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Female Corporeality, Motherhood, Abortion and Agency: A Study of Red Clocks by Leni Zumas

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Abstract: Women's status in the world continuously lags behind that of men. Despite all the progress in recent decades, women still earn less than men, face more adverse health conditions, are far behind in literacy and education, have less representation in politics, are involved rarely in decision-making activities and to make the matters worse, are dictated decisions about their own body, health, sexuality, reproductive life, etc. This paper is an attempt at evaluation of the novel *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas wherein abortion is banned in America and in-vitro fertilization is also outlawed, both forcing women into and depriving them of motherhood, prompting them to discover their bodies as sites of resistance, upsetting modern and historic myths pertaining to motherhood.

Keywords: abortion, adoption, motherhood, personhood, reproductive rights

Introduction

Revoking the sensational *Roe v. Wade* ruling of 1973, a judgement of the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court ruled that the Constitution of the United States enabled women the fundamental right to exercise an abortion until foetal viability (around 28 weeks into pregnancy), Texas Heartbeat Act of 2021 came as a huge blow by manifesting a dystopian vision narrativized in the novel *Red Clocks* (2018) by Leni Zumas. In a 2014 booklet entitled *Reproductive Rights Are Human Rights: A Handbook for National Human Rights Institutions*, United Nations propounded that reproductive rights are fundamentally significant human rights and asserted its safe and successful acquirement through an endeavour at reducing unsafe abortion and post-abortion care



(RRHR 50). However, this humanist vision got devalued in the face of conservative values, depriving women of autonomy over their own life and body.

Zumas envisioned a future where abortion as well as in-vitro fertilization rights were suddenly criminalized one day in all fifty states of the USA, thus, limiting parenthood to only heteronormative couples through conventional biological method.

The United States Congress ratified the Personhood Amendment, which gives the constitutional right to life, liberty, and property to a fertilized egg at the moment of conception. Abortion is now illegal in all fifty states. Abortion providers can be charged with second-degree murder, abortion seekers with conspiracy to commit murder. In vitro fertilization, too, is federally banned, because the amendment outlaws the transfer of embryos from laboratory to uterus. (The embryos can't give their consent to be moved) (Zumas 30, 31).

Single women were even deprived of the right to adoption for the legislation demanded adoptive parents to be married. The novel puts speculative light on what it is like to live inside a woman's body in this world that has always seen it with uneasiness, wherein there is a biological imperative of motherhood or the absence of its capability that always interferes in other ambitions for the primary role of a mother is to be a "caregiver."

It is both a timely and timeless story of female resistance, with entanglements, divergences, frictions, and intimacies of four women characters to generate the narrative scaffolding and interweaving how one woman's experience calls to another's. The novel rejects the idea of womanhood's conflation with motherhood, defining motherhood as something beyond birthing or adopting of children. It gives an elaborate description of an encompassing and connective womanhood existing within and beyond the consequences of what it immediately produces. There are desires and hopes for women in the pages of the novel, to be remembered, to be credited, to seek happiness that is not defined by an obligatory duty of birthing children.

The glorification of motherhood as an institution and prioritization of reproduction as a functionalist human condition grants it a conclusive status. It roots deep within the cultural discourse and is thereby indoctrinated into the psyche. Terminating a pregnancy or to voice out aversion to motherhood, therefore, leaves a woman marginalized, depreciating her value as gendered woman in the society that upholds epistemological violence. Since the second wave of feminism, radical feminism has recognised "the tyranny of reproductive biology"



(Firestone 206) as one of the strongest tools for oppression of women and technological advancement as a means for liberating women. Shulamith Firestone voiced out that the idea of pregnancy is “barbaric” (Firestone 198) and the reason behind all oppression of women. She further added that the only solution for this is the practice of ectogenesis which refers to transferring the embryo into artificial gestation. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes:

Artificial insemination completes the evolutionary advance that will enable humanity to master the reproductive function. These changes are of tremendous importance for woman in particular; she can reduce the number of her pregnancies and make them a rationally integral part of her life, instead of being their slave. During the nineteenth century, woman in her turn emancipated herself from nature; she gained mastery of her own body. Now protected in large part from the slavery of reproduction, she is in a position to assume the economic role that is offered her and will assure her of complete independence. (Beauvoir 143)

Despite early recognition and anthropological fortification of the evolution of position of women from the hunter-gatherer to current times, feminist studies have generally been furtive or unusually evasive while addressing the complex question of motherhood.

This research paper intends to approach the dogmatic constructs around motherhood, reproduction, abortion, and is an attempt towards denouncing patriarchal control over a woman’s body, from the theoretical lens of postmodern feminism and a critique of the novel taken for study.

Red Clocks- A Critique:

Red Clocks (2018) by Leni Zumas is a stacked, multi-perspective story tracing the lives of four women in the Pacific Northwest who ponder over the feelings they have about motherhood, womanhood and personhood as the U.S. starts implementing restrictive reproductive laws. The characters are identified by their occupations, wherein Ro, known as ‘The Biographer,’ is in the process of writing a biography of a 19th century female polar explorer named Eivør Mínerudottír, Ro is a history teacher at local high school. Still not able to get over her brother, Archie’s death, she often starts her mornings off at a fertility clinic for she is trying to get pregnant at the age of 42 with the aid of a sperm donor. Suffering from polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) and given her age, her chances of getting pregnant are negligible. She also considers adoption and has enlisted



herself at various institutions to be a foster mother, however, odds here too are against her for the U.S. government has also decided to put 'Every Child Needs Two' law into effect while Ro is single by choice and is not looking to get married in future too. It is ironical because when teenage girls become pregnant and want to go for abortion, they are denied the right to abort for the state assigns the status of a person to fetus. They do not take into account at that time how a single teenage girl would take up the responsibility of the child all by herself at an age when she is not even settled in her career and is financially unstable, thus depriving a rational person of her free will while they value the consent of fetus and do not support in-vitro fertilisation for the fetus would not give consent to be transported from laboratory to the womb. The law of 'Every Child Needs Two' does not suddenly seem to hold true for the governments and responsibility of the role of motherhood is imposed on teenage girls, who, if they try to get an abortion are incarcerated. Ro feels disturbed by all these things and the expensive fertility procedures she is undergoing are not covered by insurance companies. The new President also thought "women who miscarried should pay for funerals for the fetal tissue and thought a lab technician who accidentally dropped an embryo during in vitro transfer was guilty of manslaughter." (Zumas, 31) Personhood Amendment Act gave status of a person to the embryo but did not care to consider it as person when it came to providing insurance facilities.

Another character, Mattie, addressed as 'The Daughter,' is a student in Ro's class who finds out she is pregnant after losing her virginity to Ephraim, her callous classmate who is unbothered about her comfort and chooses not to wear a protection. Since abortion is outlawed in The States, she looks for ways to get an abortion somehow, even if it meant illegally crossing the border of Canada to get it done or seek treatment from Mender, an herbalist considered to be a witch by many people. The governments do not realise that such laws do not result in fewer abortions, instead, they compel women to put their lives into risk and compromise with their health by opting for unsafe abortion care. "According to the World Health Organization, 23,000 women die from unsafe abortions each year and tens of thousands more experience significant health complications globally," ("The Negative Health Implications of Restricting Abortion Access" *News*, 13 Dec. 2021). The U.S. government also had a deal with the Canadian Prime Minister under which Canada border control could incarcerate any woman they suspected of crossing the border seeking to terminate a pregnancy. "Seekers are transported back in Canadian police cars, or buses – the daughter isn't sure. When they arrive in



their home states, they are charged with conspiracy to commit murder” (Zumas 227). Also, Mattie is an adopted child, who was adopted at only a few months old. Zumas’ purpose behind crafting her as an adopted character is to sculpt the unadulterated essence of motherhood (and parenting). It echoes Indian transgender activist, Shree Gauri Sawant’s words “Motherhood is a behaviour” (Mann 2019). Although the given statement was delivered while advocating for transgenders’ right to adopt in context for transgender parents but it holds true universally. The mender, named Gin Percival, is a traditional herbalist who lives in the forest where the generations of her family have been known to make concoctions to treat even the most complicated ailments in their own conventional way. When the Personhood Amendment comes into effect, Gin still shows a readiness to helping women with their abortions like she had done before it, like her family generations had always done it as reproductive care. When Mattie, the daughter, walks through her door, she feels a longing for the sense of motherhood she gave up years ago and it is revealed that Mattie is her own biological daughter who she gave up for adoption soon after birth as she only wanted to experience what happens with her body when the baby is inside but was not ready to deal with the experiences and responsibilities of raising a child. Soon after, she goes through a courtroom trial on being falsely accused of administering an abortion to another woman who ends up in the hospital with serious injuries after falling off the stairs.

Red Clocks (2018) shows an entirely different perspective of motherhood through the lens of Susan, addressed as ‘The Wife,’ the wife of Didier who happens to be the colleague and work friend of Ro, the biographer. Susan struggles with the fatigue of raising two young children, John and Bex, fulfilling the absolute responsibility of parenthood all by herself without receiving any support and appreciation from Didier, who lives a life of entitlement owing to his gender and comes home late after dinner with his work buddies without giving his wife a heads up but with a long list of demands of the things that he believed she ought to do for him. Susan feels restless and senses a friction in their marriage as she goes along with her daily housewife and motherly chores. She keeps wondering what it would be like to abandon her marriage and her children, even with the ‘Every Child Needs Two’ law impending. However, she feels “She is too chickenshit to leave her marriage. She wants Didier to leave it first” (Zumas 191). We also get to know that she was pursuing her



graduation from the law college when she got pregnant with her first child and had to give up her academic career for motherhood.

The interconnected lives of four women (the Biographer, the Wife, the Mender, and the Daughter) hypothesize the subjectivity of the meaning of motherhood. Progressing through the novel, it is understood that “red clocks” is a term for uterus, the biological clock of women, shedding its lining every month, following a routine for the purpose of reproduction. Mattie wants her clock to hold up so as to continue her studies while Ro feels jealous of Mattie as she is toiling day and night to get her clock fixed, undergoing every possible medical procedure to get it to work. “She is submitting her area to all kinds of invasion without understanding a fraction of what’s being done to it” (Zumas 5). When abortion was not criminalized, Gin Percival used her clock to give birth even though she did not want to keep the baby and when the abortion has become illegal, she helps other women stop their clocks from being a guesthouse by performing abortions. Susan’s red clock worked when she did not want it to and wasn’t ready for it and she keeps wondering how different her life would have been had the clock not worked and she hadn’t been tethered down to a monotonous life revolving only around taking care of her husband and children.

In the background of all these contemporary perspectives there is also the story of the long-gone explorer Eivør Mínerudottír, and the story of Yasmine which comes alive through memories of Mattie. Eivør Mínerudottír, according to biographer Ro, goes on all-male expeditions after rejecting marriage at age of 19. Male dominance and entitlement follow Eivør as she constantly educates the men she is on expedition with into the Arctic. Though there is no longing for children or desire of becoming a mother in her, Eivør’s femineity still leads to her demise in a world where even the fundamental human rights were restricted to her. Yasmine, on the other hand, was a teenager, a classmate and the best friend of Mattie who became pregnant and went to get abortion in a clinic that illegally provided it. The conditions of the place have been portrayed to be filthy and pathetic where every girl’s stuff was kept around openly in a bucket. Yasmine fell seriously ill during the procedure, due to which her truth came out and she was incarcerated.

In “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading” (1992) Ann Snitow focuses on the orientation of motherhood within feminist studies in substantial detail from 1963 to 1990. The work begins with a discussion of “demon texts” like *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan and ends with a note on abortion,

autonomy, and *Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon the Maternal Instinct* (1990) by Judith Wilt. Snitow writes “feminism set out to break both taboos—those surrounding the experiences of the mothers and of the nonmother” (Snitow 33). The indoctrinated culture of blaming mothers, instead of letting them have a space to voice out their experiences has been problematic as liberation from the restrictions of patriarchal oppression demands radical shifts in the ideology. The inconclusiveness around motherhood consequently boiled down to the reflection of “what choice might mean if there were two imaginable lives for women - with and without children” (Snitow 33). The characters in *Red Clocks* (2018) include both and equal attention has been paid to their development.

Conclusion:

The 1970s pro-abortion movement used the slogan “‘Mein Bauch gehört mir,’ ‘l’utero è mio e me lo gestisco io” (My stomach is mine; my uterus is mine and I manage it myself)’ (Neyer 170). Moreover, the anti-abortion arguments and the tenet of an unborn child being a human being and its termination calling for the charges of second-degree murder, renders the interpretation of the act of abortion subjected to other enticing but flawed arguments. The trope of reducing women to reproductive machines and allowing motherhood to ascend over womanhood frames the dystopian oeuvre of *Red Clocks* (2018). Zumas voices her aversion for capitalism that links worth to productivity, thereby limiting a woman’s worth to her capacity of birthing and rearing a future human (Prieto, 2018). Also, within the capitalist structure, abortion rights do not remain confined to body autonomy because even when abortions were legal, the facility could not be accessed by poor or financially unsound women who could not afford to pay hefty sums of money. Reproductive justice, in its true essence, needs to incorporate free and non-profit reproductive healthcare (Arruzza 14). Traumatizing events occurring erratically add to the horror of the tale. The incident of one of the college girls throwing herself off the stairs with intention of terminating her pregnancy depicts her helplessness and desperation.

An extremely significant tug that Zumas has made is that in the world of her book abortion has been criminalized in the U.S., an occurrence introduced so quietly and so conclusively that it isn’t even staggering for the characters. It comes out as just another calamity for women to add to the already long list. Zumas, like Atwood, has corroborated her book in reality, focusing on things that have already been said and done for



anti-abortion laws were already being proposed in the U.S. Parliament when the book came and in September, 2021 Texas Heartbeat Act was passed. The Texas Heartbeat Act, an act of the Texas legislature, as effective from September 1, 2021, bans abortion and declares it illegal in Texas once a fetal heartbeat can be detected. In addition to measures passed by the Texas Legislature, there have been anti-abortion efforts at the local level, with 30 Texas cities banning abortion (Parker, 2021). The difference is that Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has to imagine a confluence of mass infertility induced by global pandemics, and constitutional crises to will the state of Gilead into existence. Despite all the talk about liberation, equal rights, representation and material gains, woman's condition as mother has not changed much and the balance is still heavily tilted in favour of men. Women may have rising career graphs, rich and successful husbands and all the material trappings that money can fetch, but motherhood still limits their potential, strength and renders them defenceless.

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