**Details**

**Book Review Title:** Infertility and the Excruciating Pursuit of Motherhood (Word Count: 768)

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**Book Review**

**Infertility and the Excruciating Pursuit of Motherhood**

**Rajagopal RS. *What’s a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?.* Haryana: Penguin Random House; 2021**.

*What’s a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?* is a memoir on Rohini S. Rajagopal’s excruciating five-year long fight with infertility and her journey to motherhood. After several failed attempts at natural conception and many negative HPTs (Home Pregnancy Tests), the author and her husband Ranjith visit a fertility centre in Bangalore. Rajagopal delivers a graphic description of the physical and emotional unpleasantness of her infertility treatment and also gives a vivid description of her experiences with the assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) such as the Intrauterine Insemination (IUIs), In-vitro Fertilisation (IVF) and Intracystoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI). Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) refers to the medical and scientific procedures used to treat infertility. Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) is facilitated by directly injecting a man’s sperm into the woman’s uterus around the time the eggs emerge from the ovaries. In In-vitro Fertilisation (IVF), the eggs are retrieved from the female body and carefully fertilized in a laboratory using sperms to create an embryo which will then be transferred to the uterus. In the more advanced Intracystoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI) a single selected sperm is directly injected into the retrieved egg, leading to fertilization. And similar to IVF, the fertilized embryo is then transferred to the woman’s uterus. The “lemon squeezer” in the title of the memoir represents the arduous path Rohini Rajagopal had to take; the invasion of her body by medical tools, fertility drugs, hormonal treatments, medical tests, and minor surgeries, which she endured over the years to successfully conceive. These procedures lead to unavoidable anxieties concerning their outcome, where Ranjith, her husband, becomes a mere spectator to her journey, unable to help with the medical functionalities of the treatment. He experiences and manages his anxieties separately to Rajagopal.

In addition to the medical and biological aspects, the memoir reveals the intrinsic social and cultural factors associated with infertility. Rohini Rajagopal also delves into the guilt and shame she had to bear after failing to conceive “naturally”. Through the author’s life we see how the biomedical correlation of ageing and female reproduction affects the quality of a married woman’s social life. She fears that her fertility and reproductive capabilities will become the subject of gossip among family gatherings, and that she will face unanswerable frustrating questions from them. The phrase, “ticking of the biological clock” would be familiar for women of reproductive age in a country like India- used to refer to the decline in fertility rate among women as they age. Similarly, relatable would be the sense of insecurity that Rajagopal discusses in her memoir, seeing other women break into the “exclusive club” of pregnancy effortlessly.

Crucially, the final chapter of *What’s a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?* is titled “Why Want Children?” This is a question some of the readers might wonder after knowing about the intensity of medical and financial hardships Rajagopal goes through to conceive. Indeed, the author does not have a clear answer to it. However, she also does not claim that being a mother or experiencing all the “gore and grime” of infertility is the single greatest achievement of her life. In fact, she admits to having bought into the various prevalent myths about the significance of motherhood and she addresses the effect it has had on her. This is a major strength of this account. These insights and the final confrontation of her initial ethical conundrum- of acknowledging her infertility, makes Rajagopal’s memoir a significant addition to the field of medical humanities.

In a country like India, where the value of an individual is often assessed by the conservative public through his/her ability to procreate, diagnosing infertility brings forth a barrage of problems. World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that around 48 million couples and 186 million individuals globally suffer from infertility. In India alone the prevalence of primary infertility scales between 3.9% and 16.8%. In such cases, assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) play a significant role. Rajagopal’s story has much relevance in today’s world where more childless women are seeking help from fertility clinics with a ray of hope. However, the undeniable fact is the tediousness of such an endeavour over the physical and emotional wellbeing of the female body, which this memoir has meticulously portrayed. While her story has a happy ending, she reminds the readers from the outset of her account that it is also a chronicle of multiple failures and several miscarriages (which she mentions as “deaths”). As the author herself states, *What’s a Lemon Squeezer Doing in My Vagina?*, is as much a story about the “transformative powers of reproductive science” as it is about “the ugliness of infertility treatment”.