

Dystopias of Tyranny and Misogyny: The Handmaid's Tale and The Carhullan Army

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ABSTRACT

Displaying the probable future and the doom of humanity and the Earth, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007) are two dystopian novels that present the terrible state of women along with the degradation of the society and the nonhuman environment. Atwood's the Republic of Gilead and Hall's the Authority enforce an extremely oppressive, exploitative, and misogynist order on women, which corrupts the natural flow of daily life and destroys the human and nonhuman spheres. Depicting the resistance of women against tyranny through female protagonists, these novels picture dystopian worlds of chaos and destruction ruled by anthropocentric and patriarchal dictate. With this perspective, this article aims to discuss the problem of patriarchal oppression on women in dystopian societies as portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* from the perspectives of feminist and ecofeminist theories. The analysis is conducted through a qualitative method benefiting from the reading of an array of secondary sources and the theories of feminism and ecofeminism to discuss the similar states of women in the tyrannical order of the patriarchy in both novels. The findings suggest that despite being set in different locales, time frames, and cultures, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* depict women's suffering and inferiorisation by similar patriarchal systems and the way how the oppressed women show resistance to their oppressors and strike back. Regaining their self-esteem and voice, Offred and Sister, as the representatives of all oppressed women in both novels, are empowered through their bond with fellow women and/or in nature, which provides the material for the feminist and ecofeminist analyses, through which this research aims to contribute to the field.

Keywords: dystopia, feminism, misogyny, nature, oppression

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1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, women have been made the objects of sexual abuse, inferiority, and misogynist treatment in patriarchal societies. Due to the male-dominated culture and anthropocentric practices of the societies, women are treated as the second sex, the inferior and the less rational ones (Hannam, 2007: 4) in the misogynist propaganda of the grand narratives which construct the cultures discursively through tradition, literature, and history. Taking its roots from the Ancient Greek philosophy and its reawakening in the Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment humanism lays the foundations for anthropocentric humanist philosophy, whose focus is on man as the sole representative of humankind. Defined by Protagoras as the norm, the term "human" is changed into "man" in the European Renaissance with Leonardo da Vinci's concept of "Vitruvian man" which sets man as the perfect basis for everything else in the world and constitutes the dominant philosophy of the anthropocentric logos around the world in the following centuries (Braidotti, 2018: 1-2). Putting emphasis on Eurocentrism, Protestantism, maleness, whiteness and ableism among various other Cartesian concepts, traditional Western humanism indeed forms endless chains of dichotomies and

conflicts among the very members of humankind which paves the way for the misogynist treatment of women and the destruction of the nonhuman environment and animals as the unprioritized parties. In this respect, thinking beyond the boundaries of the anthropocentric humanism, feminist philosophy, as the origin and umbrella concept for the posthuman theory itself, challenges the Cartesian dualisms of “the mind/body, subject/object, self/other, male/female, human/animal-alien-robot” (Ferrando, 2012: 11) and subverts the “patriarchal ideology marked by stability, certainty, and especially, gender hierarchies” (Yılmaz, 2021: 96).

With its foundational three waves extending from the nineteenth century to the 2010s and the ongoing posthuman feminist wave since 2012, feminism is a wide set of theories pondering on the different treatment of people and the nonhuman nature based on the anthropocentric ethics of the traditional Western discourse on gender, race, religion and so forth. The central idea underlying feminism is that that gender is socially constructed as “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 1993: 281). Going back to the third wave of feminism for the analysis of the two novels, in this study, women’s reproductive rights are highlighted. Defending women’s rights for reproduction and abortion as opposed to the essentialist view held in the US and the UK reverting women’s rights years back by assigning them only the roles of motherhood and wifeness, the third wave opposes the deterministic misogynist approach and generates a discourse from a myriad of movements taking place in the 1980s: postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, ecocriticism, New Historicism among countless others. As a result, the 1980s feminism defends women’s reproductive, political, and economic rights (Hannam, 2007: 168), freeing feminism from the grasp of traditional humanism that caused a rift among women worldwide in the first and second waves through Eurocentrism and making it a global movement embracing all women and their problems.

Likewise, benefiting the theoretical richness of the era, the third wave of feminism evolves into the ecofeminist thought as a combination of feminism and ecocriticism, which would later turn into posthuman feminism in the fourth wave. The literary theory of ecofeminism asserts that the oppression of women is identical to “the humans’ exploitation of and estrangement from nature” (Kaya, 2021: 34) since they belong to the same party inferiorised and silenced by patriarchal anthropocentrism. In other words: “Ecofeminists have described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and of nature that are significant to understanding why the environment is a feminist issue, and, conversely, why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns” (Gaard, 1993: 4). It is a movement yearning for gradual societal change and “offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction” (Gaard, 1993: 18). With this perspective, the research aims to discuss the unfavourable conditions of women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* through the lens of the third and fourth waves of feminism focusing on the reproductive issues and/or women’s connection to the environment. It is clearly gathered that the undesirable state of women is in line with the deteriorating nonhuman nature in the dystopian worlds of both novels, which constitute the analytical points of this study.

With the protagonists of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army*, Offred and Sister, both names suggesting the anonymity and exploitation of women’s bodies since the former’s name is given by her master, Fred, whereas the latter’s name is given as she cannot remember her real name and disappears among fellow sisters, the violent interference of the phallogocentric system into female fertility is reflected as a crucial human problem, referring to the third wave of feminism defending women’s rights on their bodies. While Offred is taken away from her husband and daughter just like other chosen and abducted fertile women to breed babies for a wealthy couple, Sister is left with no other choice but to escape from her husband and the perverse system of the Authority ordering that

a contraceptive device be fixed into women's bodies so that they stop getting pregnant, which eventually leads to increasing numbers of rape and sexual exploitation incidents by the male members of the same society. Moving hand in hand with the degrading ecosystem and the nonhuman environs; illnesses, failing food resources and the problem of increasing human population, highly restrictive and violent systems of dictate emerge, which calls forth the ecofeminist discussion in this research. Ruled by tyranny, the newly emerging order encourages and motivates the abuse and violation of women's bodies as a solution to all those problems the societies have been facing for years. However, Offred and Sister rise against the system(s) and find a way to protect the integrity of their bodies and identities by either befriending a cooperative Gilead soldier or joining into the ranks of a militant women's army nestled in nature fighting against the Authority in the cities. Hence, "portraying the consequences of human negligence faced by both humans and nonhuman environments" (Çetiner, 2020: 223), the novels depict the exemplary experiences of women who struggle to survive in the patriarchal states and the collapsing nature.

2. METHOD

Using qualitative method, this article analyses primary sources, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* in terms of their similarities regarding women's oppression in the anthropocentric dystopian societies with devastated nonhuman environs. To strengthen the scholarly discussion, secondary sources, articles, books, theses, and online sources are referred. Theories of feminism, ecofeminism, and New Materialisms as part of posthuman feminism, works by Stacy Alaimo, Greta Gaard, Vandana Shiva, Noël Sturgeon and Catriona Sandilands among other notable scholars of the theories are benefited from to provide the theoretical background to the discussion. The data was gathered online and from hardcover books to be dissected based on the thematic and theoretical relevance to the study. In the research, patriarchal oppression on women's bodies and minds is analysed through the perspective of feminism with the emphasis on the third wave while women's taking shelter in the nonhuman nature is discussed through the ecofeminist theory.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Carhullan Army* are two dystopian novels picturing future worlds of patriarchal tyranny, misogyny, and women's strife. Hence, it would be apt to briefly discuss the term dystopia preceding the detailed analyses of the novels to understand why the worlds depicted in these novels present a gloomy picture and how they impact the reader. The word "dystopia" as coined from "utopia" stands for negative and undesirable living conditions. While utopia speaks for an unreal society in considerably real conditions, dystopia imagines an unreal society in worse conditions than the real world (Sargent, 2006: 11). For this reason, in the dystopian imaginings, worlds devastated by human-made pollution, radiation, societal conflict, economic hardships and/or natural disasters may be delineated. Similarly, in the dystopian conditions, "floods, drought, hurricanes, and food shortages will kill millions of poor people" (Sturgeon, 2009: 4). It can be observed that these elements are abundantly present in the fictional worlds of both novels. At this point, considering that both novels are dystopias, and they leave a negative impact on the reader through bleak depictions of unreal societies, critical aspect of dystopia is functional. To put in other words, critical dystopia is

"a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds

out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia.”(Sargent, 2006: 15)

Dystopian fiction envisages such undesirable living conditions that it moves the reader for fruitful action. Taking the warning of the dystopian fiction about the nightmarish pictures of imaginary worlds with realistic effect to heart, the reader is awakened to the realities to act and offer solutions the problems in the real world. To avoid the fate presented in the novels, the contemporary reader holds the potential to change the real world into a better, liveable place, a eutopia, an intermediary world between the extremities of optimistic utopia and pessimistic dystopia. Therefore, through dystopian societies, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* draw the reader’s attention to the real-world problems of women’s unfair treatment and natural degradation.

3.1 Oppression of Women in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

The futuristic novel by Margaret Atwood that takes place in Cambridge, Massachusetts around 2045 depicts the story of a woman who is forced into being a handmaid in the oppressive system of Gilead. She is expected to bear children for the commander of The Republic of Gilead. The novel presents her previous life as she remembers the time when she was the wife of a divorced man, Luke, and had a child with him out of their marriage of love. But because marrying a divorced man was against the laws of Gilead, she was sentenced into the handmaid’s service after having been separated from her husband and daughter. In the novel, presented as the biggest problem to be addressed through strict measures is the decreasing fertility due to high radiation and pollution in the nonhuman environment:

“major national issue, sterility consequent on nuclear and chemical pollution, [...] addresses through sexual surrogacy, turning its few fertile women into ‘Handmaids’ to its highest-level Commanders and their wives, using as justification the biblical story in which the barren Rachel directs her husband Jacob to [...] her servant Billah.” (Neuman, 2006: 857)

Yet, confined into the commander’s house as a handmaid, Offred fails to conceive a baby in time. Thus, Serena, the commander’s wife, tells her to have an affair with Nick, the driver, as she suspects of the commander’s sterility. Nick is a part of the Maydays, a secret network of resistance against the system which assists Offred to flee eventually.

The Handmaid’s Tale brings to the fore the issues of “sexism, oppression, and religion made the novel extremely palpable to a 1980s feminist audience dealing with the erosion of their rights” (Dinucci, 2011: 9). Indeed, the totalitarian regime Atwood pictures in the novel is not a far cry from the reality of the 1980s with the US government run by Ronald Reagan’s political agenda enforcing fundamentalist rules concerning gender, assigning women certain roles: wifehood and motherhood in the domestic sphere and keeping women from their reproductive and abortion rights. As a backlash to the second wave feminist movement, the myriad of rights women earned for centuries up to the 1980s are disregarded, all of which find their reflection in the novel.

In the society of Gilead, Offred exemplifies the suffering of all women in her situation who are under the rigid control of the patriarch. Even her name derives from the commander’s name, Fred, which clearly signals that she belongs to Commander Fred. There are several others like her such as Ofglen, Ofwayne and Ofwarren. The system also has assigned officers to keep women in check called Guardians, Eyes and Aunts. The Aunts are especially significant since they are women held in service against women, which puts emphasis on the cruel methods of the patriarchal authority and the patriarchal violence women force on women through the male gaze. The Aunts are so oppressive towards these women that they decide if they should have short breaks from their services or whether they should lose weight. Otherwise, the women shall be punished “if they are overweight”

(Johnson, 2004: 309). They are the ones who determine the rules at the Red Centre, where handmaids are trained right before they are sent to their masters' houses and they also take active part at Jezebel's, where women other than handmaids work as prostitutes to entertain the Gilead soldiers. Offred's marginal friend Moira is one of these women at Jezebel's despite her efforts to run from the Gilead system. Moreover, the Aunts are ruthless in their ways as they torture handmaids on their hands and feet for as they declare to them "For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (91). The patriarchal order is solidified with such violence that women have no courage to raise their voice against it although it is their bodies under the service of men. In other words, "Gilead reads the biblical text literally and makes it the basis for the state-sanctioned rape, the impregnation ceremony the handmaids must undergo each month" and thence exploits female existence (Johnson, 2004: 195).

Handmaids are kept from simple pleasures such as reading, writing, or even using hand lotion or cream to feel happy since only their bodies matter for Gilead. Their minds and desires are out of question. The only ones who have the authority to read and write are the commanders and the Aunts, two groups of women in the Gilead with excessive oppression on the handmaids (Johnson, 2004: 74). The handmaids are treated as breeding animals even to the point that they are forced to have "four digits" on their ankle like a "tattoo" so that they could be traced easily if needed (65). Furthermore, the handmaids have almost no furniture in their rooms for fear that they might try to commit suicide and also their social status is below other people in the Republic of Gilead as reflected with their plain, red-coloured clothes. These women are seen so insignificant that they are "valued only when they participate in the biological acts of conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing. They seem like lonely machines incubators who are expected to remain out of sight unless called upon to serve (Myers, 2011: 13). Raised by a feminist mother, Offred gets frustrated with the whole totalitarian system at the beginning, yet she conforms to the rule in a short while to survive. She even begins to believe in the standard rules of the system after she is brainwashed at the Red Centre. For fear that she will face a worse fate and a painful death if she is expelled from the handmaid system, Offred feels obliged to conform since the alternative of being a handmaid "is banishment to the Colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as slave labourers. The dictates of state policy in Gilead thus relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival" (Malak, 1987: 9). Representing the condition of fellow handmaids in the Gilead, Offred similarly suffers from patriarchal abuse by male members of the society other than Fred. When she goes through medical examination, the doctor tries to seduce her by saying that the commander is sterile, she reacts. "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (61). However, at the end of the novel, she comes to see the possibilities. Realising the dire state of the society and herself, she takes advantage of the commander's weakness for her and indulges in reading "magazines", playing "scrabble" and using "hand lotion" to reverse her situation and uses her still limited freedom to make plots against the commander himself (Callaway, 2008: 60).

Penning a dystopian novel, Atwood reflects the future and the fear of what it might bring about. In accordance with the undesirable life conditions in a fundamental state, she depicts how "the dream turns into a nightmare" and forewarns the humanity for outcomes of totalitarian and misogynist regimes (Malak, 1987: 10). Studied through the lens of Material feminists, the oppression on women indeed paves the way for other kinds of oppression in the system including the children, the old, the helpless, the marginalised men and finally the nonhuman nature that is already severely degraded by the exploitative anthropocentric practices of the very system: extreme pollution and radiation. From the perspective of New Materialisms, the violent treatment and exploitation of the nonhuman environment is transferred into human corporeality through the trans-corporeal quality

of matter (Alaimo, 2010: 2) making people sick and sterile. Likewise, the toxicity in nature is reflected on toxicity in the human bodies, making them “toxic bodies” (Langston, 2010: viii).

In brief, the patriarchal authority uses the methods to undermine and destroy not only the women but also the nonhuman nature, which is considered insignificant in the face of anthropocentrism, and is in a way feminised since nature is the starting point for the sterility in society due to destruction and degradation originating from the toxic substances and chemicals thrown away by human beings. From an ecofeminist point, “[...] the masculinized violence directed at women, people of color, animals, and the natural world through structures of domesticity, enslavement, hunting, militarism, science and technology—all legitimated and normalized through religion, culture, and language” is the situation in Gilead (Gaard, 2011: 30). All of these are interrelated as human and nonhuman bodies are in constant interactions. In other words, “anthropogenic impact of pollution and chemical spills in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) leads to the decline of fertility rates resulting in the oppression of fertile women” (Çetiner, 2021: 646).

3.2 Anthropocentric Misogyny in The Carhullan Army

Discussing the difficulty of being a woman in a futuristic setting, Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (2007) is similarly a story of sixty women fighting against the violent system of patriarchal authority in Britain. In the dystopian world of the novel, the country suffers from illnesses, hunger, climate change and overpopulation, which brings about restrictions on personal freedom and reproduction mostly directed at women. The narrator, Sister, runs from sexual abuse and oppression of the city of Rith, and takes shelter at a farm ran by a community of women, the Carhullan Army, in the northern Cumbria. As Sister reflects, the city has been filled with “the smog of rape and tar-sand burning off, and all of us packed tightly together like fish in a smoking shed” (5), which as parallel to *The Handmaid’s Tale* underlines the manifest of the natural destruction as climate change, depletion of natural resources, human strife, and women’s suffering.

The Authority in Rith proves to be an oppressive patriarchal rule causing an increase in the incidents of suicide, rape, and the violation of human rights. However, it is women who are at the bottom level for sexual exploitation since they possess the procreation capability in their biological nature. As Sister’s husband, Andrew, talks about the situation of Britain, he feminises the country: “She’s a female, isn’t she, this country that’s been fucked over?” (31). While Sister is recounting her terrible experiences in Rith, ruled by the Authority, she depicts how women were reduced to simply animals through the command of the system that each woman must allow contraceptive coils in their bodies to keep the population down. Sister resembles the attitude of the doctor to a vet’s in that he places the coil “as efficiently as a farmer clipping the ear of one of his herd” (28). However, this enforcement proves to be wrong not only for the erasure women’s rights over their bodies but also for sowing the seeds for sexual abuse at the check-in points where women are examined by the Authority police to make sure they have the coils inside their bodies. Hence, it turns out to be abusive as “[...] women were sometimes asked to display themselves to the monitors in the back of cruisers” (27). Sister remembers an officer who deliberately told her to show her lower body in front of other men and touched her with “his gloved hand” although he had already seen the wire of her coil (17). Besides, this practice calls forth rape and sexual assault towards women because they cannot get pregnant with the help of the coil. Sister’s husband, Andrew, finds the thought of a coil in her body “so arousing that” he has sex with her immediately even though she has just had the coil and has been in pain (29). Considering all incidents related to the exploitation of the female body, the women feel obliged to rebel against the system and fire their own revolution because “a woman is what she does; she has no inherent bodily limitations that differentiate her from a man. Masculine and

feminine categories are always social and historical constructs and, when substantialized, in need of deconstruction (Gras, 2001: 68). This is how the Carhullan women base the roots of their army in the first place, through deconstruction.

Then again, Carhullan turns into a haven for abused and suffering women by sheltering and training them to be strong against the Authority. After Sister is welcomed into the community, she becomes a representative of all abused women because her "name is Sister" and she is anonymous (5). When she shows her coil to other women, they feel pity and sympathy towards her and all other women who were forced to endure the same experience. Their reaction towards the sexual exploitation of Sister as a woman reminds of the second-wave feminist movement, where personal is indeed political. As Sister expresses, women feel like a community at the Carhullan farm, and they have a common enemy to fight against. They have evolved as strong women both bodily and emotionally after demanding conditions of the training and joined to the ranks of the communal army. In Sister's words, "the only heartbeat I had was the pulse these women were beating through me" (94). In the same line, ecofeminist philosophy upholds women's resistance to patriarchy that destroys both women and nature (Shiva, 1994: xvii).

After their resistance, those women are immediately declared rebels by their unofficial status since they challenge the male Authority and they have become so radical in their movement that it bans women from having any contact with men: "No man had been inside the farm since it had passed into Jackie Nixon's hands" (169). Nixon tries to create new women out of the old ones and raise soldiers for her army, which is in other words, deconstructing the older versions of women and making them fearless fighters. Finally, Carhullan women succeed to survive in the wild nature which is abandoned and avoided by the patriarchal Authority. In fact, the Carhullan women embrace nature, make beneficial use of it, and found farms to grow their own fruits and vegetables, which is a success when compared to the failing system of Rith demanding canned food from the USA. Women's affinity with nature and the enmity of the patriarchal power towards it clearly suggest an ecofeminist viewpoint about the connection of women and nature. Therefore, when the male side, the Authority is considered, Carhullan women are able to adapt and live in the nonhuman nature harmoniously whereas men are afraid of it and try to find the solution to the society's problems in cities. The men leave nature in filth and disarray after the natural disasters originating from the menace of the ruling anthropocentric system. At this point, both women and nature have become the targets of patriarchal violence through years, which is emphasised in the ecofeminist thought:

"To understand the ways in which nature and gender are wielded as discursive constructs, to investigate the ways in which the oppression of women and the domination of nature are imbricated in a whole host of destructive relations and practices, and to create an oppositional framework capable of addressing their interrelations, it seems vital to explore the connections that ecofeminists examine between women/feminism and nature/ecology." (Sandilands xvi)

4. CONCLUSION

In short, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* aptly describe the dramatic state of women once the violating power of male-oriented societies claims their bodies and minds. Likewise, Atwood's dystopian novel depicts an ultimate point where women lose the roll over their lives completely that become breeding servants for the powerful male members of the tyrannical dictate. Offred's getaway from the Gilead by Nick's and the Eyes' help provides a glimmer of hope for the future of women's rights at the end of the novel. Hall's army of women on the other hand, pioneers battle against the oppressive system of the ority which has stolen women's rights on their bodies and will, and they succeed in making their voices heard at the

end after they take the control of the small towns. In both novels, alongside their struggle for survival in the degrading nonhuman nature, women are put in a position to sacrifice their bodily integrity and will for the procreation of population or to keep the population down. In other words, women carry the greater burden on their back in the apocalyptic dystopian world order. Thus, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* strive to raise consciousness in the reader on the discursive anthropocentric practices of the ruling patriarchal systems on women and nature through the imagined dystopian worlds of degradation, strife, and misery. Through the picturing of these dystopias, contemporary reader is guided for fruitful action for the betterment of the real-life conditions

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