



The Dystopian Novel as a Reflection of Societal Anxiety: A Comparative Study of George Orwell's 1984 and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* under the Lens of Postmodernism

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Abstract: The present research paper aims to contribute to the existing scholarship on the dystopian novel as a mirror of societal anxieties. Through a comparative analysis of George Orwell's classic masterpiece 1984 and Margaret Atwood's critically acclaimed *The Handmaid's Tale*, the study endeavours to explicate the recurring themes of oppression, totalitarianism, and surveillance as reflections of the existential fears and uncertainties of the postmodern era. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of postmodernism, the paper elucidates how the two novels offer alternative narratives that contest and subvert the dominant discourses of power and control and provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between the individual and the state in the dystopian world.

I

The concept of dystopia has long been a topic of intellectual fascination and scholarly inquiry, captivating the imagination of readers and critics alike. "A dystopian society is one in which everything is supposed to be perfect, but something has gone catastrophically wrong. The function of dystopian fiction is to show us how bad things can get and to prevent us from allowing that to happen" (Le Guin 85). "It is both a warning and an affirmation of the power of the human spirit" (Bloom 1). Against this backdrop, the seminal works of George Orwell's 1984 and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* stand out as towering achievements of the dystopian genre, encapsulating the anxieties, hopes, and aspirations of their respective cultural and historical contexts with unparalleled eloquence and insight.

The centrality of 1984 and *The Handmaid's Tale* in the dystopian canon has long been acknowledged by critics. Literary critic Lionel Trilling remarked that 1984 is a novel of "frightening power" that "succeeds in fusing certain ideas and emotions and in giving them symbolic form." He further noted that Orwell's work "manages to say in a way that is very nearly definitive what a great many thoughtful people believe about our times" (Trilling 25). In the words of Elaine Showalter, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a "compelling dystopia" that "vividly imagines a future in which women's rights are entirely circumscribed." Showalter further noted that the novel's "profound feminist critique" of patriarchal power structures and its portrayal of the "totalitarianism of the right" makes it a work of "feminist protest literature" that remains "both timely and timeless" (Showalter 217). These and other critics have noted the works' emphasis on the dangers of totalitarianism, the manipulation of language, and the subjugation of women, making them ideal candidates for a comparative study on the dystopian novel as a reflection of societal anxiety.

By conducting a meticulous and comprehensive comparative study of these two works, this thesis seeks to unravel the complex web of literary techniques and themes that underpin the dystopian novel, tracing its

evolution and significance across time and space. Through a rigorous analysis of the portrayal of political control, gender roles, and social inequality in these novels, this study will shed light on the ways in which dystopian literature reflects and critiques contemporary society while also illuminating its timeless relevance to the human condition. In doing so, this thesis will offer a nuanced and insightful examination of the dystopian novel as a powerful and enduring reflection of our cultural and political anxieties and reaffirm its place as an indispensable medium for societal critique and reflection in the present epoch of global turmoil and uncertainty.

To yield a deeper understanding of the underlying literary techniques and themes at work in *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, this thesis will employ the theory of postmodernism as a comparative lens. Postmodernism, with its focus on the fragmentation and instability of language, identity, and reality, provides a valuable framework for examining the dystopian genre's emphasis on the blurring of boundaries and the subversion of traditional norms and expectations. Through a close analysis of the use of language, symbolism, and imagery in these two novels, this study will explore how postmodernism informs their respective narratives, characters, and themes.

II

The origins of dystopian literature can be traced back to the early modern period when writers began to envision alternative social and political systems. One of the earliest examples of dystopian literature is Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which describes an ideal society based on reason and equality. However, More's *Utopia* also functions as a critique of the corrupt and unequal society of his time and, therefore, can be perceived as a precursor to dystopian literature. Other noteworthy instances of early dystopian literature include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which satirises the social and political institutions of eighteenth-century England, and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), which describes a society where machines have become so advanced that they have taken over human life.

The modern era saw the emergence of dystopian literature as a distinct genre, with the publication of George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). These novels, along with other works of dystopian literature such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), reflected the anxieties of the post-World War II era. Specifically, they expressed concerns about totalitarianism, mass media, and the dehumanising effects of technology.

Subsequently, dystopian literature continued to evolve and adapt to changing social and political conditions. In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist dystopian literature emerged as a subgenre, with works such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) exploring themes of gender inequality and reproductive rights. More recently, dystopian literature has responded to global issues like climate change and mass migration, with novels such as Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017) depicting a world ravaged by ecological disasters and civil unrest. Despite its diverse origins and themes, dystopian literature is characterised by several fundamental features. Firstly, it presents a critique of prevailing social, political, or economic systems, frequently by depicting a world where these systems have broken down or become corrupted. Secondly, it envisages a future that is bleak and oppressive, where individual freedom and autonomy are severely constrained. Thirdly, it frequently explores themes of power and control, depicting the struggle between the individual and the state or other authority figures. Finally, dystopian literature often reflects the anxieties and concerns of its historical moment, a warning about the dangers of certain political or social trends.

Postmodernism, a philosophical and artistic movement characterised by a rejection of traditional authority and a sceptical attitude towards grand narratives, has had a profound impact on the dystopian genre. Postmodernism has challenged the traditional assumptions of dystopian literature, such as the belief in a totalitarian regime or the inevitability of dystopia, by offering multiple perspectives and questioning the very nature of reality. In dystopian literature, postmodernism is often used to subvert the traditional narrative structure and to highlight the power dynamics between the individual and the state. It is also used to explore the themes of identity, representation, and power, which are central to dystopian visions. Postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, pastiche, intertextuality, and metafiction are often employed in dystopian literature to create a sense of disorientation and critique the dominant ideologies of society. Thus, postmodernism plays a significant role in shaping the form and content of dystopian literature, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of societal anxieties and the human condition.

III

George Orwell's *1984* has been widely praised for its prophetic and insightful commentary on the nature of totalitarianism and the dangers of authoritarianism. Critic and literary theorist Frederic Jameson notes that the novel "establishes the basic paradigm of the dystopian novel" and that its influence can be seen in numerous subsequent works of fiction (Jameson 1984). The use of metafiction in the novel has also been lauded by critics, with literary scholar Linda Hutcheon observing that "the novel is about the making of truth and the construction of reality" (Hutcheon 1991). This is exemplified by the protagonist Winston Smith's job at the Ministry of Truth, where he helps to rewrite history to align with the state's propaganda. As Orwell writes, "who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 1984, p. 37). The fragmentation and non-linear narrative structures in the novel contribute to a sense of disorientation and confusion that mirrors the experience of living under a totalitarian regime. Orwell also employs intertextuality, drawing on historical and literary references to create a more complex and layered critique of power and authority. This is exemplified by the use of the slogan "Ignorance is Strength," which is a deliberate inversion of the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge is power. These postmodern elements in *1984* allow for a more nuanced and sophisticated critique of a dystopian society, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Orwell's work in a postmodern era.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a seminal work of dystopian fiction that incorporates several postmodern elements to critique patriarchal power structures and societal norms. A fragmented narrative structure that jumps back and forth between the past and present is used in the book to create a sense of bewilderment that parallels the protagonist's experience of living under an oppressive regime. Critic Joseph Conte notes that the novel's "postmodern form serves to illustrate the difficulties of knowing the truth in a totalitarian society" (Conte 1994). In order to generate a more nuanced and multi-layered critique of power and oppression, the book also makes use of intertextuality by referencing other works of literature and historical events, such as the Bible and the Salem witch trials. Atwood has commented on the significance of intertextuality in her work, stating that "we live in a world where there are a lot of texts, and the relationship between those texts is a very interesting one" (Atwood 1991). *The Handmaid's Tale* also subverts traditional narrative structures by employing a first-person female narrator who resists the patriarchal norms of her society. The dystopian elements in the novel include the brutal treatment of women and the extreme suppression of individualism and freedom of thought. As Atwood writes, "the control of women and babies has been a feature of every repressive regime on the planet" (Atwood 2017).

These two strikingly dissimilar yet strikingly alike works of dystopian literature offer a compelling analysis of societal anxiety and dystopian visions through the multifaceted lens of postmodernism. Both Orwell and Atwood utilise their respective works as a platform to unearth, scrutinise and interrogate the deleterious aspects of oppressive regimes and their control over the masses. However, despite their shared themes of totalitarianism and subjugation, the novels diverge in their settings, characters, and utilisation of postmodern techniques. While *1984* epitomises a world of manipulation and indoctrination, a bleak society where language and history are restructured to reinforce a totalitarian government's grip on the people, *The Handmaid's Tale* is rooted in a near-future United States where an ultra-conservative religious order has implemented draconian policies that effectively subjugate women. Nevertheless, the two novels share a commonality in their characters' yearning for liberty and autonomy, with Winston Smith of *1984* rebelling against the omnipresent and omnipotent government and Offred of *The Handmaid's Tale* exhibiting her resistance by asserting her agency amidst a climate of stringent societal norms.

While each is distinct and respective to their author, the works' postmodern attributes lend additional layers of depth to their critiques of dystopian societies. *1984*'s fragmented narrative, which mirrors the protagonist's disorientation and bewilderment in a world where language and history are manipulated to control the masses, conveys a message of instability and disarray. Orwell deploys 'Newspeak' - an invented language employed by the ruling party to manage thought and limit expression. The use of postmodern aesthetics in *1984* serves as an allegory for society's general schizophrenia in balancing its past with its future. Literary critic Frederic Jameson notes that the novel's postmodernism "is to be understood not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features" (Jameson 1991). In contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* uses intertextuality, drawing from historical and literary references, to convey a nuanced, intersectional critique of power and oppression. The utilisation of such techniques infuses the novel with the complexity and texture that makes it an iconic work of dystopian literature. Atwood has acknowledged that Orwell's *1984* inspired her work, declaring that "George Orwell's *1984* is the great dystopian novel, the prototypical work of its genre" (Atwood 2003).

In conclusion, both *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* offer profound critiques of dystopian societies through the prism of postmodernism. While *1984* features manipulation and control of language and history, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the control of women's bodies and their erasure of identity. These works' postmodern techniques serve to amplify their criticisms of power, with *1984* using fragmentation to communicate disorientation and *The Handmaid's Tale* relying on intertextuality to present a nuanced narrative. Ultimately, both novels remain relevant in today's postmodern era, where the control of language, history, and power continues to be a concern. Their reflections on societal anxiety and dystopian visions continue to reverberate.

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