

Universitatea „Ovidius” din Constanța

Școala Doctorală de Filologie

Domeniul Filologie

***Female Body and Power in Feminist Dystopian Novels***

**Summary**

PhD Coordinator:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Emerit Adina Ciugureanu

Supervising Committee:

Prof. univ. dr. Michaela Praisler

Prof. univ. dr. Emerit Eduard Vlad

Conf. univ. dr. habil. Ileana Marin

PhD Student

Tatiana Coțofan

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**Key words:** feminist dystopia, dystopian fiction, feminist analysis, feminist literature, women's literature, female body, gender-based discrimination, female agency, dystopian discourse, gender discourse.

## Summary

The thesis *Female Body and Power in Feminist Dystopian Novels* is primarily concerned with the place of the female body within the power relations exemplified through feminist dystopian literature. Feminist dystopia as a literary genre offers an ample ground for identifying and analysing power relations, especially when they concern women and their bodies. The large number of post-#MeToo feminist dystopias published in 2018-2019 have shown that this genre is closely linked to the social, political and cultural landscape it is written in, thus, it must be worth academic interest. Despite the highly political charge of feminist dystopia, as well as its subversive character, it has not received enough academic attention, nor has the genre itself been thoroughly analysed. The gap in knowledge regarding the genre of feminist dystopia that has gained a large readership since 2018 was the main motivation to dedicate a thesis to the study of this genre. Yet, it would be dishonest to claim that this research has been motivated solely by academic curiosity. My personal interest played a big role in continuing and finishing this research. For a young woman, living in the world that seems to be on the verge of collapse, if one is to pay attention to the news, the importance of understanding the power relations that determine the fate of the body seems to be crucial for the survival of the self.

The literary analysis in this thesis focuses mostly on feminist dystopias published between 2016 and 2019, because these works offer an opportunity to see the social, political and cultural tendencies of the time-period they were written in, as well as the direction of what is now considered to be the fourth wave feminism. Thus, the primary sources of this thesis are the following novels: *The Power* by Naomi Alderman (2016), *Vox* by Christina Dalcher (2018), *Hazards of Time Travel* by Joyce Carol Oates (2018), *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas (2018) and Margaret Atwood's follow up to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), anticipated for almost 35 years, *The Testaments* (2019).

There are certain obstacles, or rather insecurities, when it comes to writing about a literary subgenre that is still developing, especially when there are not enough critical studies

regarding the genre this thesis focuses on. Thus, in order to provide a stable ground for the research the most part of critical literature has been selected from well-established sources, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Michel Foucault's theories on truth, power and sexuality, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976). The power relations in the context of gender are impossible to analyze without considering the contribution of Judith Butler's theories presented in *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1996) and *Psychic Life of Power* (1997). *Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) offered the example of literary analysis from a feminist perspective. This thesis has also focused on the idea that women's bodies exist in the liminal space between incarceration and freedom, an idea that came from the comparative analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gillman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), as a representation of a dystopian space of incarceration and decay of self, and Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, as a representation of the space for growth, creativity and freedom of the self.

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part one *Gender and Genre*, aims at answering the question: How does the female body relate to power and how is it represented in the feminist dystopian discourse? To answer the first part of the question one has to analyze the power discourse regarding women's bodies from its inception to these days. Chapter 1 *The Female Body as a Socio-Cultural Construct* is divided into two subchapters, "Social Construct" and "Cultural Construct". The former subchapter deals with the role of women in society, whereas the latter deals with the representation of women in art, especially in literature. Overall, the chapter has aimed to identify the place of the female body in relation to power. To this purpose, it refers to the following theoretical works: *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949); *Feminism and Deconstruction* by Diane Elam (1994); *Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979); Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance, as well as her view on gender in the context of power, represented in her works *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1996) and *Psychic Life of Power* (1997) offer the claim that gender is as much of a construct as any discourse; thus only by questioning it one can free her/himself of the burden of social expectations of gender performativity. John Berger's explanation of 'gaze' in *Ways of Seeing* and Zygmunt Bauman's view on identity construction in the postmodern world represented in works *Consuming Life* (2007) and *Liquid Modernity* (1999) round up the theoretical background with a view to understanding the role and place of the female body in contemporary culture. Other theoretical works that help understand the place of the female

body in relation to power are: *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer (1970), *The Sex Which is not One* by Luce Irigaray (1979), Julia Kristeva's essays *Desire in Language* (1969) and *Powers of Horror* (1980), and *Invisible Women* by Caroline Criado Perez (2019). A better understanding of the place of women in culture (with a view to defining the female body as a cultural construct) is offered by Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) as well as literary texts, such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892), Angela Carter's short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and the novella *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1872).

Chapter 1 functions as a theoretical literature review for this thesis. The last part of the chapter in which the representation of monstrous femininity is analyzed through comparing the vision of a female vampire created by a male author – *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu – with the vision of a female author – “The Lady of the House of Love” by Angela Carter – shows that the female body as a cultural construct is represented through the lenses of fear and fascination. Therefore, women's bodies are hyper visual and unseen at the same time. Thus, in the socio-cultural imagery women exist in the liminal space between life and death, salvation and sin, Madona and whore, while the rigid social norms and gender stereotypes do not allow for any nuance within these roles.

Chapter 2 *Challenging the (Female Body as Socio-Cultural) Constructs* has also been divided into two subchapters “Dystopian Fiction a Brief Overview of the Genre” and “Feminist Dystopia.” The first subchapter focuses on the genre of dystopia with a view to identifying the characteristics of this genre. However, given the “brief overview,” it does not contain an in-depth analysis of the genre, nor of its representative works. The theoretical framework for this subchapter has been grounded on the study *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017) by Gregory Claeys, which discusses the genre and the social premises for its apparition. Also, it focuses on such concepts as *literary space* and *dystopian space*, which will later help in the close reading of the primary sources.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the term *feminist dystopia*, the history of this subgenre, its characteristics and main concerns. *Feminist dystopia* as a literary subgenre dwells on the emphasized social inequalities based on gender (sometimes race and class), which led to the oppression of women, with a view to emphasizing the need for change in the society. However, the issues of gender had been explored in literature even before such terms as feminism or dystopia appeared. Thus, the second chapter of this thesis offers a historical overview of feminist dystopia and a somewhat comprehensive list of works that belong to this subgenre from a chronological perspective. Perhaps, the most important claim made in this

chapter has been the fact that Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* may be considered one of the first feminist dystopias. A close reading of *Frankenstein* through the lens of feminist dystopia helped me establish the connection between the feminist movements, the backlash and the birth of feminist dystopias. As Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is widely regarded as one of the most influential proto-feminists, it is not surprising that her life and work influenced her daughter, who, in her first novel, created a vision of the world in which men in their blind ambition seek to exclude women completely from the process of creating life. Thus, I argue that *Frankenstein* is one of the first feminist dystopias that shows the connection between feminist thought and gender discrimination through literature.

Chapter 2 also offers a picture of the chronological evolution of feminist thought in literature that merged into the genre of feminist dystopia in the form in which it is known today. One of the first science fiction novels to question the social differentiation on the basis of gender is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). The chapter offers a list of works in the subgenre of feminist dystopia based on the model of Gregory Claeys work *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017), in which the author describes the main points that make the novel dystopian as well as their relevance to the genre. Yet, it is not enough to present feminist dystopias in the form of a list arranged in the chronological order of publication and followed by a description, since this genre, perhaps more than other literary genres can be truly understood when placed in the context it was written in.

The characteristics of feminist dystopian fiction identified in the second chapter have helped structure the analysis of the primary sources. These characteristics can also be viewed as a result of the socio-cultural construct(s) of the female body. In other words, they are the issues, which the authors dwell on and want to challenge. Based on the preliminary reading of the primary sources and of feminist dystopian fiction written before 2000, I have identified the following characteristics of feminist dystopian fiction: 1) Strong connection to the social, political and cultural context of the time of writing; 2) Emphasis on the liberating character of writing or any other form of telling one's own story, which helps in dealing with the issue of historical silencing of women; 3) Emphasis on the issue of the female body as state property. Chapter two has described the first characteristic while the second and third characteristics were used in the structure and text analysis of the third and fourth chapters, respectively.

Overall, the second chapter has helped place feminist dystopia in the socio-cultural context of the time it was written and has offered the much-needed information that has led to answer the question: How does the female body relate to power and how is it represented in feminist dystopian discourse? The full answer to the question provided by the first two chapters

of this thesis would be that the female body is a socio-cultural construct that has been shaped in time by the discourse of power; thus, it comes to be regulated through ideology, religion and other types of power discourses that require control and domination of the female body. Feminist dystopia provides a safe literary space in which these discourses are purposefully emphasized so that they can be questioned and analyzed with a view to dismantling, or at least understanding, them only as discourses, not laws or imperatives by means of which one is supposed to shape one's identity.

The second part of this thesis, titled *Dystopian Spaces* aims at answering the second research question: in what ways do feminist dystopian novels question the dichotomic relationship between power and the female body? In order to find the answers to this question it seemed suitable to apply the close reading of contemporary feminist dystopia, with a special view to emphasizing their characteristics as well as the way in which they approach the power relations. Thus, the chapter titled The Silencing of Women in Contemporary Feminist Dystopia: Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018) and Joyce Carol Oates's *Hazards of Time Travel* (2018) has been concerned with the contemporary feminist dystopian novels under scrutiny as a means of resistance to women's silencing. The fact that the analysis of these contemporary works comes after the study of the preceding ones helps create a more comprehensive image of the reasoning behind feminist dystopia, which, as it turns out, often envisions the backlash to the feminist movements. In this way, these dystopian texts manage to warn the female readers against the threats to their freedom.

Silencing is not necessarily a display of power or a form of punishment, but rather it is a carefully crafted discourse embedded in the backlash to the feminist movements that aims at minimizing women's voices. Silencing during the backlash is often disguised into the arguments that women no longer need feminism because they already have all the freedom they need. The nostalgic discourse that surfaced in the twenty first century aims at painting the idealized picture of the past, when there was order, certainty and stability, with clearly defined gender roles and safety for women within the domestic space. This discourse is as alluring as it is false; nevertheless, it seems to appeal to young people who are exhausted by the chaos and the insecurity of today's world. The backlash discourse is dangerous because it appeals to both men and women, albeit in a different manner, trying to convince them that the struggle for freedom and equality is over.

The novels *Vox* and *Hazards of Time Travel* show the dangers of technology that can be used to imprison women within the traditional roles by the men who are not willing to embrace the vision of a more egalitarian society. As the twenty-first century is marked by a



rapid technological advance, it is not surprising that the main mechanism that threatens to silence women is a convergence of conservative political leaders and the technological advancement that may offer these leaders an unprecedented level of control over the bodies of their subjects. The novel *Vox* by Christina Dalcher dwells on the importance of language for the development of cognitive functions, thus the restricted access to education on the basis of gender may impede women not only from achieving independence but also from having their cognitive abilities fully developed. *Hazards of Time Travel* by Joyce Carol Oates offers an image of the backlash that intends to not just stop women from achieving their freedom, but also to prevent people from critically engaging with power. In Oates' vision, the most effective way of discouraging people from critical thinking is through conditioning them to regard intellectual endeavor as a futile effort that brings nothing but failure.

Chapter 4, *The Issue of the Female Body as State Property in Contemporary Feminist Dystopian Fiction* analyzes the primary sources through the lens of the relationship between women's bodies and power. The chapter reiterates the idea that women's bodies exist in the liminary space between what can be defined as a room with yellow wallpaper and the room of one's own. Both metaphors refer to a room under lock and key, yet the power of either destruction or transformation is in the hands of the people who hold the key to the room. The hypothesis of the chapter is that in order to get a hold of the key and transform the literary space of decay – that is the room with yellow wallpaper – into the room of one's own there are certain steps that should be taken. These steps are exemplified through the close reading of the conflict resolutions of the primary sources under scrutiny.

The first step is patriarchal bargain, or the path of least resistance, which implies negotiation with power from the stance of the powerless, playing the negotiated role in the hope of achieving a modicum of freedom or even, with some luck, a small amount of power. It is a path of survival in order to preserve a sense of the self; yet, it is not a path leading to growth and empowerment. The novels that offer an example of this path in their conflict resolutions are *Hazards of Time Travel* and *Red Clocks*. Both novels show the dystopian orders from which there is no possibility of escape.

The next step is rebellion, which, regardless of the outcome, helps create enough precedents for drawing attention, which later will help renegotiate the power imbalance. This step is illustrated in *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood (2019), *The Power* by Naomi Alderman (2016) and *Vox* by Christina Dalcher (2018). Through the character of Aunt Lydia, *The Testaments* offers an example of accepting the patriarchal bargain as a means of survival only to gather forces for a rebellion. *The Power* demonstrates the possibility of violent rebellion

that could lead to the destruction of the world as we know it, in case the order of things based on fear, domination and control remains unchanged. *Vox* by Christina Dalcher, on the other hand, offers an example of conflict resolution that shows the possibility of a better future after the collapse of the oppressive regime brought by the protagonist. The ending of *Vox* is hopeful and reassuring, but the reassurance that all oppression will inevitably come to an end is a mere fantasy that does more harm than good by offering a false sense of safety to readers.

The last step is subversion, which is possible only when the power imbalance has been reduced. Subversion offers the possibility of questioning the discourses that uphold the patriarchal order of things, which can lead to constructive dialogue with a view to reducing the power imbalance, if not eliminating it. *The Power* by Naomi Alderman is an example of the subversion of gender roles and expectations; it also demonstrates the falseness of the gender stereotypes. By giving women a physical advantage over men, Alderman shows that gender-based violence is not a personal matter, but a deeply rooted social issue that is upheld by years of cultural normalization. By deconstructing the gender stereotypes this novel demonstrates that violence is not gender specific, it is a choice to exert power and control over the physically weaker individual.

The last chapter, *From Gilead to Present Days: The Testaments by Margaret Atwood (2019), Glimmers of Hope, the Dystopia of Consumer-Oriented Feminism and the Future of Feminist Dystopia*, is the longest chapter of this thesis (and not just in the title), which rounds up the research in order to bring it to the present. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part offers a comparative analysis of *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale* with a view to identify the changes of discourse in feminist dystopia that have occurred since the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The main change that occurred is that of the tone, which has become more urgent and demanding in the power dynamic between the genders.

The next subchapter offers an overview of contemporary feminist activism which takes place online, as well as of the setbacks brought up by technology through which contemporary feminism is spread. As technology progresses and people spend more time online, the tech corporations, have unlimited access to people's personal information, using it to maximize the profit. Thus, the social-media algorithms are designed for keeping people glued to their screens. In this sense, the entertainment value of the online content is placed above all else. The backlash is also an online phenomenon that is becoming increasingly violent and pervasive. Online narratives are pushing the right-wing ideas packaged as ways of improving oneself through exercise and beauty routines, while encouraging gender stereotypes and misogyny. Perhaps, the most threatening of the online forms of misogyny is the growth of the incel (involuntary

celibates) community, that aims at denigrating women and “putting them back in their place”, while also spreading the threats of physical violence, that sadly, happens offline too. Finally, this subchapter also offers a view on the way in which feminism has been repackaged for internet consumption. Starting with celebrity feminism that places personal gain over the community, the idea of choice feminism has morphed into the idea of empowerment through consumption rather than through activism.

The last subchapter offers a picture of the contemporary literary market in which the majority of published writers as well as the majority of readers are women. Literary fiction has also become increasingly feminist, which raises the question whether there is a future for feminist dystopia in this brave new literary landscape. As the research shows, the time to celebrate has not yet come. Even if the majority of published writers are young women, they do not enjoy the same amount of respect as their male counterparts. And while women are celebrating the fact that they have conquered the world of contemporary literature, book bans across the US school libraries show that contemporary literature is one step away from censorship. In this context, there is still a place for feminist dystopia, which after its moment of peak popularity in 2018 has undergone some significant changes. Namely, it has returned to its initial form of a secondary genre that lives as a theme inside other genres of speculative fiction. The subchapter describes a selected number of works of contemporary feminist dystopia published between 2019 and 2022. These works are shelved into such genres as young adult dystopia, science fiction, fantasy and horror. This shows that women’s struggle is far from being over and, as long as there are threats to women’s freedom, there will be feminist dystopias, even if they are shaped by, or intermingle with, different genres.

Coming back to the research question that the second part of this thesis aims to answer, after the close reading of the primary sources, it has become clear that feminist dystopias question the dichotomic relationship between power and the female body by enhancing the already existing issues of gender-based discrimination. Through this procedure, the reader comes to understand and question gender and body related stereotypes that are regarded as true and socially acceptable. In this way, the reader comes to realize that gender-based discrimination is a carefully constructed power discourse that has become socially acceptable because it has never been questioned or challenged.

This research is far from being complete and there are still a lot of directions for further enquiries, especially considering how much the nature of feminist discourse and the backlash discourse have changed in the short amount of five years in which this study has been written. It is important to consider that in the last couple of years the use of artificial intelligence grew

from a science fiction notion into an every day practice. Sadly, it was but briefly touched upon in chapter 5, as just another potential threat that might bring feminist dystopia from literature into real life. The generative AI is growing in popularity and it seems important to suggest an analysis of this phenomenon from the feminist point of view. Thus, the potential direction for future research into the generative AI could be, among others, AI Generated Faces and Bodies; How Generative AI Impacts Women's Body Image: AI Models, Deep-Fake and the Male Gaze. The urgency of this direction of study is suggested by the paradox that AI learns from the content shared online, while the most popular content online is usually created to appeal to the male gaze.

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