

Ethical Dilemma of Abortion in Francine Rivers' Novel '*The Atonement Child*'

Pradeep Rai¹

Email: pradprai@gmail.com

Abstract

Francine Rivers's a 1997 realistic novel "The Atonement Child" presents ethical dilemma of abortion in a Western Christian society. When a young girl gets pregnant due to rape, aborting the baby seems to be the right thing to do for the good of the girl and her family, but they cannot easily do so as Christian ethics suggests against abortion in all situations. Conflict and confusion arise from this ethical dilemma of abortion, which the novelist has tried to resolve finally by adhering to Christian ethics and having the baby born beautiful and healthy and the whole family again coming to terms. When analyzed this ethical dilemma of abortion by subjecting it to the opposing principles of Consequentialism and Christianity as explained by Michael Banner in his book Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems, it is found that the resolution provided by the novelist is not a resolution in a truly practical sense; the ambiguity surrounding the wellbeing of the mother, child, and the entire family continues to exist.

Keywords: abortion, Christianity, consequentialism, dilemma, ethical, resolution

Introduction

Francine Rivers is an American Christian novelist. Her 1997 realistic novel *The Atonement Child* deals with serious ethical questions surrounding the justification of abortion, and demonstrates its moral-psychological effects upon the individual and their family.

Dynah Carey is the central character in the novel. She comes from an American Christian family that consists of her loving parents, Hannah Carey and Douglas Carey, and her strong-willed grandmother, Evie Daniels, who lives by herself. She has been brought up well in Christian beliefs and ethics. Her mother Hannah is deeply religious. She has always taught Dynah that abortion is wrong and forbidden by God, and this knowledge has ingrained deep in Dynah's consciousness. In the beginning of the novel she is a young girl studying at a Bible college, and working in a local manor house during evenings as a part time job. She is beautiful, disciplined, obedient to her parents and faithful to her God. She is also engaged to a

¹ Mr. Rai is an Assistant Lecturer of English at Tribhuvan University, Dhankuta Multiple Campus, Dhankuta, Nepal.

wonderful Christian guy, Ethan Goodson Turner, who is studying in senior class at the same college and is training himself to be a Pastor in near future. Dynah's life seems happy and her future very promising.

Then, all of a sudden, her perfect life gets shattered one night when Dynah gets raped by an unidentified man while returning from her job. The resulting pregnancy and reactions from her family and friends try to shatter her life and faith in the Christian ideals. Abortion that she and the people around her hated so much now seems to be the only available solution out of the problem. Her pro-life fiancé Ethan suddenly finds abortion acceptable as the only way out of the mess, her pro-life college threatens to expel her unless she gets rid of her pregnancy, and her family gets divided between her parents (father and mother) forcing an abortion and her grandmother strongly resisting it.

In the course of growing tension and attempts to resolve it, Dynah's mother Hannah is known to have had abortion herself that made her incapable of having children for several years until Dynah was finally born. She had to abort her baby to escape from social shame after her lover impregnated and then abandoned her. Dynah's grandmother, Evie, also reveals that she was forced to have an abortion for health reasons. She had had therapeutic abortion. According to her, she was suffering from tuberculosis during her pregnancy and the doctor told her husband, Frank, that she wouldn't survive another child. So, in order to save Evie's life Frank pressed her to have abortion. Evie was already five months along and the baby was a boy. Reluctantly, she aborted the baby.

Dynah finally leaves her home in order to keep her family away from further tension and find the solution to her problem on her own. Though Joseph Gullierno, a good friend of her, tries to come to her aid, she chooses to struggle all alone, and slowly finds rest and peace in 'God's Words', the Holy Bible, and prayer. Consoled and guided by the Words of the Bible, she eventually decides to give birth to the baby and then give it up for adoption. But, once she sees and holds the baby in her hands, she cannot give her up, and instead, feels that God wants her to keep the baby. So, she decides to keep the baby and rear it herself.

Abortion is a burning issue today all over the world. Is abortion right? Should the law of the nation sanction it? – Such are the questions that have given rise to the heated debate over abortion. There are people in huge number in both camps who support abortion and who oppose it. Especially in a religious society where a baby born is valued as a gift of God, abortion may be taken as sin. But in certain situations like pregnancy due to rape where abortion seems desirable, how does such society deal with the matter of sin and salvation of the victimized woman?

Here, Dynah is a realistic character who resembles a devout Christian girl in a Western society, and who is as vulnerable as any other young girl in the world. Since she decides to keep the baby at last as directed by the Christian ideals, she can be considered as an idealistic character too. But before Dynah can eventually decide to give birth to the baby, she undergoes serious ethical dilemma which this research paper has tried to explore and analyze. What led Dynah to decide to give birth to the baby, and did it truly solve her problem? The answers to these questions will help better understand the nature of the

dilemma surrounding abortion in a Western Christian society and also may suggest the possible practical resolution, if any, to the dilemma. This research paper aims to achieve this goal.

As the case in the novel is that of Western society (an American society) which is predominantly a Christian society, this research paper tries to limit its study to principles, beliefs, and practices of Western Christian society. Hence, the result may not be true to the experiences of Eastern societies, where the principles of ethics may vary quite significantly from the Western ones.

Methods and Materials

This research is primarily based on the case study of the ethical dilemma of abortion present in Francine Rivers' realistic novel *The Atonement Child*. To analyze the ethical dilemma of abortion which this novel presents, this paper first reviews one online news article on abortion by Lynn Vavrek and two published books *A Defense of Abortion* and *The Ethics of Abortion* by David Boonin and Christopher Koczor respectively, then subjects two opposing principles, namely, Consequentialism and Christianity as highlighted by Michael Banner in his book *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* to the characters and events of the novel. Also, adequate textual evidences from the novel are sought to reach certain conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Abortion or Adoption

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines "dilemma" as "a situation that makes problems, often one in which you have to make a very difficult choice between things of equal importance." Dynah is in a serious dilemma of abortion. She has to choose between aborting the child and giving birth to it, which are the options of equal importance for her. The same dictionary defines "ethical" as "connected with beliefs and principles about what is right and wrong." Since we are inquiring into the question of abortion being right or wrong, it is the ethical dilemma that concerns us here.

The abortion dilemma is not limited to simply yes or no question, i.e., whether abortion is right or wrong. It is not that simple! The issue is very complex since there is a wide range of conditions when and why abortion becomes (or seems to be) desirable or necessary. As Lynn Vavreck (2015) reports in his article published in *New York Times*, the 2012 survey of public opinion on legality of abortion conducted by American National Election Studies (A.N.E.S.) fielded four options to choose from:

- (1) By law, abortion should never be permitted;
 - (2) The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger;
 - (3) The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest or danger to the woman's life but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established; and
 - (4) by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.
- (para. 5)

The four options fielded by A.N.E.S. shows the range of variation between abortion as always permissible and abortion as never permissible. According to Vavreck, roughly 12 percent respondents believed abortion should never be legal under any circumstance, while much greater percentage believed abortion should always be legal. Majority of opinions were conditional. Although this survey is about legality of abortion, it springs from the question of rightness or wrongness of abortion in a particular situation.

According to Boonin (2002), opponents of abortion believe that “the fetus is a human being, killing human beings is morally wrong, abortion causes the death of the fetus, therefore abortion is morally wrong,” (p. xiii) whereas, supporters of abortion believe that “it’s the woman’s body, so it’s her choice” (p. xiii).

Koczor (2011) in his book *The Ethics of Abortion* analyzes the hard cases for both the critics and the defenders of abortion. Difficult circumstances like fetal deformity, rape, incest, and concern for the life of the mother are explained as hard cases for the critics of abortion, whereas, murder of pregnant woman, sex selection abortion and abortion for frivolous reasons are explained as hard cases for the defenders of abortion (p. 177).

In case of rape, Koczor (2011) writes, “. . . justification is sought not in an appeal to the good of the child involved but rather in an appeal to the good of the mother” (p. 184). He admits that “pregnancy due to rape is horrendously difficult” and “the just rage felt by those who have been sexually assaulted needs to be fittingly discharged.” But then he questions, “Is abortion a proper outlet?” and goes on to answer, “Abortion cannot undo what has been done in a rape. Abortion doesn’t even punish the rapist for what he did. Instead it harms an innocent human being, and, given the health and psychological risks involved in abortion . . . , puts the woman again in harm’s way” (p. 184). Koczor, finally, explains how giving birth to a child conceived by rape could be a heroic deed:

In rape, a man assaults an innocent human being; in nurturing life, a woman protects an innocent human being. In rape, a man undermines the freedom of another; in nurturing life, a woman grants freedom to another. In rape, a man imposes himself to the great detriment of another; in nurturing life, a woman makes a gift of herself to the great benefit of another. (p. 184)

Thus, according to Koczor (2011), by giving birth to the child a woman can transform the horrible crime of rape into an act of high moral standard and immense generosity. In the novel under study, Dynah Carey has become pregnant from rape. Seen from Koczor’s perspective, she has done a highly generous and self-sacrificial work in choosing to give birth to the child.

Since Dynah is raised a Christian in a Christian family, it is expedient to question - how does a Christian family perceive and deal with the issue of abortion? What form of ethical dilemma might be experienced by a deeply religious person in a Christian society and how shall he or she try to resolve it? In order to find out the answers to these questions and to understand the ethical dilemma of abortion in the light of these answers, this paper now turns to the ideas of Michael Banner presented in his book *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*.

Consequentialism vs. Christianity

In his aforementioned book, Banner (2003) tries to analyze the issue of abortion from the perspective of Christian ethics. But before that, he explains the view of consequentialism in contrast to which he then sheds light upon the Christian view. According to him, consequentialism is “the doctrine that [says] the ends justify the means” and “the theory that [says] actions are good or right, bad or wrong, in virtue, and solely in virtue, of their consequences” and so “the morally best action in any situation is just that one which promises to maximize good consequences” (p. 89). Consequentialism rejects the notion of goodness or badness of action in itself. It is the consequence that determines whether an action is good or bad, or right or wrong. If the consequence is good, then the action is also good or right for that matter.

Applying this consequentialist view to abortion, Banner (2003) says, “the teenager who has been raped, the hard-pressed mother of an already large family expecting a handicapped child and so on will be deemed by a consequentialist analysis to be cases where abortion are warranted” because “just to take the first example, the already severely traumatized young girl, probably and understandably harboring no feelings of love for the child she never wished for, will likely be said to have but a small chance of making a good mother or of giving the child a good start in life” (p. 91). So, according to Banner, consequentialism favors abortion in most difficult cases such as unwanted pregnancy due to rape.

Consequentialism can be seen very prominently in Francine Rivers’ novel *The Atonement Child*. Dynah was always against abortion before her rape, but after rape, for the first time she comes to face abortion, and not just face it but is forced to have it herself. When her college roommate, Janet Wells, opines that she must have abortion, she says, “I’ve been against abortion since I first knew what it was, and now I’m supposed to have one? How can I?” (Rivers, p. 66) Dynah is too good to even think of having abortion. When she says that she thinks she should have the baby, Janet reasons, “And then what? Who’d want a baby conceived that way? You’d be stuck with it for the rest of your life. It’s not fair, Dynah. It’s not right, either. Why should you have to suffer for what someone did to you? You’ve never done anything to deserve this” (pp. 73-74). For Janet, Dynah doesn’t need to bear the consequences of the action that she didn’t do. We are responsible only for what we do, not for what others do to us.

Similarly, seeing from consequentialist view, Dynah’s mother, Hannah, sees no other option than abortion. The narrator comments, “. . . she [Hannah] and Dynah would have the day to talk about options. Options? Abortion. That’s what she was going to have to talk about. What other way was there out of this terrible mess?” (p. 140). During their talk, Hannah asks, “Have you thought very much about what you want to do?” Dynah replies, “Yes. No. I don’t know. I’m so confused, Mom.” Then Hannah proposes her option. “Dynah, there isn’t a soul who’d speak against you if you decided to have an abortion. Under these circumstances, who would dare?” When Dynah reminds her mother that she had always said how wrong abortion was, Hannah explains, “When it’s used for convenience or birth control or a way of getting out of responsibility, yes, it’s wrong. None of those reasons apply in this

situation, Dynah. You didn't bring this upon yourself. You didn't make a choice" (pp. 150-51). Thus, Hannah sees abortion as the only way out of the problem in this particular case of pregnancy due to rape.

If Dynah didn't agree to have abortion, the suffering would not be upon her alone; the whole family would suffer, thus making the consequences much worse. Talking to his wife Hannah angrily, Dynah's father Douglas says:

Who do you think will have to take responsibility if she does decide to have it [baby]? Me! How's she going to finish school or get a job with a baby? You're going to be baby-sitting. You like that idea? You want to give up all your community work? I'm going to be paying the bills. Well, no thanks. I'm retiring in a few years. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life taking responsibility for a child forced on my daughter by rape. And neither is she! It might be different if it had been someone she loved." (p. 156)

Here Douglas is pragmatically very right. If Dynah decides to have the baby, her career can be ruined. And not alone she will suffer, but unnecessarily her father and mother will suffer too.

Douglas adds, ". . . What if he was black? What if he had AIDS? What sort of human being is it going to be? Who in their right mind would want it?" (p. 157). Here Douglas's argument is in no way dismissible. He hints at absolute possibility since Dynah's rapist hasn't been identified. The night he raped Dynah, he had used a mask, and the night was very dark. Dynah couldn't identify the man. So, he could be of any race or color. And he could even have AIDs which would get transmitted to both the mother and the baby. Thus, the consequences of having the baby would be immeasurably worse. If abortion prevents it, then abortion must be right.

The immediate and greatest effect of rape and pregnancy falls upon Ethan, Dynah's fiancé. When Dynah informs Ethan about her pregnancy, and then asks in her confusion, "What are we going to do?," Ethan without hesitation suggests abortion. When Dynah says that it's wrong, he reasons, "Of course it's wrong – when girls are using it for birth control or women are doing it because having a baby is an inconvenience or a financial burden or a guy doesn't want to take responsibility. But under these circumstances? How can it be wrong? Is it your fault you're pregnant? Am I supposed to be a father to something so despicable?" (p. 57) Truly, Ethan cannot be expected to be father to a child that has been forced by rape, for he can only hate the child that has spoiled his otherwise pure love. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between Dynah and Ethan breaks when she continues to refuse to have abortion however much he presses her to do so.

Hence, by consequentialist calculus, the right thing for Dynah is to abort the baby as soon as possible, otherwise, not just her but many of her people around her would have to bear worse consequences. She may be willing to suffer, but how can it be right for her to cause other people to suffer tremendously because of her decision?

The two of her own people who advised Dynah against abortion, i.e., to give birth to the baby were her grandmother Evie and her trusted friend Joe. Joe was once a bad guy, but

now he has become a true Christian. Because of his carelessness and wrongful means of life in past, he had caused his former girlfriend to abort the child, for which he is not able to forgive himself yet. He wants to stop any more incidents of abortion now. Evie opposes abortion because of the deep moral-psychological effect she thinks will have upon the person for her whole life afterwards, i.e., guilty feeling. She draws Hannah and Doug's attention to this possibility: ". . . Do you honestly think she could have an abortion and not suffer for it for the rest of her life?" (p. 224) Confessing that she had a therapeutic abortion, she reveals she "was angry and hurt for several years afterward" (p. 223). She informs that her husband Frank also went through the similar experience. Then she says, ". . . Gradually, we buried thoughts of what we had done and went on with our lives" (p. 223). But before one could conclude that ultimately the things were forgotten, Evie continues, "Some things can't be buried no matter how hard or how long you try. . ." (p. 223), hinting that they are still suffering with the feeling of guilt. Hence, for Joe and Evie, living with guilty feeling after abortion is more painful than the pain caused by having the baby. But this guilty feeling is the product of the belief that abortion is morally wrong, and this belief is largely a Christian belief.

Banner (2003) differentiates Christian worldview from the view of the secular world. He quotes apostle Paul from Romans 12:2 in the Bible: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds" (p. 93), and then goes on to say, "this renewal of our minds, which comes about as we understand ourselves and the world in the light of the gospel of creation, reconciliation and redemption . . ., reorders our beliefs and with that reordering, reorders our attitudes, affections and desires" (pp. 93-94). So, the Christian beliefs and attitudes are not shaped by the physics, economics, or politics of this world but by the worldview of the Bible.

Similarly, bringing an early Christian scholar Augustine's argument into discussion, Banner (2003) shows wrong is wrong however good result it may produce:

' . . . [Augustine argues] to hold that it is sometimes right to lie is to hold that one may do evil that good may come; but this is to hold that if . . . some woman should cast her eye upon a catholic Joseph, and promise him she will betray their hidden retreats if she obtain from him that he lie with her, and it be certain that if he consent unto her she will make good her promise', we would be obliged to conclude that he should 'lie with her', so that there would be 'chaste adulteries', or thefts, or blasphemies, or whatever may be necessary to achieve the good end. But this, thinks Augustine, is absurd. Though 'It does indeed make very much difference, for what cause, with what end, with what intention a thing be done . . . those things which are clearly sins, are upon no plea of a good cause, with no seeming good end, no alleged good intention, to be done.' (p. 96)

So, for Augustine, wrong is by nature wrong, and should never be done in justification of good cause, good end or good intention. Banner (2003) also informs that according to the traditional Roman Catholic teaching, abortion is always wrong no matter whether it is intended or unintended or whether it is resulted as a means or as an end. He says it is reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II's statement from "his recent Encyclical letter

Evangelium” that “direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder” (p. 118).

Explaining further the Christian view, Banner (2003) tells that “. . . life is . . . the gift of the Lord in whose service life is properly spent” (p. 117). It means a human life is given by Him and for Him, so we can’t do whatever we like with our life. Hence, Banner says, “Suicide is wrong just because it refuses to spend life in the service of God. Martyrdom is right just because it is willing to spend life, in a different sense, in the service of God” (p. 117). It implies that “what is crucial to a Christian understanding of life is not that life must always and ever be protected and served, but rather that life must always and ever be regarded not as our own, but as belonging to God” (p. 117). Banner further informs that “a community which knows human life to be created, reconciled and redeemed in Jesus Christ will be a community which, in its acceptance of children, gives expression to its characteristic virtues of faith, hope and love” and “such a community would welcome children . . . with faith in the goodness of God’s creation, a hope in his providential dealings with it, and a love appropriate to his regard for it” (p. 118).

Banner (2003) quotes a current Christian writer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who says, “It is in Jesus Christ that God’s relation to the world is defined. We know of no relation of God to the world other than through Jesus Christ” (cited in Banner, p. 135). Then Banner goes on to explain what it is to know or see reality through Jesus Christ:

A church which saw reality through Jesus Christ would witness to the world through a way of life which would express those truths about human existence, its origin and its destiny, which are known in him. This way of life, in what is done as much as in what is said, would be welcoming of children, female as well as male, handicapped as well as unhandicapped, planned as well as unplanned. (p. 135)

Hence, the people who see reality through Jesus Christ would welcome children unconditionally and not abort it for any sorts of inconvenience.

Resolution: True or False?

Dynah is a true Christian girl. In her indecisiveness whether to abort the baby or not, she turns to her God and waits on him for the answer to her problem. Resisting her mother’s admonition for abortion, she says, “I’ve laid it all before him, and he hasn’t given me an answer. I keep praying, but he won’t talk to me. So I have to wait. I have to wait on him” (Rivers, p. 153). She ultimately leaves her home, and staying in a hotel away from her family and friends, seeks peace of mind and answer from God reading the Bible and praying fervently all the time: “[In her hotel room] Dynah sat on the edge of her bed and picked up her Bible. She had been reading the Psalms, taking what comfort she could in David’s anguish and frustration” (p. 234).

Dynah slowly begins to understand what she ought to do. And then, she says to Joe one day, “I choose life. I choose to believe God’s Word. I choose to believe in his presence and his promises. I choose to have this child. I choose to believe that God is the Father of the fatherless” (p. 251). She continues, “However this child was conceived, God will be the Father. My baby won’t enter the world unloved or unwanted. If I can’t feel a full measure of

joy, I know the Lord will” (pp. 251-52). Such a great confidence in her God is born in Dynah! After the baby is born, Dynah takes her in her hands and silently utters the words of praise to her God: “Oh, Lord, you formed my baby’s inward parts; you wove her in my womb. I give thanks to you, for she is fearfully and wonderfully made . . . She is beautiful as you are beautiful, perfect in every way” (p. 364).

Thus, after a long struggle, Dynah, a true devotee of Biblical God, eventually decides to give birth to the baby and keep it herself as a beautiful gift from God. Hence, in this novel the ethical dilemma of abortion gets resolved the way it is approved by Christian beliefs and ethics, but while doing so, the novelist Rivers has, in fact, tried to reconcile the Christian ethics with consequentialism. The baby is given birth and is placed in the good care of her own mother, whereas, Dynah is shown to be finally happy with a healthy and beautiful baby girl and a true love and faithful support of her good friend Joe. It seems all is well at the end. However, it is not the resolution in true sense, but just a kind of hybrid or compromised resolution wherein still lies ambivalence, ambiguity and paradoxes which are the characteristics of dilemmatic situation.

Had Dynah given up the baby for adoption after giving it birth, the conflict could have been said to resolve in some meaningful way. She would have avoided the sin of committing abortion and then putting off the further consequences of having the baby she could have started a new life still supported by her family and good friend Joe. But by making Dynah also decide to keep the baby herself, the novelist Rivers has failed to resolve the dilemma pragmatically. Dynah is happy to keep the baby herself. But what if somebody asked her later in future who the father of the baby was? Will she be able to say that the baby was conceived in rape? Joe may marry Dynah and give his name to the child as her father, but when he shall have his own child someday, will his love not be biased? As Dynah will be engaged in rearing the child herself, will she be able to complete her studies now or have time to do any job, as doubted by her father Douglas? Hannah and Douglas are finally made to accept Dynah’s decision to give birth to the baby, but nowhere is it hinted that they will welcome her decision to keep the baby too. So, will Hannah be able to receive the baby as her own granddaughter and help Dynah to raise her up? Douglas had once despised and disowned the baby. Will he now change his mind and be ready to financially support the upbringing of the child? All these questions remain unanswered. Hence, the ethical dilemma of abortion hasn’t been truly resolved yet.

Conclusion

When faced with unwanted pregnancy due to rape, even a devout Christian family gets trapped into a dilemmatic condition regarding whether to abort the child or not, and though one may try to resolve it according to Christian ethics, the dilemma continues to remain unresolved in a truly practical sense. Hence, in the case of unwanted pregnancy due to rape, the best way to resolve the dilemma would be to give birth to the baby and then get rid of it immediately by giving it to somebody for adoption, thus satisfying both the principles of Christian ethics and Consequentialism.

References

Banner, M. (2003). *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*. Cambridge University P.

Boonin, D. (2002). *A Defense of Abortion*. Cambridge University P.

Koczor, C. (2011). *The Ethics of Abortion*. Routledge.

Rivers, F. (1997). *The Atonement Child*. Tyndale House Publishers.

Vavreck, L. (2015, May 6). Candidates Fight Over Abortion, but Public Has Surprising Level of Harmony. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/upshot/candidates-disagree-on-abortion-but-public-is-in-surprising-harmony.html>

