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DISCUSSING THE FEMINIST AGENDA IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S DYSTOPIAN NOVELS *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND *MADDADDAM*[1]

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ABSTRACT. In this article, an analysis is made of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *MaddAddam* (2013) from a gendered and generic perspective. *The Handmaid's Tale* was one of the novels that marked the dystopian turn in the 1980s writing of fiction, while *MaddAddam* is, for some critics, a feminist critical dystopia in which the ending retains hope for a better future. Consequently, both novels belong a priori to a specific branch of the dystopian genre: the feminist dystopian novel. However, some ambiguity or even contradictory readings can be inferred in both texts. This article explores *The Handmaid's Tale* and *MaddAddam's* portrayal of women and their acts of resistance in order to assess these texts' liberatory or still inherently conservative messages of their endings, especially regarding women.

Keywords: Atwood, Feminist Dystopia, Endings and Dystopias, Transgressive Utopias.

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DEBATIENDO LA AGENDA FEMINISTA EN LAS NOVELAS DISTÓPICAS DE MARGARET ATWOOD *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* Y *MADDADDAM*

RESUMEN. En este artículo se hace un análisis de las novelas de Margaret Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) y *MaddAddam* (2013) desde las perspectivas de los roles de género y de género literario. *The Handmaid's Tale* fue una de las novelas que marcó el giro hacia las distopías, mientras que *MaddAddam* es para algunos críticos una distopía crítica feminista en la que el final todavía retiene la esperanza de un futuro mejor. En consecuencia, ambas novelas pertenecen a priori a una rama específica dentro del género distópico: la novela distópica feminista. Sin embargo, se puede deducir cierta ambigüedad o incluso lecturas contradictorias en ambos textos. Este artículo explora el retrato que *The Handmaid's Tale* y *MaddAddam* hacen de las mujeres y de sus actos de resistencia con el fin de analizar los mensajes liberatorios o todavía inherentemente conservadores de sus finales, especialmente con respecto a las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Atwood, distopía feminista, distopías y finales, utopías transgresivas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) was one of the publications that heralded the dystopian move in the 1980s fiction. Moreover, according to Tom Moylan, *The Handmaid* "opened up the dystopia to new possibilities for its creative realization and reception" (2000: 150). Dystopian approaches are a subjective way of wrestling with the changing social reality, the economic, political, and cultural conditions of a specific geographical and historical society creatively displayed into the future to criticize it. In this article, an analysis is made of Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *MaddAddam* (2013) from a gendered and generic perspective. If *The Handmaid's Tale* marked the dystopian turn, *MaddAddam*, the third novel in the *MaddAddam* trilogy –*Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam*– is, for some authors, a feminist critical dystopia in which its ending, and thus the whole trilogy denouement, retains hope for a better future. As a result, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *MaddAddam* a priori conform to a specific subgenre of dystopian fiction defined as feminist dystopian fiction.

However, some ambiguity or even contradictory readings can be found in the texts. This article examines the portrayal of female characters and their acts of resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *MaddAddam* to assess both novels' *liberatory* or *inherently conservative* final messages, particularly regarding women roles and expectations.

2. *THE HANMAID'S TALE*, A FEMINIST DYSTOPIA?

When writing her novel in the 1980s, Atwood imposed herself a strict rule: she "would not include any detail that people had not already done, sometime, somewhere; or that they lacked the technology to do" (Atwood 2022: 252). There is a general agreement that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopia, but what kind of dystopia? Who or what are the targets for the critique? *The Handmaid's Tale* was extensively classified and recognized at first as a "feminist dystopia" (Malik 1987: 11), a "global feminist fable" (Bouson 2010: 3), "a political tract deploring […] antifeminist attitudes" (Lehmann-Haupt 1986: n.p.), or even a "feminist *1984*" (Johnson 1986: n.p.). In this line, Gina Wisker claims that Atwood's novelty is that the novel is "a feminist challenge to the forms of dystopian fiction" (2012: 95). Furthermore, Coral Ann Howells agrees with the term feminist dystopia: "This is a herstory, a deconstructive view of patriarchal authority, which in turn is challenged at an academic conference two hundred years later" (2000: 142). Nonetheless, not long after its first publication, the novel sparked significant controversy in its portrayal of feminism. For instance, in the harshest critical review ever received by *The Handmaid's Tale*, Mary McCarthy claimed that the novel partially blamed "excessive feminism" for the creation of Gilead (1986: n.p.). Nevertheless, what Atwood stated she wanted in 1984 and still maintained in 2017 is to "try a dystopia from the female point of view [. . .] this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a 'feminist dystopia' except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered 'feminist' by those who think women ought not to have these things" (2011: 146).

Even if Atwood disagrees with *The Handmaid's Tale*'s label of *feminist dystopia*, there are legitimate reasons that support, at first sight, this gendered and genre classification. Dystopias, as Howells states, have a warning function of sending out "danger signals to its readers" (2008: 161) and, as such, *The Handmaid's Tale* has undeniable feminist warning messages. Some feminists read the novel as a warning against their most feared threats to women. As Barbara Ehrenreich explains, there is a branch of feminism –cultural feminism– that sees "all of history as a male assault on women and, by proxy, on nature itself" (2004: 78), and consequently they predict and fear a future in which women are deprived of all their rights as citizens. In this frightening future, women would be forced to fulfill a limited role only as "breeders and scullery maids" to be discarded and annihilated when technology makes enough progress to supply their wombs and cause them unnecessary for human reproduction (Ehrenreich 2004: 78-79). *The Handmaid's Tale* puts into practice this feminist nightmare of women's subjugation. In the strongly patriarchal Gilead, women have "freedom from" instead of "freedom to" (Atwood 1996: 37). Those who are not classified as unwomen are protected from sexual assaults and kept safe in their imposed role of breeders, wives, and housekeepers. In the first steps of the regime's creation, women are deprived of their jobs and strictly forbidden to hold property (1996: 187). Later on, they are denied access to any education and reading (1996: 98). Handmaids are taught their duties in the "Domestic Science Room" (1996: 127). They are indoctrinated through documentaries and old porn films –presented

as actual footage– to learn how badly they were treated by men in the time before Gilead (1996: 128). As Offred recognizes, after the brainwashing in the Red Centre, they were "losing the taste for freedom, already [they] were finding these walls secure" (1996: 143). Even worse, the Historical Notes chapter mentions the existence of "escaped Handmaids who had difficulty adjusting to life in the outside world […] after the *protected existence* they had led" (1996: 323, emphasis added). This vision of women as infantilized and totally subjugated to men's whim and compulsory protection functions as the materialization of cultural feminism's worst fears. Consequently, it is easy to understand that the term "feminist" became quickly attached to Atwood's dystopian novel.

Totalitarian societies in dystopic fictions repress their citizens' thoughts and speech. Without freedom of speech, storytelling comes as an act of resistance because for Offred "to tell her tale is to risk her life" (Stein 2013: 261). Karen Stein emphasizes the importance of language in dystopias and sees Offred as a "Scheherazade in Dystopia" linking "the feminist project to 'steal the language' of/from patriarchy – and the postmodern critique of language" (2013: 261). However, it is precisely in language and the way the story is narrated –narrative time, reconstruction of the story– that some ambiguity or even contradictory readings can be found in the text. *The Handmaid's Tale* offers two different projected futures. One is Offred's story, and the other one is the conference that takes place at the "University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195" (Atwood 1996: 311). Professor Pieixoto introduces Offred's story as the result of writing down *his* random organization of some thirty cassette tapes found in the former US state of Maine – which was part of the republic of Gilead. The Historical Notes chapter serves to confirm Offred's survival after the ending of her first-person narration as well as the end of the nightmarish society of the republic of Gilead. However, it also introduces some doubts about Offred's reliability as a narrator –the veracity of her story, because it "might be a forgery" (1996*:* 314 – and shows how the society after Gilead is too similar to that society that allowed Gilead to be born. As Arnold Davidson remarks: "Even with the lesson of Gilead readily at hand, the intellectuals of 2195 seem to be preparing the way for Gilead again" (1988: 120). Borrowing again from Davidson, he points to the ideological construction of history when he says: "how we choose to construct history partly determines the history we are likely to get" (1988: 115). At the end of the novel, a male narrator, Pieixoto, tries to be "cautious about passing moral judgements upon the Gileadeans" (Atwood 1996: 314). Atwood, through Pieixoto, ironically questions, deconstructs and reinterprets Offred's story[2], engaging in metafictional commentary of the storytelling process, disclosing this way the fictional character of her story and by extension of any narrative:

[2] *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985 when postmodernism was at its peak, and it is generally considered as one of the best examples of postmodern fiction. The Historical Notes chapter is key to presenting the characteristic postmodern multiplicity of narratives. On the one hand, Offred's voice tries to destabilize the oppressive order, and, on the other, Pieixoto appropriates her story under the pretension of offering objective truth. (Caminero-Santangelo 1994: n.p.)

> Supposing, then, the tapes to be genuine, what of the nature of the account itself? Obviously, it could not have been recorded during the period of time it recounts, since, if the author is telling the truth, no machine or tapes would have been available to her, nor would she have had a place of concealment for them. Also, there is a certain reflective quality about the narrative that would to my mind rule out synchronicity. It has a whiff of emotion recollected, if not in tranquility, at least post facto. (Atwood 1996: 315)

Pieixoto's commentary makes perfectly clear that Offred's apparently interpolated narration –composed by present impressions during her life as handmaid and her subsequent narration from the time she was a free US citizen– can be only subsequent narration rendered from any unknown moment in the future in which she is no longer Offred. Thus, the total veracity of her narrative of resistance is suddenly under suspicion of distorting the truth. The questioning of Offred's narrative reaches a new level when the importance of language and narration as act of resistance in dystopian narratives is considered. As Ildney Cavalcanty argues, "Futuristic dystopias are stories about language […] feminist dystopias overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation" (2000: 152). However, in Howells's opinion, "Offred has the author's support…and she also has the reader's sympathy, so that [the Historical Notes chapter] does not succeed in undermining herstory after all" (2000: 142).

Besides, Offred's narration is not only questioned and reconstructed in the Historical Notes but also *from within* her own narration. Offred's narrative voice comments on and outlines the fictional character of her own memories: "this is a reconstruction […] It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was" (Atwood 1996: 144), or "I made that up. It didn't happen that way" (1996: 275). Thus, the story and the act or narrating become entangled with a clear metafictional intention, a self-conscious reflection on the act of narrating. In spite of Stein's affirmation that for Offred "to tell her tale is to risk her life" (2013: 263), she did not take any dangerous or risky action either as a US citizen or as a handmaid: "I've crossed no boundaries. I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's choice that terrifies me" (1996: 71). As Mathew Bolton aptly argues: "Atwood's narrators thought much, but acted little […] speak in lamentation rather than in protest" (2010: 72). Moreover, we do not have any clue about whether her story ever reached her contemporaries or not, and even less about its political impact, because the Gileadean state still prevails after her disappearance. However, and although the others' experience is not available through an unmediated rendering in *The Handmaid's Tale,* as Moylan wittingly outlines, "Gilead is a society in which the contradictions are more pervasive and closer to the surface than in many of the dystopian accounts of authoritarian states" (2000: 164). There are other sources of resistance to the regime that come directly from within: its unhappy ruling class that according to him make *Handmaid* a "weak dystopia" (2000: 164). Even in the climactic moment of the "Ceremony" (Atwood 1996: 105), Offred underlines the discomfort and suffering of the other participants: The Ceremony "is not recreation, even for the Commander […] [he], too, is doing his duty" (1996: 105). Offred wonders "which of us is it worse for, her

[the Commander's wife] or me?" (1996: 106). Those wives forced to accept a handmaid[3] also subvert the regime law by enforcing their handmaids to illegally achieve their pregnancies. The wives may know that their husbands were sterile – "many of the Commanders had come in contact with a sterility causing virus" (1996: 321)– and sought the help of younger men, such as the doctors or Nick himself (Atwood 1996: 70; 214-15), even though all of them know that if discovered the penalty would be death. The Commanders, paradoxically trapped in their own prohibitions, resist their own enacted laws with private and forbidden sexual intercourse with their handmaids and attending Jezebel, the bar and brothel (1996: 207). Finally, in the novel there are many other dissident female presences who resist and *act* against the regime: the unwomen, former feminists, nuns that reject to be assimilated by the regime, lesbian Moira, activists like Ofglen, and women working as prostitutes at Jezebel, among others. The fact that Offred's narrative has been recorded after her time serving as handmaid would diminish its effect as counter narrative at the same time as it increases the self-justifying and passive mood of her account. It becomes a submissive victim narrative, moreover when her main aim is only to adapt and survive.

According to Fiona Tolan, the metafictional elements of the novel represent a self-conscious strategy to scrutinize "the role of narrative in creating the historical record" and thus Offred's story focuses on the examination of the history of the feminist movement (2007: 144). Atwood ironically underlines how the feminist movement and the Gilead republic have common goals achieved very often through censorship. She shows how Gilead adopted some of the feminist movement's ideas in line with those of Gilead: "some of their ideas were sound enough" (Atwood 1996: 128). In spite of being considered from the very beginning a feminist novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* questions "the validity of any political or philosophical system that is prepared to limit basic freedoms in the pursuit of its goal" (Tolan 2007: 152). As Donna Haraway, very suspicious of totalizing and universal theories, affirms:

> The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one. Perhaps, ironically, we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos. (2016: 173)

In her dystopian fiction *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood cautions against totalitarian systems of thought that compromise individual freedom, not only religion and politics but also that early dogmatic feminism. As Gayle Greene emphasizes, feminism "is too a target of Atwood's satire" (1987: 14). In the same line, Ehrenreich outlines that in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "we are being warned […] not only about the theocratic ambitions of the religious right but about a repressive tendency in feminism itself" (2004: 78). It seems undeniable that Atwood encourages the idea of

[3] "Not every Commander has a Handmaid: some of their wives have children" (Atwood 1996: 127).

freedom and personal liberty before any ideology, thus, the label of "feminist dystopia" seems to be slightly restrictive for *The Handmaid's Tale*.

On the other hand, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not what Moylan describes as a "pure" dystopia, for it offers the possibility of a hopeful future in its ending at the Nunavit conference –which reverses the dystopic conclusion by giving the novel a "potential utopian gesture" (Moylan 2000: 165). Although Moylan still classifies *Handmaid* as a classical dystopia –mainly for reasons related to its publication date– other critics such as Raffaella Baccolini and Ildney Cavalcanti inscribe Atwood's novel within another specific label: the critical dystopia. Critical dystopia is a variant within dystopian fiction in which the discourse still retains hope for a better future, a utopian space, or a movement toward utopia (in Moylan 2000: 190). It is precisely in the presence of a non-yet-defeated utopian core in an open-ending narrative that Dunja M. Mohr distinguishes the feminist dystopia's specificity:

> Strictly speaking, the classical dystopia has often (if not always) contained a utopian, but a defeated, utopian core […] The utopian subtext of contemporary feminist dystopias can be found precisely in this gap between the narrated dystopian present and the anticipated realization of a potential utopian future that classical dystopia evades […] However, in contrast to a classical utopian narrative and like the 'critical utopias,' they resist narrative closure (perfection). Without ever narrating or exactly defining utopia, these new feminist dystopias map not a single path but rather several motions and changes that may lead to a potentially better future. (2007: 9)

Consequently, the utopian mood would still be alive, particularly in the modern feminist dystopias, but disguised as dystopia, in a new derivation within the genre that Mohr calls "transgressive utopian dystopias" (2007: 4). From the 1990s onwards feminist dystopias have added to their initial more exclusive focus on women's agency an increasing concern with racism and climate change: "Critiquing this correlation between gender and genre, feminist fiction in general and feminist utopian/dystopian writing in particular have from the beginning deliberately crossed genre boundaries and questioned the stability of genre conventions" (Moylan and Baccolini 2007: 164). Atwood herself acknowledges the frequent and inherent hybridity of utopia and dystopia in what she calls "ustopia"; that is, "a combination of the imagined perfect society and its opposite" (Atwood 2011: 66). Accordingly, it can be inferred that the clues for *The Handmaid's Tale*'s generic classification, and with them the specific ideological message of the novel, are precisely to be found in the novel's ending, as the glimpse of utopia appears as readers learn that Gilead's regime is toppled in the future.

3. *MADDADDAM* AND THE *FEMINIST* DYSTOPIAN IMPULSE

In contrast to *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel *MaddAddam* opens the story with "the actual process of building utopia" (Mohr 2007: 5). As explained above, *MaddAddam* is the last novel in the trilogy, the one that describes the new future, a new beginning after the apocalypse (Somacarrera 2021: 112), and in terms of plot and characterization the one that best adapts to this essay's departure hypothesis.

Through the analysis of women's faith at the end of the trilogy, mainly focusing on Toby and the development of her identity, tracing it back to the previous novel, *The Year of the Flood* (Atwood 2013), this essay discusses the proposed ending for women. The trilogy's denouement conveys the positive –utopian– or negative –dystopian– mood that determines the novel's belonging to a specific genre and, what is more, its ideological message. Traditionally, an ending offering multiple possibilities would easily categorize a work of fiction into the transgressive and liberal corner. However, as Brian Richardson remarks, "close endings with fixed solutions were inherently conservative while open endings were necessary liberatory […] [but] open endings soon became widespread, even conventional" (2018: 332). If *MaddAddam* plunges the reader into the very process of building a utopian community, it would be interesting to consider the ending's openness so as to do a tentative reading about the ideologically *liberatory* or *inherently conservative* final message of the trilogy. I would like to discuss whether the ending –by resisting closure– could be understood as utopian –belonging to a feminist critical dystopia– and opening up a space for opposition and a critique upon twenty-first century patriarchal cultural patterns, or the other way round: an ending displaying a dystopian core in an ironic demonstration of the impossibility of changing human nature for the better. The narrative world depicted after the Anthropocene frontier in *MaddAddam* can be interpreted mainly as dystopian, especially for women. To assess this hypothesis, I consider the characterization and depiction of human women and their place and role in the new society created after the Waterless Flood.

Together with Zeb, Toby is portrayed as the most skillful and strong ethical character in the trilogy. Even when confronted with her survival needs, Toby is unwilling to hurt any living creature. Physically Toby is very far away from the voluptuous woman type: she is skinny, muscular, and not sexually eye-catching (Atwood 2014: 20). Moreover, her body is described as almost androgynous. According to Lindsay McCoy Anderson (2012), Atwood would question male dominance by giving certain utopian potential to the *androgynous* woman. Apparently, Toby occupies a liminal third space between the masculine and the feminine that seems to question the inherent western binary thinking that links males with agency and females with passivity: "liminality disrupts the binary system, and, as a result, threatens the dominance of masculinity […]. Toby demonstrate[s] that hope exists for those who navigate between the extremely feminine and masculine stereotypes" (Anderson 2012: 50). However, the mere act of qualifying Toby, a slender woman with small breasts, as *androgynous* can be another way of perpetuating stereotypes and describing women through men's eyes and expectations. Furthermore, the idea of attaching skillfulness, resolution, and survival capacity to the only woman in the story who is not sexually attractive and fertile, that is, to the *masculinized* woman, may reinforce gendered binary thinking by means of attaching specific abilities only to specific body types. In other words, standardly beautiful and fertile women are once again relegated to the role of being guided and cared for by men and now by the *masculinized* woman as well. Nevertheless, it is my contention that despite Toby's non-standard appearance, she is not actually neutral or liminal in her sexuality or feelings. What is more, she would

have internalized patriarchal expectations both for herself and for the other women to the point that at the end of the novel, she has become an *ugly duckling* or *Cinderella* since the denouement of her story comes ironically close to a romantic fairy tale and adds to the novel touches of consolation in the form of "they lived happily ever after, until parted by death".

In the pre-Waterless Flood times, after the death of her ailing mother –who died of a strange illness provoked by infected pills disguised by the Corporations as vitamin supplements– and her father's suicide in the same days, Toby has to struggle alone for survival, without legal identity, money or friends. She moves to the Pleeblands, the area that is considered the lowest among the low levels of society, a place where she could have done business with her only possession "of marketable value […] her young ass" (Atwood 2014: 35). However, even though she resists losing the ownership of her whole body, she trades with some *fragments* of it. She sells first her hair and then her eggs with the eventual consequence of being rendered infertile after an infection (2014: 38-39). In spite of her apparent lack of sex appeal, which should make her invisible to the male gaze, she is elected as a forced lover by Blanco, her boss in the SecretBurguers place and the most wicked of the Painballers later on. She is raped several times and thus eventually deprived of her body's ownership. Blanco exerts brutality and abuse over everyone around him, but only women suffer his sexual violence. Moreover, when she is rescued and integrated into the God's Gardeners, she goes through another episode of molestation attempt (Atwood 2014: 124). This time the rape is not perpetrated, and Pilar –a high-rank God's Gardener– recommends Toby to forget about the incident: "He's tried that on more than one of us […] The Ancient Australopithecus can come out in all of us. You must forgive him in your heart" (Atwood 2014: 124).

Laurie Vickroy highlights how Atwood recurrently reveals and considers the subject of "women's vulnerability to physical, sexual, and psychological violence in situations of male domination" (2013: 254). Atwood's protagonists are often sexually abused, and the *MaddAddam* trilogy is not an exception: Toby, Amanda, and Ren –female narrators and focalizers through the trilogy– are raped. Nevertheless, although Amanda and Ren are sexually assaulted by the Crakers, these rapes are minimized, devoid of any significance, and forgiven. Amanda and Ren are encouraged not to make too much of a fuss about the incident. Toby, Amanda, and Ren suffer from this traumatic experience and seem to use typical psychological defenses to work through their trauma, like forgetfulness and emotional or physical dissociation. Vickroy explains how the effort to overcome their trauma is what may guide Atwood's female characters' behavior as "overly passive and emotionally paralyzed, unreliable and overly defensive, unheroic and even unethical –failures that are manifestations of trauma" (2013: 256). This seems to be the scheme employed by Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*: passivity and adaptability as strategies of survival, and writing as an act of resistance. However, Offred's account is so biased by her need of self-justification that it jeopardizes the reliability of her narration.

Toby adopts a different method to survive to her extremely hard life conditions. Apparently she adapts to her situation by becoming a tougher person, emphasizing her visible lack of the physical traits typically associated to femininity. Survival implies for Toby the building of a new identity, and thus she has to renounce to a "unified self [that] may be a fantasy" (Raschke 2014: 35), but "the production of nonidentity makes moot any sense of resistive agency" (Raschke 2014: 33). She produces a self that is split between an aging and neutral outside and a careful and tender inside. Toby hides her feelings by putting an extremely thick cover layer between her and the rest of the world; but as Adam One –the God's Gardeners' founder– easily understands, "that hard shell is not your true self. Inside that shell you have a warm and tender heart, and a kind soul". (Atwood 2014: 49). She is always touched by the presence of children –or their absence after the Waterless Flood– no matter whether human or Craker. This special sensibility to children may be considered as an unconscious manifestation of her inability to become a mother. After several experiences of sexual harassment –being repeatedly raped by Blanco and having her body assaulted by undesired fondling– she is hugged and welcome by God's Gardeners' children. This asexual and friendly physical contact becomes the first instance of a clear touching emotion in Toby, the first crack on her shell (Atwood 2014: 51). She relives and expands this emotional link with her mother-like relationship with little Blackbeard, the Craker child, to the point that she feels sadness when she recognizes in him the signs of adulthood and consequently the end of her *motherhood*: "very soon he will be grown up. Why does this make me sad?" (Atwood 2014: 378). Children provide her with comfort and strength. Children, and eventually her love story with Zeb, are the triggers that break her protective shield, because she did not have any hope of being either loved or appreciated: "alone is how she'll always be […] She'd waited so long, she'd given up waiting" (2014: 49).

Toby has internalized the way others see her. Her lack of an exhuberant femininity in the shape of curves makes her feel diminished in the presence of overtly sexual and attractive women. Her bodily insecurity prevents her from establishing bonds with other women. She resents these women using their bodies and sexuality as *the tools* she does not have to attract men. When Toby meets Zeb he is having a sexual affair with Lucerne, an attractive married woman who eloped with him. Lucerne sees "nothing sexual about [Toby]" (Atwood 2014: 137), and does not consider Toby as a rival for Zeb's attentions. Yet Toby, attracted by Zeb, feels jealous of Lucerne when she tells her about her first meeting with Zeb (2014: 141). Toby, totally aware of her apparent sexual *invisibility*, does not sympathize with visually appealing females, and judges them harshly to the point she is sometimes ashamed of her own critical thoughts. It is an ambivalent feeling that ranges from envy to the moral superiority complex that Toby shows with Lucerne, Nuala[4] and

[4] Nuala is a God Gardener accused of having a sexual affair with a male God Gardener engaged with another woman. Nuala denies the accusations but Toby personally thinks she is actually very promiscuous, and the allegations easy to believe "considering the way [Nuala] rub[s] against pant legs. Nuala flirted with anything male"(Atwood 2014: 200).

eventually after the Waterless Flood with the more threatening woman for her, the younger and fertile Swift Fox. After the apocalypse, Toby's body is not only anodyne but also aging. Toby uses self-deprecating humor in the construction of her identity through the interaction between herself and the younger woman, and tries to hide her love for Zeb because "women learn to see themselves and other women through men's eyes" (Davies 2006: 62) and she has internalized the stereotype for a middle-aged woman:

> Naturally they see it as funny […] romance among the chronologically challenged is giggle folder. For the youthful, lovelorn and wrinkly don't blend, or not without farce […] They must feel she's passed that moment. Brewing herbs, gathering mushrooms, applying maggots, tending bees, removing warts – beldam's roles. Those are her proper vocations. (Atwood 2014: 89)

Toby, *the sexually invisible woman*, is silently in love with Zeb from the very moment she meets him. The hope of seeing him again is her main motivation in the time after the spreading of the virus, when she is alone and enclosed trying to survive. After the pandemic, when she has already had sexual intercourse with him, she is insecure of her own value and attractiveness for Zeb, and alpha man. This is why she suffers and is resentful towards the woman who may be her rival for Zeb's attentions:

> Toby feels a rush of anger […] Toby knows she's resenting the snide innuendoes Swift Fox aimed at her earlier, not to mention the gauzy shift and the cute shorts. And the breast weaponry, and the girly-girl pigtails. They don't go with your budding wrinkles, she feels like saying. (Atwood 2014: 143)

In a time in which fertility seems to be the most valuable thing, Toby, infertile and older than her rival, is not even able to say out loud her worst worries: the fear of not being deserving of and enough for Zeb. But Toby, the *androgynous Cinderella* who has not lost her modesty, kindness and diligence is finally *chosen* by the alpha man and achieves her personal happy ending, *fairy tale-like*, with wedding ceremony included. The skillful woman, which demonstrates an equal blend of masculine authority and feminine nurturing, ends up like in a teen comedy when the *ugly girl* is chosen and preferred to her younger and prettier rival. However, Toby's and Zeb's ending is as happy as any human life can be expected to be. Although questionably realistic, it is nevertheless closed and even utopian for the last recognized *purely human* couple –an "overly saccharine happily-ever-after ending" (Raschke 2014: 28). Yet, the outcome of Toby's fate twists to a romantic tragedy when Zeb disappears and is given up for dead, and Toby cannot recover from the grief she feels over her husband's death: "She did not ever become happy again" (Atwood 2014: 389). Several months after Zeb's death she discovers she has an incurable illness –presumably cancer– and goes to the forest to commit suicide before being painfully terminal. Ironically blurring the limits between dystopias and romantic novels, Atwood gives a love story ending to Toby, demonstrating that human happiness is only achieved at an individual level. This quite conventional

ending –girl meets boy and lives happy until death– has, however, a final hint of transgression in the form of female agency and a movement towards drama: Toby could not choose to retain the ownership of her body when she was raped but she decides when it is time to die. When life is no longer desirable, for it offers only suffering to her, she does not renounce to her body control and faces the last possible act of agency: committing suicide.

The three fertile women –Amanda, Ren and Swift Fox– are the first mothers of hybrid Craker/human descendants, but with the exception of the last one, this was not a conscious and voluntary decision. Both Amanda and Ren are raped. When Amanda –"who was so traumatized she was almost catatonic" (Atwood 2014: 11)– and Ren are sexually assaulted by the Crakers, they both ask Toby to help them, but the "major cultural misunderstanding" –never named as rape– is done. Forgiveness and understanding are applied compromising women's rights: the *rights* of the assaulters to their own culture or ignorance are privileged over women's right to be safe. It seems that any difference in cultural patterns is always sanctioned to women's detriment. This controversy may remind readers of the current reality in the debate between feminism and multiculturalism. It is what Sheyla Benhabib explains as the liberals' dilemma: "The attempt on the part of liberal courts to do justice to cultural pluralism and to the varieties of immigrants' cultural experiences had led to the increased vulnerability of the weakest members of these groups – namely, women and children" (2015: 88). This is the argument brought about by the *cultural defense strategy* in legal cases involving immigrants from non-Western cultures. There is a clash resulting from the interaction of distinct cultural groups' coexistence that leads to the question posed by some feminist thinkers: "is multiculturalism bad for women?" (Benhabib 2015: 86). The fact of accepting as mitigating circumstances that one's own culture justifies criminal actions like marriage by rape, parent-child suicide or washing the family honor with murder has as a consequence that "doing justice to the defendant, injustice is done to the victims" (Benhabib 2015: 88).

Moreover, when Amanda, unsure of the paternity of her baby after being raped by both Painballers and Crakers, demands Toby to help her to have an abortion –"I want this thing out of me" (Atwood 2014: 216)– she finds out that in the new world the sudden loss of technology goes to the detriment of women's rights as well. A woman can no longer decide whether she wants to be a mother or not. Amanda fears the genetic conditioning that a Painballer's descendant could have, and expresses her intention of killing the baby in case of its being totally human: "who could expect her to give birth to a murderer's child?" (Atwood 2014: 215). It seems that it is only the prospective father's genetic information that conditions and defines the baby's identity and belonging. As in *The Handmaid's Tale* the newborn was *the Commander's baby*, in *MaddAddam* the baby would be either a *Painballer's baby*

or a *Craker's baby*. There is the shadow of eugenics in this passage of the novel.[5] Moreover, it seems to be a patriarchal thinking that which supports genetic determinism *only* by the father's side. Atwood avoids the controversy of nurturing or not the Painballer's baby: all the new born are Crakers' children, children of the *good* rapists. On the other hand, Amanda risks her own life during her pregnancy since the Crakers' different growing pattern could have caused a very large baby and an increased danger of dying in childbirth. However, when she gives birth to a hybrid baby she is suddenly recovered from her traumatic state of passivity and detachment. Motherhood is the magical tool that heals her from her trauma, and she becomes very fond of the newborn (Atwood 2014: 380).

The new society between humans and Crakers is born through and thanks to women's bodies, this time functioning as mediators not only between nature and culture but also as mediators between species:

> The sphere of sexual and reproductive lives is a central focus of most human cultures. The regulation of these functions forms the dividing line between nature and culture: all animal species need to mate and reproduce in order to survive […] Nature does not dictate who should mate with whom; but all known human societies regulate mating for reproductive or nonreproductive purposes and create a symbolic universe of significations in accordance with which kinship patterns are formed and sexual taboos established. Women and their bodies are the symbolic-cultural site upon which human societies inscript their moral order. In virtue of their capacity for sexual reproduction, women mediate between nature and culture, between the animal species to which we all belong and the symbolic order that makes us into cultural beings. (Benhabib 2015: 84)

Borrowing Benhabib's rationale, there is a new *kinship pattern* and a new *symbolic universe of signification* in *MaddAddam*'s post-apocalyptic community. Curiously enough, only human women mate with the Crakers, there is no mention of any sexual relationship between human men and Craker women. The remaining question is whether this new hybrid society is really a new one for women. In other words, from a cultural perspective, is *MaddAddam*'s rebuilding of the world leading to a better future for women? Fertile women's bodies are returned to nature's ownership. Amanda's and Ren's involuntary motherhood and happy acceptance of the hybrid children can be inferred as a patriarchal backlash to traditional gender roles. In *MaddAddam*'s society, motherhood only brings happiness, even when it is not the result of free choice, and lack of motherhood, as is the case with Toby, calls for substitution and sadness.

The birth of hybrid children brings hope for the future and seems to represent the return to an idyllic time, a blissful ending for the human survivors: they "lived happily together and had many distinguished descendants". However, there is still

[5] Eugenics, as defined by its founder Sir Francis Galton, is "the science which deals with all influences which improve the inborn qualities of race; also with those which develop them to the utmost advantage" (Squier 1994: 57).

too much uncertainty surrounding *MaddAddam*'s foreseeable future for it to be idyllic; as Debrah Raschke explains, the ending "mirrors our own complicity in Craker complacency, in a too cozy survival narrative that is, in fact, driving us closer to apocalypse" (2014: 36). Toby encountered her personal happiness in her love relationship with Zeb, and personal love is an element that is not shared between Crakers and humans. Women break traditional monogamy only for the conception, since they mate with four Crakers each time, but eventually the nuclear heterosexual family with its classical structure is the proposed solution. Human women procreate with the Crakers but they only find love and support in their fellow *pure* human beings: "Crozier and Ren […] Shackleton is supporting Amanda, and Ivory Bill has offered his services as soi-disant father to the Swift Fox twins […] [and] she tolerates his help" (Atwood 2014: 380). Moreover, they do not know for sure whether hybridity will be possible beyond the first generation. In the long run, maybe the future will exclusively belong to the Crakers: "A horse plus a donkey gives you a mule, but it's sterile" (2014: 206-207). If the hybrid project fails, human beings will live only within Toby's and Blackbeard's chronicles, within language and memory.

In sum, rather than breaking feminine and masculine stereotypes, Toby's characterization is perpetuating them. Atwood's election of an androgynous woman as the most skillful and resolute model of female in the *MaddAddam* community can be seen as a reaffirmation of gender stereotypes: it is the *unwoman*, the only one able to *protect* and defend the other women. However, like in a fairy tale, her narrative is still developed around the love story, a male-female encounter, and her final suicide does not seem enough to claim female agency. Furthermore, the other survivor women, those who are still fertile, are meant to be happy through the most traditional female role: motherhood. Pregnancy becomes the only synonym of future and hope. "One might say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world, and the end of capitalism, than it is to think outside the structuring fantasies of gender"(Colebrook 2014: 150). Even though the ending is still open, it does not seem either subversive or liberatory enough for *MaddAddam* to be labeled as feminist dystopia or transgressive utopian dystopia in Mohr's terms. Based on the final ideological message and the story development from the already supposed utopian society to an ending that is open to dystopian implications, *MaddAddam* would rather be –borrowing Mohr's coined term– a *non-so transgressive dystopian utopia* rather than a *transgressive utopian dystopia*.

4. CONCLUSION

The Handmaid's Tale is undoubtedly a dystopian novel written from a female point of view. To label it primarily as a feminist dystopia would be to essentialize a book that comprises multilayered meanings since it aims at numerous other targets in its social criticism agenda: religious extremism, environmental degradation, right-wing extremism, authoritarian government repression, and dogmatic feminism, among others. In a totalitarian society repression of thought and speech makes any dissident story a narrative of resistance, a means of subversion. However, the passive

strategy of resistance Offred employs to survive under Gilead's regime painfully reminds the reader of former American citizens' behavior that allowed for the birth of the totalitarian state. Moreover, the Historical Notes section not only challenges the verisimilitude of her account –it casts doubts and compromises the identity of the actual narrator of the story since it diminishes the potential subversive power of her account: "'who tells,' changes everything" (Raschke 2014: 23)– but also displays a future too similar to that preceding Gilead. If this is the utopian future within the dystopia, it is about to transpire the beginning of another dystopia. On the other hand, Offred's tale comments on its own internal mechanisms in a metafictional enterprise that invites reflection about the role of narrative in the linguistic creation of reality and history. Moreover, the novel also questions the early feminist dream of a female language that in Haraway's words would be "totalizing and imperialist" (2016: 323). In this cautionary tale, Atwood, faithful to "the moral imperative that drives her work" (Bouson 2011: 23), is committed to the ethical dimension of literature that she understands as "a necessity because increasingly, if we can imagine something, we'll be able to do it" (Atwood 2004: 517). Atwood eventually emphasizes that individual freedom is more important than *any* ideology.

The presence of some *utopian move* or certain openness in the ending is what would distinguish *MaddAddam*'s classification as a feminist critical dystopia or even as a "transgressive utopian dystopia" in Mohr's words. The ending necessarily had to be liberatory and offering new positive paths for women. However, *MaddAddam*'s final ideological message is neither essentially feminist nor even liberatory. The alleged transgressive power of giving prominence to a non-standardized *androgynous* woman seems to enlarge the traditionally hierarchical gender regime, attaching qualities of resolution, skillfulness and agency only to certain types of bodies, those which are deprived of *feminine weakness*. In addition, it is precisely the internalization of the effects of the male gaze that generates difficulties in Toby's empathy with other women and the construction of her own identity. Moreover, with the exception of the final wink to women's agency in the shape of her suicide, Toby's ending is a reinforcement of gender essentialism, a fairy-tale ending in which the good and deserving girl achieves her dream: marriage with her lifelong love.

The ending is quite conventional for Toby but it involves the backlash to a patriarchal society for women and a possible dystopian story of extinction for humanity in general. The apparent satisfactory closure of the ending affirms procreative heteronormative standards and thus binarisms are not overcome, the hopeful happy ending is only apparent, what lies behind is bitter. Women are determined more than ever by their bodies and their fertility. *MaddAddam*'s proposed solution is hybridity: kinship and respect for all kinds of creatures. But hybridity compromises only women's bodies and their return to an obliged state of nurturers, and motherhood as the panacea for happiness. Even the infertile woman, Toby, finds her substitute motherhood. In the end, the new society created in *MaddAddam* is not so new. It is a parodic community duplicating the most traditional patriarchal patterns, a backlash for women, a circular move. It seems that

in *MaddAddam* when questions around gender are addressed, it is often the case that the critique is at best only partially realized. Paraphrasing Mohr, *MaddAddam* would be a *non-so-transgressive dystopian utopia* rather than a *transgressive utopian dystopia* for it opens in the very process of building utopia, but the ending, even though it is not totally closed, is anything but hopeful for women. The only *feminist* achievement is to deprive human men from paternity in exchange for women conceiving hybrids out of any sentimental relationship. However, a woman's role is mainly to reproduce, and happiness is to be found only through motherhood, even after suffering one of the most traumatic events for a woman, as is the case with rape. If, as Howells remarks, "the issue of language and power has always been crucial in the construction of dystopias" (2008: 165), in the end women do not retain either language or power. Women, and with them human beings, even lose control over the story and language, for the last words belong to Blackbeard, a Craker man. There is not any guarantee for the continuity of human life on Earth, or even for the hybrid community's stability since Zeb's, Black Rhino's and Katuro's disappearing – after looking for the origin of a tall smoke (Atwood 2014: 388-389)– still points to the existence of violent humans in the surroundings. The irony is that showing such an undesirable future for humans, and specifically for women, makes our present look not so bad, and this is not the didactic purpose of any piece of fiction in the field of utopianism.

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