

Voices of Resistance: Feminist Discourse in Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home*

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ABSTRACT

Feminist literary criticism has evolved into one of the most influential approaches for examining the representation of women, gender relations, sexuality, and power structures in literature. Contemporary feminist fiction extends beyond the demand for legal equality to engage with issues such as reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, queer identity, family diversity, and social justice. Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home* (2011) is a remarkable contribution to this tradition, presenting a compelling narrative that explores infertility, same-sex relationships, assisted reproductive technologies, religious conservatism, and legal conflicts through the experiences of its protagonist, Zoe Baxter. The novel portrays the emotional, psychological, and social struggles of a woman who seeks to redefine her identity after the breakdown of her marriage and who challenges institutional barriers while pursuing motherhood and personal happiness. This review critically examines the feminist discourse embedded in the novel by applying liberal feminism, radical feminism, intersectional feminism, and queer feminist theory. It investigates the representation of women's agency, reproductive autonomy, motherhood, lesbian identity, institutional patriarchy, and the changing concept of family in contemporary society. The review further analyses the role of religion, law, and social norms in regulating women's choices and discusses how Picoult critiques these structures through her multidimensional characters and ethical dilemmas. The findings indicate that *Sing You Home* redefines feminist resistance as a process of emotional resilience, self-determination, and the assertion of individual rights rather than merely opposition to patriarchal authority. The novel also demonstrates that motherhood and family should be understood through love, care, responsibility, and mutual respect instead of rigid biological or heterosexual definitions. By integrating gender studies, reproductive ethics, and queer theory, *Sing You Home* broadens the scope of feminist literary discourse and remains a valuable text for scholars of literature, gender studies, sociology, law, and cultural studies..

Keywords: Feminism, Jodi Picoult, *Sing You Home*, Women's Agency, Reproductive Justice, Queer Theory, Patriarchy...

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a powerful medium for reflecting society and questioning social, cultural, and political structures. Among the many approaches to literary criticism, feminist literary criticism plays a vital role in examining the representation of women, gender relations, and systems of power in literary texts (Showalter, 1977; Tong, 2018). Initially centred on women's legal and political rights, feminist criticism has expanded to include issues such as reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, intersectionality, queer identity, and social justice (hooks, 2000; Ahmed, 2017). Scholars including Simone de Beauvoir (2011), Betty Friedan (1963), Kate Millett (1970), Judith Butler (1990), Elaine Showalter (1977), bell hooks (2000), and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) have significantly contributed to the development of feminist theory by challenging patriarchal ideologies and promoting equality and inclusion. Their works have provided valuable frameworks for analysing literature from gendered, cultural, and social perspectives (Beauvoir, 2011; Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000; Millett, 1970; Showalter, 1977).

Among contemporary American novelists, Jodi Picoult is widely recognised for addressing complex ethical and social issues through compelling narratives (Picoult, 2011). Her novels frequently explore themes such as medical ethics, family relationships, discrimination, reproductive technologies, and human rights. Rather than offering simple moral answers, Picoult presents multiple viewpoints, encouraging readers to engage critically with controversial issues (Picoult, 2011). Her 2011 novel *Sing You Home* exemplifies this approach by combining personal relationships with broader debates concerning gender, sexuality, religion, reproductive rights, and legal justice (Picoult, 2011).

Sing You Home follows the life of Zoe Baxter, a successful music therapist whose repeated miscarriages and infertility place immense strain on her marriage to Max Baxter. After their divorce, Zoe develops a loving relationship with Vanessa Shaw, a school counsellor. Their decision to build a family using frozen embryos created during Zoe's previous marriage results in a complex legal dispute involving reproductive ownership, parental rights, religious beliefs, and LGBTQ+ equality. Through this conflict, Picoult explores how personal decisions are influenced by legal systems, cultural expectations, and institutional authority (Picoult, 2011).

The novel presents several important feminist themes. It highlights women's agency by portraying Zoe as a resilient individual who reconstructs her identity despite emotional loss and social prejudice (Beauvoir, 2011; Friedan, 1963). It also examines reproductive justice by emphasising women's right to make independent decisions regarding their bodies and parenthood (Rich, 1976). Furthermore, the relationship between Zoe and Vanessa challenges heteronormative assumptions and promotes a broader understanding of family based on love, care, and mutual commitment rather than biological or traditional definitions (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990). The novel also critically examines the influence of religion and patriarchal institutions in shaping public attitudes toward women's rights and LGBTQ+ identities (Millett, 1970; Young, 1990).

This review analyses *Sing You Home* through the perspectives of liberal feminism, radical feminism, intersectionality, and queer theory (Tong, 2018; Millett, 1970; Crenshaw, 1989; Butler, 1990). It focuses on women's agency, reproductive rights, queer identity, family diversity, and institutional patriarchy to evaluate the novel's contribution to contemporary feminist literary criticism. The review argues that *Sing You Home* is more than a story about infertility or same-sex relationships; it is a significant feminist text that advocates equality, reproductive autonomy, social inclusion, and human dignity while encouraging readers to reconsider traditional ideas of gender, family, and justice (Picoult, 2011; Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2000).

2. Women's Agency and Identity Reconstruction

Women's agency is a central theme in Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home*, highlighting a woman's ability to make independent decisions and redefine her identity despite social and institutional barriers (Picoult, 2011; Beauvoir, 2011). Through the character of Zoe Baxter, Picoult challenges traditional expectations that women should derive their identity solely from marriage and motherhood. Instead, the novel portrays identity as dynamic, shaped by resilience, personal choices, and emotional growth (Beauvoir, 2011; Friedan, 1963; Tong, 2018).

At the beginning of the novel, Zoe appears to fulfil conventional gender expectations as a successful music therapist and a devoted wife whose greatest ambition is to become a mother. However, repeated miscarriages and unsuccessful fertility treatments place immense emotional strain on her marriage and self-esteem. Picoult illustrates that infertility is not merely a medical condition but also a social and psychological challenge, exposing the pressure women face when motherhood is considered the measure of female fulfilment (Picoult, 2011; Rich, 1976). Zoe's experiences reflect Simone de Beauvoir's view that women are often valued according to socially constructed gender roles rather than as autonomous individuals (Beauvoir, 2011).

The collapse of Zoe's marriage becomes a turning point in her life. Rather than accepting divorce as a personal failure, she gradually rebuilds her confidence through professional commitment and emotional resilience. Her transformation reflects liberal feminist ideals that emphasise women's right to self-determination and equality irrespective of marital status (Friedan, 1963; Tong, 2018). Picoult portrays empowerment as a gradual process achieved through perseverance rather than dramatic rebellion (Picoult, 2011).

A significant stage in Zoe's identity reconstruction is her relationship with Vanessa Shaw. Their friendship develops naturally into a loving partnership based on trust, mutual respect, and emotional support. Through this relationship, Picoult challenges rigid assumptions about gender and sexuality, supporting Judith Butler's argument that identity is shaped by lived experience rather than fixed biological categories (Butler, 1990). Vanessa's encouragement enables Zoe to recognise her strengths and envision a future beyond her past disappointments, reinforcing feminist ideas of self-realisation and personal autonomy (hooks, 2000; Ahmed, 2017).

Professional independence also strengthens Zoe's agency. Her work as a music therapist provides financial security, emotional purpose, and confidence, demonstrating that women can establish meaningful identities beyond family roles (Gilligan, 1982; Nussbaum, 1999). The novel further emphasises emotional resilience, portraying vulnerability as a source of strength rather than weakness. Zoe's willingness to challenge institutional barriers, particularly during the legal dispute over the frozen embryos, symbolises her determination to defend her reproductive rights and personal autonomy (Picoult, 2011; Young, 1990).

Overall, *Sing You Home* presents women's agency as a continuous process of growth, self-discovery, and resistance to patriarchal expectations (Millett, 1970; hooks, 2000). Through Zoe Baxter's journey, Picoult demonstrates that true empowerment lies in the freedom to define one's own identity, pursue personal aspirations, and make independent choices (Beauvoir, 2011; Tong, 2018). The novel therefore offers a compelling feminist perspective on resilience, equality, and self-

determination, establishing women's agency as the foundation of its feminist discourse (Picoult, 2011).

3. Reproductive Rights, Motherhood, and Bodily Autonomy

Reproductive rights are a central theme in Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home*, highlighting women's freedom to make informed decisions about their bodies, fertility, and parenthood (Picoult, 2011; Rich, 1976; Tong, 2018). The novel examines infertility, assisted reproductive technology, embryo custody, and the legal and ethical challenges surrounding reproductive choice. Through Zoe Baxter's experiences, Picoult argues that reproductive autonomy is closely linked to women's dignity, equality, and human rights (Picoult, 2011; Beauvoir, 2011; Nussbaum, 1999).

The story begins with Zoe and her husband, Max Baxter, sharing the dream of becoming parents. However, repeated miscarriages and unsuccessful fertility treatments place immense emotional and physical strain on Zoe. Picoult portrays infertility not simply as a medical condition but as an experience that affects identity, relationships, and emotional well-being (Picoult, 2011). Zoe's struggles reflect the social expectation that motherhood defines womanhood, a view criticised by Adrienne Rich (1976), who distinguished motherhood as a personal experience from motherhood as a social institution. This perspective also aligns with feminist critiques of traditional gender roles that associate female identity primarily with reproduction (Beauvoir, 2011; Friedan, 1963).

The novel gives particular importance to in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and the legal dispute over frozen embryos. After Zoe and Max divorce, Zoe wishes to use the embryos to have a child with her new partner, Vanessa Shaw. Max opposes this decision following his religious conversion, resulting in a courtroom conflict over reproductive consent and embryo ownership (Picoult, 2011). Rather than offering a simple solution, Picoult presents the ethical complexities of assisted reproductive technologies and encourages readers to reflect on competing legal and moral perspectives (Gilligan, 1982; Nussbaum, 1999).

From a feminist perspective, the embryo custody case symbolises the importance of bodily autonomy. Zoe's determination to pursue motherhood represents her right to make independent reproductive decisions despite legal and social obstacles (Rich, 1976; Tong, 2018). At the same time, the novel illustrates how religion, law, and cultural beliefs influence reproductive choices. Picoult distinguishes personal faith from institutional control, prompting readers to consider how legal and religious systems may affect women's reproductive freedom (Young, 1990; Millett, 1970).

Another significant contribution of the novel is its redefinition of motherhood. Picoult argues that motherhood should be understood through love, care, and responsibility rather than biological relationships alone (Picoult, 2011; Rich, 1976). Zoe's desire to become a mother remains unchanged despite divorce and her same-sex relationship, demonstrating that parenting is founded on commitment rather than traditional family structures (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980). Overall, *Sing You Home* presents reproductive rights as an essential element of feminist discourse, advocating women's autonomy, reproductive justice, and equal recognition of diverse family forms in contemporary society (Picoult, 2011; Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2000).

4. Queer Identity and Family Diversity

Queer identity and family diversity are important themes in Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home*. The novel challenges traditional beliefs about gender, sexuality, marriage, and parenthood by presenting same-sex relationships as equally meaningful and capable of providing stable family environments (Picoult, 2011; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Through Zoe Baxter and Vanessa Shaw, Picoult argues that love, commitment, and responsible parenting are not determined by gender or sexual orientation but by mutual respect and emotional support (Picoult, 2011; Rich, 1980; Ahmed, 2017).

Following the breakdown of her marriage to Max Baxter, Zoe gradually develops a close friendship with Vanessa Shaw that later becomes a romantic relationship. Picoult portrays this transition with sensitivity, showing that their bond grows through trust, shared experiences, and emotional healing rather than sudden attraction (Picoult, 2011). This representation reflects Judith Butler's (1990) theory that gender and sexuality are socially constructed and that identity can evolve through lived experience. It also supports queer theoretical perspectives that challenge fixed categories of gender and sexual identity (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990).

The novel also rejects stereotypes commonly associated with lesbian relationships. Instead of portraying Zoe and Vanessa as outsiders, Picoult presents them as compassionate individuals who aspire to build a loving family. Their relationship is based on equality, open communication, and shared responsibility, demonstrating that healthy relationships depend on emotional commitment rather than traditional gender roles (Picoult, 2011; hooks, 2000; Walker, 1983).

Family diversity is another significant aspect of the novel. Through Zoe and Vanessa's desire to raise a child together, Picoult challenges the belief that family must be based on heterosexual marriage or biological ties (Picoult, 2011; Rich, 1980). The dispute over the frozen embryos further highlights the changing understanding of parenthood and emphasises that parenting involves love, care, and lifelong responsibility (Rich, 1976; Nussbaum, 1999). The novel therefore supports feminist and queer perspectives that recognise diverse family structures as equally valuable (Collins, 2000; Ahmed, 2017).

Overall, *Sing You Home* promotes acceptance, equality, and inclusion by redefining family through emotional commitment rather than social convention (Picoult, 2011; Young, 1990). Zoe's journey demonstrates that personal identity and motherhood are shaped by authenticity, resilience, and the freedom to make independent choices (Beauvoir, 2011; Butler,

1990). Consequently, the novel makes a meaningful contribution to feminist and queer literary criticism by advocating equal recognition for diverse identities and family forms (Tong, 2018; hooks, 2000; Picoult, 2011).

5. Patriarchy, Religion, and Legal Conflict

Patriarchy, religion, and legal conflict are central themes in Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home*. The novel explores how social institutions influence women's reproductive choices, family relationships, and personal freedom (Picoult, 2011; Millett, 1970; Young, 1990). Through Zoe Baxter's experiences, Picoult demonstrates that gender inequality is sustained not only through individual attitudes but also through legal systems, religious beliefs, and traditional family values (Beauvoir, 2011; Millett, 1970; Tong, 2018).

Zoe's struggle extends beyond infertility to a broader fight for reproductive autonomy. After years of fertility treatment and emotional hardship, she seeks to use the frozen embryos to become a mother. However, her decision is challenged by legal and ideological barriers (Picoult, 2011). This reflects Kate Millett's (1970) argument that patriarchal societies often regulate women's bodies and reproductive choices through institutional power. The novel highlights how women's autonomy may be restricted despite their personal experiences and sacrifices, reinforcing feminist critiques of structural inequality (hooks, 2000; Rich, 1976).

Religion further complicates the conflict when Max Baxter undergoes a religious conversion and opposes Zoe's reproductive plans. Picoult carefully distinguishes personal faith from institutional interpretations of religion, showing that some beliefs may reinforce traditional gender roles and oppose same-sex parenting (Picoult, 2011). Rather than criticising religion itself, the novel encourages readers to examine how religious ideologies can influence legal decisions and public attitudes toward women's rights and LGBTQ+ equality (Young, 1990; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990).

The courtroom serves as a symbolic setting where law, morality, science, and personal identity intersect. The dispute over the frozen embryos raises questions about reproductive freedom, parental rights, and family diversity (Picoult, 2011). Picoult illustrates that existing legal systems often struggle to address advances in reproductive technology and changing social values. Zoe's case demonstrates how legal institutions may fail to fully recognise women's lived experiences and emotional investment in reproductive decisions (Nussbaum, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Rich, 1976).

Overall, *Sing You Home* presents patriarchy as a system embedded within religion, law, and society rather than merely individual behaviour (Millett, 1970; Beauvoir, 2011). Through Zoe's resilience and determination, Picoult advocates equality, reproductive justice, and respect for diverse family structures (Picoult, 2011; Ahmed, 2017; Collins, 2000). The novel ultimately encourages readers to question traditional assumptions about gender, family, and institutional authority, making it an important contribution to contemporary feminist literary criticism (Tong, 2018; hooks, 2000; Picoult, 2011).

6. Feminist Significance of *Sing You Home*

Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home* is an important work of contemporary feminist literature because it explores women's agency, reproductive justice, queer identity, family diversity, and institutional discrimination within a single narrative (Picoult, 2011; Tong, 2018; Ahmed, 2017). The novel broadens feminist discourse by showing that feminism extends beyond legal equality to include personal choices, bodily autonomy, and social inclusion (Beauvoir, 2011; hooks, 2000). Through Zoe Baxter's experiences, Picoult presents feminism as a lived experience shaped by resilience, compassion, and the pursuit of justice (Picoult, 2011; Nussbaum, 1999).

A major strength of the novel is its realistic portrayal of women. Zoe is not presented as an idealised heroine but as an ordinary woman who overcomes infertility, divorce, and legal challenges through determination and emotional strength (Picoult, 2011). Her journey demonstrates that empowerment develops through self-discovery and resilience rather than perfection, reflecting feminist ideas of women's autonomy and self-determination (Beauvoir, 2011; Friedan, 1963; Gilligan, 1982). The novel also redefines motherhood by presenting it as a personal choice based on love and commitment instead of a compulsory social role (Rich, 1976; Tong, 2018).

The novel makes a valuable contribution to queer feminist criticism by portraying Zoe and Vanessa's relationship as healthy, supportive, and equal (Picoult, 2011). Their partnership challenges traditional assumptions about marriage and family, showing that strong families are built on trust, care, and responsibility rather than biological or heterosexual norms (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990). Picoult also incorporates concepts such as gender fluidity and intersectionality, demonstrating that discrimination can arise from the interaction of gender, sexuality, and legal inequality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

Another significant aspect of the novel is its examination of law and religion. Through the embryo custody dispute, Picoult illustrates how reproductive rights, religious beliefs, and legal systems influence women's lives (Picoult, 2011; Young, 1990). Rather than presenting these issues in a one-sided manner, she encourages readers to consider multiple perspectives while promoting empathy, equality, and respect for individual rights (Gilligan, 1982; Nussbaum, 1999; Ahmed, 2017). This balanced approach enhances the novel's literary and educational value.

Overall, *Sing You Home* is a significant contribution to feminist literary criticism because it combines compelling storytelling

with contemporary social issues (Picoult, 2011). By advocating women's autonomy, reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and family diversity, Picoult encourages readers to reconsider traditional ideas of gender, identity, and justice (hooks, 2000; Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989). Consequently, the novel remains an important text for the study of feminism, gender studies, and contemporary literature (Showalter, 1977; Tong, 2018; Picoult, 2011).

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present review demonstrates that Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home* is a significant work of contemporary feminist fiction that examines women's agency, reproductive rights, queer identity, family diversity, and institutional patriarchy. The novel extends feminist discourse beyond traditional gender equality by addressing modern issues such as assisted reproductive technology, same-sex relationships, legal conflicts, and reproductive justice. Through Zoe Baxter's experiences, Picoult presents feminism as a struggle for personal autonomy, dignity, and equal opportunities rather than merely resistance against male dominance.

The analysis reveals that women's agency is the foundation of the novel. Zoe's transformation from an emotionally distressed woman into a confident and independent individual reflects the feminist principle of self-determination. Despite repeated miscarriages, divorce, and social criticism, she reconstructs her identity through resilience and informed decision-making. This supports Beauvoir's (2011) view that women should define themselves independently rather than through socially imposed roles.

Reproductive rights emerge as another major theme. The frozen embryo dispute illustrates the ethical and legal complexities associated with assisted reproductive technologies. Zoe's determination to become a mother highlights the importance of bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom. Picoult demonstrates that motherhood should be viewed as a matter of personal choice rather than social obligation, reinforcing Adrienne Rich's (1976) concept of motherhood as both a personal experience and a social institution.

The review further indicates that the novel makes a valuable contribution to queer feminist literature. Zoe's relationship with Vanessa Shaw challenges heteronormative assumptions by presenting same-sex love as emotionally stable, respectful, and family-oriented. Their partnership demonstrates that genuine families are built through love, care, and commitment rather than biological or heterosexual relationships. This finding supports Butler's (1990) theory that gender and sexuality are socially constructed and should not be confined to rigid categories.

Religion and legal institutions also play an important role in shaping the narrative. Max Baxter's religious conversion and the courtroom battle over embryo custody reveal how institutional beliefs influence reproductive decisions and family rights. Picoult distinguishes between personal faith and institutional control, encouraging readers to evaluate how legal and religious systems affect women's autonomy and LGBTQ+ equality.

Overall, the review establishes that *Sing You Home* successfully integrates feminist theory with contemporary social issues. The novel promotes equality, reproductive justice, family diversity, and respect for human dignity while encouraging critical reflection on the relationship between gender, law, religion, and personal freedom. Consequently, it remains an important text for feminist literary criticism and contributes significantly to discussions of women's rights and social justice in contemporary literature.

8. Summary and Conclusion

The present review examined the feminist discourse in Jodi Picoult's *Sing You Home* by exploring its representation of women's agency, reproductive rights, queer identity, family diversity, patriarchy, religion, and legal conflict. The analysis demonstrates that the novel is a powerful example of contemporary feminist literature because it addresses issues that are highly relevant to modern society. Rather than focusing solely on women's struggle for equality within traditional patriarchal structures, Picoult expands feminist discourse by incorporating themes of bodily autonomy, assisted reproductive technology, LGBTQ+ rights, and the changing concept of family. Through these themes, the novel illustrates the evolving nature of feminism in the twenty-first century.

A major finding of this review is that Zoe Baxter emerges as a strong feminist protagonist whose journey reflects resilience, self-discovery, and personal empowerment. Although she experiences repeated miscarriages, infertility, marital breakdown, and legal challenges, she refuses to surrender to social expectations or personal despair. Instead, she reconstructs her identity through emotional strength, professional independence, and informed decision-making. Her transformation reflects the central feminist principle that women should define themselves through their own aspirations rather than through socially imposed gender roles.

The review also establishes that reproductive justice is one of the novel's most significant contributions to feminist literature. The conflict surrounding frozen embryos highlights complex ethical, legal, and social issues concerning reproductive autonomy. Picoult effectively demonstrates that motherhood should be recognised as a matter of personal choice rather than a compulsory social expectation. By portraying infertility as both a medical and emotional experience, the novel encourages readers to appreciate the psychological dimensions of reproductive health while advocating respect for women's bodily

autonomy and reproductive rights.

Another important contribution of *Sing You Home* is its positive representation of queer identity and family diversity. Zoe's relationship with Vanessa Shaw challenges traditional assumptions regarding marriage and parenthood by demonstrating that love, commitment, and responsible parenting are not determined by gender or sexual orientation. The novel broadens the definition of family beyond biological and heterosexual boundaries, thereby supporting contemporary feminist and queer theories that recognise diverse family structures as equally valuable.

Furthermore, the novel critically examines the influence of religion and legal institutions on women's reproductive choices and LGBTQ+ rights. Through the courtroom dispute and the opposing beliefs of the major characters, Picoult illustrates how institutional authority often shapes personal decisions concerning family, sexuality, and parenthood. Nevertheless, the novel promotes dialogue, empathy, and equality rather than conflict, encouraging readers to reconsider conventional ideas about justice and human dignity.

In conclusion, *Sing You Home* is a significant contribution to contemporary feminist literature because it successfully integrates women's agency, reproductive justice, queer identity, and institutional critique within a compelling narrative. The novel demonstrates that feminist resistance is expressed through resilience, autonomy, compassion, and the courage to challenge discrimination. By combining literary excellence with contemporary social issues, Jodi Picoult offers readers a deeper understanding of gender equality, family diversity, and human rights. Consequently, *Sing You Home* remains an important text for feminist literary criticism and continues to inspire scholarly discussion on women's rights, reproductive freedom, and social justice in the modern world.

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