the Global South" is a fresh addition to the literature and offers nuanced insight on both sides of the transnational exchange of goods. Nahavandi brings forward her experience working on the developing world and selects working cases that are the most relevant for each theme. In addition, she offers a balanced feminist perspective— neither vilifying nor victimizing either size in the exchange, a particularly refreshing approach when it comes to gendered issues such as surrogate women. Indeed, while contending that the commodification of the human body is a modern form of slavery and colonization (p. 93), Nahavandi presents her points factually, and underscores issues of development and the continued poverty and inequality in the Global South in an impartial manner. The book would be of particular interest to gender studies scholars and political sociologists and complements other work in the fields of law and bioethics.

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