

M(othering) the Mother: Rethinking Reproductive Justice and Abortion Rights by Critically Analysing Selected Literary Works

Manika Ahuja

Senior Research Fellow, PG Department of English, MCM DAV College for Women, Chandigarh

Abstract: While author Virginia Woolf issued a clarion call for women to uphold their personal autonomy in her notable work *A Room of One's Own*, the bodily autonomy of women spiralled abysmally low with the overturning of the landmark US Supreme Court judgment *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. Not only did the judgment eclipse abortion access in the United States of America, but its ripple effect also threatens to take the entire world in its grip. With reproductive freedom of women at stake, it becomes essential to analyse selected works of modern fiction such as Joanne Ramos's *The Farm* (2019) and *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas (2018) along with Margaret Atwood's classic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to shed light on how these make a case for reproductive justice. In doing so, the research paper also endeavours to unravel the construction of the mother as the 'Other', who is often asked to comply with the didactic moral constructions of motherhood in addition to being denied reproductive decision-making power. Reference will also be made to oft-quoted literary critics Alison Bartlett, Kristin Luker, Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, who vociferously wrote on the issue. The aim of the study is to examine notions of reproductive justice through an in-depth analysis of seminal works of literature which challenge the narratives surrounding pregnancy and childbirth.

Keywords: Reproductive Justice, Motherhood, Dystopian Science Fiction, Other, Women

Introduction

The reproductive rights of women came under severe assault with the overturning of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* judgment on June 24, 2022. The *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* judgment (which overruled the *Roe v. Wade* case of 1973) not only eclipses abortion access in the United States of America, but its ripple effect also threatens to take the entire world in its grip. While the *Roe v. Wade*

(1973) judgment had been the settled legal precedent in the US for nearly fifty years and made safe abortion accessible to women, its reversal grants unfettered powers to the state to regulate abortion, thereby undermining women's right to terminate unwanted pregnancies.

The overturning of the judgment stirred a myriad of emotions among women who eloquently lamented their consequent loss of reproductive freedom. It came as no surprise that many women's groups labelled the overturning of the historic *Roe v. Wade* judgment as a "dark day for American democracy" (Fottrell). Critically acclaimed author Margaret Atwood, whose work *The Handmaid's Tale* depicted a strikingly similar state of affairs in the fictitious Republic of Gilead, expressed her thoughts on the judgment by taking to Instagram and posting a picture of herself with a coffee mug bearing the words "I told you so" (Prieb). Atwood's reaction to the draft of the Supreme Court opinion merits closer attention here. Expressing absolute disbelief at the prophetic nature of her novel, when asked about her opinion on the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* judgment, the author noted, "I invented Gilead; the Supreme Court is making it real" (Atwood).

Meghan Markle, The Duchess of Sussex, voiced her concerns at the far-reaching impact of the *Dobbs* judgment, which took away women's constitutional right to abortion. According to her, the ruling puts the physical safety of women in tremendous danger as it would entail women attempting unsafe abortions upon themselves to get rid of their unwanted or accidental pregnancies:

This [ruling] is having a very real impact on women's bodies and lives starting now... Those who are pregnant and find themselves in a medical emergency will be at the mercy of doctors and lawyers to determine if a procedure that is needed to save her life can even be done at all. What does this tell women? It tells us that our physical safety doesn't matter and, as a result, that we don't matter. But we do. Women matter. (Garrard)

With the reproductive freedom of women in serious peril with the pronouncement of the 2022 judgment, a turn to selected literary texts is necessitated since numerous dystopian science fiction novels, most notably, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* had already anticipated the reproductive rights issues the world is grappling with today.

Often hailed as the most celebrated work of science fiction which condemned the practice of state-controlled reproduction, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood gave its readers plenty of food for thought by sparking relevant debates around the issue. Many modern works of literature, such as *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas and *The Farm* by Joanne Ramos, followed suit and became mouthpieces of their respective authors as they spoke about the pressing need to accord reproductive freedom to women, thereby making a case for reproductive justice. However, the authors were left in a state of shock when they found that what appeared to be a case of far-sighted literary imagination at the time of writing their novels is fast turning into reality today. The study places selected works of modern dystopian science fiction-*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Red Clocks* and *The Farm* as its focal point in order to understand how these present the evolution of current issues pertaining to reproductive justice in imagined scenarios which are likely to arise in the near future.

Kristin Luker, the author of the critically-acclaimed book *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, made a rather astute observation when she noted that "In two short decades, the issue of abortion has moved from the fringes of public concern to centre stage" (1). The right to safe and legal abortions is a human right which every woman must have. HR Bellicosa, author of *The Punishings*-a novel about a world without abortion, succinctly observed, "Abortion is health care. Abortion is freedom. Abortion is bodily autonomy. A country without this human right is not a free country" (Garrard).

While access to safe and legal abortion is a primary component of reproductive justice, it is not the only one. Reproductive justice, a term which splices reproductive rights and social justice together, is made up of three core values. Renowned reproductive justice and human rights activists Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger assert in their work *Reproductive Justice* that the definition of reproductive justice contains three primary principles under its ambit:

1. the right *not* to have a child; 2. the right to *have* a child; and 3. The right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments. In addition, reproductive justice demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being. (9)

The Right to breastfeed openly is also a component of reproductive justice. Yet, but a woman nursing her infant in public raises a storm in a teacup. They are looked at with scorn and are asked to “cover up” because society finds it excessively difficult to resist the urge to politicise and sexualise lactating breasts.

The deprivation of women’s personal autonomy, thus, comes to the fore in a multitude of ways- from state-controlled reproductive decisions to the social stigma attached with breastfeeding in public et al. Stripped of their right to bodily self-determination, women are rendered devoid of the power to decide whether they wish to carry a pregnancy to its full term or to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. In protecting the right to life of the fetus she nurtures in her womb, the right to personal liberty and privacy of a woman are severely eroded in the process.

Although made with a noble intent of safeguarding maternal health, state statutes more often than not render women devoid of any control on their own bodies. The right to privacy of the women stands violated in such a situation since physicians and lawmakers are often handed over the baton to make reproductive decisions on behalf of women.

Many authors have been vociferously voicing their concerns on the issue and it becomes pertinent to take their observations into consideration. An exploration of works of literature which make a case for reproductive justice can play a vital role in enlightening contemporary debates surrounding the bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom of women. The present paper critically examines selected works of literary fiction by reading them through the lens of women’s reproductive rights in order to see how their narratives make a case for reproductive justice. A literary perspective on women’s reproductive rights reveals that novels of science fiction and dystopian speculative fiction not only offer a peep into most of the reproductive rights issues which are highly likely to arise in the near future but also warn one of the catastrophes which will follow if the state were to control the reproductive rights of women.

Margaret Atwood pictured a dystopian society in her critically-acclaimed work *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where women are compelled to bear children for high-ranking members of the

society. The book, which offers a rich indictment of forced pregnancies and lack of access to reproductive health-care facilities for the handmaids, by conjuring up imagined scenarios where they are exposed to the humiliating rituals by patriarchs who treat them like chattels. The work thus, voiced Atwood's fears of living in a society which forced women to bear children, by dehumanising them and treating them like objects. Some lines which resonate with the spirit of the work seem ironic, given the way in which surrogate mothers are treated as "biological objects" in the real world, "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (102). Atwood's dystopian vision of a world where women's reproductive rights are severely curtailed came true as every woman in America is experiencing the horrors described in Atwood's book in the aftermath of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

Another work which merits discussion at this juncture is *The Farm* by Joanne Ramos. *The Farm* almost mirrors the pertinent issues raised by Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* by focussing on the plight of a surrogate mother who is lured with empty promises by a rich couple in return for her promise to deliver a healthy child to them. But as soon as she fulfils the promise and delivers a child, she is cut off from their lives just like a non-existent entity. In its essence, the novel showcases that pregnancy becomes the burden of the marginalised. The book, which ponders over what might ensue if surrogacy were taken to its high-capitalist extreme, seems to be a reflection of the current times, where many people look at surrogacy with disdain and see it as an arrangement where "wombs (are) on hire", a position which reduces the position of economically weak women to the status of commodities to be exploited at the hands of the privileged sections of society (Pratap).

Ramos symbolically presents the problematic ways in which capitalist regimes and state agencies control the bodies of women by imagining a dystopian world where pregnant "hosts" are kept under constant surveillance by the rich clients. These modern-day "handmaids" are forbidden from using their cellphones or contacting their friends and family under the guise of protecting "fetal

security.” Every movement of these women is under scanner by virtue of wristbands and security cameras, which in turn escalates concerns about the problematic status of surrogate mothers and the denial of privacy to them. Many critics have drawn parallels between the situations presented in the book and the current state of “baby factories” in India and Ukraine.

During the course of her work, Ramos makes a snide remark on the practice of forced surrogacy or a situation when women’s financial hardships force them to accept the offer of becoming surrogate mothers as she observes, “Because in America you only have to know how to make money. Money buys everything else” (175). Interestingly, soon after Ramos published *The Farm* in 2019, Alabama’s restrictive abortion laws were passed, which turned Ramos’s fears into reality. When parallels were drawn between her novel and the anti-abortion scenario, which is ubiquitous in the times we are living in, Ramos famously commented, “I can’t believe we’re here again” (Lea).

Red Clocks by Leni Zumas conjures up the ghastly image of a near-future United States which has declared both, abortion and in vitro fertilisation as illegal. In her work, Zumas imagines a time when the Personhood Amendment has been added to the US Constitution, thereby curtailing the reproductive freedom of women. The bleak picture painted in the work does not seem too far-sighted given the current flurry of anti-abortion laws which are dominating the legal world, especially in the US, as an after-effect of the overturn of the *Roe v. Wade* judgment. The politics of reproduction, which attacks women’s freedom of choice to determine when and how they want to become mothers, leaves them helpless as they see their bodies being governed by the state. Zumas blames “the monsters in Congress who passed the Personhood Amendment and the walking lobotomies on the Supreme Court who reversed *Roe v. Wade*. (As a result of which) Two short years ago...abortion was legal in this country, but now we have to resort to throwing ourselves down the stairs” (59).

The novel, which deftly weaves together the lives of five women ranging from different age groups, offers a psychological insight into the minds of women who are not allowed to exercise their own discretion when it comes to matters pertaining to their reproductive decisions. While Ro, a 42-year old woman whose hopes of becoming a mother through the process of artificial insemination are

dashed to the ground with the passage of the federal laws banning in vitro fertilisation in the US; Mattie, a minor girl of 15 years of age lives in constant fear of inviting imprisonment if she “chooses” to abort her unwanted pregnancy which, given the fact that she is underage, she is clearly not in a position to sustain.

Another important facet of ensuring reproductive justice for women is the right to breastfeed openly. Oft-quoted literary critic Alison Bartlett vociferously wrote on the issue of breastfeeding in public, which is another significant aspect of reproductive justice. In *Breastwork: Rethinking Breastfeeding* Bartlett goes on to argue that the fact that public spectacles of women breastfeeding are considered scandalous in a lot of countries till date, speaks volumes about the conflict between nature and socio-legal norms which continue to govern women’s bodies. Bartlett puts the real position about breastfeeding into perspective when she spells the gospel truth at the very outset of her work, “breastmilk has always meant ‘more’ than just breastmilk. I was mostly appalled by what I read about breastfeeding” (1).

The irony is not lost on women when they are made to realise that the natural act of a mother nursing her infant in public gives rise to a storm in the teacup since “breastfeeding has always been political” (18). In addition to this, the proliferation of mothering and baby care manuals apart from breastfeeding pedagogy material available in the market reinforces the view that the “glands which are the decision-makers” must comply with the directions listed in baby care manuals. While Australia, Canada and Taiwan feature on the list of the countries where nursing in public is hailed as legal and a common occurrence, there are countries such as Saudi Arabia and India and where breastfeeding in public is considered scandalous.

Quite recently, Australian Senator Larissa Waters nursed her baby while engaging in pertinent discussions in the parliament. Quite admirably, Waters became a symbol of power for every mother when she rose up without batting an eyelid to firmly address the parliament with her 14-week-old daughter latching onto her lactating breast. A flurry of newspapers and social media articles carried headlines such as “Larissa Waters becomes the first woman in Australian Parliament to deliver a

speech while breastfeeding” (Lieu). When videos of her proudly breastfeeding her baby while speaking on a motion in the Australian Parliament addressing black lung disease among the coal miners in Queensland went viral, Waters reacted with the powerful words, “I hope [this] helps to ... remove any vestige of stigma against breastfeeding a baby when they are hungry” (Lieu).

The current situation being witnessed in the US is in sharp contrast to the legal position of abortions in India. The landmark *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. The Union of India and Others* judgment of 2017 recognised women’s fundamental right to make their own reproductive choices as part of their right to life and personal liberty enshrined under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. Articles 3 and 17 of The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) state that; “The right of a woman to make autonomous decisions about her own reproductive functions is at the very core of her fundamental right to equality and privacy, concerning intimate matters of physical and psychological integrity.” However, it is important to bear in mind that while women are the most deeply impacted by the passage of restrictive legislations on abortion, which spell doom for reproductive freedom, it also collaterally impacts those belonging to other communities. Issues of bodily autonomy accompanying pregnancy affect white women and women of colour differently than they impact the lives of transgender couples, but the common thread which connects all of them is the regressive way in which the anti-abortion laws impact their “right to choose” (“Safe”).

Conclusion

The recent reversal of the hitherto landmark judgment reminds one of the pre-Roe v. *Wade* era, wherein the lack of legal access to abortions had led to the creation of a secret underground abortion counselling service by the name of Jane Collective. The said service, which operated from 1969 to 1973, assisted women who wanted to abort their accidental pregnancies. Those who could not travel all the way resorted to dangerous methods to abort their pregnancies themselves. It comes as no surprise then that the current curtailment of women’s reproductive freedom has led to a revival of the Jane Collective’s mission from the 1960s under the new initiative “We Are Jane.”

When critically acclaimed author Margaret Atwood lamented that “A ‘deeply rooted’ tradition is that women’s reproductive organs do not belong to the women who possess them. They belong only to the state” (Atwood), she questioned not just the anti-abortion laws which saw the light of the day after the *Dobbs* judgment, but also questioned the relegation of women to the status of what Edward Said called the “Other” even in relation to their own bodies.

Lindy West, author of the critically-acclaimed book *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*, succinctly captured the essence of the matter, when she noted, “I believe unconditionally in the right of people with uteruses to decide what grows inside of their body and feeds on their blood and endangers their life and reroutes their future. There are no ‘good’ abortions and ‘bad’ abortions, there are only pregnant people who want them and pregnant people who don’t...” (73).

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