

An Essence of Postmodern Truth(s): Analyzing “Motherhood” in *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas

Argha Basu & Priyanka Tripathi

Department of HSS, IIT Patna

Bihta, Patna, Bihar, 801106, India

Email:argha1991@gmail.com; priyankatripathi@iitp.ac.in

Abstract In a world where postmodern feminism aims at inclusivity and intends to do away with the politics of defining categories, the overturning of the landmark 1973, *Roe vs Wade* judgment complicates the very notion of reproductive rights and justice. It further brings under scrutiny the institution and practice of motherhood and abortion. Literary fiction dealing with the issues of abortion is numbered but within that limited oeuvre, *Red Clocks* (2018) by Leni Zumas approaches these issues from an essentially postmodern perspective. The trope of multifarious vantage points of four major characters, the Biographer, the Mender, the Wife, and the Daughter; with the overarching life story of the polar explorer Eivør Mínervudóttir simultaneously offers conflicting and converging notions of motherhood, agency, and freedom. The speculative setting of the novel adds to the crisis and the dystopian air further problematizes the issues. By employing the method of close textual reading and anchoring on the theoretical models of feminist critical dystopias and feminist epistemology (postmodern narratives) this research paper intends to investigate the narrative space of the novel to depict the variegated shades of motherhood, the nuances of abolishing the abortion rights and the autonomy over the body.

Keywords dystopian fiction; postmodern feminism; motherhood; abortion; agency

Authors **Argha Basu** is a UGC-JRF (Ph. D.) in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Patna (Bihar 801106, India). His area of interest includes Dystopian Fiction, South-Asian Fiction, Feminist Epistemology, and Contemporary Feminist Theory. He has published with *Critique: Journal of Contemporary Fiction*, *Media Asia*, *Journal of International Women's Studies* amongst others. **Priyanka Tripathi** is Associate Professor of English and the former of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Patna (Bihar 801106, India). She is also the Co-Executive Editor of the

Journal of International Women's Studies. She has been awarded Visiting Research Fellowship (2022-23) by IASH, the University of Edinburgh. Her monograph with Bloomsbury is titled, *The Gendered War: Evaluating Feminist Ethnographic Narratives of the 1971 War of Bangladesh*. She works in the area of Gender Studies, South Asian Fiction, GeoHumanities, and Graphic Novels.

Introduction

Overturning the landmark judgment of 1973, *Roe v. Wade*¹ ruling that enabled women to exercise their constitutional right to an abortion till Foetal viability² (medically considered to be around 28 weeks of pregnancy) (Vishwanath), the US Supreme Court has manifested a dystopian vision narrativized a few years back in Leni Zumas' novel *Red Clocks* (2018). The originalist (Walther) justice Sam Alito's statement, "Abortion presents a profound moral question" (Thomson-DeVeaux) and his emphasis on the idea that abortion is not a constitutional right complicate the human/constitutional rights binary. In a booklet published in 2014 entitled *Reproductive Rights Are Human Rights: A Handbook for National Human Rights Institutions*, United Nations asserted that reproductive rights are human rights and further persuaded its practical and successful attainment through an attempt at reducing unsafe abortion and post-abortion care (50). Ironically, this humanist vision got maligned within a purist flux of conservative values and allowed garish narrative speculation to be a part of "lived experiences."³ Zumas envisioned a future where abortion rights were taken away from women in all fifty states in the USA and the manifestation of parenthood was limited to heteronormative couples. It questions the liberal bedrock of postmodern existence where inclusivity dictates the terms of being and multiple truths prevail, deconstructing the socio-cultural metanarrative. Though Elisabeth Woronzoff in her review calls the book "safe" and identifies the lack of intersectional investment as a lacuna, this does not invalidate its contemporary significance. If postmodern truth(s) dictate flexibility the fixation on the deliberate use of intersectional components is retrograde. When asked where the research for *Red Clocks* began, Zumas replied that the novel started as a research project where her feelings, observations, and failures were being documented but

1 In this landmark decision, the Supreme Court of the USA declared that the woman's right to abortion would be protected by the right to privacy as reflected in the Fourteenth Amendment.

2 Fetal viability is the ability of the fetus to survive outside the uterus. It is considered as a marker for safe abortion.

3 Lived experience refers to the depiction of experiences and choices of an individual and the knowledge they emanate.

soon, the personal exposition shifted to the historical beliefs concerning pregnancy and more (Prieto). The exposition classifies Zumas' movement into heterogeneity. She introduces a not-so-far, oh well, contemporary America.

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)

The interconnected lives of four women (the Biographer, the Wife, the Mender, and the Daughter) presuppose the fluidity of the meaning of motherhood. With different aspirations in life, these primarily unnamed characters attempt at experiencing the process. While the Biographer looks for an IVF, the Wife wants to leave her family behind. The daughter is trying to get rid of an unwanted pregnancy. And the Mender illegally attempts to help others to abort while suffering from the dilemma of revealing her true identity to her daughter whom she had given up at birth. Zumas uses a brilliant trope for weaving her narrative. At the beginning of every chapter, she allows the readers a glimpse of the life of the polar explorer Eivør Mínervudottír from the unfinished manuscript of the Biographer. This sentence should be rephrased. The rephrased sentence will be: Mínervudottír's inconsequential death by the end of the book recreates a Sisyphean atmosphere where the struggle towards the height becomes enough to fill a man's heart (Camus 119) as she was found lying dead on a pane of ice and the the search party left her body behind. The Blacksmith wrote to his wife, "It is odious to lose a woman's body to this wilderness, [...] but we hadn't the strength to retrieve it" (Zumas 343).

The traditional utopias were regarded as grand narratives with no deviation whatsoever. But with dystopias, deviations became the tradition, the improbability of utopias was replaced by practicability, and the desperate attempt at ruthless cleansing created more crevices. The incarceration of young girls in *Red Clocks* irrespective of their class or legacy reverberates the desperation for uniformity. "Even the daughter of Erica Salter, member of the Oregon House of Representatives, was locked up in Bolt River Youth Correctional Facility. A message had to be sent" (Zumas 308). Thus, the homogeneous category ceased to exist and a postmodern fragmented condition surfaced (Gomel 20). This postmodern air, with a sense of

existential crisis, offers a prevalent setting for a critical dystopia, a subgenre that explores overlapping narrative spaces. The article eventually expands the notion of critical dystopias and the validity of including *Red Cocks* within this niche.

In the introductory section of her work, *Motherhood: Feminism's Unfinished Business* (2021) Eliane Glaser shares an experience of meeting with a sixty-year-old woman at a park as the woman asked her about the ages of her children and said, “‘The most important job in the world,’ she said. ‘Enjoy it while it lasts’” (1). The deification of motherhood as an institution and the primacy of reproduction as a teleological human condition render it an apodictic status. It looms large within the cultural discourse and roots deep into the psyche. Hence, for a woman to terminate a pregnancy or to voice her aversion to parenthood leaves her marginalized which is an outcome of epistemological violence. Since the second wave, radical feminism identified “the tyranny of reproductive biology” (Firestone 206) as one of the strongest tools of repression and foreshadowed technological advancement as means for liberating women. This phrase appears in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) by Shulamith Firestone as she firmly believed that the idea of pregnancy is “barbaric” (198) and the source of all oppression for women. This can only be resolved if the practice of ectogenesis is perfected by transferring the embryo into artificial gestation. Despite this early recognition and scientific (anthropological) stronghold concerning the evolution of the position of women from the hunter-gatherer to contemporary times, feminist scholarship has always been either surreptitious or uncannily silent in addressing the question of *motherhood*.

This research paper intends to approach the crystallized, ideological constructs around motherhood, reproduction, abortion, and the optimization of a woman's body, from the theoretical perspective of postmodern feminism (as an extension of feminist epistemology) and critical dystopias. Contextually locating the idea of motherhood through employing the method of close textual reading and hermeneutics, this research paper will attempt to put forward the pluralistic understanding of truth(s) and perspective(s). The inquisition meanders within the tripartite structure of three primary questions: “Who is a mother?,” “What is a mother?,” and “What is motherhood?”

Feminism, Science, and Motherhood

In children, we cheat death. What assigns veneration to the act of reproduction to put it beyond the discourse of biological instinct and practice of living organisms is the human consciousness of the finitude of life as we know it and the uncertainty

beyond death. Anthropologically speaking, procreation is the only tangible attempt of leaving a piece of ourselves behind and ascertaining the continuity of the species. One trivial argument stems from the process of sexual reproduction by associating it with the idea of pleasure. But evolutionary theory and scientific disambiguation have established the fact that the practice dates back to the eukaryotes, single-celled protists that appeared approximately two billion years ago and one point three billion years before the development of pleasures assessing neurons (Otto). Evolutionary psychology establishes the nuances of procreation as an extension of cognitive programs on multiple grounds and addresses several threads, the choice of mates, the idea of pair bonding, behavioural changes, and more; but eventually, converge on the ground of the survival of the species. As for human beings (mammals), reproduction leads to the birth of a new organism with a mix of genetic variations from both parent organisms with a closer biological and physical tie to the female (Shackelford 477). But there lies a crevice between reproduction and mothering. The gender-neutral desire to procreate finds a gendered explication in the performance of being a mother, which usually gets defined as instinctive and confined to women. Sarah Gibbens opens her article entitled “Is Maternal Instinct Only for Moms? Here’s the Science” (2018) with an experiment performed by renowned anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy on herself and her husband to measure the levels of oxytocin released by their brains on the events of seeing their grandchild. The similarity in the neuroendocrinological transformation helps her establish the motherly instinct beyond the confines of gendered identity. Feminism has always been sceptical when it comes to addressing the nuances of motherhood as it raises the fundamental question of the existence and continuity of the human race. Undoubtedly, the biological process that partially mitigates the worst existential crisis of death must invite problematic narratives and thrive on axiomatic protocols. Besides, motherhood inevitably brings in a second individual in question (Hrdy in Glaser 9). The principles and responses get guided by the consideration of the well-being of the child as well. The questions around motherhood and reproduction, therefore, need sensitive academic intervention. In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2018 entitled “Is motherhood the unfinished work of feminism?,” Amy Westervelt asserts the gender essentialism associated with motherhood and how despite being one of the cornerstones dictating the subjugation of women as identified by the radical feminist theorists, for ages, the discussion on motherhood gets sidelined in contemporary academia. Decades of academic feminism with researchers, theorists, and scholars like Rich, Patricia Hill Collins, Sarah Ruddick, Miriam Johnson, and Alice Walker; the issues of motherhood appear in fewer

than three per cent of papers, journal articles, and textbooks of modern gender theory (Westervelt). The exchange between feminist scholarship and motherhood is complicated but the extended threads of the phenomenon (reproductive rights, abortion, reproductive health, and more) find considerable recognition. Within the western epistemological canon, the teleological purpose of human existence has long been considered to be reproduction (Nielsen). By extension, the purpose of a woman's existence is associated with reproductive compatibility and the following responsibilities of child care. Movements toward gender equality have revised this understanding. Anthropologist Lisa McAllister has observed a shift in this predominant perspective. She identified the search for success as a biological motivation in human beings and that the more successful ones tend to leave more offspring behind (McAllister in Gibbens). Previously, what was considered a marker of success for a woman has changed. In contemporary "society, we don't measure a woman's worth as much by a woman's ability to mother or have children anymore" (Gibbens). Therefore the drive of reproduction, which has long been considered axiomatic, meets an epistemological turn and hurls individuals with no biological instinct of having children. The current status problematizes the definitive metanarrative of motherhood and questions the epistemological stand around the idea.

In "Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading" (1992) Ann Snitow discussed the trajectory of motherhood within feminist studies in extensive detail from 1963 to 1990. The work commences with a discussion of "demon texts" like *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and ends with a note on *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon the Maternal Instinct* (1990). To explain the purpose of the study Snitow writes "that feminism set out to break both taboos—those surrounding the experiences of the mothers and of the non-mother" (33). The Equal Right Amendment (1972) phase of the feminist movement practically realized the anticipated gulf between mothers and non-mothers when it came to the exclusivity of the experience. The culture of blaming mothers, instead of allowing them a space to share their experiences has been problematic as liberation from the shackles of patriarchal oppression demanded radical ideological shifts. The ambivalence around motherhood eventually 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* include both and Zumars pays equal attention to their development. The woman who gave up her child for adoption, the woman who desperately wants to become a mother, the woman who wants to leave her children, the woman who wants to abort, the

woman who adopted, the woman who wants to follow the archaic tradition of parenting; all of them got subjected to empathetic, practical, psychological and nuanced investigation. Mattie's attempt in a nutshell to understand and imagine the conditions under which her bio-mother had given her up vindicates this inference, "Her bio-mother could have been young too. She could have been headed to medical school, then to a neurochemistry doctorate program, then to her own research lab in California" (Zumas 120). This flexible paradigmatic position empowers the intervention of feminist epistemology as a part of narrative strategies to deconstruct the crystalized ideals. Zumas' approach showcases intermittent inclusion of findings from evolutionary studies (empirical). Susan's decision of marrying Didier was influenced by his height as the choice of a tall partner ensures access to food high on top of the tree (Zumas 27). Even her reflection on the choice of a skinny woman from a man's perspective is a rational choice as "voluptuousness signal that a body was already ensuring the survival of another man's genetic material" (Zumas 79). Ro's choice of a sperm donor is meticulous and scientifically grounded as well. The prevailing sense of scientific awareness in these characters promises a space for a shifting epistemology where purely emotional decision-making is consciously getting subsided. Among the refreshingly emerging genres of speculative fiction, feminist dystopias (Hickey) which emerged in the 1970s, have played a key role in introducing epistemological twists by surfacing major issues concerning the oppression and marginalization of women.

***Red Clocks* as a Feminist Critical Dystopia**

Robert O. Evans identified dystopian narratives as cautionary tales with a focus on what can now be done to achieve a better future (Evans in Sargent 6). This might be reasoned by Anne Cranny-Francis's definition of dystopia as "the textual representation of a society worse than the writer's/reader's own" (125). Margaret Atwood's explication behind the inspiration for writing *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is an insistence on the fact that she had not written anything that did not have a historical grounding (Evans). In the essay "The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake 'In Context'" (2004), while revisiting two of their classic dystopian works of fiction, Atwood identified what differentiates speculative fiction from science fiction and that framework depicts an emphasis on the "more or less to hand experience" (513). While dystopian fiction as a subgenre of speculative fiction anchors on probable narratives, some of the previous works of this genre have shown uncannily realistic reflection within a few decades of their conception, like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), *Brave New World* (1932), *White Noise* (1985) and more. But with

the conception of a fractured space-time and a shift in Newtonian perception of space, the all-encompassing notion of the utopias changed. The concept of the modern utopia projected a pseudo-progressive dream, but as ideological projects, they craved the certainty of the Newtonian paradigm, and this adherence to a deterministic space created deviations (Gomel 20).

The epistemic uncertainty of narrative space (Gomel 20) spawns this fragmentation, and the multiplicity of perspectives renders it subversive, despite its proximity to realism. The idea of holistic happiness or singular dejection could not be discerned. If the primary contention of a critical utopia is the awareness of its limitation (Moylan 10) then critical dystopia is an overlap between radical dystopian imagination and traditional genres to give birth to more open narrative spaces (Baccolini and Moylan 43). Zumas brings forth the everyday troubles of the four primary characters in the text within a socio-cultural trope that simultaneously reads probable and distant. *Red Clocks* qualifies as a feminist critical dystopia precisely because it satisfies the three preconditions set by Ildney Cavalcanti, i.e. the negative critique of heteronormative patriarchy and feminist theory, the textual self-awareness in generic terms, and inspiring an explosive reaction as it might shape the critical-feminist public readership (Baccolini and Moylan 48).

Besides critiquing the removal of the right to abortion for women, the novel foreshadows the limitations of identifying “women” as a category within modernist feminist scholarship. The Biographer’s struggle to get pregnant is presented against the Wife’s (Susan) natural and effortless conception of two children and the Daughter’s desperate attempt at abortion. The work stands critical of some of the foundational concepts of feminism as well. Roosevelt’s apprehension of being made fun of by Susan on knowing her attempt to visit the Mender subverts the notion of “sisterhood,” “If she told Susan about seeing the witch, Susan would act supportive and serious, then laugh about it behind the biographer’s back” (Zumas 65). The idea of agency, coupled with self-doubt in the character of the Biographer receives similar treatment. Throughout the novel, Roosevelt keeps on questioning her compatibility as a single mother as the rest of the characters heedlessly infuse mistrust.

How can you raise a child alone if you don’t even find out what they’re doing to your area? (Zumas 5)

How can you raise a child alone when all you’re having for lunch is vending-machine maize puffs? (Zumas 32)

But how can you raise a child alone when you can’t resist twelve ounces of

coffee? (Zumas 91)

The trope of reducing women to reproductive machines and allowing motherhood to triumph over womanhood shapes the dystopian corpus of the text. Sporadic events add to the horror of the tale. The incident of one of the college girls throwing herself off the stair to terminate her pregnancy depicted helplessness and desperation.

[...] Ro/Miss said in class she hoped they understood who was to blame for this rib: the monsters in Congress who passed the Personhood Amendment and the walking lobotomies on the Supreme Court who reversed Roe v. Wade. “Two short years ago,” [...] (Zumas 49)

The multiple facets of motherhood and the treatment of the abortion question from variegated perspectives satisfy the condition of creating critical awareness. The readers were prepared for this ghastly outcome throughout the book, and its contemporaneous manifestation further strengthens the speculation and potential of these narratives.

Angus McLaren in *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (1999) defines the feminist campaigns of the 1970s (as a part of the second-wave feminism) to address the collectively identified problem of abortion for women as a primary agenda and the legalization of abortion in 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision by the US Supreme Court celebrated and recognized women’s agency. Coincidentally, the same period witnessed the development of feminist dystopian fiction as a prominent subgenre of speculative works in texts like *The Female Man* (1975) by Joanna Russ. The development of postmodern feminism (during the third wave) reshapes the question of choice (concerning the body and mind alike) and the “collective problem” discourses to ascribe merit to the subject positions. While Russ’ novel takes up different aspects of the feminist crisis through various characters, contemporary works use similar tropes to showcase variegated shades of the same problem to arrive at an inconclusive flux of multiple truths.

Metanarratives give birth to counter metanarratives. Feminist movements are no exceptions. A close reading of the waves of feminism narrates how the problems identified as the generic representation of the feminist crisis have been limited in their exposure. Women as a homogeneous category ceased to exist. The development of concepts such as “intersectionality” in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw, streamlined the nuances of the postmodern position. One of the cornerstones that defined womanhood, i.e. motherhood too had undergone serious questioning.

Postmodern feminism realized the incomplete perception of mothers either as degraded figures or as another vulnerable human institution within “depleted fictions, sentimental claptrap or political occasion” (Caesar 123). In the age of surrogacy and IVF, there emerges a serious need to reconsider the understanding of motherhood. Motherhood studies have recognized motherhood as not a single practice or a monolithic category of practice, but rather a mutually exclusive, multifarious series of acts (O’Reilly, *Maternal* 532). Though Zumas has been blamed for ignoring the marginalized community (especially women of colour) in this work (Smith), still the readers are offered a kaleidoscopic scope of witnessing “motherhood.”

Feminist Epistemology and motherhood

“Women are made and meant to be, not men, but mothers of men” (Hubbard 39). Nancy Chodorow condenses the trouble around the primacy of motherhood through young girls who get engendered early in their lives to develop a desire for motherhood and femininity (Zalewski 19). Western science and philosophy have always glorified this identity of a woman and epitomized it to an extent where everything else fades away. The psychoanalytical argument augments the girls’ affinity towards their mothers long after they grow up, unlike boys who break free from the bond early, enabling them to care more for others, thus rendering it suitable for them to perform motherly responsibilities (Zalewski 19). These modernist epistemological notions devalue the significance of subjective dilemma for a woman and the advantage of paradoxical existence. The grand narratives of socio-cultural appropriation are subtly contested, substantiated, and subverted by Zumas.

The Wife’s recurrent fatigue and disgust concerning parenting and her sense of guilt help the readers locate one of the untold and consciously neglected truths about mothering, vis-à-vis parenting.

They are yipping and pipping, her two. They are rolling and polling and slapping and papping, rompling with little fists and heels on the bald carpet.

They are hers, but she can’t get inside them.

They can’t get back inside her.

They are hurling their fists—Bex fistier, but John brave. (Zumas 23)

The presence of these children both functions as rewarding and confining. Susan’s desire to come out of the marriage with Didier constantly gets hindered by her concern for the children, “She takes a long breath. ‘Are you saying they

wouldn't benefit from our relationship improving?" (Zumas 109). Eventually, at the moment of separation, the identity of being a mother could not trap her in, rather she embraces herself and soars. Zumas deftly unknots the good mother/bad mother binary (as offered by radical feminists). The reference to Didier's mother who blamed him for his father's abandonment is a case in point as for Didier, the responsibility converges upon the shrink who convinced his mother into believing that.

Despite innumerable warnings, Ro desperately wanted parts of what Susan had and wished to do away with. Her desire to become a mother and her fixation on achieving it through artificial insemination foregrounds the strength of epistemic constructs. Since the beginning, she notes down the accusations she was subjected to as a single woman and somehow ends up falling prey to these constrictive measures. Her search for the fulfilment of being a woman centered on motherhood and she could push her limits to all extents to conceive.

[...] she wants an ashy line down the center of a round belly; she wants nausea. Susan's marks of motherhood: spider veins at the knee backs, loose stomach skin, lowered breasts. Affronts to vanity worn as badges of the ultimate accomplishment. (Zumas 89)

Her rational questioning of this obsession ends up in an answer of instinct, a "throb" (Zumas 90) that wants to make another human being. Chapters depicting the process of IVF, choice of sperm donors, and preparatory treatments; read like a series of physical, psychological, and emotional turmoil. In the face of all misinterpretation, she stands resolute,

When her first caseworker at the adoption agency said "You do realize, I hope, that a child is not a replacement for a romantic partner?" the biographer almost walked out of the interview. She did not walk out, because she wanted to get onto their wait-list. That night she threw a potted cactus against her refrigerator. (Zumas 170)

The pathos intensifies against the rapidly shrinking opportunity of availing of single parenthood as her chance to adopt was fast withering away.

Through Mattie's parents who adopted her when she was months old, Zumas sketches the unadulterated essence of motherhood (and parenting). The mother's conscientious inquiry of her pregnancy and eventual moral support reaffirms this

contention. Within the traditional discourse of motherhood “caregiving” plays a key role. Ro could put aside her envy at Mattie’s attempt to abort. She wanted to ask for her child, but could not. Rather her inherent motherly instinct manifests itself through her selfless affection for Mattie, from taking her to Portland to offering her post-abortion care, “Ro/Miss goes out, comes back. Turn the overhead light off and the bedside lamp on. ‘Close your eyes’” (Zumas 322). One more shade of motherhood is explored through the Mender’s affection for her animals. Her conversations with them and the aspect of anthropomorphized imagination reinvigorate the nuances of motherhood.

Malky’s been gone three days. Long for him—she doesn’t like it. The sun is dropping. Killers in the woods. Malky is a killer himself but no match for coyotes and foxes and red-tailed hawks. Every creature, prey to someone. (Zumas 68)

Adrienne Rich *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) has differentiated between motherhood as a patriarchal construct (institution) and motherhood as a lived experience. From the perspective of a feminist standpoint as a component of feminist epistemology, the second conception of motherhood claims more validity. Later Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking* (1989) elaborated on the notion of experience. But within a fictional scope, the application of standpoint theory might appear limiting. But as the genre of speculative fiction thrives on tangible and probable mimetic experiences; the experiences of the characters as depicted by Zumas can be taken into consideration to understand the component of experience within motherhood studies. Throughout the novel, the institution of motherhood emerges as a set of practices rather than something innate. Ruddick’s illustration of motherhood as a practice allowed scholars to deconstruct mothering from the identity of the mother (as configured within the traditional, socio-cultural institution of motherhood) as it can be performed by anyone who is committed to meet the demands of the needs of maternal practices (O’Reilly, *Twenty-First* 6).

Feminist Epistemology, Abortion, and Agency

“The profound moral question” (Thomson-DeVeaux) that was anchored upon by the Supreme Court of the USA, presents, in a nutshell, the ideological stagnancy and obfuscation around abortion. The feminist understanding of reproductive choice has been associated with the agency of their bodies and a choice of reproduction. The 1970s movement used the slogan “‘Mein Bauch gehört mir,’ ‘l’utero è mio e

me lo gestisco io” (My belly is mine; the uterus is mine and I manage it myself)’ (Neyer 170) with a claim for their right to abortion. Besides the secular anti-abortion argument and the conviction that an unborn child is a living being and its termination invites the charges of second-degree murder, the interpretation of the act of abortion gets subjected to other tempting but flawed arguments. When the daughter was preparing for a school debate in her eighth grade as a member of the pro-choice team, her father, instead of appreciating her efforts, presented a set of inherently fallacious statements to convince the daughter of the importance of eliminating abortion rights. When his argument about adopted families who await children failed, along with the need for validating an embryo as a living being, he resorted to *argumentum ad passiones* (an argument that appeals more to emotion than to reason) to win her over.

“What if your bio mother had chosen to terminate?”

“Well, she didn’t, but other people should be able to.”

“Think of all the happy adopted families that wouldn’t exist.”

“But Dad, a lot of women would still give their babies up for adoption.”

“But what about the women who didn’t?”

“Why can’t everyone just decide for themselves?”

“When someone decides to murder a fellow human with a gun, we put them in jail, don’t we?”

“Not if they’re a cop.”

“Think of all the families waiting for a child. Think of me and your mom, how long we waited.”

“But—”

“An embryo is a living being.”

“So is a dandelion.”

“Well, I can’t imagine the world without you, pigeon, and neither can your mother.”

She doesn’t want them to imagine the world without her. (Zumas 120)

Mattie is the only character seeking an abortion in the text and her journey allows the readers a glimpse into the dystopian world. Though the text’s focus is on the abolition of the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) judgment, the overarching objective still summons a ruthless purification in the pursuit of restoring “dignity, strength, and prosperity to American families” (Zumas 32). Besides the *Personhood Amendment*, Public Law 116-172 i.e. “Every Child Needs Two” (Zumas 31), would come into

effect to obliterate the idea of single parenthood. This devolution into the annals of Victorian morality concerning sexuality and family allows the text a wider scope.

Zumas distinctively offers a narrative space that reduces the fundamental aspect of existence for women to tools of reproduction and stays true to the rudimentary principles of dystopian narratives. She voices her disgust for capitalism that connects worth to productiveness and limits a woman's worth to her capacity of bearing a future human (Prieto). Within the ambit of capitalism, the abortion question does not get limited to the aspect of corporeal autonomy. The available practices of legal abortion do not aid the poor and working-class women who suffer from the lack of means to pay or the chances to access the clinics (Arruzza 14). Reproductive justice thus demands free, not-for-profit health care. The purgation for women of colour works more efficiently than that of white middle/upper-middle-class women. The character of Yasmine, a friend of Mattie is an oblique but concrete reference to this problem. She was forced into a youth detention centre for attempting a self-induced abortion and a coerced hysterectomy. Her silence voices the truth behind The Pink Wall and the politics of representation.

Zumas explores the idea of subjectivity and agency on multiple levels. The story of Boadicea, the queen of the Celtic tribe called the Iceni who summoned her army to fight against the Romans (Zumas 7), is the first agentic, embedded narrative that presents a glimpse of Ro's vision and philosophy. Despite being an independent woman, she falls prey to the epistemological violence of the socio-cultural patriarchal order. She associated her worth with her compatibility to conceive. In one section of the book, the misbehaving student in her class forced her to couple her failure as a teacher with her inability to become a mother,

Usually she has no issues with discipline; this outburst makes her feel like a failure.

Well, she is a failure. She and her uterus fail, fail, fail.

[...]

The biographer and her ovaries fail, fail, fail. (Zumas 141)

The lists she kept to remind her of things or to write down issues that perturbed her bring forth the amount of socio-cultural stigma she was subjected to and her conscious effort to unlearn (Zumas 201, 222, 240). The radical feminist Jeffner Allen believed that motherhood is dangerous to women as within the patriarchal construct a woman exists as a womb and a wife, which invariably assigns her the identity of a mother. Motherhood is dangerous to women. It continues the structure within which

females must be women and mothers, and conversely, because it denies females the creation of subjectivity (Allen 315). Ro denies her subjectivity in her pursuit to become a mother. While elaborating on the nuances of the 'docile bodies' Michel Foucault illustrated the motif behind control. How a body within a system of power and knowledge is optimized to serve a utilitarian purpose (Rabinow 182). For a woman, motherhood is that optimization and the creation of knowledge around the construct dictate epistemological control. A similar crisis was experienced by Susan when her identity as a mother and a wife suspended her individuality. Though Zumas successfully resolves the issue by assigning her the strength to walk out of the marriage and accept nature as she finds fit. The symbol of the plastic bag has ingeniously been used here, as it had initially appeared to Susan as a charred animal and she could never erase the image from her mind. But finally, she could embrace the raw nature as a manifestation of her very being.

The wife kneels on the path.

Rent a car. Open a bank account. Bring yourself to care.

She reaches for the black earth.

Her body yearns, inexplicably, to taste it.

Brings a handful to her lips. The minerals sizzle on her tongue, rich with the gists of flower and bone. (Zumas 326)

The character of the Mender is foregrounded as a contrast to the rest of the characters and their agencies. From her choice of lifestyle, through her denial of Lola's advances, to her efforts with helping women and abstaining from seeing her daughter; she emerged as one of the 'feminist subjects'. But her sense of freedom, connection with nature, and mobility assigns her the identity of a deviant, a witch. She lived as an outcast and was blamed for things that had nothing to do with her but the public consciousness of castigation. Her self-estimation concerning the public opinion that distinguishes her as weird, absurd, and a witch (Zumas 41) helps her navigate better. By the end of the book when she was released from the false accusation of trying to abort Mrs Fivey's unborn child and in the process made her drink a potion that resulted in her falling through the stairs, Gin returned to nature, to the space that she identified with and welcomed it in all its glory.

The mender rubs leopard's-bane salve into her burning calves. Lies in the dark with the cat on her chest. No more human voices the rest of the day. She wants only Malky's growl and the mehhh of Hans and Pinka. The bleat of the owl,

chirp of the bat, squeak of the ghost of the varying hare. This is how Percivals do. (Zumas 337)

Judith Butler in “Contingent Foundations” (1995) analyses the idea of postmodern feminine subjectivity as a future of “multiple specifications” and asserted that only by liberating the category of women from a fixed referent we can arrive at the realization of “agency” (Butler 50).

Conclusion

One of the primary impetus behind reproduction is the concept of genetic transmutation for generations to come. But this becomes erroneous owing to the inevitable mixing and shuffling (“Zooming in”), and the “meaningfulness of life” (James) is not limited to it. An awareness of human evolution puts forward the loss of estrus as one of the defining components in shaping the sexuality of the species. The hypothesis emanating from this theory tangibly disestablishes the exclusivity of reproduction from the act of coitus and depicts its function in developing pair bonds (Wagener) between humans and strikes a blow at the foundation of the moral narratives. The vulnerability of human newborns and their need to be looked after added to the subjugation of women. It attested to a sense of exclusivity to the care-giving performance (a major component of motherhood). Coincidentally, the initiative of the “ape mothers” to allow “others to help in the rearing of their infants” (“The Evolution of Motherhood”) considerably impacted the evolution of humans.

Feminist epistemology as a discipline is flexible and though the foundational approach is to introduce the gender framework to the existing body of epistemology, still it aims at dismantling the existing sinewy knowledge narratives. It’s the act of asking questions that helps one grow. *Red Clocks* asks these questions and not even once attempts to answer them. The search for an answer controverts the crux of postmodern feminism and feminist epistemology which is in synchronization with the temperament of contemporary scientific investigation. It walks towards unravelling the intricacies of the nature of being, through finer assessments to arrive at inconclusive conclusions. And eventually, everything might co-exist, as Vandana Shiva once said that in the quantum world, it is impossible to get rid of uncertainty as there exists no binary, no either/or. For the Quantum realm, the conjunction in use is “and” (Harvard GSD 00:16:16 - 00:16:37). By definition, critical dystopias are non-deterministic. A close observation of Zumas’ use of the all-encompassing embedded tale of Eivør Mínervudóttir not only unearths one woman’s exclusive

journey but also guides us through the different phases of her life since childhood. From a constricting patriarchal setup, she soars high through compromise and struggles to live the life of a polar explorer. Zumas has weaved a spacetime of co-existence where the binaries cease to exist and the difference is the only constant.

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by the “University Grants Commission (190511074986/NET-JRF: JULY 2019).”

Works Cited

- “The Evolution of Motherhood.” *PBS*, October 26, 2009. Available at: <<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/evolution-motherhood/>> (accessed July 11, 2022).
- “Zooming In On Genetic Shuffling.” European Molecular Biology Laboratory. *ScienceDaily*, July 13, 2008. Available at: <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/07/080710103855.htm> (accessed July 3, 2022).
- Allen, Jeffner. “Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women.” *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, edited by Joyce Treblicot. USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1989. pp. 315-30.
- Arruzza, Cinzia, et al. *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto*. London: Verso, 2019.
- Atwood, Margaret. “The Handmaid’s Tale and Oryx and Crake ‘In Context.’” *PMLA*, vol. 119, no. 3, 2004, pp. 513-17.
- Baccolini, Raffaella, and Tom Moylan, editors. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism.’” *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, edited by Steven Seidman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. pp. 153-170.
- Caesar, Terry. “Motherhood and Postmodernism.” *American Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1995, pp. 120-40.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. 1942. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, July 1991, p. 1241-1299. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>> (accessed August 3, 2022).
- Delillo, Don. *White Noise*. 1985. New York: Oenguin, 2009.
- Evans, Greg. “Margaret Atwood Tells Writing Class Those ‘Bad Things’ Really Happened-Deadline.” *DEADLINE*, July 11, 2018. Available at: <<https://deadline.com/2018/07/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood-masterclass-writing-class-bad-things-really-happened-1202424424/>> (accessed August 8, 2022).
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam

Books, 1970.

- Gibbens, Sarah. "Is Maternal Instinct Only for Moms? Here's the Science." *Science*, May 9, 2018. Available at: <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/mothers-day-2018-maternal-instinct-oxytocin-babies-science>> (accessed July 24, 2022).
- Glaser, Eliane. *Motherhood: Feminism's Unfinished Business*. UK: Fourth Estate, 2021.
- Gomel, Elana. *Narrative Space and Time: Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Harvard GSD. "International Womxn's Day Lecture: Dr. Vandana Shiva." *YouTube*, March 6, 2020. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ErD5Vx8dTw&t=870s> (accessed July 27, 2022).
- Hickey, Greg. "Margaret Atwood And The Rise Of The Feminist Dystopia | TCR." *The Curious Reader*, September 17, 2019. Available at: <<https://www.thecuriousreader.in/features/margaret-atwood-feminist-dystopia/>> (accessed July 29, 2022).
- Hubbard, Ruth. *The Politics of Women's Biology*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1990.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. 1932. London: Vintage, 2007.
- James, Laurence A. *The Meaningfulness of Life*. PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 2007. Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/phi_etd/10> (accessed August 4, 2022).
- McLaren, Angus. *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History*. USA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. 1986. New York: Peter Lang, 2014.
- Neyer, Gerda, and Laura Bernardi. "Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction." *Historical Social Research*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 162-176. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.12759/HSR.36.2011.2.162-176>> (accessed August 1, 2022).
- Nielsen, Karen. "The Private Parts of Animals: Aristotle on the Teleology of Sexual Difference." *Phronesis*, vol. 53, no. 4-5, 2008, pp. 373-405. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1163/156852808X338337>> (accessed August 1, 2022).
- O'Reilly, Andrea, editor. *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*. Canada: Demeter Press, 2007.
- . editor. *Twenty-First-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010.
- Orwell, George, et al. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 1949. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Otto, Sarah P. "Sexual Reproduction and the Evolution of Sex." *Nature Education*, 2008. Available at: <<http://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/sexual-reproduction-and-the-evolution-of-sex-824>> (accessed July 23, 2022).
- Prieto, Thea. "The Mythology of Motherhood: Leni Zumas on Red Clocks." *Entropy*, April 10, 2018. Available at: <<https://entropymag.org/the-mythology-of-motherhood-leni-zumas-on-red-clocks/>> (accessed June 23, 2022).
- Rabinow, Paul, editor. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- Reproductive Rights are Human Rights: A Handbook for National Human Rights Institutions*.

- United Nations, 2014. Available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/NHRIHandbook.pdf>> (accessed July 18, 2022).
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1976. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Russ, Joanna. *The Female Man*. 1975. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1-37. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246?seq=1>> (accessed July 12, 2022).
- Shackelford, Todd K., editor. *The SAGE Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology: Applications of Evolutionary Psychology*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021.
- Smith, S. E. "'Red Clocks' Shows Dystopias Are Still Too White." *Bitch Media*, 16 January 16, 2018. Available at: <<https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/red-clocks-review>> (accessed July 17, 2022).
- Snitow, Ann. "Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading." *Feminist Review*, no. 40, 1992, pp. 32-51. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1395276>> (accessed July 7, 2022).
- Thomson-DeVeaux, Amelia. "The Supreme Court's Argument For Overturning Roe v. Wade." *FiveThirtyEight*, June 24, 2022. Available at: <<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-supreme-courts-argument-for-overturning-roe-v-wade/>> (accessed July 17, 2022).
- Vishwanath, Apurva. "Explained: What Is Roe v. Wade, Which the US Supreme Court Has Overturned — and Why Is It Significant?" *The Indian Express*, June 25, 2022. Available at: <<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-roe-v-wade-us-supreme-court-overturned-significant-abortion-constitutional-right-7989490/>> (accessed July 17, 2022).
- Wagener, Joshua. *'Loss of Estrus' and Concealed Ovulation in Human Evolution: A Reevaluation*. Honors Projects, Illinois Wesleyan University, 2006. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/socanth_honproj/17> (accessed August 7, 2022).
- Walther, Matthew. "Sam Alito: A Civil Man." *The American Spectator*, April 21, 2014. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170522135245/https://spectator.org/58731_sam-alito-civil-man/> (accessed July 16, 2022).
- Westervelt, Amy. "Is Motherhood the Unfinished Work of Feminism?" *The Guardian*, May 26, 2018. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/26/is-motherhood-the-unfinished-work-of-feminism>> (accessed July 15, 2022).
- Woronzoff, Elisabeth. "For a Feminist Dystopian Tale, 'Red Clocks', Is Rather Safe, PopMatters." *PopMatters*, February 8, 2019. Available at: <<https://www.popmatters.com/leni-zumas-red-clocks-2628014658.html>> (accessed July 18, 2022).
- Zalewski, Marysia. *Feminism after Postmodernism: Theorising through Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Zumas, Leni. *Red Clocks*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018.