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EN 614

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8 May 2018

My Body, My Choice: An Evolution of Reproductive Politics in American Literature

Reproductive rights in the United States have been a divisive topic over the past century, and the current state of affairs has not changed that. With the Trump administration seeking to overhaul Title X—the only federal grant that provides citizens with access to family planning and similar preventative health services—and rollback Obama-era birth control mandates, reproductive health stands in a precarious situation. Though the danger of this situation has been addressed by various authors over the last 50 years, authors Margaret Atwood and Leni Zumas depict two drastically different yet equally important worlds to attack this war on reproductive rights.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, depicts a new United States, now called the Republic of Gilead, in which every woman's role is defined by her fertility. In this world, reproductive rights have nothing to do with a woman's autonomy, or even desire to have children, and everything to do with reproduction itself—a means to repopulate a dying world. Zumas's novel *Red Clocks*, published in 2018, describes a mildly dystopic United States that has declared abortion and all manners of contraception illegal via the Personhood Amendment—a law that deems an embryo a full citizen. The United States of *Red Clocks* focuses not on the role of reproduction in population, but rather on the rights of the fetus. While both of these novels present different societies with different problems, they adhere to a couple of common themes: the politics of reproduction and parenthood and the role of reproductive rights in feminine

autonomy. These books, written some 30 years apart, articulate the evolution of reproductive rights and the politics of motherhood in the United States from the 1980s to the present.

Analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale* and Reproductive Politics

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was written and published in the wake of Ronald Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign. The religious zealotry exhibited in this campaign inspired the Republic of Gilead, and with bombings on abortion and family planning clinics throughout the country during this time, the parallels Atwood sets up between the dystopic Gilead and the real United States are unsettling at best. Nadine Brozan, in her article for *The New York Times* in 1985, quotes Shirley Gordon, the executive director of Family Planning Advocates of New York State: "But who could foresee that abortion would be a major factor in the election, who could foresee that Archbishop John J. O'Connor would intrude himself into the campaign, who could foresee that we would have bombings of clinics all over the country?" Though the role of abortion and reproductive health played a much different role in the reelection of Reagan than it did in the formation of Gilead, the similarities between the two political climates cannot be ignored.

Yet, reproductive rights do not merely extend to birth control and abortion. As Nada Logan Stotland states in her article "Reproductive Rights and Women's Mental Health," "Reproductive rights compass the status of women as citizens" (1). In the Republic of Gilead, the men in charge recognize this connection between feminine autonomy and reproductive rights. By taking away these rights, they effectively take away the rights of all women in their society. Beyond this, they define women by their fertility levels. Gilead reduces women to a base level of procreation—they are not citizens, they are barely seen as human. Handmaid's are essentially

reproductive slaves and all other women are there only to provide for men in some way or another.

Atwood's protagonist Offred articulates this stripping of personhood in Chapter 14: "It's my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body's, if there is a difference" (81). Offred, this woman brave enough to tell her story of abuse and lifelessness, has had her humanity stripped in such a way that she has no sense of self—she is but a body, only here to produce a child. Jane Armbruster paints this stripping of humanity as a metaphor in her article "Memory and Politics—A Reflection on *The Handmaid's Tale*": "Please consider Handmaid Offred's tale to be a metaphor: an allegory for the cultural context that shapes our attempts to create through political action institutions that support the full expression of humanity in all its diversity" (146). Armbruster believes that the Republic of Gilead—a male dominated society—suppresses this diversity of humanity by denying humanity its full expression.

While Gilead reveres fertility in women, those in power refuse to acknowledge the possibility of sterility in men. In fact, the term "sterile" is banned, as Offred states, "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (61). This ignorance of sterility furthers the idea that women are merely vessels for reproduction, nothing more and nothing less.

While Gilead is first and foremost a patriarchy on steroids, we must also note that even the men do not live happy lives. As Nancy Topping Bazin puts it, "The nightmare existence envelops the oppressor as well as the oppressed" (119). Gilead's society orbits around pregnancy and birth; the very basis of the society hinges upon the ability of women to get pregnant and repopulate the nation. Because of this, everyone's lives are rigid and regimented. Bazin goes on to quote Atwood herself to drive this point home, "...the way women are treated in a society

determines the shape of the society” (119). Because women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are less than human, even the men who have all the basic rights of humans do not and cannot live as fully as they once did. When the rights of one group are restricted, the rights of all become restricted.

Analyzing *Red Clocks* and the Politics of Motherhood

Zumas’s novel *Red Clocks* was written and published in the wake of Donald Trump’s election in 2016. Similar to the reelection of Reagan, the election of Trump brought out religious zealots and right-wing extremists. His rhetoric of xenophobia included a border wall with Mexico to keep illegal immigrants out of the US as well as blatant disregard for women’s rights. With depictions of a border wall—though for much different reasons—and laws that effectively degrade women to second class citizens, the United States depicted by Zumas is not far off from the current reality of the nation’s political climate. Set in the rural town of Newville, Oregon, *Red Clocks* follows the lives of four women as they are affected by the new Personhood Amendment, with snippets of a biography on a 19th century Arctic explorer whose ambitions and research were shaped by the sexism that ruled the world in which she lived.

Our main characters, only referred to by arbitrary identifies within their own chapters are Ro, the biographer who seeks desperately to be a single mother; Mattie, the daughter who finds herself pregnant at fifteen and terrified about the impact this will have on her future; Gin, the mender who provides holistic family planning; and Susan, the wife who has two children she loves and resents simultaneously. Throughout the novel, we see how their lives though vastly different intertwine, how they buy into the tenet of patriarchy of pitting woman against woman, and how they eventually lift themselves and each other up to defeat, in some small way, patriarchy.

The primary problem for all of these women lies in the criminalization of all contraception, especially abortion, meaning that women who are not prepared to be mothers are

forced into motherhood. Trump himself criminalizes abortion, as he states in a 2016 interview with MSNBC's Chris Matthews, "There has to be some form of punishment [for the woman who gets an abortion]." Though he refuses to comment on just what that punishment should be, he establishes his place in the Republican party as a leader adamantly against abortion. The Personhood Amendment in *Red Clocks* takes this idea of punishing abortion seekers to insidious heights. Zumas spells out the details of the Personhood Amendment in chapter 5: "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.)" (32-33).

To further pull this fiction into reality, this concept of human life beginning at conception—as is the case in Zumas's U.S.—is no longer strictly reserved for religious groups and anti-abortion organizations in Trump's United States. According to Julia Belluz, "...the Trump Administration's 2018-22 draft plan for Human and Health Services...for the first time suggested the federal health agency will now be 'serving and protecting Americans at every stage of life, beginning at conception.'" This language establishes the administration's stance on women's health. The rally cry "My body, my choice" has no effect on them; they are only interested in limiting the rights of women to choose their own path, a parallel with Zumas's United States that cannot be ignored.

There is also mention of the "Pink Wall" in Zumas's United States—a border wall with Canada that is meant to keep abortion seekers from getting through to Canada where abortion is still legal. The US government of *Red Clocks* deliberately labels this border control the Pink Wall, playing on the relatively unanimous idea that pink symbolizes femininity. Professor

Stefano Puntoni discusses the importance of color symbolism to the fight against breast cancer—the color pink is now synonymous with the movement—and how the connection of pink with femininity hurts the cause: “By adding all this pink, by asking women to think about gender, you’re triggering [very strong denial mechanisms]. You’re raising the idea that this is a female thing... The cues themselves aren’t threatening—it’s just a color! But it connects who you are to the threat.” Though Professor Puntoni speaks of a completely different aspect of women’s health, his point rings true with Zumas’s border wall. By labeling it the Pink Wall, the government of *Red Clocks* makes a point to connect the threat of jail time with the very existence of femininity and fertility.

Zumas’s focus on motherhood in politics shapes the message of her novel. All of the main characters have a relationship with motherhood, even the 19th century Arctic explorer Eivør Mínerudottír. Ro battles with her desperation to be a mother; Mattie battles with her desperation not to be a mother just yet; Susan battles with her love of motherhood and her hatred of her life; Gin battles with the emotions of giving up her child; and Eivør battles with the disappointment of her own mother, as Ro writes of her subject, “That in eighteen months I had not been gotten with child brought shame to my mother. The red morn I left for Aberdeen, she said, ‘Go on, get that broken *fisa* away from us’” (121). All of this encompasses Zumas’s message that motherhood is a choice; being a mother should not be forced on anyone nor denied for reasons beyond a woman’s control.

Within these relationships to motherhood itself, Ro and Susan especially are haunted by the concept of the Good Mother vs. the Bad Mother. In her essay “‘Between Creation and Devouring’: Southern Women Writers and the Politics of Motherhood,” Keira Williams defines this concept as the “mommy myth”:

“Women, according to this myth, were incomplete without children, and the Good Mothers devoted their entire beings—body, soul, time, and mind—to their children. Those mothers who did not fall within the narrow definition of the mommy myth—single, working, or minority mothers—were, of course, Bad Mothers” (29).

As a single woman in her early 40s, Ro is bombarded with comments by Didier (Susan’s husband), Susan, and even her own father about how difficult it will be to raise a child alone; her fertility doctor even reminds her often that a child is not a substitute for company. In the end, Ro has to accept that she probably will never have a child of her own—the government has passed a law, *Every Child Needs Two*, that single citizens cannot adopt or seek fertility medications/procedures. In the eyes of the U.S. government, Ro is the prime example of a Bad Mother. Though Susan falls into the definition of the Good Mother—she doesn’t work, she spends almost every hour of the day with her children and loves them deeply—she feels as if she more accurately exemplifies the Bad Mother because she *wants* to go back to school, she wants to create a life of her own that is not strictly defined by her role as wife and mother.

Comparing Gilead to a Modern Dystopic United States

Red Clocks has been hailed as “...*The Handmaid’s Tale* for a new millenium” as stated on the book jacket, but the two novels have vastly different plots, themes, and even messages. Zumas’s novel feels more realistic if only because nothing except the current state of reproductive rights in the U.S. has changed, whereas Atwood’s Gilead feels distant—not necessarily impossible, but not too close. Yet for all the similarities and differences within each novel, both authors illustrate worlds which attack women in order to marginalize and even profit off of them.

The differences in these two novels often lie in their portrayals of government and international relations. One such instance is the relationship each version of the U.S. has with Canada. As Mattie tries to cross into Canada to get an abortion—her options in the U.S. are slim to none at best—readers become aware of the complicity of the Canadian government in keeping the *Red Clocks* U.S. abortion status quo alive: “Section 10.31 of the Canadian Border Services Agency Regulations states: ‘If an unaccompanied minor registers a positive result on a FIRST RESPONSE Rapid Result Pregnancy Test, and cannot verify a legitimate personal or professional purpose in a Canadian province, she shall be taken into custody and returned to U.S. law enforcement officials’” (Zumas, 246). This complicity on the part of Canada stands in direct contrast to the Canada of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Atwood’s depiction of Canada is a nation of hope and compassion, whereas Zumas’s Canada is as corrupt as the U.S. government she critiques.

Though both dystopian visions of the United States, Atwood and Zumas drew on the unrest in the eras in which they were writing to create the most impactful fictions possible. Atwood’s novel speaks to a sense of religious absolutism—the Republic of Gilead’s entire platform is based on the story of Jacob and Rachel, a platform Atwood sets up in the epigraph by quoting the book of Genesis. Yet Zumas’s plot pulls from the direct attacks on women by the United States government in recent years. Her version of the U.S. plays on the fears of women around the nation on November 9, 2016, as they woke up to a nation that elected a misogynist demagogue for a president—a man who brags about the women he has slept with, a man who believes he is entitled to women’s bodies. Yet both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Red Clocks* identify the importance of reproductive rights to women’s rights.

Where Are We Now? The Current State of Affairs

Reproductive rights have taken many twists and turns over the past three decades. In some ways, institutions like Planned Parenthood have made progress, while in others, women's rights—or at least the outlook on women's rights—have regressed. For all the progress made by the first and second-wave feminists, women in the U.S. are still fighting for equal pay and paid maternity as well as the ability to walk home at night without fear. Many feminist contemporaries of Atwood believed the regressions were a result of what Jill Swale deems “post-feminism,” which she describes as “Middle-class women have become complacent as they have gained most of the legal changes they sought in the 1960s and 70s.” Indeed, Armbruster believes this as well, as she states: “...feminism in the U.S....tends to forget the past when it wants to move forward...we tend to lose a sense of our own identities and a sense of continuity in our politics, losses that make it difficult to develop new institutions that work any better than the ones we want to replace” (150). Yet, Zumas's *Red Clocks* proves both of these women wrong. Women in the era of Trump have not become complacent in their feminism or lost interest; rather, we have rallied together to create art and fight against the patriarchal standards placed on us.

By electing Trump, the nation regressed—a pattern seen in U.S. politics often, moving from vast progression to vast regression. However, the women in this nation have not been so enthusiastic about change in decades. With the Women's March on Washington organization, authors like Leni Zumas, musicians like Beyoncé, politicians like Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren, and many more women around the nation working to advance women's rights, it is clear that progress is still striving. Our political climate may have regressed in 2016, just as it did in 1985, but the calls to action of both Atwood and Zumas instill a hope that progress will never truly be forgotten or defeated.

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