



Fertility in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Leni Zumas's Red Clocks: A Gender Study

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Abstract

Gender studies is a huge field that is so rich with studies concerning both genders. That study focuses on socio- cultural structure of the roles of males and females, which accordingly affects the political and economic condition of both sexes. Fertility as part of gender studies is a complex and deeply personal issue that has been a recurring theme in literature throughout history. It encompasses the ability to conceive and bear children, and the experiences of those who struggle with infertility or reproductive challenges. This theme has been explored in various literary works, shedding light on fertility's emotional, social, and cultural dimensions. Fertility is depicted in literary works such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Canadian author Margaret Atwood and *Red Clocks* (2018) by Leni Zumas, these two novels really illustrated the impact of restricted reproductive laws and how they affect women's lives, identities, and autonomy which are explored by both authors using dystopian settings. Fertility is the major issue that these novels examine and how society views and is affected by contraception, burdening women's life in the process. Such a topic is imperative to create a kind of awareness to reach a kind of equality between men and women as part of human rights, which leads afterwards to a developed society.

Keywords: Dystopian setting, fertility, Gender study, social inequality



الخصوبة في (حكاية الجارية) و (ساعات حمراء) للكاتبه لني زوماس: دراسة جندرية

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المستخلص :

دراسة الجندرية من الدراسات الحديثة والغنية التي تخصص كلا الجنسين. تركز هذه الدراسة على البنية الاجتماعية - الثقافية لأدوار الذكور والإناث، والتي تؤثر بالتالي على الوضع السياسي والاقتصادي لكلا الجنسين. الخصوبة كجزء من الدراسة الجندرية هي من المشاكل الشخصية المعقدة والمهمة التي يتناولها الأدب عبر الزمن. وتشمل الدراسة تجارب القدرة على الحمل وإنجاب الأطفال، وتجارب أولئك الذين يعانون من العقم أو تحديات الإنجاب، الاثنان عانوا من خلال الروايتين المختارة من مشاكل نفسيه واجتماعية وثقافية. تم استكشاف هذا الموضوع في العديد من الأعمال الأدبية، مما ألقى الضوء على الأبعاد العاطفية والاجتماعية والثقافية للخصوبة. تم تصوير الخصوبة في أعمال أدبية مثل *حكاية الخادمة* (١٩٨٥) للكاتبه الكندية مارغريت أتوود و*ساعات حمراء* (٢٠١٨) للكاتبه ليني زوماس، وقد أوضحت هاتان الروايتين حقاً تأثير قوانين الإنجاب المقيدة وكيف تؤثر على حياة المرأة وهويتها واستقلاليتها والتي استكشفتها كلتا المؤلفتين بتطبيقها من خلال خلفية لمجتمع فاسد. الخصوبة هي القضية الرئيسية التي تتناولها هذه الروايات، وكيف ينظر المجتمع إلى وسائل منع الحمل ويتأثر بها، مما يُثقل كاهل المرأة. يُعدّ هذا الموضوع ضروريًا لخلق نوع من الوعي للوصول إلى نوع من المساواة بين الرجل والمرأة كجزء من حقوق الإنسان، مما يؤدي لاحقاً إلى مجتمع واعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: محيط فاسد، خصوبة، دراسة جندرية، التفاوت الاجتماعية

1. Introduction

Women's studies are conceptualized as a flexible field that could represent issues of gender and sexuality in new ways. Before dealing with gender studies, one has to know the difference between gender and sex studies.

Sex issues stand for biological and functional characteristics of males and females, i.e. reproductive organs, chromosomes etc. On the other hand, gender studies stand for social standards for men and women, i.e. norms, roles and behavior for each of them (Money et al, 1955, p.302). The women studies that are presented are seen through a dystopian setting.

The word dystopia means 'bad place' because it is the opposite of utopia; the perfect place. The dystopian setting is important for it "...serves as a rich and multifaceted terrain for exploring societal norms, power dynamics, and forms of resistance." as Dash puts it, and it "...delves into how authors construct and deconstruct gender roles, stereotypes, and power dynamics within their narratives." (p.7).

It is interesting that by viewing the suffering of women through female narrators, which enriches the vision and the experience those victims in the novels. Women's issues are highly connected to society and environment which "highlights the meaning of class struggle in dealing with social inequalities. It considers closely how the domination of patriarchal figures creates gender inequalities" (Shafiq, 2023, p.30). Because it challenges social conventions, the current study is significant because it fosters a sense of social awareness. Besides, it enriches English literature as a cultural study.

2. Methodology

Gender Studies is relatively young. In fact, the academic study of gender can be traced back to the 1960s, and it should be understood in its connection with a new wave in feminism, which played an important role in its development as a new analytical category. At that time, second wave feminism was speaking up against all sorts of gender inequalities. In academia, disciplines started to be criticized for contributing to the marginalization of women by producing knowledge that did not take gender into consideration. Until the 1970s, gender had not been a concern for social sciences, arts or the humanities.

Gender studies is a type of study that includes lots of fields and issues that concerns gender and sex, gives language and voice to social inequalities, processes, conditions, arrangements, and rituals that can otherwise go unspoken and unnamed. Rose Mcdermott in her article "Distinguishing Sex and Gender" asserts that gender studies "focuses on the ways gender identity

and sexual orientation shape behaviors and feelings, and it investigates power dynamics that relate to sex”. (Mcdermott, 2011, p.91) The field is not limited to women only; it can also include men when it comes to domestic violence.

Gender and fertility are involvedly interrelated, social prospects of each gender role, will shape reproduce behaviour and choice. Usually, language, symbols, pictures, culture, and identity are all impacted to contribute life’s meaning. The Gender study clarifies the purpose for low fertility that is caused due to the double burden of women from traditional family outlooks and social expectations.

Women are viewed as objects of production from a patriarchal perspective, and they suffer severely when they attempt to exercise informal social control over their bodies. Fertility and childbirth have always been a problem for women and “... their partners rarely suffer any blame because it has become women's duty to carry all of it since childbirth is considered the primary responsibility of women” (Yeboah, 2024, p.180). The social norms mould women with certain guidelines to be within nurturing duty. Writers echo women’s suffering from such norms in their writings.

It is through the gender study lens Margaret Atwood provides in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a society were gender role is imposed under a theocratic organization set in a dystopian background. And Leni Zumas’ presents in *Red Clocks* a restrictive reproductive dystopia setting, draws off women control their bodies. The novel is presented from four female characters, each belong to different social roles, all share the same suffering. Reading these novels from gender study frame, it enriches the novels with different perspectives.

3. Related Works

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* & Leni Zumas’s *Red Clocks* are famous and captivating novels that inspired many writers to write about them. Gökçenaz Gayret, in her article entitled “Walking Wombs: Loss of Individuality and Self-Alienation in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” dealt with the sense of alienation in the novel showing the pressure of the male chauvinist society. The study describes women as ‘walking wombs’ as if they are derived a distorted female identity, in a tyrannical patriarchal rule. Furthermore, Sally C. S. Brooks, in her M.A thesis *The War of the Sexes*, illustrated the hierarchy power between sexes in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The author also shows a reference to the Biblical significance in the novel. In the article of Argha Basu & Priyanka Tripathi which is entitled “An Essence of Postmodern Truth(s): Analyzing “Motherhood” in *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas” have analyzed the novel from a postmodern feminist point of view,

concentrating on the idea of motherhood and the old questions that concern motherly identity.

As for gender studies, there are many studies in that field, most of them were psychological, or religious studies, and most studies did not apply gender study on those two novels precisely. Accordingly, there is a gap in dealing with *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Red Clocks* from a gender lens. The significance of the current study lies in its attempt to write about how society normalizes concerns that are imposed on one gender more than the other. And that is the gap the current study meant to fill.

4. Findings

In this study we are seeking to answer certain questions, that are raised in these novels.

Q1: Does a woman have the right for abortion?

Q2: Do Society have control over women's body through its traditional norms?

Q3: Do men suffer the same as women from social norms?

Q4: If fertility is both gender's issue, so why it is only female's responsibility?

5. Discussion

5.1. Fertility in *The Handmaid's Tale* & *Red Clocks*:

Due to life expense, unstable living conditions, and irresponsibility of expanding families, fertility rate drops off. The results could lead to aging societies that really causes economic and social pressure on the governments (Chira, 2020). Writers are concern of the problem and they make the concept of fertility evolves in literature, and predicting a future of sexual slavery and ritualized rape under a fundamental government.

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Zumas's *Red Clocks*, two dystopian novels, the topic of fertility is explored in depth. Both stories depict cultures that are battling reproductive issues and place a strong emphasis on the government's control over women's bodies. This study intends to investigate the implications of fertility concerns and its impact on women's autonomy and agency as well as the broader socio-political circumstances that inform their narratives through a comparative examination of these works. By examining these literary works, one can gain valuable insights into the potential consequences of policies and ideologies that diminish women's reproductive rights. Therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Red Clocks* are powerful speculative novels that approach the issue of fertility from several perspectives.

5.2. Societal Stratification and Reproduction

Certain literary works including *The Handmaid Tale* and *Red Clocks*, have the uncanny capacity to transcend time, encapsulating contemporary issues and illuminating the shifting dynamics of gender, power, and autonomy. They both provide a haunting yet thought-provoking examination of women's life in dystopian futures. Although these two works are diverse in their tales and settings, they have remarkable parallels that compel readers to consider the connections between their worlds, themes, and societal commentary. Meulen the professor in Utrecht University who is specialized in literary studies assured in her contemporary female-centered dystopian fiction that:

Both recent books make use of multiple, very diverse perspectives, whereas *The Handmaid's Tale* was narrated and focalized by a single protagonist. This ensures ... *Red Clocks* is readable and relatable for a far larger and more diverse audience and can therefore spread its message to a larger amount of people (Meulen, 2018, p.13).

The Handmaid's Tale and *Red Clocks* serve as examples of how literature may inspire societal awareness and transformation. Both books struck a chord with readers and generated important discussions about gender equality, women's agency, and reproductive rights. They have moved beyond the realm of fiction and established themselves as key concepts in discussions of gender dynamics and real-world reproductive politics.

These novels face hard truths and wrestle with the effects of restricted reproductive laws by offering compelling and emotionally resonant storylines. They urge discussing the current condition of reproductive rights critically and speaking out in favor of a more just and equitable future. Additionally, both books serve as warnings about the dangers of societies that take advantage of reproductive concerns to influence and control women's lives. The continuing evolving call for women rights in society in different cultures as Judy Kimble and Elaine Unterhalter stated "have worked together on areas of common concern, such as the struggle for contraception and abortion rights and the fight for equal pay" (p ١٢).

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the society controls women for their fertility in the form of 'Handmaids'. While at the same time men are not treated the same, on the other way, they;

...are the ones who make the rules and decisions, and women are often seen as subordinate. This power dynamic means that even in a situation where fertility is an issue for both men and women, men would likely be the ones making decisions about how to address it, and they would be unlikely to

subject themselves to the same kind of control that they impose on women.” (Cuesta, 2018, p.5)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the society adheres to biblical religious teachings that uphold women to accomplish their traditional role as mothers. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the government of Gilead uses reproductive control as an effective instrument that suppresses women's agency, presenting a terrifying picture of a society in which liberty and autonomy are curtailed. “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”. (*Handmaid's Tale*, p.61) a speech said by the doctor who offers to try to impregnate a lady. The same idea in Zumas's *Red Clock*, there are four women whose lives are interrelated: The Mender, the Wife, the daughter and biographer, who assume to present the true meaning of motherhood. With different environment they share the same experience process, in which a “... woman to terminate a pregnancy or to voice her aversion to parenthood leaves her marginalized which is an outcome of epistemological violence.” (Basu & Tripathi, 2023, p.291). The fictional Personhood Amendment in Zumas's novel they intend to protect every embryo from an aborting mother which limits reproductive rights in *Red Clocks*. Jonathan F. Will defines that movement as: “Acknowledging the “personhood” of the preborn is thought to be an avenue toward establishing a framework that would achieve this goal [to prohibit abortion] without direct reference to abortion.” (p. 578). The Personhood Amendment which disempowers women and creates a society where personal decisions are strictly regulated, “Over the course of human evolution, did men learn to be attracted to skinny women because they were not visibly pregnant? Did voluptuousness signal that a body was already ensuring the survival of another man's genetic material?” (*Red Clocks*, p.644). The novels show that when reproductive rights are violated, the repercussions are extensive, affecting people's lives, social cohesiveness, and gender dynamics. Readers are prompted to consider the significance of defending reproductive rights as a basic component of human dignity and gender equality (Gentile, 2015). Atwood and Zumas illustrate how these civilizations devalue women's autonomy and reduce them to their reproductive capacities. Therefore, the main issues with women's persistent low status are reducing them to their reproductive activities and the effects of a culture that aims to regulate and exploit reproduction. Consequently, they are abused because of their body which is different from that of men as Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* stated: “women have ovaries, uterus, these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature” (p.15).

Because of the traditional gender roles that allocate to women the major

responsibility for childcare and household responsibilities, women's identities are frequently stripped away in patriarchal societies. As a result, the call for a change and the attempt to put an end to the exploitation of women will set women free from all the constrictions of the society where women viewed as inferior to men. Women may experience pressure to put motherhood before other facets of their lives in communities where these roles are strongly enforced, which restricts their options for when and how many children to have. Offred loses her job, fears for her life and the life of her daughter. Offred doesn't want to repeat the pain she suffered when her mother was involved in the activism during her adolescent. Now she depends on her husband, she wonders "He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his." (*Handmaid's Tale*, p.116). She senses that her husband, Luka, is happy to have his power over her now after losing her job.

The gendered aspects of fertility problems and birth control are discussed in both books. Whereas *Red Clocks* shows how cultural expectations of motherhood can trump personal ambitions and goals, *Gilead* depicts women as slaves only for their ability to procreate. *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a profoundly stratified and hierarchical society in which women's roles are strictly defined by their reproductive capacities. "... Gilead in the eighties by banning all forms of birth control, imposing compulsory pregnancy tests on female population, and linking promotion and wage increases to fertility" (*Handmaid's Tale*, p.305). The government seizes control of the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic regime that rises to power following a drop in reproduction rates and severe social unrest, establishing a totalitarian society where religious fanaticism governs every area of life. Within Gilead's repressive system, women are split into several social groups, each serving a specific function. The Wives of the Commanders, who symbolize the ruling class's elite, are the highest-ranking women. These ladies are married to high-ranking leaders and are frequently infertile, requiring 'Handmaids' to bear children on their behalf. (Ismail et al, 2020)

The Handmaids, who wear red robes and have white wings, represent fertility and are tasked with bearing offspring. They are assigned to Commanders and their Wives and are forced to engage in sexual interactions known as the "Ceremony" in order to conceive. The major value of the Handmaids is their fertility, and they are considered as precious commodities, controlled and watched to ensure that they perform their reproductive tasks. as Offred states "we are all for breeding purposes. We aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category there is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us [...] we are two legged wombs, that's all:

sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (*Handmaid’s Tale*, p.13). Women are dehumanized and subjected to a status comparable to slavery in Gilead, where they are primarily valued for their reproductive role, with their identity and worth decided only by their biological ability to carry children. Women are effectively considered as walking wombs in Margaret Atwood's novel, and those who are unable to bear offspring are deprived of their gender identity. There are also Marthas, who work as domestic helpers in houses, assisting the Wives and Handmaids. They have a lower status, but their contributions are vital to the operation of homes and the wider system. Women who are unable to bear children are referred to as "Unwomen" in Gilead and are considered useless inside the societal order. These women face harsh penalties, often being sentenced to hard labor in hazardous circumstances or being executed. This devaluation of infertile women is depicted in the novel as a glaring example of how society reduces women to their biological roles, abandoning them when they no longer serve their reproductive purpose (Turki & Abdulrazzaq, 2023).

Furthermore, in Atwood's narrative, motherhood is elevated to the highest virtue and becomes the single avenue for women's salvation and societal acceptance. Motherhood is exalted as the ultimate purpose of a woman's existence within Gilead, supporting the notion that a woman's worth is directly related to her capacity to bear and raise children. By telling the handmaids to "think of yourselves as seeds," (*Handmaid’s Tale*, p.27), Aunt Lydia highlights this point. She keeps making them say on a daily routine “let’s pretend we’re trees” (*Handmaid’s Tale*, p.27), then Offred immediately replayed “stand[ing] on the corner, pretending I am a tree” (*Handmaid’s Tale*, p.27) The meaning of this statement for Gilead's ruling class is that women are like trees giving fruits, and the fruits represent their reproductive capacity of bearing offspring for their masters. This statement, however, has a different connotation because Offred is describing a mental retreat. In nature, trees represent independence, rootedness, and endurance. She dissociates from her immediate surroundings and the harsh realities of her situation when she engaged in this mental practice. She seeks peace and strength by mentally withdrawing from her harsh environment and envisioning herself as something free and uncontrollable, such as a tree. In other terms, this phrase represents her inner resistance and refusal to be utterly dehumanized by Gilead's society. Another example of exploiting women’s body is the way of the greetings to the fertile handmaids, “Bless be the fruit” (*Handmaid’s Tale*, p.27) to which the preferred reply would be “May the Lord open” (*Handmaid’s Tale*, p.27). This is a traditional greeting among the people of Gilead, especially among the Aunts and other women in positions of authority. It is religious in nature, emphasizing fertility and reproduction. It also acts as a reminder of this obligation and the significance

of procreation in Gilead's society. These statements, along with other religious and ceremonial aspects, contribute to Gilead's repressive and carefully regulated and monitored environment, in which women's bodies and reproductive capacity are tightly governed and supervised in the name of religion and societal order.

As a result, motherhood is portrayed in Gilead as a sacred duty and a type of religious devotion. The ruling ideology rationalizes women's subordination and the establishment of the Handmaid system by arguing that dropping birth rates are the result of societal sinfulness and moral deterioration. Handmaids are positioned as the solution to this issue, and their reproductive ability is viewed as a method of national salvation and rejuvenation. While motherhood is praised, *The Handmaid's Tale*, also examines the emotional toll it takes on women within this oppressive system. Handmaids are forced to give up any emotional attachment to the children they bear. Jodi Picoult in her book gives a brilliant description about the relationship between a child and his mother and the bond that no one in the world can deconstruct it, she stated "Sometimes when you pick up your child you can feel the map of your own bones beneath your hands, or smell the scent of your skin in the nape of his neck. This is the most extraordinary thing about motherhood - finding a piece of yourself separate and apart that all the same you could not live without" (p.160). Thus, the handmaid's babies are immediately taken away after birth and given to the wives, depriving them of the opportunity to form meaningful connections with their offspring and perpetuating the objectification of their bodies for the sole purpose of reproduction.

In addition to the negative consequences that lead to erasing women's identity, women have been stripped of their real names. Offred reveals this fact by saying "my name is not Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden" (*Handmaid's Tale*, p.99). In this dystopian story, in which the protagonist reflects the oppressive and dehumanizing society. she is referred to by the name "Offred," which signifies her role as a possession of the man she serves, Fred. This loss of her true identity symbolizes the dehumanizing effects of the Gileadean regime. J. Brooks Bouson clearly clarifies the nature of the society "Through its imposition of a rigid system of hierarchal classification, the Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallogocentric economy" (p.137) Handmaids like Offred are forced to bear children for the ruling class. They are essentially treated as property rather than individuals with rights. The relentless emphasis on motherhood confines women to a singular, narrowly defined role, limiting their identity and potential. In this society, women are stripped of their right

to pursue careers, education, or personal aspirations. Instead, their value is measured solely by their ability to bear children. The issue of fertility linked with the position of women in Gilead society as LY Phan asserts that there is "...preference for high fertility, ...[and]children are viewed as a source of labor, as well as a way for women to rise their statue" (p. 66)

By reducing women to their reproductive function, in the male-dominated culture of Gilead, women's bodies are universally seen as mere objects. For instance, Offred provides an illustration of such subordinate condition "resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object" (*Handmaid's Tale*, p.282). The Handmaids are wholeheartedly committed to their positions as biological mothers within Gilead's society. The Gilead government employs various methods to solidify its power dynamics and expand male dominance. The Aunts instruct the Handmaids on assuming maternal roles and faithfully fulfilling their responsibilities. More to mention, Gilead enforces a patriarchal system that effectively denies them agency, reducing them to dependent, one-dimensional figures in the larger narrative of societal regeneration.

In the realm of contemporary literature, authors who write about the position of women in society and how the struggle for achieving equal status with men are still present. However, the desire to continue advocating for women's rights through literary works is still a potent force, captivating us to address the ongoing oppression and exploitation of women today. Writers provide a deep insight to the painful reality that countless women face around the world. As a result, they utilize their pens as instruments of empowerment, using words to fight normalized injustices and pave the path for a future in which every woman's worth is recognized. *Red Clocks* is an example of such writings which present stories of women who are marginalized and obliged to follow the rules of their society. Set in the imaginary town of Newville, Oregon, *Red Clocks* is a dramatic and eye-opening novel that tackles the intricacy of gender, self-determination, and reproductive rights. Set in a not-too-distant dystopian future, a harsh new rule known as the Personhood Amendment has been passed, outlawing abortion and in vitro fertilization. The new law also grants embryos legal rights, effectively equating their position to that of living beings.

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 (*Red Clocks*, p.30).

This comment demonstrates the restricted policies on women's reproductive rights and fertility. The Personhood Amendment deprives women of their reproductive rights, leaving them with few options for parenting and family planning. Women's wants and aspirations have been minimized by cultural standards, resulting in disempowerment and limited prospects. Being a spinster hurts a woman and creates wonder "What does the word "spinster" do that "bachelor" doesn't do? Why do they carry different associations? These are language acts, people" (*Red Clocks*, p.180). It is surely the society is imposing the ideals of being a full woman, and that what the tale is illustrating.

The tale follows four different female protagonists whose lives intersect as they deal with the ramifications of this harsh policy. Ro, a single high school history teacher and a biographer. She is writing about Eivør Mínevudottír, the female polar and explorer. Ro is interested in the biography of this less – known explorer in the 19th century, because she rejects marriage since she was 19 years old, believing she castoffs male dominating. An idea seems to fascinate Ro who believes that "...every wedding ring in the room [The Fertile Office]. Serious rocks, fat bands of glitter. They live on the fingers of women who have leather sofas and solvent husbands but whose cells and tubes and bloods are failing at their animal destiny." (*Red Clocks*, p.77). Yet, she has a strong desire to become a mother while she still can. According to law, Ro is prohibited from adopting a child because she is single, and any child should have two parents with valid license for their marriage to be adopted. Besides she cannot conceive a child as she is still single. She waits long enough for the right person to appear as a soulmate but he never came. So she decides to see if she can carry a baby with a donor sperm. With low pregnant chances she has, Ro decides to speed up her adoption submission to get a child. Being a teacher of history makes her recognize "how many horrors are legitimated in public daylight, against the will of most of the people." (*Red Clocks*, p.175). Ro is doing her best to avoid restrictions that would limit her options for motherhood.

Susan, on the other hand, a woman and a mother of two children, she is Ro's friend in another high school teacher. She is the wife of Didier; unappreciated husband, leaving her to feel depressed, and imprisoned in an unsatisfying marriage. She strongly wants to leave her domestic role, may be for another man, but she can't. Simone de Beauvoir assures that in *The Second Sex* (1956) that "marriage normally subordinates wife to husband," (p.447). Susan struggles to obtain the right to her own body because her husband is unwilling to grant her a divorce: "Shut up, she tells her monkey

mind. Please shut up, you picker of nits, presser of bruises, counter of losses, fearer of failures, collector of grievances future and past.” (*Red Clocks*, p.224). Susan feels regret to have ungrateful family that she is anchored in, a husband and children whom prevent her from achieving her dreams.

Mattie is the third character, a teenage girl who becomes pregnant unintentionally, “You can’t say it was rape or incest - nobody cares how it got into you.” (*Red Clocks*, p.230). Mattie is a stellar student in Ro’s class, being pregnant and lonely, she faces the consequences of the Personhood Amendment, which has an unexpected impact on her future and aspirations. “The Personhood Amendment, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the calls for abortion providers to face the death penalty - the person she planned to be would care about this mess, would bother to be furious. Too tired to be furious.” (*Red Clocks*, p.254). Seeking ways to have a secret abortion, she thought of getting help by going to another country, Canada maybe is a good choice. “The border control can detain any woman or girl they “reasonably” suspect of crossing into Canada for the purpose of ending a pregnancy”. (*Red Clocks*, p. 234)

The fourth one is Gin, an unsociable herbalist and homeopath, lives in the forest “Whatever frees Gin Percival to leave her hair twiggy and wear shapeless sack dresses and smell unwashed—the wife wants that.” (*Red Clocks*, p.254). Gin falls in the crosshairs of the law when she is indicted for providing illegal reproductive assistance to women in need. “How many minutes, hours, months, even actual years, of their lives do girls and women waste in agonizing? And how many billions of dollars of corporate profit are made as a result?” (*Red Clocks*, p.65). Gin falls in a trouble with the Personhood Amendment and she is taken to a courtroom on trial for aborting a woman that ends up with serious wounds that she should be taken to a hospital. “...the mender had the same problem, she didn’t solve it how Temple told her to. Terminations were lawful then, but the mender wanted to know how it felt to grow a human, with her own blood and minerals, in her own red clock.” (*Red Clocks*, p. 200).

The ‘red clock’ is the uterus, that sheds blood every month for a period and it carries babies for nine months. It is the actual biological clock for a woman. Mattie wished to stop her clock to continue her studies to college. On the other hand, Ro wants to fix her clock, desperately wanting to conceive a child, but her chances are low. When her teenage student Mattie needed help from her teacher, Ro had mixed feelings. Her student is pregnant easily and she doesn’t want that, while Ro wants a baby desperately and she could not be. Gin also had mixed feelings when Mattie came to her for assistance. Gin used her red clock to give birth to a baby that she didn’t keep, a case resonates with that of Gin. Susan’s red clock worked at a time

she was not ready for that; she wanted to achieve her dream by going to law school (Basu & Tripathi, 2023). The different stories illustrate the complication of reproductive decisions that affect all women.

The novel is narrated through the eyes of different women, these four women live in the same town, a biographer, a mother, a teacher, and a healer. and they are connected with the same situation. Women are lensed through a social frame as Sarah Gibbens puts it in her article *Is Maternal Instinct Only for Moms? Here's the Science*; saying "... don't measure a woman's worth as much by a woman's ability to mother or have children anymore" (p.294). Through these various points of view, the novel investigates how the societal system affects women's lives in various manners. Women are considered sex objects, "Over the course of human evolution, did men learn to be attracted to skinny women because they were not visibly pregnant? Did voluptuousness signal that a body was already ensuring the survival of another man's genetic material?" (*Red Clocks*, p.81) As a result, the novel sheds light on the complex obstacles they face in a society preoccupied with questions of reproduction, identity, and agency. Simone de Beauvoir, in her *The Second Sex* assures that idea by saying; "woman is reduced to an object condition, because of the [...] structure of society" (p.184). Those women are questioning their feelings about motherhood due to the restricted reproductive laws.

The four protagonists struggle with concerns of identity, delving into what it means to be a woman in a culture where traditional societal roles and standards are strongly embedded. In examining the difficulties women face in a society that enact rules to control their bodies and choices. Each of these women in *The Red Clocks* faces a different obstacle that needs to stand out and fight to gain their rights in observing that all women deserve equal place with men: "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence" (*Women*, 2014, p.78). Through its depressing prose and gripping narrative, *Red Clocks* provokes discussions on feminism, motherhood, and the constant struggle for reproductive justice. Thus, Zuma investigates how feminism plays a critical role in their desire for self-discovery and independence.

6. Conclusion

Fertility, as a part of gender studies, illustrate how women are being treated in different parts of the world. Women are victimized by silencing them, and making them accept what they consider as traditional norm without having the choice what to do in their own bodies. What is interesting is that gender

issue is not a fixed concept but it is rather a social rule that imposed on women by a patriarchal point of view. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* & Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* both deal with women struggle against rules imposed by their societies. Those societies show full control over their bodies, making the women's decision over their lives so useless.

Atwood's *The Handmaid Tale* associates environment's subjugation and women's suppression by showing the results of environmental degradation on females. Fertility is regarded as a conventional social norm that women are obliged to fulfill. Otherwise, they are going to be accused as being incomplete by not fulfilling their duty. Similarly, Zumas's *Red Clocks* illustrates that having children is the typical gender's responsibility; if not, they will break the norms. That societal pressure really burdens women with physical and psychological oppression and forcing them to be as vessels for breeding. In their novels, writers depict these issues in an effort to raise awareness and convey the notion that women face social and psychological hardships. Those women are in real danger by accepting patriarchal subjugation and by carrying the pressure of being the only ones responsible of production and fertility. Atwood and Zumas both agree that fertility has the potential to influence humankind's future and that women's crucial and potent role in the struggle for survival is what motivates men to strive to regulate it. As the *WORLD SURVEY ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT 2014* declares "the advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and ... are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society" (p.20). For if the suffering continues, women will never stop the struggle in the society.

It would be fantastic to conduct additional research on feminist dystopias, including the works of Atwood and Zuma. Additionally, one can use a gender lens to analyze classic works, such as those from the Renaissance or the Victorian era.

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