

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
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**REPRESENTATION OF REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE IN LENI ZUMAS' *RED***

***CLOCKS***

**BA thesis**

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## **Abstract**

Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks*, first published in 2018, is a novel about four women's reproductive journeys in a dystopian version of the United States where abortion and IVF treatments have been banned and adoption has been made illegal for single parents. This thesis focuses on the reproductive journeys of the four women in the novel and tries to understand why they make the choices they make.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction gives background information on the novel and the importance of discussing women's reproductive rights. The introduction also includes the aim of the thesis. The literature review provides an overview of speculative fiction, feminist science fiction, and reproductive choice. The second main chapter provides an analysis of the reproductive choices of the four characters in the novel. The chapter is divided into four sub-chapters that each deal with one of the women. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

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## Introduction

Women's right to abortion has been a topic of debate worldwide for many decades. Recently the debate has become very heated, especially in the United States where it eventually culminated with the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the US Supreme Court decision that has been protecting the constitutional right to abortion for nearly 50 years (Tumin 2022: para. 1). Although the debate in the United States is perhaps the best-known and has received the most media and social media coverage, we can see the debate happening in many other countries as well. Two years ago, in January 2021, the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland deemed that abortion because of a severe fetal defect or incurable illness that threatens the fetus's life is unconstitutional (Tayler 2022: para. 15). The abortion debate has also been ongoing in Estonia for many years and although abortion in Estonia is still legal, some political parties believe that this should be changed. For example, during the 2023 Parliamentary Elections, the Estonian Conservative People's Party made promises that, should they be elected, they would stop the use of taxpayer money to fund abortions in Estonia (Vaher 2023: para 1).

Political discussions make their way into literature where, in addition to the political perspective, authors also show how individuals are affected by these issues. The focus of this thesis is on how reproductive choices are represented in Leni Zumas' novel *Red Clocks*, often cited among the most popular science fiction novels that deal with reproductive choice. Additionally, the novel offers a look into four different reproductive paths, that is, it goes beyond just discussing abortion. It provides us with insight into the thoughts and reproductive decisions of four different women in a dystopian version of the United States of America, where abortion and IVF have been banned and adoption is illegal for single parents. Ro desperately tries to have a child as a single mother, Gin is dragged into a medical malpractice lawsuit and is unable to provide her biological daughter, who she gave up for adoption, with

an abortion remedy, Matilda tries to get access to an abortion in a country where she could be jailed for it and Susan faces the consequences of a mistimed and perhaps unwanted pregnancy.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the representation of reproductive choice based on the reproductive journeys of the characters in Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks*. The thesis will focus on the journeys of the four characters: Ro the biographer, Mattie the daughter, Susan the wife, and Gin the mender. The literature review will provide an overview of speculative fiction, feminist (science) fiction, and how reproduction is used as a metaphor in fiction. The empirical study will analyze where their journeys start, what decisions they make along the way, and how their choices change or do not change along the way.

## 1. GENDER AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

Before analyzing the novel itself, it is important to understand the different genres that the novel mixes: speculative fiction, feminist fiction, and (science) fiction concerning reproductive rights.

### 1.1 SPECULATIVE FICTION

*Red Clocks* can be viewed as an example of speculative fiction, a genre that has many different definitions. Gill (2013: 72) defines speculative fiction as fiction that conjectures about matters that in the normal course of things could not be. She adds that speculative fiction envisions a different world in which not only events are different but causes operate by logics other than normal ones (Gill 2013: 73). Another definition for it is that speculative fiction “must [be] possible to the universe as we know it”, meaning that a story cannot be called speculative fiction if it includes elements such as dragons or magic, because those cannot exist in the real world (Gill 2013: 74).

Lawler (1980: 1) uses speculative fiction as an umbrella term to refer to science fiction and fantasy that engages with new, future, or alternate worlds. Gomez (1993: 948-949) provides the same definition as Lawler, but she adds that speculative fiction makes manifest more than is currently accepted, such as intergalactic travel, ghosts, telekinesis, or vampires. She states that speculative fiction addresses the human concern with the future, with magic, and with the perpetual. She says that the term refers to works that posit a time and circumstance that does not yet exist (Gomez 1993: 949). Unlike Gomez and Lawler, Ketterer et al (2005: 246) make a distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction. For them science fiction includes books with things in them we cannot yet do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we cannot go to. They say that speculative fiction, unlike science fiction, takes place on the Earth and employs means that are already more or less familiar (Ketterer et al 2005: 246). Harges (1998: 31) defines speculative fiction as works

exploring the ambiguous relationship between reality and fiction through the use of political as well as scientific speculation. She explains that speculative fiction allows us to combine political concerns with creativity (Harges 1998: 31). Hollinger (1993: 272) defines speculative fiction as a group of texts ranging from the most realistic of hard science fiction novels to the most allegorical of experimental fiction. Margaret Atwood describes her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as speculative fiction because the story she tells takes situations that actually exist to their logical conclusion if the cultural and political momentum of contemporary times continues in its present trajectory (Keyfer-Boyd 2006: 139).

In addition to understanding the definition of speculative fiction, it is also important to understand what speculative fiction is useful for. Lawler (1980: 3) states that speculative fiction serves as a source of inspiration for new technology, new science, and new careers in the sciences. He adds that speculative fiction can serve as a cautionary tale or a sort of warning system about the future (Lawler 1980: 3). Zumas' *Red Clocks* fills this function to an extent, warning us about the possible consequences of overturning *Roe v. Wade* and banning abortions. Harges (1993: 955) agrees with Lawler, stating that speculative fiction is especially well suited to fill a didactic function. The novels need not only be warnings. Lawler (1980: 10) adds that speculative fiction makes it possible not only to imagine earthly paradises but also to create them and make them work. In her book, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Sarah Lefanu says that for women specifically, speculative fiction allows the fulfilment of wishes (cited in Gomez 1993: 955).

When we take into consideration the functions that Lawler assigns to speculative fiction, we can see that writing speculative fiction requires some sense of prophetic writing. A novel cannot function as a warning system unless its author is capable of making informed assumptions about where our society might be headed. Therefore, writers of speculative fiction can at times be seen as prophets. Larson (1989: 27) states that after the publication of

*The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood emerged as one of the most provocative writing prophets who analyzed the encounter with modern Western forms of faithlessness that breeds alienation, violence, and injustice. Larson (1989: 34) states that in *The Handmaid's Tale* misogynist, racist theocracy has risen to power and established a terrorist biblical patriarchy in a post-apocalyptic US. Zumas' novel does not take place in a post-apocalyptic universe, but it places its characters into a similarly misogynistic US.

Zumas' *Red Clocks* is in accordance with most of the definitions provided above. It fits best Atwood's definition of speculative fiction, perhaps because the premise of Zumas' *Red Clocks* is very similar to that of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both authors have analyzed the contemporary political scene in the United States and have developed a fictional society based on their observations. Both novels also focus on reproductive rights. Atwood has taken her novel in a post-apocalyptic direction while the United States in Zumas' novel is more similar to the contemporary US.

## **1.2 FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION**

Greene (1990: 82) believes that in the early 1970s a new genre emerged: women's quest fiction. This is a genre about women seeking freedom from traditional roles and writing their own endings instead of following the tradition (Greene 1990: 82). Greene (1990: 83) explains that early feminist critics focused on liberating women from the stereotypes that cultural and literary tradition had assigned to them.

Feminist science fiction, for example, tried to imagine worlds in which gender difference does not lead to discrimination (Roberts 1993: 90). Roberts (1993: 90) states that feminist science fiction uses gender differences to empower women. Roberts adds that feminist science fiction novels are often set in the near future or in worlds that closely resemble the Earth as we know it now (Roberts 1993: 91). Feminist writers emphasize the

importance of interdependence and mercy over independence and justice, as well as the benefit of sexual equality to both men and women (Roberts 1993: 91-92).

Donawerth (1990: 537) states that a crucial difference between the science depicted in men's science fiction and women's science fiction is the participation of women. Women science fiction writers' interest in women scientists seems to be a result of changes in women's careers in the 1960s (Donawerth 1990: 538). Robins (1993: 5) argues that one big difference between the male dominated 'hard' science fiction and the female dominated 'soft' science fiction is the treatment of different sciences. While in the former the focus is on physics and astronomy, the latter also discusses psychology, anthropology, or other disciplines in social sciences and humanities. Roberts (1993: 7) also sees a difference in how the two kinds of science fiction texts imagine magic. In male science fiction magical powers are usually depicted as evil and corrupt, while in feminist science fiction magic is valued and often depicted in parallel to science (Roberts 1993: 7-8).

Two topics are often central in feminist science fiction: refuting and rearranging gender stereotypes and alternative methods of reproduction (Donawerth 1990: 540). Anne Fausto-Sterling (1985: 59-60) refutes the idea that there is a genetic basis for boys' superior mathematics skills and girls' superior verbal abilities. She argues against the idea that there are more male geniuses than female ones because of genetic differences or that hormonal fluctuations inhibit females' ability to function rationally and decisively, and that male aggression is a naturally evolved biological characteristic that accounts for the inevitability of patriarchy and war (Fausto-Sterling 1985: 59-60).

We can see the unequal treatment of the genders in mainstream science fiction. Attebery (2002) points out the inherent sexism of the superman trope. Attebery (2002: 82) states that as a rule of thumb the superman character, who is not always Clark Kent, is "muscular, handsome, keen-eyed, gifted with extraordinary senses and superior intelligence,

able to outfight or outwit any opponent.” Merrick (2003: 242) contradicts the importance of physical superiority that Attebery emphasizes by stating “The superhuman qualities of such characters often lay in their intellectual and scientific superiority, rather than a more traditional masculine physicality.” Attebery (2002: 82) also introduces the female counterpart to superman, the so-called wonder woman character, who is, however, treated as less super than the superman. For example, in *Slan* by Van Vogt Kathleen Layton is given the same powers as the male hero but she is unable to make effective use of them (Attebery 2002: 82). Attebery (2002: 83) offers a possible explanation for the way the wonder woman is portrayed: “Exaggerate the traits that the megatext associates with masculinity and you get the stronger, faster, more aggressive, more inventive superman of SF tradition. Exaggerate the feminine traits and you get someone who erases herself from the story.”

Annas (1978: 147) states that, differently from female science fiction writers, male science fiction writers have generally avoided discussions of sex and gender roles. Feminist science fiction’s attempts to criticize traditional gender stereotypes are illustrated by the use of different gender dynamics in science fiction books. Attebery (2002: 8) contrasts the traditional male-female opposition to the male-female-additional third sex/gender. Attebery (2002: 8) explains that while the traditional male-female dynamic makes it very easy to portray men as the “norm” and women as the “alien”, the addition of a third sex/gender makes it more difficult to make such distinctions. In his list of potential gender dynamics, Attebery (2002: 9) mentions societies where gender is chosen either voluntarily or involuntarily (through metamorphosis) and societies without gender-based division. Roberts (2000: 96) also mentions the possibilities of planets with one gender (all male, all female, or all third gender), or, as Merrick (2003: 242) calls those alien civilizations, ‘hermaphrodites’. Merrick (2003: 242) also posits the possibility of worlds with two or more different genders

that do not subscribe to the male-female stereotypes that we often take for granted, thus avoiding dualistic opposition.

According to Annas (1978: 146), the use of androgyny among female writers became popular after the publication of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Carolyn Heilbrun defines androgyny as a condition "under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned" (cited in Annas 1978: 146). In other words, androgyny suggests a full range of experience open to individuals who may be aggressive as women or tender as men. Barbara Gelphi, in contrast, defines androgyny as "a psychic unity [...] conceived as existing in all individuals" (cited in Annas 1978: 146). Sometimes, in a very different vein, it is also associated with a religious sense of oneness with God, the moment of revelation, and manic ecstasy (Annas 1978: 146). According to Annas (1978: 146), androgyny is an inclusive concept, and that inclusiveness suggests that the central concern of feminist writers lies in modifying gender roles to allow full human development for every individual.

### **1.3 REPRODUCTION IN FICTION**

When we look at the reproductive journeys of the four characters in Zumas' *Red Clocks* there are four questions we need to look at in more detail. Why do women choose/want to have children? Why do women decide to give up their children? Why do some women choose abortion? And how does an unwanted or mistimed pregnancy affect the life of the child and the mother? Each of these questions pertains to one of the four characters in Zumas' novel.

Wesley (2007: 14) states that for many women the desire to have a child comes from the fact that society promotes an idealized picture of motherhood. Many women have children because it is what society, their family, or their spouse expects of them (Wesley 2007: 14). Other women choose to have a child as a sort of cure for loneliness (Wesley 2007:

14). Adams (2016: 635) explains that many married adults believe that children bring maturity, satisfaction, and happiness to their lives. Based on the results of in-depth interviews with women who did not yet have a child, but who wished to have one Adams (2016: 638) has laid down the following reasons for women wanting children: having a child means having a complete family, children bring happiness, they like children, having a child will be beneficial in old age, children are cute, it is natural for a woman to want a child, having a child is a necessary stage in a woman's life, pressure from family or peers and lastly having a child will make sure that their family line continues. Wesley (2007: 15) agrees that some men and women have children as a way of continuing their bloodlines and cultural traditions and she adds that the desire to have a child could have something to do with the desire to live vicariously through that child.

On the other hand, there are women who choose to not have children or, if they do, give them up for adoption. These women are seen by many as unfeminine and lacking something in their lives (Adams 2016: 632). There are many reasons for a woman to choose to give their child up for adoption: sometimes the pregnancy is mistimed and the woman is not ready to be a mother yet, in other cases raising a child is too big of a financial burden, some women decide they are too young to raise a child but also do not want to have an abortion, while some women decide they are too old for a child (Adoption Together n. d.). Some women simply want their children to be raised by a different family so that the child will have more opportunities in life than they can provide (Adoption Together n. d.). Whatever the reason for giving the child away, the birth mother will experience grief and loss that in many cases is difficult to deal with (Adoption Network n. d.). The lack of rituals associated with this form of loss can create a situation where the birth mother is unable to grieve properly and as a result is unable to let go of the child fully (Adoption Network n. d.).

Many women choose to abort the child instead of giving it up for adoption. In a 1987 survey, three-quarters of the responders stated that having a child and going through pregnancy would interfere with their work and school lives (Torres and Forrest 1988: 169). Similarly, Finer et al (2005: 112) reported that 38% of the women in their survey reported that a child would interfere with the woman's education or work. Two-thirds of the responders also stated they could not afford to raise a child and half of them said they did not want to be a single parent (Torres and Forrest 1988: 169). Additionally, Torres and Forrest (1988: 169) state that teenagers were more likely to report they were not mature enough to raise a child. Many women also reported that they chose to have an abortion because they did not want people to know they were sexually active, which, according to Torres and Forrest (1988: 175-176), may reflect the societal disapproval of young or unmarried women being sexually active.

It is also important to ask why a woman would choose to get an abortion rather than to give birth and put the baby up for adoption. Khazan (2019) reports that some women find abortion to be less emotionally painful. Women stated that they were unwilling to part with a child they had already carried to term and said they would feel guilty about placing their child with an adoption agency (Khazan 2019).

It is also important to understand how a mistimed or unwanted pregnancy affects the woman and her child. Wesley (2007: 15) reports that unplanned pregnancies could cause feelings of distress and uncertainty towards their relationship. She adds that according to a study conducted by Hay and Evans in 2006 children born of unwanted or mistimed pregnancies were statistically more likely to show elevations in delinquency (Wesley 2007: 15). Pratasava (2022: para 2) reported that unplanned pregnancies raised the likelihood that the woman would start smoking, using illicit drugs, or develop maternal anxiety or depression. Women facing unintended pregnancies are also more likely to receive less

education (Pratasava 2022: para 2). Pratasava (2022: para 2) also reported that unwanted children are at a higher risk of behavioral issues in adolescence. Gipson et al (2008: 28) also stated that women who reported unwanted pregnancies faced higher levels of depression and that they were more likely to spank or slap their kids.

The above discussion has shown how reproductive choice continues to be a politically divisive subject in different countries. This is why it is something that has been studied in social sciences, to understand women's motivations in both having and not having children. The existing research has shown that women's choices are strongly affected by the socio-cultural context and its norms, but also their economic circumstances and other life choices. Social norms, though, are always important and hence we need literary texts to help us imagine the possible consequences of the political choices made now. This is something that has been done in feminist speculative fiction, like in the novel that will be analyzed in the following section.

## **2. ANALYSIS OF THE REPRODUCTIVE CHOICES OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN *RED CLOCKS***

In the empirical part of the thesis, I will analyze the reproductive journeys of the biographer, the daughter, the mender, and the wife in Leni Zumas' novel *Red Clocks*. I will talk about what each of the characters' reproductive journeys looks like and analyze specific choices they make on their journeys.

Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* is a speculative science fiction novel set in a dystopian future of the United States. The novel follows the lives of four women in a small fishing town in Oregon. Each of the women faces some struggles related to reproduction. Each of the women is first introduced to the reader by an assigned title rather than by their name.

The novel begins with the biographer, whose name is later revealed to be Roberta Stephens but who is generally referred to as Ro. The biographer is followed by the mender who is named Gin Percival. Then comes the daughter, named Matilda Quarles, who is generally referred to as Mattie. The last woman the readers meet is the wife, who is named Susan Korsmo.

The novel begins with the biographer sitting in the waiting room of a fertility clinic. It is revealed that Ro is a single woman in her 40s attempting to have a child through intrauterine insemination, which is the last option available to her. It is later revealed that two years before the events of the novel take place the United States government had granted a fertilized egg the right to life, liberty, and property. As a result, abortion and in vitro fertilization (IVF) were outlawed because the embryo has the right to life, and it cannot give its consent to being moved into the uterus. A few months after the banning of abortion and IVF another law is passed which makes it illegal for single people to adopt children. During her final attempt at intrauterine fertilization, Ro goes to the mender for fertility advice.

The mender is seen by most of the town as a hippie who lives in the forest and rarely shows her face in society. She is a doctor in some ways. She provides people with natural

remedies for their ailments, and she gives Ro advice on increasing her fertility and chances of pregnancy. She is revealed to also help women who are seeking illegal abortions in the early weeks of pregnancy. The mender is later revealed to be the biological mother of Mattie, the daughter, whom she gave up for adoption right after giving birth.

The daughter is still in high school. She is a gifted student and is revealed to be the biographer's star student. In the first chapter narrated by her, she has sex with a boy from school whom she really likes. When she finds out she is pregnant she quickly decides that she needs to have an abortion. She seeks help from the mender but is unable to get it. She attempts to travel to Canada to have an abortion but is stopped at the border and denied entrance. Eventually, she finds an illegal abortion clinic in the USA and manages to get the biographer to drive her there and back.

The wife's reproductive journey does not revolve around the question of whether to have children or not but rather around the complications of getting married and having children at a young age. She is in a troubled marriage, her husband refuses to go to marriage counseling with her and she does not want to leave him because she is afraid of the emotional toll that growing up in a broken family can have on her children.

Ro wants to have children, Mattie does not. Gin Percival wants to help women in their reproductive journeys and Susan wants to get out of her marriage but feels stuck because of her children. They are all tied together by the fact that each of them is struggling with reproduction in some form or another.

## **2.1 THE BIOGRAPHER**

Ro teaches high school history. In addition to teaching, Ro is also writing a biography about Eivor Minervudottir, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century polar explorer. Ro does not have much of a social life. She is somewhat close to Didier, a French teacher in Ro's school, and his wife Susan. Ro's closest friend is Penny, the English teacher in Ro's school who writes romance books in

her spare time. Her social circle is limited to her coworkers and their spouses. Her lack of social life can be explained by the fact that Ro spends most of her free time working on Minervudottir's biography and on her attempts to have a child.

The biographer's reproductive journey is rather long and complicated. At the center of that complicated journey is her deep-rooted desire to have a child. Ro has decided to stay single; she is not looking for a relationship and that makes having a child considerably more difficult for her. IVF procedures which she could previously have used to have a child have been outlawed after the acceptance of the Parenthood Amendment. Another law called Every Child Needs Two has made it illegal for single parents to adopt children in an effort to "restore dignity, strength, and prosperity to American families" (Zumas 2018: 32). Ro is left with one option, intrauterine insemination, which is not as effective as IVF but is still incredibly expensive. Eventually, Ro searches for fertility help from the mender.

When her gynecologist tells her that she has been diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome as a result of which the probability of her getting pregnant is incredibly low and thus there is no point in her going through another round of intrauterine insemination, Ro seems to give up on life. Then she finds out that Matilda, the daughter, is pregnant and plans to have an abortion. She begins to wonder whether Matilda could give her the child instead of getting an abortion. She wonders if asking Matilda to go through a pregnancy that is causing her obvious emotional grief would be inappropriate. Although Ro desperately wants to ask Mattie for her child, she eventually decides to help her get an abortion. There are four key phases in Ro's reproductive journey that I will talk about in greater detail: her original desire to have a child, her seeking fertility help from the mender, her mental state when she finds out about Matilda's pregnancy, and lastly, her decision to help Matilda get an abortion.

Women in general want to have children for many reasons. There is no clear answer in the case of Ro either. Wesley (2007: 14) explains that many women have children because that is what society expects of women. Ro reflects on this as well:

But why does she want them, really? Because Susan has them? Because the Salem bookstore manager has them? Because she always vaguely assumed she would have them herself? Or does the desire come from some creaturely place, pre-civilized, some biological throb that floods her bloodways with the message *Make more of yourself!* /.../ The throb simply wants another human machine that can, in turn, make another. (Zumas 2018: 89-90)

She also wonders whether her desire to have a child is just an attempt to recreate the family she used to have with her mother, father, and brother (Zumas 2018: 240). Her brother and mother have both died and her father whom she does not visit much lives in Florida.

Wesley (2007: 14) also states that to some women having a child means the end of loneliness. This idea is also explored in the book, not by Ro, but by her therapist who asks her if her campaign to have a child might be a defense against the pain of being alone (Zumas 2018: 201). Although Ro denies this, it is still something we have to take into consideration.

When we look at Ro's desire to have a child as a potential defense against loneliness then we also have to talk about her brother. Ro's parts of the novel are littered with references to her brother, how much she loved him, how much she misses him, and his drug addiction. Her brother, Archie, was Ro's favorite person and she wants to name her child after him if she ever has one (Zumas 2018: 239-240). Perhaps her desire to have a child is not just a remedy against loneliness but an attempt to fill the hole that losing Archie left in her heart.

During what ends up being her last intrauterine insemination cycle Ro also seeks help from the mender, Gin Percival. Most of the town regards Gin as a lunatic or an anti-social witch living in the forest to escape people. This step shows Ro's desperation. This is also noted by the mender who thinks "Deep down she doesn't believe the mender can help, no matter how much she wants to believe it. This is a person unaccustomed to being helped." (Zumas 2018: 44). Although Ro believes that Gin cannot help her, she still seeks for her advice because she wants to try everything before she gives up her desire to have a child.

Ro finds out about Matilda's pregnancy not long after she receives the news that her latest, and last, intrauterine insemination round has failed. Her first response is anger. When Mattie confirms that she is planning to terminate her pregnancy Ro starts crying. Ro has changed from a person who at the beginning of the book criticized the abortion ban into somebody who Matilda fears will give her up to the authorities. Mattie even thinks "This is not the Ro/Miss she loves" and "Who is this monstrous imposter?" (Zumas 2018: 196-197). The desperation to have a child has completely changed Ro as a person. Ro seems to resent the fact that Matilda, who can have a child so easily, is choosing to terminate her pregnancy, when she, who has been trying so hard, will probably never have a child.

Ro's decision to help Matilda get an abortion does not come easily. She spends a lot of time pondering how inappropriate it would be to ask Matilda to go through with her pregnancy and then give the child to her. Eventually, she even shows up at her house to ask her but finds out Matilda has already left for Canada. Ro even admits that some part of her hopes Matilda is apprehended at the border and sent back (Zumas 2018: 222-223). When Matilda has a breakdown in front of her Ro realizes that Matilda is terrified and that asking her for the child would be unethical (Zumas 2018: 298-301).

By the end of the novel Ro has decided that "She wants to stretch her mind wider than "to have one." Wider than "not to have one."" (Zumas 2018: 348). She is finally finding aspirations in life that are not tied to her reproduction. She has broken free from the obsession of having a child.

## **2.2 THE MENDER**

Gin Percival is a high school dropout who has decided to live in a little house in the forest and who provides people with natural remedies for everything but mainly deals with gynecological health. There are two sides to Gin Percival's link to reproduction. First, she

helps women who want to have children and women who want to terminate their pregnancies. Second, she has had a child herself and has chosen to give it up for adoption.

Her decision to go through with her pregnancy is interesting since at the time she could have chosen to terminate it. Abortions were legal then, but she chose to go through with her pregnancy saying that “[she] wanted to know how it felt to grow a human, with her own blood and minerals, in her own red clock. Grow but not keep.” (Zumas 2018: 158).

Mary-Joan Gerson has argued that early childhood experiences have an impact on a woman’s reproductive choices and that being cared for by one’s mother might make women more interested in having a child (cited in Wesley 2007: 16). This theory can help us understand the mender’s decision as she did not have the best mother. Perhaps she decided to give her child up for adoption because she felt that like her mother, she would not make a good parent. Even though her aunt encouraged her to have a termination she chose to go through with her pregnancy. One reason for giving kids up for adoption is the fact the mother is just not ready to raise a child or cannot handle it financially. Both reasons can pertain to the mender as she was young when she got pregnant, and she did not have a stable stream of income. Her decision to give her child up for adoption might have been an attempt at giving her child a better life than she had, as she grew up in financial difficulties with an emotionally distant, drug-addicted mother. She also was not in a stable relationship at the time and would have probably been a single mother.

According to the Adoption Network (n.d.), the grief of letting go of a child can be difficult to get over as there are no rituals to help the mother. In the novel, it seems that Gin Percival has been unable to let go of her child. “[She] Walks home from the library the long way, past the school. /.../ Last week she stood here an hour until the last child came out and the doors stopped; but the girl she was waiting for did not appear.” (Zumas 2018: 40) She is still going out of her way just to see her daughter, to check up on her and feel like she is

somehow still a part of her life. This lingering connection to Matilda, her daughter, later negatively affects Matilda as Gin does not provide her with an abortion remedy right away but asks her to come back later. Before she can help Matilda Gin is apprehended by the police and prosecuted.

### **2.3 THE DAUGHTER**

Matilda Quarles is a teenager attending high school. She is intelligent, kind, and likeable. She sometimes babysits for Susan and Didier and is Ro's star student in history. Matilda was raised by adoptive parents and, although she does not know this, her biological mother is Gin Percival, the mender. In the novel, Matilda gets pregnant after her first sexual encounter and is faced with the decision of whether to keep the child or give it up for adoption.

She makes her decision instantly when she finds out about her pregnancy. "She doesn't weep or hyperventilate or text Ash a photo of the plus sign blazing on the stick. /.../ The witch has a treatment, if it's early enough. And she doesn't charge money." (Zumas 2018: 100) She decides to have an abortion right away and does not consider keeping the child. This decision may be affected by the fact she herself was adopted. There are many instances in the book where Matilda wonders about her biological mother, who she was, what she was like, and most importantly why she gave her away. She fantasizes about the possibility of finding her mother or her mother finding her. She wonders why her mother chose to spend nine months carrying her if she was not going to keep her. It is possible that her decision to have an abortion came so fast because she does not want to put her future child in the same position that she is in. She even says, "She doesn't want the kid to wonder why he wasn't kept" (Zumas 2018: 121).

Matilda does go to see the mender, but she is not given a remedy for the abortion right away and the mender is arrested for medical malpractice before she can help Matilda.

Matilda's next plan is to attempt to cross the border to go to Canada. She creates a plan, invents a friend in Canada that she is visiting, and prepares some documents to prove this. She is stopped at the border and sent back to Oregon. She fails at having an abortion again.

After this Matilda considers her options: "Is the failure of this trip a sign? She has tried twice now. Maybe she should just stay pregnant." (Zumas 2018: 247). Ultimately, she does not want to keep the child: "She doesn't want to skip the Math academy. /.../ Or to push it out. She doesn't want to wonder; and she would. The kid too – *Why wasn't I kept? Was his mother too young? Too old? Too hot? Too cold?*" (Zumas 2018: 247). So, she decides to find an illegal termination house in the US and, with the help of Ro who drives her there, she is finally able to have an abortion.

The biggest reason why Matilda chooses to have an abortion seems to be the fact she was adopted and has always wondered why her birth mother gave her away. She does not want to put her child in that position. Finer et al (2005: 112) report that many women choose to have an abortion because having a child would affect their work life or education. This applies to Matilda as well. When she finds out about her pregnancy, she immediately starts thinking about how it would affect her education. When she finds out her mathematics teacher has nominated her for a program called 'Math Academy' she thinks about how pregnant she would be by then. Her education and future opportunities would suffer since attending the Math Academy would look good on college applications.

Torres and Forrest (1988: 175-176) report that especially young and unmarried women may choose to terminate a pregnancy because they do not want people to know they are sexually active. As Matilda chooses not to ask her mother's advice on this issue, it is possible that this is the case for her as well. She also does not tell her best friend Ash about her pregnancy right away. Although the opinion of others is not the most important reason for her decision, it is still likely that this affected her decision in some way.

## 2.4 THE WIFE

Susan Korsmo is a stay-at-home mother of two children. She is married to Didier and is friends with Ro. She had children at a young age and her education was impacted by it as she had to drop out of law school to raise her child. Her first pregnancy was unplanned and although the child does not seem to be completely unwanted, she is certainly mistimed. Susan's reproductive journey is about how having unplanned children change a person's life.

Wesley (2007: 15) reports that an unplanned pregnancy can cause feelings of uncertainty and distress towards a relationship. This distress is evident in Susan's life. Her relationship with her husband has been in a downward spiral for a while. Her husband is dismissive and distant, he does not support his wife when she is parenting their children and he refuses to even consider going to marriage counseling when Susan asks him to go with her. Susan wants to end the marriage but as she puts it, she is "too chickenshit to leave first" (Zumas 2018: 232). So instead of leaving she decides to cheat on her husband with one of his coworkers and, although Brian is not interested in sleeping with her, the decision is still significant in Susan's journey. Her refusal to leave her husband is not entirely selfish, as she fears the impact that a broken family will have on her children as they grow up. But for a long time, she fails to consider the effect that her staying in a relationship that makes her miserable is having on her children.

Pratasava (2022: para 2) states that women faced with unwanted or unplanned pregnancies are more likely to drop out of school and leave their education unfinished or to simply get less education because they do not pursue a college degree. Susan dropped out of law school when she got pregnant, she gave her education up for her husband and children, and although her financial life was not really impacted by that decision, since her parents had money and they gave her a house, her mental health certainly took a hit.

By the end of the novel, Susan decides to finally take matters into her own hands and ask Didier for a separation. She stops being the wife and frees herself from the marriage she has compared to a dying animal on the side of the road, black and burnt but still trying. Her freedom is symbolized by the ending of her last chapter:

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 gifts of flower and bone. (...) Bright minerals. Powdered feathers. Ancient shells. (...) She keeps tasting. The soil is bark and needle and flecks of brain, little animal burnt and dead. Goodbye, shipwrecks. Goodbye, house. Goodbye, wife. (Zumas 2018: 326)

She finally does something just because she wants to do it, this is not for anyone but herself, an expression of freedom.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyze the representation of reproductive choice through the journeys of the four main characters in Leni Zumas' novel *Red Clocks*: the biographer, the mender, the daughter, and the wife. In the literature review, an overview of speculative fiction, feminist science fiction, and reproductive choice was given. The empirical part provided an analysis of the reproductive journeys of the four main characters and the decisions they made throughout their journeys.

Speculative fiction can be defined as science fiction and fantasy that takes existing situations to their logical conclusions by analyzing contemporary political and cultural landscapes and functions as a warning system about the future. Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* can be considered speculative fiction as it portrays an alternate world of the contemporary United States and tries to prophesy the potential effects banning abortion and IVF can have on our society. The reproductive choices women face both in real life and in the novel can be summed up in four questions: why women want children, why women give up their children, why women choose to abort their pregnancies, and how mistimed pregnancies affect women.

Throughout the novel, the biographer, Ro, struggles with her desire to have a child. She dedicates everything she has, from her mental health to her money, to her pursuit of a child but by the end of the novel, she is forced to face the fact that she will not be a mother, and she begins to find different aspirations in life. There is no clear reason as to why Ro wanted a child, but the novel provides multiple possible explanations for her relentless pursuit. Her desire for a child could potentially be a way of avoiding loneliness, an attempt to fill the hole her brother's death left in her heart or a response to the societal pressure put on women.

The daughter, Matilda, struggles to access an abortion, and through her journey, we learn why she does not want a child. Matilda was adopted and has spent most of her life

wondering why her mother gave her up and if she will ever find her. She does not want to give birth to a child she cannot raise, so she chooses to have an abortion instead. Additionally, having a child would impact her education, which is a common reason for women seeking abortion.

The mender, Gin, chose to give birth to her child and then put her up for adoption, which impacted her mental health. She cannot really let go of the child since she lives in the same town as her biological daughter and continues to “visit” her occasionally, staring at her as she leaves school. Her experience supports the idea that to some women, giving a child up for adoption can be more emotionally difficult than abortion. The mender reveals that she wanted to know what it felt like to grow a child. However, it is likely she felt that she could not keep the baby due to her societal standing and economic situation, which is a common reason for choosing adoption.

The wife, Susan, spends most of the novel in a loveless marriage because she fears the effect a broken marriage could have on her children. By the end of the novel, she decides to separate from her husband and reclaim the life she left behind when she first became pregnant. Susan’s reproductive journey is about the effect her mistimed pregnancy had on her life, education, and mental health, which is best shown through her broken marriage.

This thesis analyzed the reproductive choice journeys of the four main characters in Leni Zumas’ *Red Clocks*. The analysis showed that fiction can indeed help us see the complexity of human experiences behind political slogans for and against abortion. *Red Clocks* could be further analyzed as an example of modern speculative fiction. Additionally, it would be interesting to see an analysis of the role the male characters play in the novel.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Annabel Bremen**

**Representation of Reproductive Choice in Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks***

**Reproduktiivsete valikute kujutamine Leni Zumas' romaanis „Red Clocks“**

Bakalaurusetöö

2023

Lehekülgede arv: 30

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Analüüs näitas, et Ro tahab last saada, aga ta on üksik naine ning romaanis kujutatud Ameerikas on *in vitro* viljastamine keelatud ning üksikvanematele ei ole lapsendamine lubatud. Üks võimalik seletus tema lapsesaamise soovile on lootus lapse saamisega täita auku, mille tema ellu jättis ta venna surm. Matilda tahab teha aborti riigis, kus abort on keelustatud. Ta tahab aborti teha, kuna on ise adopteeritud laps ning ta ei taha, et laps, kelle ta sünnitaks, peaks kogu oma elu mõtlema, miks ta bioloogiline ema teda endale ei jätnud. Gin otsustas lapse sünnitada, aga teda mitte endale jätta. Ta tahtis teada, mis tunne on last kanda, kuid finantspõhjustel ei saanud ta last kasvatada. Susan on veetnud suurema osa oma elust ilma armastuseta abielus ja tegeleb tagajärgedega, mis on tekkinud vale ajastusega rasedusest.

Märksõnad: ulmekirjandus, reproduktiivne valik, feministlik ulmekirjandus

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