



Women's Studies International Forum

Volume 92, May–June 2022, 102578

Abortion and the experience of US citizenship in Jodi Picoult's *A Spark of Light*

Artemis Michailidou  

Hellenic Military Academy, Varis-Koropiou Avenue, GR-16673, Vari, Athens, Greece

Received 16 December 2020, Revised 8 February 2022, Accepted 7 March 2022, Available online 31 March 2022, Version of Record 31 March 2022.

Show less  Share  Cite

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102578>[Get rights and content](#)

Abstract

The following paper will focus on Jodi Picoult's handling of abortion in her novel *A Spark of Light* (2018). I will argue that the author uses abortion as a magnifying glass which exposes the experience of “second-class citizenship” that many American women are forced to embody. Particular emphasis will be given to the influence of religion within American society, the implications of racist thinking in relation to the broader concept of biopolitics, the legacy of the Reaganite Right, and the dominance of fetal or infantile images in the public sphere. The conclusion will stress that Picoult's novel deserves the widest possible audience, as it critically engages with the material conditions of citizenship, and shows how abortion, biopolitics, and civil rights can be re-thought, re-negotiated and re-politicized.

Introduction

The following paper will focus on Jodi Picoult's *A Spark of Light* (2018), a novel that explores the controversial issue of abortion and raises crucial questions about morality, ethics, citizenship and feminist awareness in twenty-first century America. Placed within the broader framework of women's reproductive health, I will argue that the above novel approaches abortion not as “a biological thing with clear bounds, but [as] a multi-faceted and distributed effect in time and space, a problem both material and political to which questions of state, race, freedom, individuality, and economic prosperity” are brought together in ways that connect the personal and the micrological with the national and the macrological.¹ Jocelyn McClurg in *USA Today* describes the timing of *Spark's* publication as “eerie”, arguing that abortion, more than ever before, represents a “hot-button topic”. Likewise, Karin Tanabe in *The Washington Post* concludes that the book is “timely, balanced and certain to inspire debate”, representing Picoult “at her fearless best.”²

Before going any further, it makes sense to provide readers with a brief summary of the plot: The story takes place at a Jackson women's clinic, the only one in Mississippi (as in real life) which provides abortion services. A lone protester with a gun has taken the staff and patients hostage. The narration starts at the most crucial moment in the negotiations for their release, and unravels backwards, gradually revealing what brought each of the characters there. Holding our attention to the very last page, Picoult brilliantly explores “the complexity of balancing the right to life with the right to choose.”³

The subject is certainly sensitive, but Picoult is no stranger to sensitive social issues: in *Mercy* (1996) and *Lone Wolf* (2012), for instance, she explored euthanasia; in *The Pact* (1998), she focused on teen suicide; in *Second Glance* (2003), she examined eugenics and sterilization laws; in *My Sister's Keeper* (2004) she tackled stem-cells research and in-vitro fertilization, whereas in *Sing You Home* (2011) she discussed again artificial reproduction in relation to gay rights. Finally, in *Small Great Things* (2016), Picoult produced a remarkable analysis of acknowledged and covert racism. It is therefore no surprise that she chose to explore yet one more thorny subject that has divided US society for decades. In fact, it could be argued that, with *A Spark of Light*, Picoult expands on her radical thematology and, through abortion, draws attention to the links between reproduction and the various faces of racism, or between privilege and social deprivation – thus actively engaging with some of the most crucial debates that have occupied feminist scholarship for decades.

Throughout this paper, therefore, I will approach Picoult's novel as an all-encompassing work which utilizes abortion in order to examine various pathologies of US society in the last fifty years. Beginning with the first (illegal) abortion in the narrative, which coincides with the landmark “Roe v. Wade” verdict in 1973, and moving on to the moment of *Spark's* publication, I will discuss abortion politics from Richard Nixon to the present and focus on the material and symbolic conditions of US citizenship as outlined by Evelyn Glenn, who argues that, materially,

“the autonomy and freedom” of the American citizen should not be examined without considering the “often involuntary” labor of “non-autonomous wives, slaves, children, servants, and employees” or, more recently, by Dominique Leydet, who focuses on “the need to acknowledge the internal diversity of contemporary liberal democracies” and the unequal distribution of both privileges and duties within them.⁴ Particular attention will be paid to the socio-cultural legacy of the Reaganite Right, which is responsible, in the words of Lauren Berlant, both for diluting “the oppositional discourses of the historically stereotyped citizens”, such as “people of color [or] women”, and for replacing, in the US collective unconscious, “a nation made for adult citizens” with one “imagined for fetuses and children.”⁵ Drawing upon recent theoretical debates such as those proposed by Michelle Murphy, who analyzes (feminist) biopolitics in relation to entanglements, “defined as attachments of material, technical, and social relations across divergent and even antagonistic terrains of politics”,⁶ or Mildred A. Schwarz and Raymond Tatalovich, who believe that abortion exemplifies “the kind of symbolic politics that reflect deep-seated values”,⁷ I will illuminate the author's discomfiture with discriminatory capitalist practices and address the limitations and prejudices of the US legislative system in the twenty-first century. In addition, I will argue that Picoult's intelligent exposure of the influence of religion in relation to abortion brings to light a “white male supremacy” project that still dominates a significant part of American society, infiltrating the political system and seeking to disempower both women and the very notion of citizenship. By showing how our own decisions can open up new options in the way reproduction debates are approached and politicized today, the novel makes a strong statement that defies this disempowerment and urges for critical, unbiased thinking. Ultimately, I will conclude that Picoult's provocative and sophisticated exploration of abortion in *A Spark of Light* deserves the widest possible audience and is indispensable for comprehending contemporary US society.

Section snippets

Contextualization

The novel's title, to begin with, provides an interesting bridge between abortion and Picoult's earlier explorations of assisted reproduction; more specifically, the “spark of light” alludes to the initial moment of conception observed in IVF laboratories, and refers to the “zinc flash at the precise instant a sperm fertilized an egg” (341). Research has proved that, the healthier the egg, the brighter the spark.⁸...

Abortion experiences: “choices” and “rights”

Dr. Ward may have declared that he does not want abortion to become the benchmark upon which a woman should judge herself, and yet, for all the women in *Spark*, the procedure turns out to be the key moment of their lives. There is, for instance, Janine, the pro-life activist who has

entered the clinic undercover, in an attempt to collect evidence that would support her militant group's allegations of coerced abortions. Janine grew up in southwest Chicago, a place “where you came not from...

The religion parameter

But what exactly do we mean by the term “Religious Right”, and how have its supporters influenced the abortion debate in the US? Schwarz and Tatalovich argue that the term originates in the early 1970s, when the US Catholic Church and the evangelical Protestant churches joined forces and urged “grassroot political activism against abortion”, thus cementing the latter as their “most enduring policy commitment.”³⁰ Expanding on the evangelical branch of the term, Neil...

Race, racism and reproduction

In addition to religious fundamentalism, the foregrounding of characters like Allen and George at the anti-choice frontlines exposes one more crucial dimension of the abortion debate: the racial one. Dr. Ward, for instance, always pays attention to the race of the women who come to the clinic because “the politics of abortion had so much in common with the politics of race” (324); one need only compare the statistics between the *Roe vs. Wade* years and the present day to understand the weight of ...

Conclusion

Dr. Ward describes the women he sees at the clinic as “warriors” who terrify the male politicians, so much so that laws are specifically designed to keep them down. “As if that could ever be done”, he concludes (325). Is that statement sufficient, however, to pronounce Picoult a “feminist” writer? Do her novels reveal an integrated position with respect to biopolitics, abortion, feminism, and civil rights, or is she more interested in simply raising socio-civic awareness, without proposing any...

Declaration of competing interest

The research which led to the above article did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or any other sector...

References (0)

Cited by (0)

Recommended articles (6)

Research article

[Exploring the determinants of female early age marriages in Pakistan](#)

Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 92, 2022, Article 102594

[Show abstract](#) ✓

Research article

[Spatial geographies, socio-demographic factors and social trust in women's organisations in Africa](#)

Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 92, 2022, Article 102593

[Show abstract](#) ✓

Research article

[The role of educational attainment and educational pairings in women's marriage behavior in Turkey](#)

Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 93, 2022, Article 102616

[Show abstract](#) ✓

Research article

[The TECC Clinic: An innovative resource for mitigating technology-enabled coercive control](#)

Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 92, 2022, Article 102596

[Show abstract](#) ✓

Research article

[Gender relations and the establishment of the LGBT movement in Timor-Leste](#)

Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 93, 2022, Article 102613

[Show abstract](#) ✓

Research article

[Translating international health policies into lived realities: Maternal health, social support programs, and obstetric violence in highland Peru](#)

Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 92, 2022, Article 102600

[Show abstract](#) 

[View full text](#)

© 2022 Published by Elsevier Ltd.



Copyright © 2022 Elsevier B.V. or its licensors or contributors.
ScienceDirect® is a registered trademark of Elsevier B.V.

