

THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
ABDERRAHMANE MIRA UNIVERSITY OF BEJAIA
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



**Women and the Abortion Controversy in Joyce Carol
Oates's *A Book of American Martyrs* (2017)**

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfilment of
the Requirement for an **M.A. Degree in English Literature and Civilization**

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Academic Year: 2019 / 2020

Abstract

The present research work examines the wide-ranging impact of the abortion controversy on American women in Joyce Carol Oates's *A Book of American Martyrs* through the lens of the feminist theory. This study aims to show the destructive outcomes of extreme devotion to the abortion cause and its damaging effects on the female characters in the novel. The results reveal that women are the first victims of the conflict over abortion. The first generation female characters are doomed to subordination and subjugation whatever their political ideology, religion, and social status is. Oates places hope in the second generation female characters and shows that women may experience all sorts of oppression and marginalization, but there is always room for revolt, change making, and subsequently liberation.

Key Words: *A Book of American Martyrs*, abortion controversy, patriarchy, oppression, struggle.

Dedication

To my dear parents for their ultimate support and precious prayers

To the ones who never left my side, my cherished sisters Sarah, Lucinda, and Sandra

To my beloved friends Dounia, Kenza and Chahinez for their unconditional love and care

Acknowledgements

From the bottom of my heart, I shall express my sincere gratitude to the Almighty God for His guidance and enlightenment

I shall express special thanks for my supervisor Dr. Nouara Touche Karouni for her thoughtful comments, indispensable corrections, and overall insights

A special gratitude extends to all the teachers who enlightened me with their knowledge throughout my learning experience

I owe a debt of gratitude to all my family members for the heartwarming encouragement and support they have always provided me with

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General Introduction

General Introduction

A century after American women gained the right to vote, there have been vast improvements in their status and an undeniable progress towards equality of the sexes in the American society. Yet, gender inequalities still exist and the perception that women are intrinsically inferior or different to men remains a common belief in a society deeply rooted in conservative values.

In her fiction, Joyce Carol Oates explores the living conditions of her own age and particularly concerns herself with women's experiences in the midst of a male-based society. Oates's canon comprises a large set of political, social, and historical occurrences. For instance, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) explores the issue of social class in the United States and the atmosphere of the Second World War and Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War are all incorporated into the plot of *Because It Is Bitter, Because It Is My Heart* (1990). In addition, her most recent work, *Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars* (2020), addresses the issue of cultural identity and racism in contemporary America at a time when protests over the killing of George Floyd have erupted all across America. As for *A Book of American Martyrs* (2017), it invites the reader to look into the ways the abortion controversy impacts American women. Owing to their androcentric milieu, female characters in the novel endure oppression, alienation, and subjugation.

Oates's role as a feminist consists not in idealizing female figures but rather in warning and informing about the hostility against women and the harms that may be exercised on them. Likewise, female characters in *A Book of American Martyrs* are victims of subordination and male chauvinism. Though socially and ideologically different, Oates puts

her female characters on the same scale when it comes to their status as women in a phallogentric environment.

Oates's publication of the novel came amidst a blood boiling moment when tension and violence between the Pro-Choice and Pro-Life camps grew greater. In fact, the different perceptions regarding abortion gave birth to two distinct standpoints which unceasingly strive for recognition from the legal authorities. On the one hand, the abortion defenders, best known as Pro-Choice, put forward women's full freedom to control their reproductive rights as they are the sole actors of their own lives. On the other hand, the anti-abortion extremists, the so-called Pro-Life, prioritize the fetal life over the woman's selfishness. In her novel, Oates creates two male characters as representations of the two said ideologies. As the title indicates, the male characters are celebrated martyrs and heroes of their causes. In contrast, female characters are the ones to pay for this martyrdom.

Joyce Carol Oates has emerged as one of the most distinguished and prolific writers in America. The towering success and uniqueness of her works owe to her versatility and audacity to tackle the most sensitive, probably the most tabooed, concerns of modern society. Her oeuvres about women, femininity and feminism may displease a broad spectrum of readers as her representation of women does not promise triumphant and idealized images which, these readers think, may act against their emancipation. Her canon is in characterization what may be called "feminist dystopian fiction" which acts as cautionary tales against society's established orders. In this respect, Alter says: "they're in a way how-to books, or what-would-I-do books, supposing this happened to me, what would I do?" This is how Margaret Atwood describes this kind of writing which, in fact, was warmly embraced with the publication of her masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

As a committed wordsmith, Oates feels concerned about society's most common preoccupations and subsequently suggests possible solutions. Women's oppression in her writings is highlighted in a diversity of ways. Her attention has recently turned into the abortion conflict in America with the publication of *A Book of American Martyrs* (2017). Through this literary work, the writer attempts to make the battle over abortion known to the public. More importantly, she introduces the reader to two different worlds, pro-choice and pro-life, in an attempt to equally represent and voice these ideological choices. Hence, this multitude of perspectives may break prejudices and stereotypes about the Other and give more room to mutual respect and tolerance.

Oates's work received considerable attention in the research literature. Significant works include Ellen Friedman's article "Feminism, Masculinity, and Nation in Joyce Carol Oates's fiction". The latter explores the evolution of male characters in Oates's fiction and their role in serving feminist purposes. She argues that Oates's 1965 book, *At the Seminary*, strengthens traditional masculinity at the expense of female figures. The seminary in this context is exclusively a male-based domain, and despite some female attempts to defy gender roles, hegemonic masculinity triumphs at the end.

In later years, Oates's works did allow some elasticity in gender roles. For instance, *Faithless*, a work from her 2011 collection, registers some changes in hegemonic masculinity. The mother in *Faithless* is oppressed by her husband who imprisons her in his farm and later murders her. The disappearance of an essential element of the family brings about disunion in the traditional family. Unlike their mother, the two daughters defy and resist their father's decisions and choices for them. This change owes not only to the disappearance of the mother, but also to the time span of the story, the 1980s. Ellen Friedman views that Oates brilliantly prepares the ground with peculiar heed for the fading of the father. At first, he is the leading figure of the narrative, yet his image fades progressively so that his death is barely

noticeable. The narrative shifts from hegemonic masculinity to feminine takeover. Friedman notes that, by pushing the father to the margin or out of the narrative, the writer suggests a radical reformulation of classic US fiction which is characteristically father-driven (2-4).

Another relevant work for our study is Joanne Creighton's article "Unliberated Women in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction" in which he argues that emotional release is a vehicle to true liberation in Oates's fiction. He asserts that Elena of *Do With Me What You Will* (1973) is the only female character who dares to lose control over her emotions and thus liberate herself through love. Other characters, Nada of *Expensive People* (1968) and Loretta of *Them* (1969), have mastered the art of self-sufficiency which impedes them from genuine feeling and subsequently emotional release which promises selfhood.

Frightened by a childhood kidnapping experience, Elena withdraws from life experiences and retains an over-exaggerated passivity. Her mother describes her as a peaceful statue disconnected from the aggression of the world, and her husband is attracted to her ethereal quality. Notwithstanding, no one is interested in knowing the reason behind her disconnection of the world. Self-awakening occurs at the moment she meets with Jack, a stranger. Initially, she keeps on her state of passivity, but a permanent change takes place when she experiences orgasm for the first time. This new relationship offers her a new vision of life and permits her self-determinism that she was incapable of before. According to Creighton, Oates, in this case, confirms that fulfillment is only possible when a man and a woman normalize their biological and emotional drives. It is only when they permit loss of control that they have an opportunity to liberate the true self. Creighton goes on to add that, Elena's case is the first successful liberation through love in Oates's fiction (2-4).

Oates's feminism is recurrently questioned on the basis that women are depicted in a negative light. For instance, Christine Atkins in an article for *Women's Studies: An*

Interdisciplinary Journal, argues that Oates's narratives recurrently confine girls in situations of rape. Nevertheless, Tanya Horeck in her article, "Lost Girls: The fiction of Joyce Carol Oates", asserts that "her exploration of archetypal narratives of masculinity and femininity is in fact deeply valuable to a feminist analysis of the politics of rape and the formation of female subjectivity". For Horeck, the fate of women, Oates represents, is foreshadowed from the first lines and is doomed to demise as her writings are true representations of reality. While some feminist favor triumphant resistance, Oates does not cloud the issue with an alternate reality.

The protagonist of *Black Water* (1992), Kelly Kelleher, is a victim of violence and betrayal. The story is about the scandalous relationship between Mary Jo and Senator Ted Kennedy who, after the car drowns in Chappaquiddick, uses his lover to lift up from the car in order for his honor to be saved. Yet, the female protagonist desperately remains hopeful that her lover would bring help and save her. In recounting the childhood and adulthood memories of the victim, Oates shoes the destructive force of certain myths of femininity and masculinity. Kelly Kelleher represents the archetype of the American woman who entails the ideals of femininity popular to American culture. Horeck affirms that *Black Water* is a treatise about the ways women are duped and misled by the myths of heterosexual love and romance (3-6).

In the same vein, Marilyn Wesley in her work, "Reverence, Rape, Resistance: Joyce Carol Oates and Feminist Film Theory", explores Oates's short story *The Girl* (1974) which employs film techniques as a representation of women's exploitation in film industry. *The Girl* is the story of a sixteen-year-old girl who, because of her strive for recognition, becomes the star of a movie in which she is literally annihilated. The movie includes a rape scene of the young girl by a gang of boys. While Greg Johnson considers the rape scene as a symbol of the disenfranchisement of women, Wesley asserts that the story is more about the account of the

filming of a rape than it is about the rape itself. The film critic Molly Haskell notes that the treatment of woman as art object and idealized icon is after all the major principle of the aesthetic of film. Indeed, it is this fulfillment that the girl looks forward to achieve through her participation in the movie. The subjugation of the girl in the movie fulfills the aim of creating a dominating male symbol. Through the eyes of the rapists, the girl is seen as a sexual object that brings about group rape. Wesley confirms that the paramount of the male gaze does not only engender the girl's physical obliteration but also leads to her psychological annihilation (3-8).

Another concern in Oates's depiction of women's condition in society is explored by Pamela Smiley. Her article, "Incest, Roman Catholicism and Joyce Carol Oates", lays focus on the writer's association of incest to Roman Catholicism. The novelist uses incest to display the violence of modern society. Her female characters invite victimization through their vulnerability and minimal control over their lives. Smiley claims that a woman in Oates's terms is doomed to victimization regardless of her social or intellectual profile. A sexual and violent man and a dependent and powerless woman is the typical description of Oates's couples. Ironically, however, the female incest victim is furious with women but sympathetic to men; this is systematically linked to her weakened self-esteem which prompts the belief that she deserves such an abuse and consequently does not react against it. This continuous victimization results in various annihilative forms such as drug addiction, eating disorders, and suicide attempts. Additionally, Smiley writes that in Oates's sense, incest is a law of cultural misogyny and violence inherited from the monastic propaganda canonized by the Church Fathers.

The Virgin in the Rose Bower (2010), a gothic mystery trilogy, is an instance of incest in a Roman Catholic context. The writer considers this work "uniquely American" whose purpose is the exhibition of the "historically authentic crimes against women, children and the

poor". Smiley remarks that incest occurs commonly in the absence of a strong maternal figure, as is the case with Karen of *With Shuddering Fall* (1964) who prematurely feels concerned and responsible for her father. Seemingly, the relationship between Karen and Hertz is that of a child and a father. Yet, the intensity of their bond suggests something else. As Smiley defines it, incest is the premature initiation of a child to sexuality by a caretaker, a father in the case of Karen. The latter is imperatively pushed to sexuality by her patriarch, with a man who seems to be his double. Progressively, Smiley notes that Karen becomes dependent to violent sexuality and sees all relationships with men in terms of sexuality. She confirms that incest does not introduce the child to sexuality so much as to power hierarchies. If one is a woman, one does not have power over the body (Smiley 2-11).

Oates's commitment to women's issues extends to her 2017 novel, *A Book of American Martyrs* which explores the abortion debate in America and its far-reaching consequences on American women. The novel has been in most part explored by media web which offer only a general insight of the book but not a deepened analysis. In a *Los Angeles* review, Steph Cha asserts that the novel's publication coincided with the most divisive regime change in the history of recent America. Furthermore, she acknowledges the novel's versatility as it explores many issues relative to American culture. Though Oates is an abortion supporter, the narrative "does not end up falling on that side of the spectrum". Moreover, Cha relates the novel's success to its rejection of dehumanizing or satirizing anyone; its empathy extends to all characters.

In the same respect, Erica Wagner asserts that the writer avoids condescension in presenting her characters. However disadvantaged a character might be, there is a full human being behind his/her eyes. Additionally, she notes that the period between 1993 and 2015 has registered 11 murders and 26 killing attempts due to anti-abortion violence. A fact that may have pushed Joyce Carol Oates to turn her gaze to the abortion conflict in its American

context. Wagner describes the novel as gripping and full of unexpected twists with a heartfelt honesty. She eventually comments on the novel as a reminder that “we must all strive to see as best we can through each other’s eyes”.

As mentioned above, Joyce Carol Oates has long concerned herself with issues relative to women’s oppression, victimization, and dependency. Her work offered feminist theorists and scholars a wide range of literary material which acts as an indicator of women’s position within a phallogentric society, specifically in American society. Indeed her works have been extensively approached from a feminist light. Yet, up to my knowledge, none of these studies centered its interest on exploring *A Book of American Martyrs* from a feminist lens. Furthermore, being recently published, this novel is only slightly explored. As such, my task in this research is to fill this gap in research and study *A Book of American Martyrs* as a feminist narrative.

My research work aims at exploring the impact of the abortion issue on American women. Through the study of female characters, it attempts to show how women, pro-life or pro-choice, are doomed to breakdown and subordination. Moreover, it will try to spotlight men’s chauvinism in American society and its decisive out-turn. Eventually, the study will examine the possibility of women to transcend subjugation and achieve liberation.

Throughout this study, I will rely on the feminist literary theory by putting a focus on Simon De Beauvoir’s concept of Otherness and the feminist consciousness-raising approach to examine the abortion controversy in America and its far-reaching consequence on the female characters in the novel. The selection of this pertinent method helps show the ways in which women are treated as subordinate according to patriarchal standards and how men, pro-life or pro-choice, emerge victorious and fulfill their individuality. Additionally, through this

approach I will try to demonstrate that women may achieve transcendence and emerge victorious from the submissive social system.

In terms of structure, this paper will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will introduce the American writer Joyce Carol Oates in addition to some references to her literary oeuvres. Then, it will provide the plot summary of the book under study to enhance the reader's understanding of the upcoming analysis. Lastly, it will review the history of the abortion issue in its American context. The second chapter will introduce the feminist thought along with its evolution, brands, and influence on women's reproductive rights. Thereafter, it will shed light on feminist literary criticism with an emphasis on Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Otherness and feminist consciousness-raising approach. Then, it will undertake the analysis of female characters in *A Book of American Martyrs* in accordance to the selected approach.

Chapter One

Chapter One

Biography of Joyce Carol Oates, the Plot Summary of *A Book of American Martyrs*, and an Account on the American Debate on Abortion

Introduction

The present chapter presents some biographical notes about Joyce Carol Oates that hint at the writer's choice of words and stance in her novel, *A Book of American Martyrs*. Thereafter, it will provide an overview of *A Book of American Martyrs* which would offer the reader a thorough understanding of the story. Finally, it reviews the history of abortion in the United States of America. It explains to the reader the interrelated factors that contributed to the making of the abortion debate and thus enables him to better understand the complex and multidimensional nature of this issue.

1. Joyce Carol Oates's Profile and Literary Canon:

Joyce Carol Oates, also known under the pen-names Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly, is one of the most distinguished and versatile American writers. She was born on June 16, 1938, in Lockport, New York, the daughter of a tool-and-die designer and a homemaker. Since childhood, she showed great interest in literature. Her first novel was written at the age of fifteen, but it was considered too depressing for teenagers to be published. She received heavy support from her parents as, at a young age, she was seen a promising writer.

After high school Oates was given a scholarship to Syracuse University where she graduated at the top of her class in 1960. At Wisconsin University, she applied as a graduate student where she met her partner Raymond Joseph Smith. Initially, she taught at the

University of Detroit, but has then moved to Canada to teach at the University of Windsor and later at Princeton University in New Jersey.

Her publications comprise more than 58 novels in addition to a number of short stories, essays, nonfiction, and poetry. Her writings touch most on sensitive subjects such as the sexual, spiritual, and collapse of the intellectual life in modern America. For instance, the writer's first novel, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), deals with the theme of violence and evil; a story of two lovers who discover themselves mortal enemies.

The writer is especially inspired by daily struggles modern American women suffer and fight against such as rape, marital problems, poverty, and harassment which eventually lead them to tragic fates. Nevertheless, she resists the label "feminist", and prefers to be referred to as a writer solely without reference to sex. Unlike radical feminists, Oates does not create female characters that always triumph at the end of the narrative; instead, she brings to light the voices of unfulfilled, frustrated and trapped women in a time when they still are victims of patriarchy. By so doing, the writer pushes the reader to reconsider the society he/she lives in and therefore think of solutions. Additionally, she pays attention that her fiction reflects the bitter reality rather than idealizing it.

According to Mary Kathryn Grant, Oates's canon comprises three kinds of female characters: despairing women, destructive women, strong and strenuous women (Singh 1). Therefore, every woman can find herself in the novelist's lines. For instance, *Blonde* is about the story of a young girl, Marilyn Monroe, whose beauty had been exploited in a society that does not cherish real female talents but only limits women to sexuality. Accordingly, on the first occasion, the young girl, Norma Jeane, had been raped by the producer instead of having a movie audition. In a nutshell, the novel shows the lenses through which an intelligent and beautiful woman is seen by a male-dominated society; a victim is all that she can be called.

Indeed, *Blonde* is a tribute to the devastated and unrevealed side of the 20th century American star.

Politically, Oates self-identifies as a liberal; she publically expresses her opposition to US President Donald Trump and his policies. The author is extremely active on social media, specifically Twitter, and is engaged in different public discussions. In her 2018's novel, *Hazards of Time Travel*, she created a dystopian world that would take place 20 years from then. Totalitarianism is at issue and thus fear and instability prevail in the narrative. In short, Oates conveys the idea that everything is political including time. She says: "America is founded upon amnesia – denial" (Kellaway). Deeply impacted by the death of her husband, the best-selling author got into a near suicidal sorrow which was later detailed in the memoir *A Widow's Story*.

Additionally, Oates embraces free-choice and acceptance of the other regardless of his/her own faith or politics. In fact, these tenets are reflected in her 2017's book, *A Book of American Martyrs*. Nearly one thousand pages long, the book tackles a sensitive issue, abortion, which brought about a divided America. Furthermore, the novel discusses many different topics central to the American society, from abortion, women's oppression, sexism, to terrorism. As for religion, the American writer was a Catholic; it was until 2007 that she declared herself atheist. Throughout her career, Oates received a great number of awards and honors of which A National Book Award *Them* (1970), and Pulitzer Prize for fiction

2. Summary of *A Book of American Martyrs*

In 1999 in rural Ohio, Luther Dunphy, the so-called soldier of God, shoots down the abortionist doctor Gus Voorhees and his escort. The murder unavoidably and intimately links the two American families, the Voorheeses and Dunphys, for the rest of their days. The book opens with Luther describing the scene of the murder; he believes that God has carefully

chosen this mission for him. Being an ardent Evangelical, Luther considers abortion as infanticide for which abortionists should be harshly condemned. He claims that a woman's mind during pregnancy is vulnerable and fragile, consequently she is not to be blamed for the decision she makes. Instead, it is the doctor's duty to instruct and advise her to avoid such a mistake. Since the introduction of *Roe v. Wade* to the Supreme Court, both Catholic and Protestant organizations united against the socialist state and federal governments, including the Army of God and Operation Rescue to which Luther belonged. With the use of flashbacks, the author smoothly moves from Luther's present life to past memories. As a teenager, he was plagued by lust and weak to temptation. Felice Sipper, a young female classmate, has been sexually assaulted and raped by Luther Dunphy. This symbolizes Luther's sexist and misogynistic attitude towards women. Semi-literate working class Midwesterner, he was introduced to religion only after he met his wife, Edna Mae. Father of five children, he is more concerned with his duty as a Christian than his duty as a father. He has spent all his life trying to figure out how to be a good servant to the Lord. He eventually ended up understanding that Gus Voorhees was the only path into salvation.

The common point between the murderer and the victim is their vehemence and determination to fulfill their duties. The liberal and idealistic doctor, Gus Voorhees, is well-known for his massive support for women's reproductive rights. Though he had been constantly threatened by the pro-life activists, Gus has always been determined to provide help to women in need of it and to never stop until he is stopped. In Michigan, he is known as being a "male-feminist hero". He even succeeded to convince the state legislators to vote for the establishment of a commission on women's reproductive medical rights.

At an early age, Luther Dunphy exhibited strong hatred for and mistreatment of women. This is especially shown in the interior monologue devoted to the character. The way he sees and treats his wife, Edna Mae, reveals his nature as a sexist. Though he pretends to be

religious man, he cheats on his wife each time opportunity knocks. Being fully taken up by his duties as a Christian, he seldom participates in the upbringing of his own children. Resultantly, all responsibilities fall upon his wife's shoulders. Hence, no room is left for Edna Mae's personal life and ambitions, and she eventually falls in the trap of pill addiction. Jenna's life is no different from Edna's. Because Gus considers that his job should take precedence over his family, Jenna is forcibly the only responsible of the children. After the abortionist's death, his daughter discovered that he had some affairs with other women. Though the two female characters are ideologically different, the writer puts them on the same scale when it comes to marital life.

The reason behind Gus Voorhees's ardent desire to become an abortion provider is his mother's own experience with abortion. Young and unready to beget children, Madelena Kein desperately wanted to terminate her pregnancy. When it proved impossible, she married Gus's father only out of obligation. Nevertheless, she did not allow herself to become a stay-at-home woman; she has always thought that family is a sort of entrapment. As she passionately and intensely holds her principles as an independent woman, she quit her marital life as soon as her son was eight. Luther Dunphy declares that: "always a woman is happy, a baby in her arms," but surprisingly every mother in the novel abandons her children.

In the aftermath of the killing, the story parallels the lives of the two fatherless families and exposes the far-reaching consequences of the murder on them. Both wives, Edna and Jenna, suffer because of their husbands' self-regarding devotion to a cause. Moreover, both families have children of the same age who are victims of their fathers' choices. The writer mainly focuses on and follows the journey of the two eldest daughters of both families, Naomi Voorhees and Dawn Dunphy. Viciously bullied, both female characters bloodily revenge and work hard to change their destinies as daughters of martyrs. They both inherit the same mindset and strength of character from their fathers, differently though. As they grow

up, their anger grows greater towards life and to each other. Naomi starts her career as a documentary filmmaker and creates an archive of her father's life. Her counterpart, Dawn Dunphy, channels her anger into boxing. Poor and ill-educated, Dawn finds success and fame in her boxing career and becomes known as "The Hammer of Jesus".

On March 6th, 2011, Luther Dunphy was sentenced to death by lethal injection. Death penalty is another issue at the core of American society. Most Americans, including Congressmen, oppose such a barbaric sentence as its main targets are the blacks and the poor. Guilty of first-degree homicide, Luther's death has been more painful and botched than the victims'. As Edna Mae puts it: "There are many lives that are ended when a man is a soldier for Christ – not just the abortion doctors' lives." The two men's martyrdom brought about disconnected families embittered by grief. Since Gus's death, bitterness and awkwardness grew between the family members. Jenna has made her own way without her children. On the other hand, Edna Mae cut off all contact with her daughter Dawn since she has started boxing.

In the concluding chapter entitled: "The Consolation of Grief", Oates attempts to heal the wounds and reconcile the two interwoven and opposing positions. In an interview arranged with Dawn, Naomi reveals her identity as the abortionist's daughter. Miraculously, their reaction to this confrontation is unexpectedly peaceful; as if they were in quest of such a joyous relief for a long time. Indeed, Americans' hope for a more peaceful and less divided America resonates in the last chapter.

3. The History of Abortion in America

Abortion is one of America's most prominent controversies; the changing of times as well as the overall circumstances in the country from one epoch to another played a central role in defining Americans' views towards abortion. It is characterized by its dynamic nature and its interchangeable relationship with different spheres, namely the medical and legal. In

order to understand the issue of abortion, one needs to relate it to its different historical alterations. Thus a review of the different stages through which the aforementioned issue went is presented below.

3.1. Women's Struggle for Abortion Access during the 18th and 19th Centuries

The advocacy of as well as the objection to abortion are both generated from American culture and its exceptional way of looking at things. The constant need and demand of women for abortion called at once for its illegalization and legalization, and their attempt to control their reproductive rights has never ceased and has thus impacted on the different legislations related to abortion. It is important to note that, the term "Abortion" had a completely different meaning back in the early centuries in America. It was used only to refer to miscarriages of later pregnancies. What we call now early induced abortion was never referred to as abortion. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a fetus was not regarded as a living entity before quickening; this therefore gave the right to abortion under common law. Surprisingly, not even the Protestant and Catholic churches believed a human being existed prior to ensoulment. As a matter of fact, abortion was not yet a much debated issue.

The legalization of abortion in the early stages of pregnancy gave birth to abortifacients which were deliberately sold all over the country. Historian Leslie Reagan states that by the mid-eighteenth century, these abortifacients became a national commercial practice from which high profits were earned. The 1820s and 1830s, however, witnessed the legal objection to the sale of these products as they proved to be poisonous. Paradoxically, this new law did not condemn people who grew these venomous herbs at home, nor did it punish women for consuming them. This only suggests that the state supported the

commercialization of these abortifacients, and implicitly allowed women to protect their reproductive rights (9-10).

Another alternative of induced abortions comprised practitioners to whom women turned in case abortifacients did not show their efficiency. Midwives and Homeopaths prevailed and held power over the performance of abortions for a long time though they lacked medical facilities and skills. In the late 1830s, Madam Restell became the most prominent practitioner in America; she owned offices all over the country in order to assure abortion to any woman in need of it. Yet, she provided abortions solely to married white native women of upper and middle classes (Ibid).

By the mid-century, the rate of birth among white women decreased considerably, hence the idea of being submerged by the “Other” generated an alarming anxiety among white men. Accordingly, the medical leader against abortion, Dr Horatio R. Storer, asked white American women whether it is better for America to “be filled by your own children or by those of aliens?” he said “this is a question our women must answer; upon their loins depends the future destiny of the nation.”(Reagan 11). Thus, race and class were two crucial factors, among others, that paved the way to the criminalization of abortion.

Until 1857, the medical field was not involved in the practice of abortion; yet this reticence would make its way out sooner. With the widespread presence of competitors mainly known as irregulars, regular physicians called for an urgent participation in the battle over abortion. The legal profession influenced medical thinking in the same way that medicine influenced the legal definitions of crime; each one relied on the other to decide about the legality of abortion (Reagan 5). Hostility towards abortion grew greater as the American Medical Association initiated a campaign against abortion at any stage of pregnancy in 1857. The anti-abortion crusade aimed especially at excluding women from the

medical profession as their role was limited to the concept of Angels in the House. Therefore, they were paddling upstream by involving themselves in what does not suit their fragile nature (Martin 253).

The anti-abortion movement was at its core based on race and gender. The fear of being out-populated by the non-native race and the idea that women could submerge and take power over the outside sphere, mainly politics, threatened American culture. Historians of abortion argue that the nineteenth century abortion politics were tightly linked to gender relations. In this line of argument, Omi and Winant assert that, the anti-abortion campaign was part of the Anglo-Saxon racial project (Beisel and Kay 1-2).

The campaign against abortion faced huge opposition from the feminist movement which, most and foremost, called for the idea of voluntary motherhood. Linda Gordon holds that child-bearing for the nineteenth century feminists was a major form of women's oppression (5). She adds that though nineteenth century feminists advocated voluntary motherhood, they harshly condemned contraceptives for they openly permit promiscuity (7). One reason for which feminists supported voluntary motherhood was the good upbringing of the child after birth. In many cases, unwanted babies may suffer poor cognitive development and subsequently become victims of their parents' unintendedness on delivery.

By 1880, laws passed in every state in the USA criminalizing abortion for the first time in its history; women no longer had their word to say regarding their bodies, and physicians were the only authority that could determine whether an abortion ought to take place or not. Unexpectedly, however, the number of abortions grew greater since its illegalization. According to the National Abortion Federation, the number of illegal abortions before *Roe v. Wade* reached 1.2 million per year. More importantly, the back-alley abortions to which women turned brought about immense health harms and sometimes even death.

3.2. Women and Abortion during the 20th Century

3.2. 1. Abortion before *Roe v. Wade*

In the early years of the 20th century, abortion was criminalized at all stages of pregnancy and there were very few cases in which it was allowed. According to Leslie Reagan, states control of abortion was thoroughly successful during the first decades of the century. Yet, even though it was illegal, women found ways to have it anyway. At the time, there were two categories of physicians, many of them cooperated with the legal authorities so as to ensure their safety and thus avoid prosecution, while others preferred to provide help to the needy women though they risked legal punishment. Indeed, states adopted a new strategy that would limit abortion. Men were forced to marry women whom they impregnated; it was a way to punish them for their illicit sexual behavior. By so doing, however, states neglected other reasons for which women could not want to be mothers. Instead it limited women's will and need of abortion to patriarchal standards (130-131).

Prior to *Roe v. Wade*, the strict framework imposed on abortion was such a heavy burden on American women whose quest for terminating pregnancies was of an urgent need. The aftermath of the Second World War did not provide an adequate atmosphere for begetting children; neither the chaotic world nor desperate women were ready to welcome new mouths to feed. It was primarily the advance of medical treatment that narrowed the scope of abortion. Dorothy McBride and Jennifer Keys claim that, the reason for which most pregnancies were terminated proved to be invalid, in other words, the mother's life was seldom put at risk thanks to improvements of the medical equipments. Therefore, women had no option except self-induced abortions which proved deadly in most cases. Only few doctors ventured to extend the abortion limits beyond therapeutic grounds, and this systematically

extended the number of the victims of mismanaged abortions to 17,000 women during the 1930s (11-12).

The advocacy for abortion intensified each time new restrictions were imposed. The role of organizations is inestimable in promoting and defending women's right of safe access to abortion. Planned Parenthood is among the first organizations that answered women's distress with Margaret Sanger at its head. Since its founding, it led a crusade to raise consciousness about the indispensability of birth control and in 1932 it even redefined the Comstock Act of 1873 which considered contraceptives as obscene materials, and therefore allowed physicians to import and prescribe contraceptives ("Planned Parenthood").

Aware of the alarming and gruesome rate of self-abortions during the Depression era, Dr Edward Keemer, an African American physician, volunteered to use his expertise in minimizing the damages of self-induced abortions. His testimonies showed the horrifying methods with which women attempted to terminate their pregnancies: "some would swallow quinine or turpentine. Others a corrosive potassium permanganate tablet into their vaginas" (Solinger120). Though times have changed, the racial agenda seems extremely faithful to the American way of dealing with things, even with the most sensitive ones. As a matter of fact, Dr Keemer revealed that race was a determining factor in his career as abortionist. The white authorities would be grateful and content if a black woman benefited from an abortion, this favorably means one less black child would be part of the American society. Performing an abortion on white women, however, may even lead to death. In addition to this, Solinger states in her work *Pregnancy and Power*, that women eased financially were less likely to be exposed to self-induced abortion, contrary to poor women who were the first target of botched abortions (122).

Censorship was another means to restrict abortion and give people little knowledge about it. Though some physicians attempted to liberalize and extend the boundaries of abortion through their writings, the state objected to publish such materials, or if published, the editors were charged to delete the passages that advocate legal abortion. This was done primarily out of fear that a feminist movement would rise and take over (Reagan139-140). The Depression decade contributed a great deal in gaining medical sympathy and widening the meaning of therapeutic abortion. In this way, it can be said that access to abortion was less restricted than the preceding years.

Leslie Reagan declared that therapeutic abortions gained medical recognition due to the tough social and economic conditions of the country in the Depression era. Doctors charged to perform abortions were specialized solely in the aforementioned procedure. It is worth noting that married women terminated their pregnancies primarily because they would be deprived of work if they had a husband who could support the family. Furthermore, single women delayed their marriages and performed abortion for the very same reason (132-133).

Once the economic and social crisis of the Depression was thrown away, it was necessary to foist new laws on women's reproductive rights. As one might have noticed, the regulation of abortion was tightly related to the set of conditions under which the nation was living, thus it differs from one epoch to another and from one situation to another. In this regard, historian Rickie Solinger thinks that the period that followed the Second World War to be a misfortune for women seeking abortion and that a pregnant girl outside of marriage was exposed to the society's disrespectful treatment (4). This means that unwed women who sought abortion in the aftermath of the war were subject to scornful abuse and insults and this is basically due to the conservative values to which the American society was intimately attached. Additionally, Solinger states that the 1950s abortion politics benefited from committees established at the level of every hospital; a bench of doctors would meet and

decide whether an abortion should take place, and it could be done only if the woman was diagnosed by two specialists as psychologically unfit to be a mother. Nevertheless, even this slight exception was constantly questioned; many physicians did not believe in such grounds (4).

Apparently physicians did not acknowledge in any case the necessity of abortion. They rather considered it a lack of responsibility from the part of the mother and an immoral act that distorts the woman's femininity. The only condition under which a doctor could permit an abortion was to sterilize the woman at the same time. Records show that between 1941 and 1950, 75% of abortions were accompanied with sterilization (Solinger 5). Undoubtedly, this new strategy held for main objective disturbing women's minds with the thought that they could no longer be mothers, and hence bring down the number of abortions.

In the 1960s, the German measles epidemic along with the dangerous effects of thalidomide on fetuses raised consciousness among the clergy as well as the medical and legal authorities which established the Association for the Study of Abortion (Schoen 9). Shortly afterwards, feminists began to put pressure on legislators and physicians to prompt reform laws. On April 1970, Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed a bill for the legalization of abortion in New York. Some years earlier, Colorado, North Carolina and California were the first states to pass reform bills, and they were later followed by Alaska Hawaii and New York (Shoen 10). By 1973, more than 1,200 women's self-help health groups were formed across the United States. They united to express their dissatisfaction with health care, and their ultimate goal was to gain power and have more control over their health, specifically over their reproductive rights (Francine).

However, a question comes along while examining the feminists' efforts in advocating abortion, are all feminists pro-choice? The answer is no. The anti-abortion

movement has been usually characterized as anti-feminist. Yet, in the mid-1970s, social organizations such as Students for Life and Feminists for Life, identified as pro-woman. The so-called pro-life feminists wanted to reclaim leadership from pro-life organizations, which were purely male-dominated, and simultaneously advocating and privileging motherhood (Abigail 4). In her article, Helen Alvaré, a pro-life feminist, stated that pro-choice activists have always been paradoxical in their convictions and demands; it is a movement concerned with the vulnerable that calls to the right of destroying a human life at its most vulnerable time. She is the founder of Women Speak to Themselves Organization. She attempted to reconcile pro-life and pro-woman agendas. Pro-life women have eventually become some of the major anti-abortion movements' spokespersons.

3.2.2. Introducing *Roe v. Wade* to the Supreme Court

“Despite ongoing divisions within the court and among its observers with respect to this function, modern rights including privacy, interstate travel and voting owe themselves to the judiciary’s willingness to extend beyond the textual limitations of the Constitution” (Lively and Broyles 613). It is clear from this quotation that the judicial branch extends the boundaries of the constitution when necessity calls for it. Before 1973, every state court was charged to regulate laws put at its disposition, and the Supreme Court has not shown any interest in regulating laws reserved to state legislatures, specifically abortion.

However, in 1973, an exception was made at the level of the Supreme Court as abortion laws were no longer restricted to the arena of state legislature. In 1969, a young Texan woman named Norma McCorvey, better known under the pseudonym Jane Roe, sought to put an end to an unwanted pregnancy. At the time, abortion in Texas was only legal if the mother’s health was in danger. After several unsuccessful attempts to get an illegal abortion, she was referred to two Texas attorneys, Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee, who

willed to defy the anti-abortion laws. Shortly afterwards, the two attorneys filed a lawsuit against Henry Wade, the district attorney of Dallas county, Texas. It was for the first time that the legal authority in the United States recognized abortion as a right directly drawn from the Fourteenth Amendment which preserves the citizens' privacy, and the decision was ruled by a majority vote (7-2). Eight years earlier, another case was introduced to the Supreme Court, *Griswold v. Connecticut*; it upheld the right of using contraceptives for married couples, a right that constitutionally protects the citizens' privacy including the choice of begetting children. It was this case that encouraged and inspired some pro-choice activists to defend abortion as a capital need that requires constitutional recognition (McKeever and Davies 306).

Roe v. Wade faced immense criticism. For instance, the two Justices who voted against the aforementioned case, Bryon White and William Rehnquist, did not believe abortion to hold a constitutional dimension, but was rather an issue to be assigned to state legislature and its elected representatives (617). *Roe v. Wade* ruling did not only dissatisfy abortion opponents but also some pro-choice activists because it did not give women access to abortion on demand.

Typical grounds for legalizing abortion comprised the protection of women's privacy which is regarded a fundamental right in the American Constitution, but to what extent is the fetal life concerned with the same right under the same constitution? In fact, this question stirred lot of controversy and opened the door to various distinct interpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment. Some put forward the idea that a fetus is a person and thus his/her right of privacy is preserved under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Others, on the other hand, did not believe a fetus to reach the stage of deserving rights constitutionally protected; therefore an exception could be made only after the fetus can survive outside the womb.

To settle the dispute by mutual concession, the Supreme Court did not make women's access to abortion absolute, that is, it did not allow abortion on demand at all stages of pregnancy. The ruling *Roe v. Wade* states that abortion is put at the women's disposition during the first trimester regardless of the reason, and the state's intervention is absolutely banned at this stage. During the second trimester, abortion is still permitted and this until the end of the trimester. Though the embryo is generally termed a fetus in the fourth month, which means the first moves of the fetus are detected, the Supreme Court's decision still permitted abortion until the end of the second trimester. Over the course of the third trimester, however, the state court has the authority to prohibit abortion; after viability abortion is strictly banned except when the physician deems the mother's life is endangered by the pregnancy.

3. 2. 3. Post-*Roe* Abortion Policy

The abortion issue resisted political settlement, and after the passage of the landmark *Roe v. Wade*, tensions between the conflicting sides became sharper and greater. It was pretty obvious that *Roe v. Wade* could not be thoroughly overturned because of the constitutional dimension it holds. Yet other measures were taken to limit abortion rates. With the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1976, abortion opponents eliminated public funding for abortion procedures and included all types of abortions, even the therapeutic. In this way, women with low incomes were the most affected by the decision, and this systematically invited back self-induced abortions ("Hyde Amendment").

Some time later, the Supreme Court declared that neither states nor the federal government was compelled to provide abortion funding for the poor in two major cases, *Maher v. Roe* in 1977 and *Harris v. McRae* in 1980. In the 1989 case, *Webster v. Reproductive Health Service*, the Supreme Court redefined the trimester framework

established in *Roe v. Wade* and extended the state's authority over abortion. While *Roe* asserted the fetus's viability over the course of the third trimester, *Webster* claimed that a fetus, owing to the advances of medical technology, could be considered viable in a sophisticated neonatal unit prior to the third trimester, and this therefore gave the state the right to show interest in and protect the fetal life (Schoen 12-13).

Abortion imagery is another tactic abortion opponents used in order to influence and manipulate public opinion. The 1984 movie *The Silent Scream* was, in fact, potential and effective in its ability to show the world the horrific side of abortion. With the use of ultrasound, the movie shows an abortion taking place in the uterus, and the procedure is accompanied with the fetus's outcries as a distress signal.

In *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* 1992, the Supreme Court further undermined the physicians' authority to decide on the performance of abortion. Adopting an "undue burden" standard, states now had only to show that the burden imposed on women's performance of abortion was not "undue", that is to say, no barrier is put in the woman's path to perform an abortion of a non-viable fetus. Furthermore, this legal case allowed some abortion barriers that were considered unconstitutional in the previous cases: a twenty-four-hour waiting period, parental consent for minors, state-mandated counseling, and a reporting requirement. Schoen states that according to the Supreme Court, women unconsciously choose to terminate their pregnancies; therefore it was imperative to protect them from their wrong choices. Physicians were also accused of the same thing thus the court was charged to intervene to protect both sides (13).

3.3. Twenty First Century Abortion's Dynamic Agenda: Women's Continuous Crusade for Abortion

Even though “sex education” was no longer a taboo in the early 2000s and was taught nationwide, educational programs made it clear that chastity was the only option outside marriage (Solinger 240). Susan Tyler Hitchcock, author of *Roe v. Wade*, declares that the number of abortions has decreased since the 1980s and the number of abortion providers diminished 11 percent between 1980 and 2000. The pro-lifers cheered that women and doctors turned away from abortion, while others were extremely worried that the back alleys would take over once again (106-107).

After President Clinton's 1990 ban of “partial-birth abortion”, medically called intact dilation and extraction, a procedure used to remove an intact fetus from the uterus in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy, the Supreme Court, in 5-4 vote, declared that laws banning partial-birth abortion without an exception for women's health were unconstitutional. In 2003, however, Congress initiated a national ban without health exception on the basis that this exception is broadly defined. By a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court upheld the congressional ban on “partial-birth abortion” in the 2007 case *Gonzales v. Carhart*. Based on care workers' testimonies that a considerable number of fetuses had been killed by doctors after being born alive, President George W. Bush signed The Born Alive Infants Protection Act in 2002 requiring doctors and hospitals to provide as many efforts as possible to protect the babies' lives (McBride and Keys 68-70). Though the state assured the babies' protection with Bush's 2002 act, the latter did not hinder some doctors to end the lives of born alive infants. Dr Kermit Gosnell was sentenced for life imprisonment after discovering that he was responsible of the death of seven infants and one woman with an overdose of sedatives. McBride and Keys state that for some, crimes committed by doctor Kermit prove that federal law needs stricter measures (70).

In the *New York Times*' article, "Obama Reverses Rules on U.S. Abortion Aid", Peter Baker reports that Obama bewailed the "politicization" of abortion as he expressed his eager to work with Congress and reach agreement by mutual concession. In this regard, President Obama struck down rules that prohibit abortion funding for international family-planning clinics. He said that, "for too long, international family planning assistance has been used as a political wedge issue, the subject of a back-and-forth debate that has served only to divide us. I have no desire to continue this stale and fruitless debate." In fact, Tod Preston, a vice president at Population Action International, believes that Obama's action would help reduce abortion rates and unintended pregnancies owing to the access to family-planning.

In 2001, Mississippi voters turned down an amendment to the state constitution; it proposed that life begins at conception and outlawed all forms of abortion and birth control. Rich Phillip asserts that critics believe that the amendment held for aim outlawing all types of abortion, cases of rape and incest included. Some anti-abortion groups feared that the amendment could be so extreme that the Supreme Court would strengthen *Roe v. Wade*.

In a research conducted by the General Social Survey over the period 1977-2012, questionnaire items show that only 7.2 percent of Americans were purely pro-life, while 31 percent were unmistakably pro-choice favoring legal abortion for any reason (McBride and Keys 254). Politically, views toward abortion vary greatly from one party to another. For Democrats, there is an inclination to legal abortion in all or most cases with a percentage of 91 percent, in contrast to 27 percent of conservative Republicans disfavoring abortion. As far as religious attitudes to abortion are concerned, 51 percent of Catholics, 76 percent of white evangelical Protestants, and 46 percent of black Protestants believe abortion to be morally wrong, in contrast to 45 percent of both mainline Protestants and unaffiliated individuals who do not consider abortion as a moral issue (McBride and Keys 256).

As outlawing abortion proved unattainable, anti-abortion activists shifted from picketing to more violent methods which are, in most cases, deadly. According to Kimberly Hutcherson, abortionists had been the target of over 300 acts of aggressive assaults, and Planned Parenthood clinics were the main objective of anti-abortion extremists. In 2015, Robert Lewis Dear attacked the Colorado Planned Parenthood clinic and killed three persons. The assault coincided with a sharp controversy that irritated both sides of the issue. Six years earlier, 67-year-old George Tiller was killed in the midst of a church in Kansas; he was one of the rare doctors who terminated pregnancies in late terms.

This violence against abortion came amid an intense and decisive political climate. The 2016 presidential elections gave a glimmer of hope for both sides as each one was looking forward to seeing the President who embraces its viewpoints in office. President Donald Trump made it clear from his campaigns that he would overturn *Roe v. Wade* and defund Planned Parenthood, as reported in a Ballotpedia's article, and he even thinks women deserve some sort of punishment for such an act. In 2016, Trump's abortion agenda included nominating pro-life justices to the Supreme Court, defunding Planned Parenthood, and upholding the Hyde Amendment as a permanent law.

Indeed, Trump's plans to restrict abortion had been concretized the moment he stepped to office. The Republican-controlled state legislatures took the measures to defund Planned Parenthood and shut down three of its health centers on June 30, 2017 (Todd). In 2018, Brett Kavanaugh, despite his unpopularity, was nominated to a lifetime seat in the Supreme Court by President Trump in an attempt to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and undermine women's access to safe legal abortion ("Planned Parenthood Action Fund Condemns Senate Vote"). The most recent and extreme law since *Roe v. Wade* is Alabama's 2019 near-total ban on abortion. The law does not make exceptions for cases of rape and incest. In her article, Miriam Berg says that some states take advantage of the spread of COVID-19 to suspend abortion procedures

calling them as non-essential. Moreover, she points out that anti-abortion politicians are not aware of the sensitive and fragile nature of abortion. Even obstetricians and gynecologist do not consider abortion access optional but rather a time-sensitive procedure.

As far as abortion sensitivity is concerned, it is estimated that many women experience abortion-specific post-traumatic stress disorder. A report written by the American Psychological Association shows that some women do suffer significant disorders, including anxiety and depression, after putting an end to their pregnancy. Though it is not possible to identify the extent to which a post-abortion illness is linked to the procedure itself, it is undeniable that women without a history of abortion are less likely to experience mental disorders than women with abortion antecedents (Reardon).

The abortion issue in the United States is not clear-cut and never will be. The implication of medical, religious, political, and above all moral grounds makes it difficult to reach an agreement that would satisfy every part of the debate. After contributing a great deal in legalizing abortion, Norma McCorvey sided with the pro-life groups and marched against abortion. This is a proof that taking a definite stance on such a sensitive issue is delicately knotty.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have introduced the American writer, Joyce Carol Oates, to elucidate the content of the book under study. As the book's content is crucial for the understanding of the upcoming analysis, we have furnished the basic elements of the story to make it accessible to the reader's apprehension. We eventually presented the history of the abortion conflict in the American society; we have traced its roots from the early 18th century until the latest developments. More importantly, we have provided a detailed account of the different forces

involved to render women's bodies a public affair. Lastly, we put forward the wide-ranging effects of the abortion conflict on American women's bodies and souls.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two

American Women and the Abortion Controversy: Analysis of Female Characters in *A*

Book of American Martyrs

Introduction

This chapter introduces the feminist thought and its perception of the abortion conflict in America and the lofty tensions it has created within the movement's leaders. Besides, we will highlight the various ways the abortion battle impacts women, both physically and psychologically. Thereafter, we will introduce feminist literary criticism with an emphasis on Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Otherness and feminist consciousness-raising approach. Then, in accordance to the said approaches, this chapter will dive in Joyce Carol Oates's narrative, *A Book of American Martyrs*, in an attempt to display the harms exercised on American women by the abortion battle and their ability to overcome imposed adversities. More precisely, we will examine female characters with an emphasis on the far-reaching consequences of the abortion conflict on them.

1. An Introduction to Feminism

The understanding and interpretation of literature owe too much to literary theories, without which literary texts would have remained blurred and mysterious. Scholars and philosophers in the field of literary criticism worked their fingers to the bone in order to assure abundant and countless ways of approaching literature. In other terms, the different underlying principles set by scholars open the door to various distinct viewpoints and embrace new creative perceptions of literary materials. Hence, the reader is provided with all the

essential tools with which to decode a literary text whose interpretation has been possibly hindered by textual and contextual complexities.

As one may have noticed, the different approaches to literature may overlap in a diversity of ways, for some of them offer nearly identical analysis. Still, it is undeniable that each approach has its special contribution that makes it distinctive and unique. As a matter of fact, every literary theory comes into light in order either to complete or defy the previous prevailing approaches. In fact, the late 1800s and early 1900s witnessed the emergence of a new perspective of understanding and dealing with literary material; an approach that would prevail in the coming decades.

The feminist approach emerged as a reaction against the prevalent patriarchal agenda and gender norms, and its main concern was to redefine gender roles and break stereotypes about women. Feminists endeavor to prompt gender equality and shed light on marginalized voices trapped by the shackles of a male-dominated society. Feminist theorists invite us to look at the unequal relationship between men and women in another light. In fact, this new thought has changed the way literary texts are viewed and studied, often by reconsidering what was known as mainstream and canonical literature.

Elinor Burkett stresses that feminism refers to the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes and is represented by a variety of institutions committed to work on behalf of women's rights and interests (Encyclopedia Britannica). As in most feminist writings, patriarchy is a key concept in Joyce Carol Oates's work. According to Sue Ellen Case, patriarchy is defined as the system which upraises men to higher positions of power and is regarded as the root of most social problems (64). On the other hand, bell Hooks disclaims the presence of male self-love as men's self-definition relies on submission to patriarchal rules. Moreover, Adrienne Rich claims that the woman's body is the foundation on which

patriarchy is established (Napikoski). In an authoritative male-dominated society, women are subject to oppression, exploitation and subordination. Thus, feminists attempt to eradicate patriarchal authority and give more room to women to exploit their physical and mental faculties. Likewise, Oates looks at the sordid experiences which women face on a daily basis with an intense curiosity and a sympathetic intention to bring them change through her redemptive work. Yet, it is worth noting that the term “feminism” in our study does not exclusively concern the advocacy for women’s rights, it is rather used to refer to women’s awareness of their identity in a male-based society and their subsequent attempts to impose this subordinate selfness.

Burkett traces the origin of feminism as early as the 14th and 15th centuries. She notes that Christine de Pisan was the first French feminist philosopher to challenge the dominant attitudes towards women with an insistent call for female education. It was until the late 16th century that the so-called debate about women reached England. Jane Anger, the first feminist pamphleteer in England, responded to the publication of a set of satiric pieces mocking women with her *Jane Anger, Her Protection for Women* (1589). Furthermore, Burkett notes that feminism never grew as a coherent movement in the Renaissance era; it was until the Enlightenment that women began to ask for liberty and sex equity. Outstanding feminist works of the Enlightenment include Olympe de Gouges’s *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791; “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen”) which declared women not only as men’s equals but their partners. In 1792, Marry Wollstonecraft published her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she suggests that men and women should be given equal opportunities in education, work, and politics (Burkett).

However, feminist activism did not reach the United States until the 1830s. Historian Annelise Orleck declares that U.S feminism developed from a set of movements for equality.

The labor movement and the anti-slavery movement, to mention only a few, were two major roots from which U.S feminism came out. Yet, the founding moment of the movement is considered by many to take place in Seneca Falls New York in 1848 where the Declaration of Sentiments was composed and ratified. The latter declared that men and women are equal in the eyes of God and thus should be given the same rights such as education, divorce, property and vote. American feminism has known influential figures of whom Sojourner Truth who was an orator for women's rights throughout the 1850s, the 60s, and the 70s. Other important feminist activists were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. They fought hard for women's right to vote and even organized civil disobedience campaigns through which women voted illegally before they were granted that right. In fact, these two women crucially changed the law in the 1860s and 1870s (Orleck).

A more global feminism emerged in the late 1900s and 1910s. Though crucial for the suffrage movement, vote for some radical feminists was not the pathway to liberation. The anarchist Emma Goldman insisted that women could reach freedom only by refusing the right to anyone over their body. By copying the English activists, however, the women's suffrage movement in the United States was reignited. Alice Paul, a radical feminist, organized mass demonstrations and confrontations with the police with the help of her forces, the "shock troops". In 1920, American feminism recorded its first major victory with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution (Burkett).

While first-wave feminists were influenced by the abolition movement, the second-wave feminists were inspired by the Civil Rights movement. Women's movement of the 1960s and 70s strove for equality for women and others. Importantly, the Civil Rights movement is known to have materially contributed to women's rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination on the basis of color, race, religion, and eventually on the basis of sex. Whereas first wave feminism comprised mainly middle-class, Western, white

women, the second wave included women of color and from developing nations and was given the label of sisterhood and solidarity. The mid-90s witnessed the emergence of a third wave of feminism which was fashioned chiefly by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. At this stage, feminism has become more global and multi-cultural and most of its activists rejected the label feminist for it is considered limiting and exclusionary. However, the goals of this wave are never made explicit as it rejects standardized objectives (Rampton). Through its evolution and extension, feminism could no longer be considered as a coherent and all-encompassing theory. Though its founding principle of equality and liberty remains fixed, each brand has its own way of reaching the very same goal.

1.1. Brands of Feminism: Liberal, Radical, Marxist, Black, and Psychoanalytic

In their book, *Feminist Thought*, Tong and Botts assert that “feminism is not a monolithic ideology”; it is rather a realm of distinct perspectives and frameworks that approach women’s oppression in a bunch of ways and eventually suggest different solutions. While liberal feminism primarily champions gender justice to undo women’s oppression, radical feminism insists that the patriarchal system must be imperatively and thoroughly ripped out in order for women to achieve full liberation (11-12). On the other hand, Marxist feminism views women as the oppressed members of both patriarchy and capitalism. This stream of feminism calls women to develop an awareness of their oppressed condition and separate themselves from male-identified ideologies which serve the interests of the patriarchal ruling class. Besides, black feminism insists on equal respect for both black men and women in all aspects of life. Black women’s oppression is tripled compared to white women; not only are they oppressed for their female identity but also for their race and class. Freudian feminism, on the other side, is founded on the psychological theories of Id, Ego, and Superego introduced by Sigmund Freud. It stresses the influence of these concepts on men and women with relation to the Oedipus complex, male supremacy and women’s subjugation.

Liberal feminists fundamentally advocate and celebrate personhood, self-fulfillment alike, and rationality. Accordingly, Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* reasoned that unless people exploit autonomously their personhood, they act as less than full human beings. Thus men and women should be given equal opportunities to develop into autonomous persons. Repeatedly, Wollstonecraft confirmed that reason should take precedence over emotion; the ideal woman is the one who liberates herself from the emotional wifely and motherly roles and devotes more room to rationality and self-determination (Tong and Botts 25).

1.2. Feminism and Women's Reproductive Rights

With the passing of time, the feminist thought grew greater and broader. Its perception of women's liberation was at first restricted to civil rights but has then expanded to reproductive rights and gender equity with the second wave feminists. Women understood that oppression was rooted in excluding them from the public sphere as they were considered intellectually inferior to men. As they began to massively join the public realm, they had to deal with another issue relative to their reproductive lives. In other words, many women were confronted with the reality that they are unequal to men in the workplace as long as a pregnancy can interrupt their active life. Childbearing for women was therefore a form of maintaining segregation. As a result, they urgently and necessarily needed a broader and more efficient health care insurance that could guarantee abortion and contraceptive coverage.

Nearly forty years after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, young women, following the steps of their grandmothers, suggested a reformist and liberal agenda while simultaneously other radical feminists sought a more revolutionary program. After the phenomenal success and influence of her work, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan was elected as the first president of the National

Organization for Women in 1966. At first, NOW's members involved both radical and liberal feminists, but it soon proved that the organization's tendency was rather fundamentally liberal as it most and foremost called to women's equality with men. The organization's 1967 Bill of Rights included eight revendications of which women's right to control their reproductive lives and to have access to education with eliminating all discrimination and segregation by sex. However, NOW's list of rights dissatisfied conservative feminists as it demanded and permitted contraceptives and abortion. On the other hand, radical feminists felt marginalized with the exclusion of the right to choose between heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian lifestyles (Tong and Botts 36-37).

Second wave liberal feminism eagerly supported abortion legalization and women's reproductive freedom. They worked hard to change the public perception of abortion as a taboo. More importantly, they raised consciousness of the deadly effects of back-alley abortion that killed thousands of women each year. Lisa Ikemoto holds that reproductive decisions were the pathway to individual autonomy, not only because they implicate the body and person identity, but also because they lead to the participation in the economic and political life. During the second wave period, which lasted from the 1950s until the 1980s, abortion advocates had to face both laws restricting abortion access and medical paternalism. Hence women needed basic health information about their reproduction. With the publication of *Our Bodies Ourselves*, the Boston Women's Health Collective aspired to dispel ignorance about women's bodies and health. Ikemoto argues that the Supreme Court landmark *Roe v. Wade* considerably reflected the premises of liberal feminism. She goes on to add that, though *Roe* was a victory for liberal feminists, the Supreme Court never referred to women's autonomy as a form of equality (8-12). Furthermore, *Roe* did not guarantee abortion on demand as many feminists desired.

Women's decision to terminate a pregnancy is often celebrated and translated as "choice" by the pro-abortion rhetoric. Pro-choice activists reject to call abortion a life-death issue, as pro-lifers name it, but rather a right-choice issue. Feminists, who consist the majority of pro-choice activists, think that a woman's body is so intimate that neither the law nor medicine is allowed to intervene within it. Arguments put forward by pro-choice feminists are usually related to economic, political, and psychological grounds. For them, a woman needs to be psychologically ready to beget children and take full responsibility of them. Second, she should be financially eased to feed another new mouth and provide essential conditions to assure an adequate and fit growth. Additionally, they view a pregnancy as a barrier to achieve political and economic success and thus equality with men.

However, it should be pointed out that not all feminists support abortion legalization, and feminism does not necessarily require that all its activists advocate for certain causes related to women's freedom including abortion. Pro-life feminists associate abortion with violence and discrimination; two criteria that feminism fights against from its start. Hence, pro-choice feminists are considered contradictory in their beliefs and claims. According to the pro-life agenda, it is more logical and practical to provide women with necessary facilities in order for them to become mothers than to let them draw in the emotional and physical wreck of abortion. In this respect, Megan Clancy explains the forsaken realities behind the abortion issue:

There are women who are raped and become pregnant; the problem is that they were raped, not that they are pregnant.

There are women who are starving who become pregnant; the problem is that they are starving, not that they are pregnant.

There are women in abusive relationships who become pregnant; the problem is that they are in abusive relationships, not that they are pregnant.

(“Arguments against Abortion”)

Abortion became officially part of the Women’s Movement in 1967. In 1969, Betty Friedan and other abortion-rights activists established the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, today known as NARAL Pro-Choice America, in order to promote reproductive freedom and inform the public about reproductive rights. It is one of the wealthiest single-issue political action committees that funds pro-choice political candidates (“NARAL Pro-Choice America”). Another pro-abortion organization is Planned Parenthood, probably the most known, whose activism goes back to the early twentieth century. Yet, Mansfield notes that, according to *New York Times*, various Planned Parenthoods have been accused of discriminating pregnant or recent post-partum employees. A number of employees have been fired after returnig from unpaid leave and pregnant employees are not given medically-necessary break. Many influential women like Hillary Clinton and Ivanka Trump support paid paternal leave but ironically Planned Parenthood, which is supposed to empower all women, is burdened by offering the minimum of unpaid leave required by the law. Jeffëris Peterson goes further to say that Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, encouraged the government to sterilize those who propagate the unfit race in order to preserve the purity of the Yankee stock.

The fight for abortion access has even extended to the third wave feminists though they were mainly focused on intersexuality and sex activity. In 2004, second and third waves feminists marched against the Supreme Court’s Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act in a protest march called “March for Women’s Rights” in Washington DC (“A Brief Summary of the Third Wave of Feminism”). Nonetheless, the inclusion of abortion in the feminist agenda

prompted division amongst feminists who were split into pro-life and pro-choice. Amanda Mansfield notes that the division on the abortion debate traces back to the early beginning of the feminist thought; Mary Wollstonecraft is among the feminists who condemned the destruction of the embryo either in the womb or after birth. Resultantly, pro-life feminists created organizations of their own that reflected their convictions and mainly urged that they be led by female members. The most known ones include New Waves Feminists, Feminists for Life, and Feminists for Nonviolent Choices.

1.3. Feminism and Literary Criticism

The influence of feminism has reached a myriad of fields of which the philosophical, social, political, psychological, as well as the literary. Feminist literary criticism offers new ways and outlooks with which to decode literary texts with an emphasis on issues of gender stereotypes. It fundamentally applies the philosophies and principles set by the feminist theory to literary material. According to Annette Kolodny, feminist criticism may be applied in a variety of contexts to cover different activities including “any criticism written by a woman, no matter what the subject, any criticism written by a woman about a man’s book which treats that book from a political or feminist perspective” as it can cover criticism written by female authors in general. Moreover, she asserts that these investigations permitted the portrayal of and attitudes towards female characters in a large set of literary materials and it allowed as well revealing the ways in which sexist bias and formulations of women’s role in society become systematized in literature (75).

In her article, “Feminist Literary Criticism”, Serpil Oppermann writes that feminist criticism started as part of the international women's liberation movement, and the first major work in this field was Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in which its author attacks the popular and cultural image of the ideal American woman as a house-wife and

mother. On the other hand, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) introduced the first modern principles of feminist criticism including the term "patriarchal" which is of major importance in feminist literary studies. Significantly, Millet argues that the Western culture made use of power to establish the dominance of men and subordination of women in society. Oppermann goes on to say that woman's cultural and literary identity as the "Other" still generates massive controversy, not only in feminist criticism but in literary studies in general.

In the same vein, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that woman has experienced long-established oppression by reducing her as the man's "Other". With respect to Hegelian and Sartrean philosophy, Beauvoir finds that the self needs otherness in order to define itself as a subject. Therefore the notion of otherness is obligatory in the composition of the self as a self. As she explains it, woman is usually referred to as the Other by man who holds the position of the Self. In her words, woman "is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other" (Mussett).

Additionally, Beauvoir declares that human existence is confined between transcendence and immanence, yet men are honored with transcendence through life's privileges while women are trapped in the repetitive life of immanence. One aspect on which Beauvoir's analysis is centered is the myth of the "Eternal Feminine." This prototypical myth, which includes the myth of the mother, the virgin, and the nature, aims at confining woman in an impossible ideal by ignoring individuality and differences among women. Furthermore, she illustrates how women, at any stage, are forced to renounce authentic subjectivity and transcendence by the acceptance of the passive and marginalized role to man's superior and active demands. Thereafter, Beauvoir explores women's passivity in what she calls her "Situation" and her "Justifications." She examines the roles of wife, mother, and prostitute to show how women are trapped in the repetitious routines of begetting children, house holding, and being the sexual objects of male libido (Mussett).

Despite long-standing oppression and subordination of women, Beauvoir believes in the existentialist principle of ontological freedom of every existent regardless of sex. Ultimately, she claims that men never succeeded in destroying women's freedom through their subjectivity. To reclaim her selfhood and freedom, Beauvoir suggests that woman should undertake her own free projects with all the danger and risk they may have. In so doing, woman will take delight in thinking, taking action, working and creating as much as men do which will allow her equality instead of subordination. For Beauvoir, equality can be reached through changes in social structures such as equal education, contraception, legal abortion, and most importantly woman's economic freedom. According to her, work will offer women enormous and advantageous benefits. However, she deems marriage a damaging choice for both men and women; she describes it as a journey from freedom to unchanging program. In a nutshell, Beauvoir's philosophy insists on sex equality through the alteration of customs and education and calls every existent, regardless of sex, age, and race, to define and impose her/his individuality (Mussett).

Another central approach to our study is feminist consciousness-raising. This concept refers to the process of increasing awareness among oppressed groups of society, women in this case, in an attempt to eradicate the social conditions that sustain injustice. The privileged group establishes prescribed norms which appear normal and standard to the disadvantaged group. As Michelle San Pedro puts it, consciousness-raising serves as a foundation for activism and experiential learning. It is important to note that consciousness-raising comprises three crucial themes, oppression, repression, and expression. It first starts when women learn about their oppressive condition in society and the ways in which their ambitions and individuality are repressed. Thereafter, there is the necessity of taking action in any possible form. Likewise, Janet Brown in her *Feminist Drama: Definition and Critical Analysis* quotes Gerda Lerner's explanation of feminist consciousness-raising:

The first stage in attaining a feminist consciousness, Lerner says, is a woman coming to self-consciousness, becoming aware of a distortion or a wrong in her own social status as a woman. At this point, she sees men as the enemy. The second step questions tradition, and tentatively moves in new directions. The third step is reaching out for others, a search for sisterhood, often involving organized groups of women. Arising out of this quest for union is the fourth step, feminist consciousness, defined as the search for autonomy. (14)

In accordance with this principle, Joyce Carol Oates creates her female characters with an intense awareness of their oppressive surrounding and a vigorous determination to confront misogyny, patriarchal standards, and traditional constraints.

Kathie Sarachild, an early feminist proponent, notes that the term consciousness-raising was first used by Ann Forer during a meeting of the women's liberation group to which she belonged. She confesses that the concept arose in her a better understanding of women's oppression. Furthermore, Ann Forer explains the multiple ways in which women are oppressed by patriarchal expectations. She says that women are all the time expected to fit certain idealistic images such as being agreeable, nice, and good-looking without reflecting on the real self.

The process of consciousness-raising has first taken place in small group discussions which women organized. They gathered to study and look into the ways oppression was fashioned through time. Progressively, their investigations proved fruitful as they developed an ardent desire to take action and substitute male chauvinism with feminist system of ideas and values. Since 1967, consciousness-raising became one of the major educational programs of the Women's Liberation Movement. Under the guise of support, consciousness-raising was often attacked by the male supremacist establishment which attempted to dilute and hold back

its strength so as no changes would see the light. In 1968, the Women's Liberation Movement took the first public action as a form of expression against male supremacy. Women protested and picketed the Miss America Contest, throwing high heels, push-up bras, lipsticks and other beauty objects into a freedom trash can. This first action contributed to a widespread awareness of the new Women's Liberation Movement, capturing world interest and giving the movement its name (Sarachild 144-47).

As far as Oates's commitment to feminism is concerned, it shows great sympathy to and an extraordinary concern for women's experiences in the patriarchal culture of contemporary America. Her female characters vary in characterization between passive, rebellious, and self-fulfilled agents. Though the stories of her female characters may seem violent and occasionally annihilating, her intention is primarily to warn and inform about the social and cultural dangers surrounding women. Another particularity about Oates's fiction is her devotion to real life stories of women obliterated by fame and objectified by male lust. In *Blonde* (1999), she reimagines the life of the twentieth century star Marilyn Monroe in an attempt to give her more voice and more freedom than she actually had in her lifetime.

Interestingly, Oates's marked period of productivity coincided with the feminist movement's highest level of activism during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. That's why most of her writings bear the impact of feminist ideologies. In addition to the themes, Oates's feminism can be recognized by the centrality of female characters that are usually the leading figures of the narrative. Additionally, she avoids any stereotype of women; even unpleasant characters can be used as a perspective to tell the story. This can be said of Dawn Dunphy from *A Book of American Martyrs*. Her fiction is especially inspired by her female predecessors namely Emily and Charlotte Bronte, Wharton Edith, Cather Willa, and Flannery O'Connor who, scholars assume, is her inescapable precursor. Another literary influence extends to Edgar Allen Poe in what concerns the dark and gothic elements of her writing, and her imaginative

skill may have been shaped by an early reading of Carroll Lewis's *Alice in Wonderland*. In a nutshell, Oates undertakes her literary talent as a responsibility to inform about the injustices and cruelties of her age and ultimately to let her artistic vision work as a redemptive and an inspiring force for the world.

2. Analysis

Joyce Carol Oates is known for her devotion to women's issues and the nightmarish experiences they undergo in a sexist and misogynist society. Furthermore, she explores the roots of hostility towards women and tries to make her fiction a sort of awakening for them. This time, her gaze turns into the oppression and marginalization brought by the abortion conflict to American women. She vividly exposes the bitter reality that a woman is imperatively oppressed and repressed no matter her conditions. However, she makes it explicit that individual freedom is still possible with the presence of a considerable amount of awareness. *A Book of American Martyrs'* plot initially revolves around the murder of Gus Voorhees by the devout Christian Luther Dunphy; two figures that fashion the American debate on abortion in the novel. In the aftermath of the killing, the novel follows the journey of the two fatherless families who suffer the consequences of the murder. As the plot thickens, it becomes apparent that female characters are the most affected victims of the homicide. In a sense, Luther Dunphy and Gus Voorhees are remembered as martyrs and heroes at the expense of their grieved families. Characters are usually said to be the writer's words made flesh. In this respect, the writer communicates the destructive fallout of the abortion conflict through female characters.

The title of the novel is similar to the 16th century text *Book of Martyrs* by John Foxe; an influential narrative that recounts the sufferings of Protestants under the Catholic

Church in England and Scotland. In the same regard, Oates reveals the outturn of extreme opinions that may result in the destruction of others' lives. Gus Voorhees was always aware of the danger surrounding his professional milieu. On many occasions, he was threatened by anti-abortion activists who were determined to purge America of baby killers. Notwithstanding, he was careless about putting his life and his family's in constant danger.

2.1. Patriarchy and Otherness: Analysis of the First Generation Female Characters

Jena Matheson, the abortionist's wife and one of the central characters, reflects the caring, responsible and quiet traditional American woman. As Gus Voorhees is fully devoted to his work, she takes on all responsibilities from household to parenting. Though she pretends to lead a happy spousal life, at the end it is revealed that her life has gone in all directions except in the one she wanted. Her ambitions have been absorbed by wifely and motherly obligations which made of her a sad yet discreet person. As a husband and father, Gus is not as liberal and protecting as he should be. Being an abortionist doctor literally means having little time and attention to other exigencies. His choice and desire to help desperate women made of his family an ocean of desperation and sorrow. Jenna is a stay-at-home mom who works as a secretary in a Planned Parenthood, and she could only work in the interstices of her husband's work. It is as if she is living on the edge of her husband's life; or rather imprisoned in his over-elaborate world. "The life of the household centered upon him, and upon her children; to herself, Jenna had become a sort of blur, a figure in motion", this passage, in fact, clearly and genuinely summarizes what Jenna's life is restricted to. Because she thinks love is all that a successful relationship needs to have, she never complains about her excessively tiring life. Her weakness resides partly in her dependence on her husband's love and attention; his indifference toward her makes her fade slowly and bitterly like a flower whose beauty is stolen by harsh conditions. In another lifetime, Jenna Matheson could have been a fresh, independent woman who undertakes her *joie-de-vivre* as life's primary

quest. Alternatively, she came to terms with her existential problems. Oates's fiction sounds pretty well like naturalistic fiction where there is no room for the weak and romantic. In other words, unless you are realistic and subsequently resistant to life's cruelties, you are doomed to failure and breakdown.

Edna Mae is another perspective the writer relies on to uncover the reality behind blind commitment. Mother of five children, Edna is a housewife exclusively devoted to homely missions. Through Luther's description, the reader comes to the conclusion that, in Luther's eyes, Edna is as fragile and vulnerable as a child. Before marriage, she used to be a nurse but she quit as soon as she was married to Luther Dunphy. Her life is not different from Jena's. She made many sacrifices in order for Luther to achieve his dream which was to become a minister in their local church. In return, she received betrayal, lack of responsibility and consideration. The writer shows the hypocrisy of the zealous Luther in many forms. He fervently opposes abortion but simultaneously allows sex outside marriage which could result in a pregnancy and subsequently in abortion. For a long time, he sought a pathway that could lead him to redemption. At the end, he settled for joining the Army of God and Operation Rescue which stimulated further his impulse to take charge of the abortionist Gus Voorhees as a godly mission.

By doing so, he made all of his family pay for his redemption and contributed to the ill-being of another entire family. Dunphy's self-regarding decision left behind a wife drawn in hysteria and despair and children who, due to their father's irrationality, have lost both parents. The two eldest children, Luke and Dawn, have grown clumsily into ferocious adolescents struggling to fit in their social environment. On the other side, Edna endures grave dependency on pills and she is scarcely conscious of anything. She thought that, by murdering Gus Voorhees, her husband put an end to their marriage, or worse, ruined their existence. As the old saying goes, it is the last straw that breaks the camel's back; Edna and

Jena were already fed up with their passive mode of living, the murder was the way they officially announced their anguish and thus surrender.

Misogyny and sexism are part of Edna's and Jena's oppression. These two concepts are prevalent in the narrative and are illustrated in many ways. At an early age, Luther Dunphy had misogynist attitudes towards women surrounding him. This permitted him to intimidate and sexually assault his classmate. His sexual lust is dependent on women and this fact increases further his hatred towards them. Occasionally, he would confess his love for Edna Mae but most of the time he restricts her to a child who consistently needs assistance. He is powerful and independent, she is passive and weak. This feeling of power and confidence allows him illicit sexual relationships despite his religious zeal. It also gives him the right to exploit his energy and time in following his dreams and to give over his responsibility towards his children and wife. As a representative of her time and its paradoxes, Oates reflects on the hypocrisy of Luther Dunphy and the contradictions between his convictions and actions. He preaches faith and loyalty but ironically betrays these principles when his libido presents itself. Oates recurrently reminds the reader of the filthy nature of Luther even after his repentance. This is probably to convey the idea that religion usually serves as a veil behind which unexpected scandals may happen, and this is not uncommon in Oates's fiction.

Besides, Gus Voorhees works hard to help desperate women but ironically does not feel any concern for his wife and children. His belief in equality and mutual respect applies only to his work and not to his spouse. In Oates's fiction, betrayal is inescapable in an oppressive relationship. Indeed, it is a form of sexism where the husband's selfishness is justified by his authority. Not only is the wife hurt by this unfaithful act, but she has also to cover this reality in order not to disappoint her children and the society's expectations. Jena Matheson is a victim of her husband's egotism, betrayal, and irresponsibility, but above all a victim of her own

choices. Though Gus Voorhees and Luther Dunphy constitute total opposites, they equally ill-treat their wives and cherish the privilege of superiority. The point is, men are oppressors no matter how different they may be politically, religiously, and socially, women, on the other side, are equitably oppressed, alienated, and subjugated however high and respectful their status may be.

Both Jena Matheson and Edna Mae constitute what Simone de Beauvoir terms the “Other” in her analysis of gender relationships in society, specifically in family. These two figures demonstrate the destructive force of oppression on American women. To understand this concept, it is crucial to refer to the status men hold in their social environment, Gus Voorhees and Luther Dunphy in this case. In her fiction, Oates uses patriarchy as the root of women’s oppression in society. Accordingly, Gus Voorhees and Luther Dunphy are portrayed as the dominant figures of the family structure that hold an infinite power. Gus Voorhees is the distinguished abortionist doctor who establishes a successful career in abortion providing. Holding the position of the patriarch, he takes full advantage of the privileges put at his disposition. According to him, work is of first importance therefore other responsibilities, marriage and parenting, are to be assigned to the weaker sex. In her analysis of gender relationship, Oates displays the huge gap between the lifestyle of men and women. While Voorhees is rewarded with the privilege of transcendence, his wife, Jana Matheson, is trapped in the dull life of immanence. In other words, Voorhees uses his wife as a means to define and impose the “self” as opposed to her, the “Other”. While he is fully devoted to his mission and ambition, his wife is forced to renounce her life goals and consecrate her full time to parenting and tending house. Not only should she take care of the children without her husband’s assistance, but also has to justify the absence of the father for the children. In a sense, she is unfairly and unwillingly pushed to take the burden and blame for existence.

On the other hand, Edna Mae experiences oppression and alienation through her relegation to being her husband's "Other". This situation of otherness is manifested through her exclusion from the creative entitlements every existent is supposed to enjoy. Characteristically, she is trapped in the image of an ideal feminine which subsequently denies her individuality and subjectivity. She masters the role of the wife and the mother but fails to genuinely define herself as an individual. On the contrary, Luther Dunphy unceasingly seeks a meaning to his life, and in the process he undermines his wife's chance to reach out to the same goal. While Edna resigns from her job as a nurse and gives herself over to marital life, Luther seems to find the ideal timing to take courses for a minister office in the church. Thus, Oates uses marriage as a symbol of entrapment for women while it scarcely alters a man's plans and life. Correspondingly, Oates joins Beauvoir on the idea that nuclear family is destructive for both sexes. Yet, it is undeniable that its consequences seem more oblitative and harmful for women than men. Ultimately, Oates shows how far-reaching the consequences of oppression and subordination can be; Edna finds relief in pill addiction instead of finding it in a healthy self-realization.

In accordance to Beauvoir's concept of "Eternal Feminine", Oates shows how both women are reduced to the roles of wife, mother, and sexual objects. Nonetheless, they fail to be affirmed by the traditional roles they were committed to. Repeatedly, Oates makes it clear that a woman, no matter her ideology and level of education, is doomed to subjugation and vanquish. It is true that Edna Mae and Jena Matheson initially relinquish their claims to transcendence through their surrender to alienated and passive roles, yet they eventually end up rejecting these very same roles and choose to reclaim their selfhood. By so doing, Oates affirms Beauvoir's belief in the existentialist principle of ontological freedom and the possibility of women to transcend the situation of Otherness. Despite long-standing subordination and passivity, Jena rejects motherhood and withdraws from her family, while

Edna abandons her daughter Dawn and reclaims her well-being. As a feminist, Oates stresses that women are not supposed to fit certain images society have created for them; the only thing they need to prove is their individuality and self-fulfillment.

2.2. Transcending Otherness and Achieving Empowerment: Analyzing the Second Generation Female Characters

Contrary to their mothers, Dawn Dunphy and Naomi Voorhees break traditional roles American women are expected to carry out. While their mothers are referred to as the “Other” in the family structure, the two daughters confront the situation of otherness with an intense awareness and an ardent desire to make change. The strength of the novel comes from the writer’s ability to draw parallels between the Voorhees family and the Dunphys. The novel’s structure is a prototype of the bildungsroman that allows the reader to witness the physical and psychological growth of the protagonists. Though Oates initially traps Naomi and Dawn in the same oppressive and passive bubble of their mothers, she eventually allows them to experience consciousness-raising and subsequently impose their selfhood. The two said characters embody the rebellious and resistant spirit destined to overcome imposed hardships and discomfort. They are the voice of rationality, a glimmer of hope for their wretched world. Nonetheless, the aftershock of the murder was burdensome for both Naomi and Dawn. They were too young to understand the scenario of the prompt change in their life with all its details. Instead of a healthy and blossoming growth, their childhood and teen were merely nightmarish. The lack of involvement of their fathers in their lives developed in them a sort of violence and hopelessness.

Naomi Voorhees is brought up in a liberal and secular family which cherishes education and self-fulfillment. She is strongly attached to her father that his sudden departure turns her life upside down. She is the most affected child of Gus’s death. She becomes an

attention seeker to elicit validation and affection from others, namely her mother. When asked about her childhood and background for University enrollment, she says forlornly it is “BECAUSE IT WAS a story related to us many times. Because we were happy then. BECAUSE AFTER MY FATHER died there was sickness in my soul. Because as a girl I hated those who had both parents living”. Evidently, these words carry too much pain; she helplessly tries to understand something she barely knows. At school, she was continuously bullied and called the daughter of a “baby killer”. In fact, responsibility becomes weighty and incomprehensible when attributed to the wrong person. After the death of Gus Voorhees, his children unceasingly blamed their mother for their father’s death. Since then, Jena decided to withdraw from her children and devote herself to legal work. Another shock for Naomi. People around her attempted to comfort her by saying that her father is hero but she thinks that “proud is like brave. Alive is what matters”.

After her mother abandoned her, Naomi was invited by her grandmother, Luther’s mother, to stay in her apartment in New York. Madelena Kein confided to her granddaughter that her father was an unintended and unwanted baby. Indeed, she is the only female character in the novel who had an actual experience with abortion. In 1956, she was still a graduate student at the University of Chicago when she learned she was pregnant. Unmarried and young, Madelena unhesitatingly decides to abort her baby. Since safe and legal abortion is not accessible to all women, she turns into back-alley abortion though it promises death more than survival. After many unsuccessful attempts, she marries Clement Voorhees and delivers the baby. She says: “I have always cherished privacy, solitude— it is the great luxury for a woman!” this becomes more apparent when she gives up Luther as soon as he reaches eight.

Madelena is described as the complete opposite of Jena and Edna on all counts. Her rationality triumphs over her emotions; she especially does not satisfy the society’s expectations under the guise of the conformist and obedient American woman. A thoughtful

linguistic professor, she undertakes success and well-being as her utmost life commodities. It is in the words of this character that abortion is justified as a capital and vital right. More importantly, the writer uses this figure as the virtual manifestation of Jena's and Edna's unfulfilled dream. She is probably the female figure who understands most the game of patriarchy. Oates makes use of this character as the exemplary woman who does not welcome oppression, but the one who makes her selfhood a priority. While diving into the world of this character, one feels that she is pretty much the voice of the writer herself. In other words, Oates, as we assume, would have opted for this character as the one who resembles her most if she was to make a choice between all the female characters. It is later revealed that Luther's urge to become an abortionist doctor is intimately linked to his mother's experience with abortion. It is not clear though whether it is empathy toward helpless women or unwanted babies. Although fearless and stoic is all that shall be said of Madelena, her son's death was a whirlwind that hit suddenly but balefully. To heal her wounds, she takes charge of Naomi as a way to catch up with her lost son.

Dawn Dunphy is portrayed as a victim of bullying and sexual assault. Coincidentally, she was intimidated the same way her father used to intimidate girls. As Felice Sipper, victim of Luther's sexual lust, Dawn experienced sexual abuse during her vulnerable adolescence. Unlike Naomi, Dawn is ill-educated and little interested in studies. Instead, she is extremely attracted to boxing and enjoys watching bloody boxing fights with her brother Luke.

As a matter of fact, boxing is one of Oates's hotly debated issues. In the book's context, boxing stands as a symbol of defying and redefining gender roles that are assumed to be purely masculine. Simultaneously, it is a line mark for the decay of the old generation and the rise of the new one. Indeed, boxing is such a powerful symbol in Oates's writing. She especially stresses that women are no less aggressive and angry than men. On boxing, Oates

comments that “No one whose interest began as mine did in childhood – as an offshoot of my father’s interest – is likely to think of boxing as a symbol of something beyond itself.” According to her, boxing is about intensity and despair more than it is about pleasure and entertainment, and this is absolutely the case of life (Ecksel). While it is generally assumed that boxing does not suit the fragile nature of women, Oates is fascinated with her female characters on the ring passionately fighting for their triumph. As far as Dawn is concerned, she tries to find meaning to her life and prove her goodness through boxing. Though Edna Mae opposed her daughter’s idea of starting a career in boxing, Dawn insists and perseverates until her dream saw the light. Because of the environment she grew up in and the loss of her father, she exhibited excitement at the sight of violence.

Naomi inherits the same personality traits of her father and grandmother. In the days that followed her father’s death, hopelessness, confusion, and anxiety reigned in her world. Her mother and brother started new lives; she seems the only one who cares about family bonding. Slowly but surely, she brings her life under control and devotes herself to a documentary film making career. She becomes obsessed with the Dunphys, especially with her counterpart Dawn, and insistently seeks to arrange an interview with her. As if someone of the Dunphys could answer her questions, or could possibly free her from the burden of the past. On the other side, Dawn Dunphy, probably the most complex character, finds success and recognition in boxing; two elements her family deprived her of. She is described in a way no any other character is described; her struggles with her inner nature, her naïveté and clumsiness are recounted in perfect precision. She is sharp and dense but kind in her own way. She bloodily fights on the ring in a way she could not fight against her fate as a martyr’s daughter. Naomi and Dawn are unavoidably linked by their fathers’ actions.

As an adolescent, Naomi is under the rule of her parents and of her mother’s experiences. These affect her quiet deeply and peculiarly. The oppressive mode that Gus

Voorhees imposes on his wife extends to his daughter. Yet, as soon as she grows older, her awareness about her status as a young girl in a patriarchal society increases considerably. Because her fiction acts as cautionary tales, Oates fashions the second generation girls in a way to revolt against the oppressive control of a male-dominated society and to inform about a possible liberation. Unlike Jena Matheson, Naomi Voorhees learns about her oppressive milieu at a young age and despite all the hardships, she manages to triumph over her repressive fate.

This second generation constitutes the total opposite of the first one on all counts. While Jena and Edna can be classified under the category of the submissive and dependant characters of Oates's canon, Naomi and Dawn are the said rebellious and triumphant agents who transcend their sordid environment. They both develop self-determination to overcome patriarchal oppression and attempt to achieve liberation. Indeed, this effort is the first stage of their consciousness-raising.

Another impediment to self-awakening is repression that stands as an obstacle for women seeking individual freedom. This is especially true for Dawn Dunphy who endures emotional and physical repression at the hand of her religious parents. She is raised in such a way that her self-esteem is lowered to a considerable extent. She abhors her natural shape as a woman, she is annoyed by menstruations, she wears tight underwear to cover her breast, and adopts a boyish style to camouflage her identity as a woman. Notwithstanding, Oates may have attributed this mindset and personal style to Dawn as a means to defy gender roles and break the shackles of submission. Even her favorite sport is a male-dominated discipline, boxing. She goes against her mother's will and excels in her boxing career. On the other hand, Naomi divorces from her family and starts a new life next to her grandmother. Redeeming themselves from repression, they achieve their dreams and define themselves as individuals. By so doing, they attain the second stage of feminist consciousness.

The third stage of self-awakening celebrates expression which is regarded as the main feminist theme. The expression of female identity is the constructive force that embodies the advance of feminist consciousness. This stage entails three major concepts: separatism, sisterhood, and self-empowerment. Separatism refers to the belief that women can achieve liberation only if separated from androcentric institutions like marriage and family. Sisterhood insists on the necessity of women to collaborate and unite to work against male paternalism. Finally, self-empowerment takes place when a woman's success does not depend on any male-support. In fact, Naomi and Dawn reached their life goals only after they divorced from their families. Progressively, they become successful and learn to enjoy their autonomy without their parents' assistance. Eventually, they experience female bonding through reconciliation and mutual understanding. Naomi unceasingly strives to meet Dawn for unknown reasons, but it is revealed at the end that sisterhood was part of their feminist consciousness-raising.

In spite of their dissimilarities on different levels, there is a heartfelt link between the two characters from the moment they met in the courtroom. Their relationship is especially characterized by mutual hatred but then reciprocal empathy. The writer is not tempted by displaying the huge gap between the two personalities; she is more motivated to show approximate similarities that express common humanity. It is true that they are attributed the same ideological mindset as their parents, but the new generation uses it differently and especially less radically. In a sense, the author conveys the idea that acceptance and co-existence are possible even in the presence of difference. Naomi and Dawn are unavoidably linked by their fathers' actions, but more importantly they proved victorious by breaking the ideological wall and paving the way to possible reconciliation. The point is, Gus Voorhees's and Luther Dunphy's commitment to their causes harmed many lives in multiple forms, yet it remains a valuable lesson for the new generation to contemplate and learn.

The structural aspect of the novel is another out-standing feature that opens the door to deeper understanding of characters; transitions between characters draw borders between different worlds causally connected. Additionally, it is an efficient way to show how characters evolve through time. The fragmented nature of this postmodern text, *A Book of American Martyrs*, echoes the fragmented families at the heart of the narrative which, in turn, echoes the nation's division on the abortion war. More remarkably, it highlights women's distinct views on abortion and the possibility to make them co-exist. Oates extraordinarily conveys a message of tolerance and hope through her respectful tone and sympathetic attitude for every ideology. According to her, women may be different in a diversity of ways, nonetheless they can be reunited by shared womanhood and sisterhood which open the door to their empowerment.

2.3. Naomi and Dawn: the Real Martyrs of the Story

It is true that martyrdom by meaning implies the death of an individual because of his religious or political beliefs. However, this very same definition may be altered in the book's context. Initially, the writer puts much focus on the murder scene and the events that followed mainly by referring to Gus Voorhees and Luther Dunphy. These two figures are the actors and the cherished members of their community, and their act of bravery gains them more recognition and respect. However, as soon as the judge pronounces the sentence on the behalf of Luther Dunphy, the writer's attention shifts to the two eldest daughters, Dawn and Naomi.

The aftermath of the killing is made by Oates much more interesting and worthy of reading. It is no longer about two individuals who fight each others' ideologies, but interestingly about perseverance, hard work, self-making, and hope. In other words, Oates is more interested in conveying a message of hope and peace than that of ideological wars and bloody violence. Gus and Luther made their daughters pay for something they did not

consentingly choose; they were mere victims of their fathers' choice. Additionally, their hostile environment contributed further to their suffering and hopelessness. In their quest for identity, Naomi and Dawn find relief in their ambitions and in discovering themselves. Progressively, they gain self-confidence and understand more their status as women. They vigorously fight against all hardships and affliction, endeavor for a better future, and eventually prove their individuality and liberation. Doubtlessly and deservedly, their real and honest struggle earns them the label MARTYRS.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shed light on the feminist theory, its evolution and brands, and its interpretation of the abortion conflict in America. Moreover, we have presented feminist literary criticism and the major concepts that make up our analysis. Then, we have highlighted the destructive outcomes of extreme devotion to the abortion cause. More explicitly, we have shown the ways in which American women could be impacted by the abortion war and how far its effects can go by providing a detailed analysis of the female characters and their experiences with the aforementioned issue. By applying Simone de Beauvoir's feminist approach of Otherness, we have shown how women, pro-life or pro-choice, are oppressed by the patriarchal rule and how they are deprived from their individuality and liberation. Eventually, we have proved that women may achieve transcendence and emerge victorious from the submissive social system in a accordance to the feminist consciousness-raising approach.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

The present research work investigates the impact of the American battle over abortion on women in Joyce Carol Oates's *A Book of American Martyrs*. Abortion is one of America's hotly debated issues and it is at the core of political, social, and moral discussions. Its tensional and sensitive nature resulted in division and even hostility among Americans. Women are the first target of this divisive conflict; not only has it harmed bodies but also ruined souls and disjoined families. As our research focuses on revealing the devastating side of abortion on American women in Oates's novel, we have relied on the theory of Otherness introduced by Simone de Beauvoir and the feminist consciousness-raising approach. These two feminist approaches highlight the ways in which women are marginalized and oppressed in the American abortion war context and later reveal the possibility of women to reclaim their liberation and selfhood.

The first chapter is devoted to biographical notes of Joyce Carol Oates, an overview of *A Book of American Martyrs*. In addition, it offers an insight into the abortion issue in the United States from the 18th century to the present time. It shows how the aforementioned issue evolved through time and subsequently brought into the heart of public discussion. In other terms, American women used to enjoy their reproductive rights without the intervention of law or medicine, but as soon as their bodies become a public affair, they undergo severe pressure physically and mentally. As medicine evolved, Americans became aware of the dangers abortion might engender. Not only were they afraid of female dominance in the public sphere, but also frightened to have their race absorbed by the "Other". In this regard, male paternalism was prioritized over women's opinion and decision regarding their bodies. As a consequence, American women had no option but to turn to clandestine abortion. This, however, prompted mobilization and advocacy for women's rights to control their bodies mainly by pro-choice feminists.

The second chapter introduces the theories of Otherness and consciousness-raising and later undertakes the analysis of female characters in *A Book of American Martyrs*. The writer uses the female figures in her novel to voice American women who are prisoners of the androcentric American society, specifically of the abortion war. As its title indicates, *A Book of American Martyrs* is centered upon two men's martyrdom in the name of their choice and devotion. Yet, as the plot unfolds and the reader witnesses the aftermath of the killing, the label "martyr" becomes associated more with female characters who endure the consequences of the murder than to Gus Voorhees and Luther Dunphy. Jena Matheson and Edna Mae lead a miserable life at the expense of their husbands' martyrdom. The two men's commitment to the abortion cause gave rise to sexist attitudes towards their women. They consider their choice to be above all priorities and hence undervalue other tasks that are said to suit more women's nature.

By relying on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of Otherness, we have shown how Edna Mae and Jena Matheson are considered no more than intruders by their husbands. The latter achieve success and self-realization at the expense of their wives who undergo nightmarish experiences. Their oppression is essentially brought about by their relinquishment to constructed American images of women. The paradigmatic myth of "The Eternal Feminine" put forward by Simone de Beauvoir applies to Jena and Edna whose lives are restricted to the roles of wife and mother. More importantly, Oates shows that Edna Mae and Jena Matheson come from different backgrounds and have distinct ideologies regarding abortion, yet they do share the same sordid fate. In other words, she puts emphasis on the inescapable and grimy destiny that awaits women in the midst of an oppressing milieu.

Notwithstanding, Oates communicates hope and tolerance through two other figures, Naomi Voorhees and Dawn Dunphy. In the light of the feminist consciousness-raising approach, we have examined the ways in which women could possibly transcend otherness

and attain freedom. With the three major themes that the said approach comprises, oppression, repression, and expression, we have shown how the second generation defies patriarchal values and assumptions and suggests an empowering system of ideas and values.

Eventually, we can affirm that Simone de Beauvoir's approach of Otherness and the feminist consciousness-raising approach successfully supported the analysis of *A Book of American Martyrs*. In her analysis of women's experiences in society, Oates masterfully exposes the problem and thereafter suggests solutions. Likewise, she puts forward the damages that the war over abortion may inevitably cause women regardless of their inclination, pro-life or pro-choice. Subsequently, she uses Edna Mae and Jena Matheson as a warning for the second generation, Dawn and Naomi who put apart their convictions and give more importance to women's empowerment.

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