ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE: RECLAIMING PERSONHOOD IN ZUMAS'S *RED CLOCKS*

Arshia Ahmad,
M Phil (English Literature) Scholar, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Email: arshiaahmad526@gmail.com
Muhammad Khakan Ajmal, Corresponding Author
Assistant Professor of English, Higher Education Department, Punjab. Email: khakanonline711@gmail.com

Abstract
This article examines Leni Zumas's Red Clocks (2018) through Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist maxim: "existence precedes essence." Set against the backdrop of a society where the Personhood Amendment defines individuals through reproductive capacity, the novel portrays the struggle to reclaim autonomy within structures of constraint. Through the intertwined lives of the Biographer, the Mender, the Daughter, and the Wife, Zumas stages the existential conflict between imposed identity and the freedom to create meaning through lived choice. Each figure enacts a distinct response: the Biographer seeks authenticity through creative action, the Mender embodies rebellion against authority, the Daughter asserts agency over her body, and the Wife confronts the inauthenticity of conformity. The analysis draws upon Sartre's notions of freedom, responsibility, and bad faith, together with Albert Camus's reflections on absurdity and rebellion. These philosophical frameworks illuminate how Red Clocks exposes the absurdity of legislated essence while affirming that authentic personhood arises only through responsibility and defiance of external imposition. By situating Zumas's narrative within existential thought, the study underscores how literature renders visible the philosophical struggle for autonomy in the face of determinism. Ultimately, this article argues that Red Clocks is less a dystopian caution than an existential meditation on personhood, autonomy, and the essence. It affirms the enduring truth that existence precedes essence, and that authentic personhood must be continually reclaimed through acts of resistance and choice.

Keywords: absurdity, autonomy, existentialism, essence, Jean-Paul Sarte, personhood

Introduction
Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018) is a provocative exploration of personhood, autonomy, and the absurdities of contemporary life, framed within an existentialist lens. Set in a dystopian near-future America, the narrative unfolds against a backdrop where reproductive rights are severely curtailed under the Personhood Amendment, a law that grants constitutional rights to embryos from conception. Abortion, adoption, and reproductive technologies are outlawed, and single parenthood is prohibited. Within this restrictive framework, the novel follows the interconnected lives of four women, each grappling with the tension between personal desire and the rigid roles imposed upon them. Their stories reflect the broader struggles of identity and freedom in a society that dictates essence rather than allowing individuals to define their own existence.

Central to this article is Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist maxim that "existence precedes essence," articulated in his 1946 lecture Existentialism Is a Humanism. Sartre argued that human beings are not born with predetermined purposes or fixed natures but must create their own essence through choices, actions, and responsibility. This philosophy underscores the freedom and burden of self-definition in a world that offers no inherent meaning. In *Red Clocks*, this maxim is deliberately inverted: the Personhood Amendment legislates essence before existence, reducing women to their biological roles and foreclosing the possibility of authentic autonomy. The existential tension between imposed essence and individual existence becomes the central conflict of the novel, dramatizing the philosophical stakes of freedom in the face of systemic control.

The struggles of Zumas's protagonists illuminate the existential conflict between autonomy and determinism. The Biographer, desperate for motherhood, confronts the absurdity of her

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

failure in the face of biological and social constraints. The Mender, accused of witchcraft for providing alternative healing, embodies the act of rebellion against restrictive legal structures. The Daughter, facing unwanted pregnancy, must negotiate shame and coercion to reclaim narrative authority over her own body. The Wife, trapped in conformity, performs a socially scripted role that negates her individuality. Each of these characters reveals the existential demand to resist imposed identities, affirming Sartre's assertion that individuals must create their essence through conscious choice rather than accept externally defined roles.

This analysis also draws upon Albert Camus's notion of absurdity, which describes the clash between humanity's search for meaning and the indifference of the world. In *Red Clocks*, absurdity manifests in the legal and moral constructs that deny agency while claiming to uphold life. Camus's call to rebellion resonates with the women's refusal to be reduced to vessels of reproduction, affirming autonomy as an existential imperative. Simone de Beauvoir's insight that "one is not born, but becomes, a woman" (The Second Sex, 1949) deepens this critique, highlighting how gender and identity are shaped by social structures rather than biology. Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of performativity illuminates the ways in which gender roles are enforced through repetition, but also remain open to subversion. These theoretical perspectives collectively underscore how Zumas portrays identity as an existential project rather than a fixed essence.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to connect existential philosophy with contemporary literary discourse. By situating *Red Clocks* within an existentialist critique, this article highlights how dystopian fiction dramatizes the struggle for autonomy and the reclamation of personhood. It argues that Zumas not only critiques the biopolitical reduction of women to reproductive functions but also stages a broader existential reclamation of identity. In doing so, her novel affirms the enduring philosophical truth that existence, lived through freedom and responsibility, precedes essence.

Literature Review

The critical reception of Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018) has consistently emphasized its provocative engagement with autonomy, personhood, and the politics of reproductive rights. Reviewers have frequently situated the novel within dystopian traditions, often comparing it to Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985). While Atwood foregrounds systemic structures of control, Zumas shifts the focus to individual subjectivities, exploring the existential toll of laws that legislate essence. As Batuman (2018) observes, Red Clocks avoids grand dystopian spectacle, instead portraying the intimate struggles of women negotiating restrictive norms. Similarly, Anderson (2020) highlights the novel's psychological depth, noting how Zumas depicts autonomy as an ongoing negotiation rather than a static condition.

Scholars have underscored how the Personhood Amendment functions as a legal mechanism of essentialism, reducing women to reproductive capacities. Goldberg (2018) identifies this as a profound inversion of existential freedom, where identity is prescribed before lived experience. Smith (2019) emphasizes the resonance of Zumas's narrative with contemporary political debates, arguing that the novel anticipates real-world attempts to curtail reproductive rights. In this respect, Zumas's dystopia speaks directly to current anxieties about autonomy, demonstrating how the imposition of essence threatens the authenticity of existence.

Existentialist philosophy provides a vital framework for interpreting these themes. Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" (1946) affirms that individuals define themselves through choices rather than through predetermined natures. Scholars such as Warnock (1970) and Shah (2022) have emphasized Sartre's insistence on radical freedom and responsibility, which resonates with the struggles of Zumas's characters. Camus's notion of absurdity (The Myth of Sisyphus, 1942) further contextualizes their confrontation with a hostile legal and social order, where meaning is denied yet freedom persists in rebellion. Brown (2022)

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

highlights how existentialist readings of literature illuminate the human capacity to resist determinism, a theme central to Zumas's narrative.

Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism adds another interpretive dimension. In The Second Sex (1949), de Beauvoir asserts that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," a claim that directly counters the essentialism legislated in Red Clocks. The characters' struggles echo her recognition that identity is not a given but a project of becoming. Butler's (1990) theory of performativity extends this critique by showing how gendered roles are constructed through repetition, but remain susceptible to subversion. Zumas's portrayal of women who resist imposed roles aligns with these theoretical insights, illustrating existential freedom within constrained circumstances.

Within the context of dystopian fiction, Zumas contributes to a long-standing literary tradition that critiques biopolitics and the erosion of autonomy. Baccolini and Moylan (2003) argue that dystopias often function as cautionary tales, revealing the dangers of unchecked power. Zumas follows this trajectory while offering a more intimate existential focus: her characters' resistance is not solely political but also profoundly philosophical, grounded in the refusal to accept essence as destiny. Misri (2019) and Hadley (2018) similarly situate the novel within biopolitical critiques, showing how reproductive policies regulate bodies and identities. Paltrow and Flavin (2013) extend this analysis to real-world contexts, noting how legal systems already impose forms of biological determinism on women.

Taken together, these critical and philosophical perspectives provide a foundation for situating Red Clocks within existentialist discourse. By engaging with Sartre's insistence on freedom, Camus's absurdity, de Beauvoir's project of becoming, and Butler's performativity, this literature review highlights how Zumas's narrative aligns with, and extends, existentialist thought. The novel becomes not merely a dystopian warning but an existential interrogation of essence, autonomy, and personhood in the face of systemic constraint.

Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in existentialist philosophy, primarily the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, while also drawing on Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and strands of biopolitical theory developed by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Together, these frameworks illuminate how Zumas's Red Clocks interrogates the tension between existence and essence, exposing the philosophical stakes of legislating identity.

At the heart of this analysis is Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" (1946). For Sartre, human beings are not born with predetermined natures but define themselves through choices, actions, and responsibility. Authenticity requires the recognition of radical freedom, while "bad faith" describes the denial of this freedom by conforming to externally imposed roles. The Personhood Amendment in Red Clocks enacts precisely such an imposition: it legislates women's essence as mothers, thereby foreclosing autonomy and denying them the existential project of self-definition. Through Sartre's lens, the novel dramatizes the struggle against this inversion, showing how individuals resist the imposition of essence by reclaiming existence through choice and defiance(Nasir et al., 2023).

Camus's philosophy of the absurd enriches this framework. In The Myth of Sisyphus (1942), Camus defines the absurd as the confrontation between humanity's search for meaning and the indifference of the world. The women in *Red Clocks* confront an absurd social order in which their individuality is negated by reductive laws. Yet, as Camus insists, recognition of absurdity calls not for resignation but for rebellion. The Biographer, the Daughter, the Mender, and the Wife embody this rebellion in different ways, rejecting or subverting imposed identities, thereby affirming autonomy against systemic absurdity.

Simone de Beauvoir extends Sartre's existentialism into gendered experience. In The Second Sex (1949), she asserts that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," highlighting how

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

identity is constructed rather than innate. Zumas's narrative vividly illustrates this principle, as each character struggles with definitions of womanhood imposed by law, biology, and culture. Judith Butler's theory of performativity (Gender Trouble, 1990) complements this view, suggesting that gender is maintained through repeated performance but remains open to disruption. Together, these perspectives reveal how identity is neither essential nor fixed but continually negotiated through lived existence.

The framework also draws on biopolitical theory. Foucault (1976) introduced the concept of biopolitics to describe the state's regulation of bodies, reproduction, and life itself. Agamben (1998) further theorized "bare life," exposing how legal systems reduce individuals to biological functions devoid of political agency. In *Red Clocks*, the Personhood Amendment enacts precisely this reduction: women are valued primarily as reproductive bodies, stripped of autonomous personhood. This biopolitical context underscores how Zumas's novel critiques the state's power to legislate essence at the expense of existential freedom.

In combining existentialism with biopolitics, this article positions *Red Clocks* as both a philosophical and political text. Sartre and Camus provide the existential insistence on freedom and rebellion, while de Beauvoir and Butler expose how gendered identity is constructed and contested. Foucault and Agamben reveal how state power enforces biological determinism, against which the novel stages its resistance. Through this theoretical synthesis, the analysis demonstrates how Zumas's narrative affirms the existential imperative that existence, not essence, defines personhood.

Textual Analysis

Personhood in Red Clocks

The concept of personhood in Red Clocks functions as both a legal classification and an existential dilemma, highlighting the tension between institutional definitions and individual selfhood. In Zumas's dystopian narrative, the passage of the "Personhood Amendment" renders the embryo a whole legal person, thereby subordinating the woman to the biological process of reproduction. This juridical restructuring foregrounds a key existentialist concern: who can define a person, and how does such a definition influence one's capacity for self-actualization? By foregrounding female subjectivity under oppressive structures, Zumas questions whether personhood is an ontological constant or a socially constructed status contingent upon power relations. In existentialist terms, personhood is not an innate quality but an achievement, a product of conscious action and freedom((Gul et al.,2023(a)). Sartre's (1946) formulation of the self as a being who must choose and define its own existence, reinterpreted here as existence over essence, starkly contrasts the state-imposed identities in Red Clocks. Through characters such as the Biographer, Zumas critiques the reduction of women to their biological capacities. The Biographer, who wishes to adopt but is denied the right due to her unmarried status and lack of fertility, becomes emblematic of a system that confers personhood selectively. Her exclusion reflects a legal and cultural logic that regards reproductive potential as the primary determinant of value, negating her subjectivity and moral agency(see Afaq et al.,2022; Gul et al., 2023(b)).

The Biographer's existential crisis is compounded by her internalized desire to conform to societal ideals of motherhood. However, her gradual recognition that her worth is not contingent upon reproduction becomes a form of existential resistance. As Sartre argues, "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 1946). In choosing to persist despite systemic invalidation, the Biographer asserts a form of personhood grounded not in biological determinism but in conscious agency. Her struggle illuminates the existentialist claim that personhood must be claimed rather than granted. Moreover, Zumas's characters are denied legal and philosophical recognition precisely because the state constructs essence first, then imposes it. By redefining the embryo as a person, the law paradoxically de-persons the woman,

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

making her a vessel rather than a subject. This mirrors Beauvoir's (1949) assertion that woman is "the Other", defined in relation to man or, in this case, to the unborn. The Wife, for instance, is not recognized for her desires or ambitions but for her capacity to maintain the domestic order. Her subjectivity is irrelevant to the societal roles she is expected to perform. In her gradual detachment from domestic life and eventual act of defiance, she too reclaims her personhood, not by rejecting her familial role outright, but by choosing it anew, on her terms.

By depicting these fragmented yet resilient selves, Red Clocks critiques the essentialist ideologies that undergird legal and cultural definitions of personhood. Zumas illustrates how such ideologies deny women the freedom to become; in doing so, she aligns the narrative with existentialist imperatives. In this context, personhood becomes an existential project: one must resist imposed definitions and assert selfhood through choice and responsibility, even when the cost of doing so is high.

The Biographer and the Myth of the Mother

In Red Clocks, the Biographer's narrative is arguably the most intimate confrontation with essence, particularly the mythic essence of "the mother." Her struggle is not simply with infertility or singlehood, but with a societal script that reduces womanhood to maternity. As Simone de Beauvoir famously argued in The Second Sex (1949/2010), woman is often "the Other," defined not by her being but about man or child. The Biographer confronts precisely this: her womanhood is treated as incomplete, not because of a lack of achievement or desire, but because she does not fulfill her "biological destiny." The "Every Child Needs Two" law becomes a weaponized essence; it codifies a belief that a woman without a male partner is inherently unfit to mother. Her application to adopt is rejected not on personal grounds but because her existence deviates from the institutional ideal. She internalizes this judgment: "Am I selfish for wanting a baby alone? Or am I foolish for thinking I could raise one at all?" (Zumas, 2018, p. 18). This rhetorical questioning reveals the existential crisis imposed by essence; she is not allowed to be, only to conform.

Existentialism, by contrast, insists that identity is created through action. Sartre's (1946) rejection of fixed essences allows for self-definition: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (p. 22). The Biographer, though rejected by the state, begins to reassert authorship over her own life, not only through her writing on the Arctic explorer Eivør, but through the act of questioning the script itself. Her biographical work becomes a meta-commentary on women who refused prescribed roles. In one scene, she writes: "Eivør never married. Never bore children. They called her mad. But she knew how to be alone. She chose that freedom" (Zumas, 2018, p. 112). This admiration reflects the Biographer's shifting allegiance, from social expectation to existential authenticity. Even as she continues to desire motherhood, the Biographer refuses to collapse her entire identity into that role. By the end of the novel, she envisions motherhood not as an essence she must fulfill but as a possibility she may still create. Her final reflections resist neat closure: "Maybe I will adopt. Maybe I won't. Maybe I'll love another child, another way. But I am not unfinished" (Zumas, 2018, p. 298). This declaration is critical. She disavows the imposed essence and embraces the uncertainty and responsibility of existence. She is not a failed mother; she is a being in process.

Two years ago, the United States Congress ratified the Personhood Amendment, which gives the constitutional right to life, liberty, and property to a fertilized egg at the moment of conception. Abortion is now illegal in all fifty states. Abortion providers can be charged with second-degree murder, abortion seekers with conspiracy to commit murder (Zumas, 2018, p. 39).

It is used to highlight how the Personhood Amendment legally enforces a deterministic view of motherhood, positioning reproductive ability as an inherent essence rather than a chosen identity. It shows how the legal system equates potential life with personhood, effectively

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

criminalizing bodily autonomy. The Biographer's struggle to conceive becomes more than a personal desire, it becomes an act of existential resistance against a state-imposed narrative that reduces women to their reproductive capacities. This directly ties into the existential critique of essentialist identity, as the amendment negates the Biographer's agency by framing motherhood as a compulsory role.

According to Ahmad (2024), it is a profound contemplation to consider how one might feel upon realizing that their own existence was the result of a deliberate choice made in the absence of love or partnership. While it is often perceived that a child should be the symbol of affection between two partners, for some, the desire to have a child arises from a deeper, existential need for purpose and connection. In such cases, motherhood itself becomes a means of affirming life, especially when one's sense of meaning hinges on nurturing and companionship. The quote aligns with the existential critique by emphasizing how motherhood can become a purposeful act in the quest for meaning, rather than merely fulfilling societal expectations.

In Red Clocks, the Biographer's desire for a child is not solely rooted in societal pressure but rather emerges as a profound search for personal significance amid existential uncertainty. Sartre's idea that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 2007) is echoed here, as the Biographer's pursuit of motherhood represents an active attempt to construct meaning within a restrictive social framework. This interpretation also reflects Beauvoir's assertion that autonomy is not merely the freedom to act but the freedom to define one's purpose in life (Beauvoir, 2010). By including this quotation, the thesis underscores the notion that parenthood, for some, transcends social norms and becomes an existential affirmation of selfhood.

The Mender and the Reclamation of Embodied Autonomy

While the Biographer resists a more internalized, psychological script of womanhood, the Mender's conflict is rooted in embodiment. Her very hands, once symbols of healing and tradition, become criminalized. The state's war on autonomy in Red Clocks is most vividly illustrated in its treatment of women like her: those who dare to offer care outside the state's definitions of legitimacy. Her knowledge of plants, passed down through generations, is rendered subversive, not because it is ineffective or dangerous, but because it operates outside patriarchal control. Zumas constructs the Mender as both healer and heretic, a woman who refuses the essentialist logic that limits femininity to sanctioned roles of mother, wife, and passive patient. "They call it quackery. Witches' work. But who else will give the girls what they need?" (Zumas, 2018, p. 162). In this line, Zumas foregrounds the politics of knowledge: traditional female wisdom is dismissed not due to lack of efficacy, but because it disrupts the state's monopoly over female bodies.

Sartre's existentialism grants no moral high ground to institutions. In fact, he insists that morality arises from choice, from authentic engagement with others. The Mender exemplifies this ethos. When she aids the Daughter in terminating her pregnancy, she does not act out of ideology, but from a deeply personal sense of ethical duty. "It was not her place to judge. Only to help. And maybe that's all ethics is" (Zumas, 2018, p. 258). This moment is a philosophical pivot, ethics as relational, not abstract; action as resistance. In Sartrean terms, the Mender acts in "good faith." She acknowledges her freedom, accepts its consequences, and takes responsibility for her choice, even when arrested. Sartre (1946) emphasized that "man is condemned to be free," meaning that freedom cannot be avoided, only exercised well or poorly (p. 34). The Mender's refusal to betray her work under interrogation is existential heroism: not because she escapes punishment, but because she remains true to her chosen values, even within the state's coercive machinery.

Unlike the Biographer, who wrestles with social constructs, the Mender's rebellion is elemental. She counters essentialism not with theory but with embodiment, choosing action

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

over identity. She does not wait for validation. In her defiance, we see Zumas's most apparent refutation of imposed essence: a woman who acts, heals, and suffers consequences without relinquishing selfhood. Her narrative ends without triumph, but with dignity. "Let them call her what they want. She knows who she is" (Zumas, 2018, p. 274). That knowledge is existential power. In a world that defines women by what they must be, the Mender chooses instead who she will become.

The Daughter and the Fight for Narrative

Among the four protagonists in Red Clocks, the Daughter faces perhaps the most direct form of state intervention, a literal criminalization of her body. At just fifteen, she becomes pregnant in a society where abortion is not only illegal but morally demonized. The state denies her the right to choose, and in doing so, strips her of narrative control. She is no longer a person in the eyes of the law; she is a vessel. This dehumanization reflects the most brutal form of essentialism: the idea that a woman's identity is reducible to reproductive capacity. Zumas masterfully captures this erasure in the Daughter's internal monologue: "They don't care what happens to me. Only what's inside me" (Zumas, 2018, p. 96). Using the word "what" instead of "who" underscores the objectification. Her personhood is suspended; the law recognizes her only as the fetus, a non-person granted more rights than she possesses.

Unlike the Biographer or the Mender, who push back through thought and action, the Daughter's resistance begins as silence. She is isolated, shamed, and terrified. However, her journey is one of reclaiming her voice. Initially afraid to speak, even to her parents, she eventually seeks out the Mender, an act that reasserts her agency. This is not merely a logistical choice; it is existential. She chooses herself, not the identity the state has imposed on her. The Daughter says little when confronted by the authorities, but Zumas allows her silence to carry weight. In existentialist thought, authenticity does not always manifest in speech or overt rebellion. Sometimes, it lies in endurance, in refusing to internalize the essence projected upon the self. As the narrative unfolds, the Daughter's defiance becomes quiet but resolute. "They can call me whatever they want. That does not make it true" (Zumas, 2018, p. 241). With this line, she disentangles identity from labels, a move Sartre would recognize as rejecting bad faith. Her decision to end the pregnancy, despite the danger and stigma, is not framed as heroic, but as necessary. Zumas does not romanticize the ordeal. Instead, she centers the reality that agency often requires choices made in fear, not fearlessness. The Daughter is not a rebel by design; she becomes one because the state offers her no alternative. Her personhood is recovered not through victory, but through refusal. By the novel's end, the Daughter's story remains open, unfinished. But that ambiguity is itself a reclaiming of narrative. She is no longer a passive object in a state-imposed script. She is a person who has acted, suffered, and continued. That, in Zumas's world, is resistance.

Freedom and Responsibility in Existentialist Thought and the Novel

In Red Clocks, freedom is not a privilege; it is a responsibility, one that comes with anguish, risk, and resistance. Sartre's existentialism insists that individuals are free to choose and are wholly responsible for those choices, regardless of external circumstances. Yet Zumas complicates this view by situating her characters within oppressive structures that punish choice, especially when it conflicts with patriarchal expectations. The novel therefore explores not only the weight of freedom but the cost of it, especially for women whose very autonomy is a threat to social order. Sartre wrote that human beings must invent their own values through action: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 1946, p. 22). This belief echoes through the Biographer's defiance. Though denied the right to adopt, she persists in her writing, reimagining motherhood beyond legal or biological definitions. In one poignant moment, she reflects: "I might not become a mother in the way the law recognizes, but that doesn't mean I haven't chosen to be one" (Zumas, 2018, p. 179). Her responsibility lies not in

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

conforming to state standards, but in claiming her own version of meaning. This is existential freedom in practice, choosing value, even against the odds.

Likewise, the Mender's freedom is anchored in her moral duty to others. She does not perform abortions for gain or notoriety; she does so out of solidarity. Her acts are laced with quiet courage. Even when faced with imprisonment, she does not express regret. "There was a choice. Always a choice. I chose to help" (Zumas, 2018, p. 271). For Sartre, this is the essence of ethical freedom, not simply acting, but accepting responsibility for one's actions and their effects on others. The Daughter also exercises freedom, though hers is fraught with fear. Her decision to seek an underground abortion is a profound act of self-determination. In doing so, she accepts the possibility of pain, danger, and isolation, but refuses to let the state define her future. Sartre maintained that authentic existence involves anguish because true freedom exposes one to the burden of self-creation. The Daughter's choices encapsulate this anguish. Her agency is raw, desperate, and deeply existential.

Through each character, Red Clocks asserts that autonomy is not about perfection or purity; it is about the courage to choose in defiance of imposed essence. The women in Zumas's novel do not wait for permission to live freely. They seize it, often at personal cost. Their resistance reaffirms Sartre's radical claim: that freedom is both our curse and our salvation, and that meaning is something we must create through choice, not something granted to us by law, tradition, or biology.

Gender as Imposition: The Myth of Fixed Womanhood

At the heart of Red Clocks lies a sustained interrogation of what it means to be a "woman not biologically, but existentially. Zumas's characters navigate a world that insists on fixed roles: mother, wife, daughter, healer. Yet, as existentialism contends, no predetermined essence defines womanhood. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Beauvoir (1949) famously argued, challenging essentialist views that reduce women to biological or social functions. In Red Clocks, this tension is dramatized across characters whose identities are constantly negotiated. The Wife, for instance, is trapped in the role of the dutiful mother and spouse, but beneath that surface lies a growing resentment. She reflects, "Her husband wants a wife who doesn't make him feel bad. That's what she is. A wife who doesn't make him feel bad" (Zumas, 2018, p. 201). Her identity has been shaped by others' comfort, not by authentic selfhood. This reflects Sartre's concept of bad faith, where individuals internalize externally imposed identities instead of choosing themselves freely. The Wife performs her essence, nurturing, agreeable, maternal, yet none of it is freely chosen. The discomfort she feels is existential, a sign that her being is not aligned with her freedom. The Biographer's struggle is even more explicit. As an unmarried woman seeking artificial insemination, she is denied motherhood by the state, which has defined her as an "insufficient" woman. The law imposes not only legal constraints but existential ones, it dictates who she is allowed to be. Zumas writes, "She isn't the right kind of woman. Not married. Not young. Not sweet. She knows how they see her" (Zumas, 2018, p. 64). Here, we see the violent intersection of gendered expectation and state power, where essence is externally assigned and internalized through shame. The Biographer's journey becomes one of reclaiming her ability to define herself on her terms, despite institutional denial.

Conclusion

Leni Zumas's Red Clocks dramatizes the existential stakes of legislating identity in a society where essence is imposed before existence. Through the narratives of the Biographer, the Mender, the Daughter, and the Wife, the novel illustrates the ways in which the Personhood Amendment denies autonomy by reducing women to reproductive roles. Yet, as each character resists in her own way, Zumas reveals the enduring truth of Sartre's maxim that "existence

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

precedes essence": identity cannot be legislated, predetermined, or reduced to biology, but must be forged through lived choice and responsibility.

The Biographer asserts freedom through writing, transforming despair into creative existence. The Mender embodies rebellion, rejecting legal definitions to practice an ethics of care. The Daughter seeks bodily agency against the reduction of self to pregnancy. The Wife, though bound by conformity, exposes the fractures of bad faith and gestures toward the reclamation of authenticity. Collectively, these characters demonstrate that personhood is not fixed but continually created through action and resistance.

The existential framework of Sartre and Camus, complemented by de Beauvoir and Butler, deepens this reading. Sartre's radical freedom, Camus's rebellion, de Beauvoir's becoming, and Butler's performativity all converge in Zumas's critique of essentialism. Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's "bare life" further expose how state power reduces individuals to biological functions, a process Zumas resists by portraying women who insist on existence as the ground of identity.Ultimately, Red Clocks affirms the existential imperative that freedom and responsibility precede essence. By resisting imposed roles, Zumas's characters reclaim their personhood against systemic constraint. The novel thus stands not only as a dystopian warning but also as a philosophical meditation, revealing how literature can illuminate the tension between autonomy and determinism. In asserting that existence is the site of selfhood, Zumas reclaims the possibility of authentic identity in a world where essence is continually threatened by political and cultural forces.

References:

Afaq, M., Sabih-ul-Hassan, S., & Gul, N. (2022). A Linguistic Critique on Naturalism in Thomas Hardy's Novel'The Mayor of Casterbridge'. *Journal of Education and Social Studies*, *3*(2), 143-150.

Agada, A. (2013). African philosophy and the challenge of innovative thinking. Thought and Practice, 5(1), 41-67.

Agada, A. (2013). African philosophy and the challenge of innovative thinking. Thought and Practice, 5(1), 41–67.

Agamben, G. (1998). Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Ahmed, A. (2024). Reflections on parenthood and identity.

Atwood, M. (1985). The Handmaid's Tale. McClelland and Stewart.

Baccolini, R. (2022). Recovering Hope In Darkness: The role of gender in dystopian narratives. REVISTA X, 17(4), 1224–1244.

Basu, A., & Tripathi, P. (2023). An essence of postmodern truth(s): Analyzing "motherhood" in Red Clocks by Leni Zumas.

Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2013). Principles of biomedical ethics (7th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). Le deuxième sexe. Paris: Gallimard.

Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). The second sex (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Berlant, L. (2018, January 16). The landscape of repression: A review of Red Clocks. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com

Birkin, L. (2019). Life Without Roe v. Wade: A Review of Red Clocks. Femspec, 19(1), 116-149.

Butler, J. (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). Undoing gender. Routledge.

Butler, O. E. (1993). Parable of the sower. Four Walls Eight Windows.

Camus, A. (1942). The Myth of Sisyphus (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Vintage Books.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

Camus, A. (1942). The Myth of Sisyphus. Vintage.
Carrithers, M., Collins, S., & Lukes, S. (Eds.). (1985). The category of the person: Anthropology, philosophy, history. Cambridge University Press.
Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.
de Beauvoir, S. (1949). The second sex. Vintage.
Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. Springer.
Derrida, J. (1994). Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international (P. Kamuf, Trans.). Routledge.
Ditum, S. (2018). A world without choice. The Lancet, 391(10136), 2201–2202.
Erdrich, L. (2017). Future home of the living God. HarperCollins.
Foucault, M. (1978). The history of sexuality: Volume 1: An introduction (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
Gibbons, S. (2019). Contemporary dystopian fiction and the politics of narrative. Palgrave Macmillan.
Goldberg, E. (2018). The dystopian imagination in contemporary American fiction. Columbia University Press.
Green, M. (2018). Narrative fractures: Identity and structure in contemporary fiction. Routledge.
Gul, N., Imran, S., & Wasti, A. T. (2023(b)). A Study of the Bidirectional Causality Relationship Between English Language and Environment: Looking Through the Lens of Ecological Discourse Analysis (EDA). *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, *4*(4), 114-125.
Gul, N., Wasti, A. T., & Hassan, S. S. U. (2023(a)). The implications of anxiety/uncertainty management theory in Pakistani context: A critique from the perspective of sociolinguistics. *City University Research Journal of Literature and Linguistics*, *6*(1), 144-163.
Hadley, T. (2018). A journey of self-definition: Red Clocks review. The New Yorker.
Hansen, L. I. J. (2019). Exploring power and feminism through the dystopian genre.
Heidegger, M. (1927). Being and time (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.
https://doi.org/10.xxxx/xxxxxx
https://www.newyorker.com
Kant, I. (1997). Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
Kant, I. (1997). Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
Korsgaard, C. M. (1996). The sources of normativity. Cambridge University Press.
Lindemann, H. (2014). Holding and letting go: The social practice of personal identities. Oxford University Press.
Mackenzie, C., & Stoljar, N. (Eds.). (2000). Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self. Oxford University Press.
Macquarrie, J. (1972). Existentialism.
Manne, K. (2017). Down girl: The logic of misogyny. Oxford University Press.
Martínez-Falquina, S. (2021). Feminist dystopia and reality in Louise Erdrich's Future Home of the Living God and Leni Zumas's Red Clocks. The European Legacy, 26(3–4), 270–286.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). Phenomenology of perception (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Meulen, K. (2018). Contemporary female-centred dystopian fiction An analysis of Naomi Alderman's The Power (2016) and Leni Zumas' Red Clocks (2018) compared to Margaret Atwood's canonical The Handmaid's Tale (1985).

Meyers, D. T. (2004). Being yourself: Essays on identity, action, and social life. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Misri, A. (2019). Personal choices, political constraints: An analysis of Red Clocks. Los Angeles Review of Books. https://lareviewofbooks.org

Nasir, S., Gul, N., & Ullah, A. (2023). Existential Elements in the Character of the Underground Man. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, *7*(2), 185-195.

Nassour, H. (2024). Abortion-Related Anxieties and Colonizing the Female Body in Leni Zumas's Red Clocks. Caietele Echinox, (46), 207-218.

Nussbaum, M. (1995). Women and human development: The capabilities approach. Cambridge University Press.

Olson, R. G. (2012). An introduction to existentialism. Courier Corporation.

Paltrow, L. M., & Flavin, J. (2013). Arrests of and forced interventions on pregnant women in the United States, 1973–2005: Implications for women's legal status and public health. Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law, 38(2), 299–343. https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-1966324

Rodgers, J. (2020, June). Imagining abortion: Foetal personhood and Leni Zumas' Red Clocks (2018). The Polyphony. Durham University Institute for Medical Humanities. https://thepolyphony.org

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55(1), 68–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Sartre, J.-P. (1943). Being and nothingness (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). New York, NY: Philosophical Library.

Sartre, J.-P. (1946). Existentialism is a humanism. Yale University Press.

Sartre, J.-P. (1956). Being and nothingness (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Philosophical Library.

Sartre, J.-P. (2007). Existentialism is a humanism (C. Macomber, Trans.). Yale University Press.

Shah, R. (2022). Existential themes in modern literature: A Sartrean perspective. Bloomsbury Academic.

Sofronas, M., Wright, D. K., & Carnevale, F. A. (2018, October). Personhood: An evolutionary concept analysis for nursing ethics, theory, practice, and research. Nursing Forum, 53(4), 406–415. https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12280

Warnock, M. (1970). Existentialism. Oxford University Press.

Zumas, Leni. (2018). Red Clocks. Little, Brown and Company.