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Ustopian Analysis of Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale'

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ABSTRACT

The terms 'Utopia' and 'Dystopia' are essentially deemed contradictory to each other. However, on a close reading, both these terms are not entirely antithetical to each other, so much so that they are even complementary to each other. In fact, both the terms are so intrinsically linked that without existence and understanding of the term 'Utopia', the term "dystopia' will be rendered meaningless, and the same is true vice-versa. The paper aims to explore the seemingly close relationship between the two concepts with reference to Margaret Atwood's novel, 'The Handmaid's Tale'. Atwood herself has coined the term 'utopia' and designated the genre to her novels as well. The Handmaid's Tale is one such novel that combines both the aspects of a utopian as well as a dystopian society. The novel elucidates various experiences wherein the readers can detect a utopian element within the dystopia that the novel essentially illustrates. The paper also explores the structure of a dystopian novel and how rebellion is an essential part of it. Rebellion is what bridges the distance between a dystopian and a utopian society as resistance to the dystopian society pave the way for a utopian society. Rebels, like the protagonist of the novel, are thus the carriers of utopia in dystopian societies. Language is another key element and a subjective tool that helps escape a dystopian society. The paper also tackles the various critiques that this relationship between utopia and dystopia is constantly subject to. Lastly, the paper explores past and future utopias in the novel and how these are a sense of hope for the present dystopia.

I. INTRODUCTION

The terms 'Utopia' and 'Dystopia' are predominantly used as contradictory to each other. Dystopian literature stems from and is irrevocably linked with the literary genre of a Utopian novel. Therefore, a dystopia cannot be discussed without understanding utopianism.[2] Although the word utopia can be said to have been coined in 1516 by Thomas More, when he used it as

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[2] Moneik Jaspers, The Individual vs. The System: Repression and Rebellion in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, and Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go' Theses.ubn.ru.nl (2017), https://theses.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/123456789/4779/Jaspers,_M_1.pdf?sequence=1 (last visited Jun 8, 2021).

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the title for the book that was to lay down the foundations of this genre, the concept itself is much older.[3] The original meaning of 'Utopia' has been derived from ancient Greek. Its meaning is based on ou-negative affix and topos- "place", essentially giving it the meaning of a place that doesn't exist. With time, however, the term utopia has been used to connote both a no place and a good place, that is, 'eutopia'. Moreover, it might refer simultaneously to a good place and its opposite, namely, a negative utopia or dystopia-an alternative nonexistent/non-desired reality- another enduring trope in literature since human life from its very origins has been dominated by fears, either real or imagined. [4]

However, Gordon, Tilley and Praksh define dystopia as not necessarily the opposite of utopia:

"Despite the name, dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia. A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society."[5]

On reading the definitions of utopias and dystopias and interpreting these literally, it appears that both the terms and concepts are antithetical to each other. However, in reality, both these terms are closely entwined. Utopian Writers wanted to change society by showing a new and improved world in their stories, and they hoped to spur the people on to take action for a better world as described in the novels.[6] The dystopian novels have a fixed structure essentially, wherein the novel opens up by giving the readers a background of the structures in place and how they operate. The story proceeds with focusing on one individual who is aware of the grievousness of the entire regime, and he has to essentially rebel against the totalitarian state, and the outcome then decides the fate of everyone in the society. The focal stumbling block for the protagonist is that there is no freedom of speech and expression. Moreover, even one's thoughts are under surveillance so as to ensure conformity to the totalitarian regime. The Handmaid's Tale resonates with this dystopian form of the novel in its truest form. Atwood's Gilead is a typical dystopian society: "in the face of a powerful regime, the narrator follows the dystopia's norms; then, some possibilities for resistance arise because of the cracks in the power structure, a love affair, and the purported existence of an anti-government movement;

[3] Dolores Herrero, *Populism and Precarity in Contemporary Indian Dystopian Fiction: Nayantara Sahgal's When the Moon Shines by Day and Prayaag Akbar's Leila'*, 42) Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies (2020), https://www.atlantisjournal.org/index.php/atlantis/article/view/722 (last visited Jun 6, 2021).
[4] *Id.*
[5] Jelena Zivic, A Dystopian Society in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Repozitorij.ffos.hr (2014), https://repozitorij.ffos.hr/islandora/object/ffos%3A995/datastream/PDF/view (last visited Jun 11, 2021).
[6] Japers, *supra* note 1.

and escape, or change seems possible." [7]

Margaret Atwood's, *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985 and is intrinsically a dystopian novel. The novel is based in America, which is now the Republic of Gilead, and a new Christian fundamentalist regime is in place. The most prominent dystopian features present in Atwood's Novel are social hierarchy, the loss of freedom, and the intricate mechanics of fear.[8] In Gilead, the men and women are arranged in a hierarchical system, and they are under the direct control of the Commanders of the Faithful, who are the founders of the Republic of Gilead. They control the rest of the society: the lower-ranking men known as the Guardians and Gileadean Official army- the Angels; but, almost more importantly, they control the group of women known as the Aunts, Marthas and the Handmaids.[9] The heroine is one of several "handmaids" who, because of their "viable ovaries", are confined to a prison-like compound in order to be available for periodically programmed sexual intercourse with their "Commanders of the Faith".[10]

Even though the novel has been largely illuminated upon as being 'dystopian', one cannot fail to notice certain 'utopian' aspects on a close examination of it. As mentioned above, Utopia and Dystopia are not necessarily contradictory to each other but complementary to each other in the sense that neither of these concepts would make sense without the other. Combining models of "good" and "bad" societies to coin her term 'ustopia', Atwood suggests that if you "scratch the surface… you see… within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia, if only in the form of the world as it existed before the bad guys took over.[11]

The Handmaid's Tale, too, can be classified as an 'ustopia'. An aspect of the novel which distinguishes it from most dystopias and is in itself is utopian are the memories from the past. Whereas most dystopian societies exist far into the future, Offred, the protagonist, remembers life before the new regime. [12]The protagonist has flashbacks to the previous life, that is, the life before the establishment of Gilead. These flashbacks are the reflection of better times, and

[7] *Id.*
[8] Zivic, *supra* note 4.
[9] *Id.*
[10] Amin Malik, *Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid Tale" and the Dystopian Tradition*, 112 Canadian Literature (2021), https://canlit.ca/article/margaret-atwoods-the-handmaid-tale-and-the-dystopian-tradition/ (last visited Jun 6, 2021).
[11] Shelley Boyd, *Ustopian Breakfasts: Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam*, 26 Utopian Studies (2015), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276099411_Ustopian_Breakfasts_Margaret_Atwood%27s_MaddAddam (last visited Jun 4, 2021).
[12] Sarah Stephenson, Visions of Utopia: "The Great Work Begins" Scholarship.rollins.edu (2017), https://scholarship.rollins.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=honors-in-the-major-english (last visited Jun 8, 2021).

Offred revisits them as they give her solace and hope for a better tomorrow. As Atwood, in one of her interviews, has said, "In any Utopia, the utopian part is something better, and in a utopia, the dystopian part is something worse."[13] The past was better, but Offred did not know that at the moment until she had to encounter the horrors of the present, which was something worse. In one of such instances, while pondering upon the past, Offred thinks to herself:

"We thought we had such problems. How were we to know we were happy?"[14]

One of the essential characteristics of a dystopia is the loss of freedom. In The Handmaid's Tale, too, there is a complete loss of freedom, and the Totalitarian state provides the people with a false sense of security so as to ensure continuous conformity and avoid rebellion. Offred, however, compares her life before and the freedom she had back then. Despite the shortcomings of society, she was 'free to' do as she pleased, wear what she wanted to and have control over her individuality.

"There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from." [15]

Now, in the dystopian state, she had the 'freedom from'. The republic of Gilead takes pride in the fact that women, primarily the handmaids, are sufficiently protected. In such a society, "women have few freedoms, but their fertility is respected, and they are free from the threat of sexual violence in the streets."[16]These memories are the only link left between Offred and the time before, making them extremely dangerous to the Gileadean Government. [17] Memories of a better past are powerful and present a challenge to the authoritarian state.

"I want everything back, the way it was." [18]

Rebellion and resistance are innate attributes of any dystopia. The subjects, but mostly the protagonist in the novel, rebel against the oppressive and dystopic regime in place in one or the other way. The question that often arises with respect to a dystopian novel is whether a rebellion in a dystopia is always based on a perception of utopia. The answer to this would be in the affirmative. A person who defies the totalitarian authorities, whether explicitly or implicitly, beyond any doubt, has a vision of something else, in most cases something better in mind. This can be argued as one who has not seen something better or has no perception of finer society

[13] Margaret Atwood, Margaret Atwood: the road to Ustopia The Guardian (2022), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia (last visited Jun 5, 2021).
[14] Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale (1996).
[15] *Id.*
[16] Zivic, *supra* note 4.
[17] Casey Holliday, THE REALITY OF UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN FICTION: THOMAS MORE'S UTOPIA AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE (2014), https://egrove.olemiss.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1165&context=hon_thesis (last visited Jun 5, 2021).
[18] Atwood, *supra* note 13.

will not revolt or resist the present regime as they are not aware of the fact that something superior to their present does exist. In the Novel, Offred wants to go back in time and make things the way they were in the past. She is aware that rebellion and resistance is the only way to achieve this goal. This longing to go back in time is further proof that the past was better and utopian in most senses, as compared to the present.

Offred uses language as an act of rebellion in the novel. Writing and reading are banned in most dystopian societies, and the Republic of Gilead is no exception to this. The mere act of writing contradicts the totalitarian regime and is considered a crime. Hence, people who decide to take such a risk and engage themselves in some form of writing already break the law and jeopardize their status as a citizen.[19] Writing this, in itself, suggests an act of aversion to the authoritarian state. As Hogsette notices, "Offred gradually recognizes that she can manipulate language in order to create her own subjectivity, a subjectivity that can enable her to act as a subversive agent against the oppressive reality created by the Republic of Gilead.[20] These rebels thus, through the acts of defiance in want of something better than the present, become the carriers of utopia in dystopian societies. Offred, therefore, is a rebel who can be viewed as a carrier of Utopia in Gilead with her continuous resistance and apprehension towards the regime. Hence, this further augments the statement that "Within every dystopia, there is a little Utopia."

Further, somebody's utopia often implies and becomes somebody else's dystopia, which in the long run makes the two terms structurally inseparable. [21] Evidence of the truthfulness of the statement can be found in the following quote from Veronica Ruth, the author of the popular dystopian Novel, *Divergent;* Roth said: "Divergent was my utopian world, I mean that wasn't the plan… as I began to build the new world, I realized it was my Utopia."[22] The Handmaid's Tale, too, even though a dystopia for everyone residing in it, was a Utopia for Creators of Gilead, that is, the Commanders of the Faithful, as it was the perfect society from their perspective.

The notion of a little utopia being present in every dystopia and rebellion being based on the notion of utopia is challenged and subject to critique. Scholars are of the view that, rather than

[19] Julia Gerhard, CONTROL AND RESISTANCE IN THE DYSTOPIAN NOVEL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS (2012), https://dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.3/10211.4_434/4%2018%202012%20Julia%20Gerhard.pdf (last visited Jun 10, 2021).
[20] Zivic, *supra* note 4.
[21] Herrero, *supra* note 2.
[22] Zsanelle Morel, The Fine Line between Utopia and Dystopia | The Prolongation of Work Sites.williams.edu (2016), https://sites.williams.edu/engl117s16/uncategorized/the-fine-line-between-utopia-and-dystopia/ (last visited Jun 7, 2021).

a utopia being present in every dystopia in some form, dystopias are not about rebellion and resistance towards the regime but rather about survival in the given state. Assessing The Hunger Games film, Berardi argues that such a dystopian portrayal no longer stimulates anger and rebellion but, rather, delivers the message that the world portrayed in the world that is given and is only survivable by competing on its terms:" In this new world, only the winner can survive, and if one wants to win, she must eliminate all the others, friends and foes."[23] This argument fails to take into account the element of hope that is present in dystopian literature. The protagonist in dystopian novels more than often accept their fault and culpability in how things are in the present, and this realization is what plants the seeds of hope for change and a better future. In "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," Raffaella Baccolini articulates, "It is the acceptance of responsibility and accountability, often worked through the memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relationship with the present and may thus begin to lay the foundations of utopian change."[24]

"Now I'm awake to the world. I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress, we didn't wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution, we didn't wake up then, either. Nothing changes instantaneously." [25]

Here, Offred takes cognizance of her and the others who were presently oppressed to have contributed to the birth of Gilead. She knows change does not come overnight but still is optimistic that if she holds on to her memories and individuality, there lies a better future for all of them. This drive to imagine a future and what is possible is the reason why Cosimo Quarta has termed the human race Homo utopicus: a species "which has hope as its moving force and the future as its ever-moving horizon, promising the better." [26]

The novel also offers another utopia. The second is placed in a future beyond the main story by the afterworld at the end of the book, which describes a future in which Gilead-the tyrannical republic of Handmaid's Tale- has ended and has thus become a subject for conferences and academic papers. [27]

The novel ends on an ambiguous note with Offred escaping the state, and she writes in her diary:

"Whether this is my end or a new beginning, I have no way of knowing: I have given myself

[23] Tom Moylan, *The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times: A Critical Reflection*, 31 Utopian Studies (2020), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/utopianstudies.31.1.0164 (last visited Jun 10, 2021).
[24] Stephenson, *supra* note 11.
[25] Atwood, *supra* note 13.
[26] Boyd, *supra* note 10.
[27] Atwood, *supra* note 12.

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over into the hands of strangers because it can't be helped. And so, I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light." [28]

The ending of the novel is therefore open for interpretation which gives it a utopian connotation. Even without a large-scale rebellion, the ambiguity of Offred's storey allows audiences to hope.[29] The continuous defiance of the regime's rules and regulations by Offred in the novel is what makes the reader hopeful of the future.

"I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light." [30]

The novel also has a section titled "Historical Notes," dated:"2195" towards the very end, which refers to certain documents titled "Partial transcript of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies", which is essentially a study conducted on the totalitarian regime in the past. By expanding the scope of the story beyond Offred, the documents provide audiences with a glimpse into the future, suggesting The Republic of Gilead is no more.[31]

In summation, therefore, hope is what ignites rebellion and resistance in the hearts of people in dystopian societies. This notion of hope, in turn, comes from a utopia and consciousness of there being a better world. The author, therefore, in The handmaid's Tale, is sending a message to her readers through the utopian aspects of the novel by prodding them to not ignore but rather question and try to change the society they live in.

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[28] Atwood, *supra* note 13.
[29] Stephenson, *supra* note 11.
[30] Atwood, *supra* note 13.
[31] Stephenson, *supra* note 11.

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