

TO READ AND LEARN: THE NECESSITY FOR A NEW DEFINITION OF DYSTOPIA AND BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE OLD AND CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAS

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Demir ALIHODŽIĆ, and **Selma VESELJEVIĆ JERKOVIĆ**. *The Boundaries of Dystopian Literature. The Genre in Context*. OFF-SET d.o.o Tuzla, 2016. ISBN: 978-9958-31-277-9. 175 pp.

What is a dystopia? At first glance, this question seems quite easy to answer. The term, which has nowadays become extremely popular, especially among the young adult readership, is predominantly defined through its antonym and inevitable predecessor – utopia. Recognized as the negative counterpart of the utopia, that is, a perfectly organized, imagined society or place, dystopia is generally described as a *bad* place, or even more simply, a utopia gone wrong. Additionally, the dystopian world is inevitably linked to a totalitarian state apparatus, depriving its inhabitants of freedom by exercising strict control over all aspects of their lives. In this manner, terms such as negative or inverted utopia, and anti-utopia (7) are often used as its synonyms, making the entire affair seem simple enough.

However, the authors of *The Boundaries of Dystopian Literature. The Genre in Context*, Demir Alihodžić and Selma Veseljević Jerković bring a new light to the issue of dystopian literature. In the first part of their book, that is, the first three chapters, they work to explicate the critical approach to the dystopian genre, its very definition and essential characteristics. The results of their research are as follows. First and foremost, the inadequate interchangeability of the terms dystopia and negative utopia, or anti-utopia, is emphasized. Whereas acknowledging the inevitably circular nature of utopian and dystopian ideals, in that they repeatedly instigate each other's occurrence, the authors claim that such action prevents dystopia from being necessarily considered as a separate genre with its own defining characteristics. Thus, they explain, and the argument indeed stands to reason, that dystopia best fits the description of the subgenre of anti-utopia, wherein anti-utopian texts serve to discredit the mere possibility of ever achieving a utopian social order, and dystopias allow for the possibility by showing the horrifying, and very likely, outcomes following the realization of such utopian ideals. Next, the authors point out that the English language

dictionaries and those referring to literary terms fail to deliver a precise, comprehensive definition of dystopia, and sometimes even any at all. By stressing that dystopia's popularity seems to work to the detriment of the genre's suitable definition, the authors' examination of its vague and insufficient nature opens the path to a more serious issue at the heart of dystopian literature. Finally, the "marvellously evasive" (16) definition of the genre is actually shown to stem from the absence of a definite list of essential characteristics in dystopian works.

In the second part of their book, beginning with chapter four, Alihodžić and Veseljević Jerković engage in the analysis of the following dystopian works that have been acknowledged both by the critics and the authors as the most renowned : Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*. Their aim is to challenge the prevalent opinion of the genre's critics that the canonical dystopian literature, on the one hand, simply does not exist anymore, or that, on the other hand, contemporary dystopian texts diverge from the said dystopian classics to the extent that they can no longer be considered as belonging to the same genre. As a result, their intention is to reveal the dated nature of the definition of dystopia and thus reconsider the three seminal dystopian novels so as to enable the inclusion of contemporary texts that are unjustly "slipping below the radar of critical attention" (24), following the inadequate critical approach to the genre of dystopia as a whole.

By comparing the above mentioned texts, the authors strive to produce a new, working definition of dystopia and discern the fundamental characteristics of the genre, while simultaneously warning about the "temporally-specific context" (36) in each of these classic examples. Accordingly, the following prominent dystopian features can be observed: a single protagonist who initially supports the ideology of his or her world (either by living in accordance with the system or by being formally employed in it), but eventually undergoes a process of social awakening and, following an unsuccessful reintegration into the society, rebels with a dubious outcome. As equally essential elements, which are often left out of the definition, the authors furthermore list the dystopian regimes' deliberate discrediting of historical continuity and the merging of private and public spheres of life. However, instead of focusing on totalitarianism in the form of communism or excessive liberalism, as seen with Orwell and Huxley, the authors encourage the new definition of dystopia to move away from the idea that the social and political criticism present in those classic dystopias must be taken as the genre's imperative.

In contrast, the fearsome realization of ideals present in *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* are encouraged not be viewed as definitive dystopian elements, but rather as a “familiar shape of a few classic dystopian works” (27). Indeed, this provides the rationale for the contemporary dystopias’ preoccupation with the ecological apocalypse due to global warming and the occurrence of deadly viruses or diseases. Additionally, as an important concept to be considered when thinking of a new definition of dystopia, the authors suggest the notion of “purpose.” Following such orientation, dystopian works are to be considered with respect to their didactic nature, which should inevitably be based on the warning against those fears in dystopian worlds that are “but a small logical step away” (50) from that of their readers. In other words, a dystopian society must be peculiar enough to allow for the *alienation effect*, but at the same time must remain familiar in the eyes of its audience in order to evoke fear and encourage the understanding of social evils present in their own, real-life society. Also, contrary to the critics’ opinion of the bleak and pessimistic endings of dystopian novels, the authors argue that, despite the negative turn of events, which is indeed encountered by many a dystopian protagonist, dystopian conclusions need not be necessarily hopeless, since such a state would be counterintuitive regarding the novels’ negotiation of an individual’s position within the oppressive society.

The fifth chapter, focused on the spatial and temporal characteristics of the dystopian city, finds that the important aspects discussed in *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* are those of energy, or the “heresy, a renewal of thought through the shattering of political, ideological, and epistemological dogmas” (66), and entropy, that is, “the conservative force which arrests change and solidifies dogma” (66). As such, the contrary terms are interconnected with another opposition: the city (“urban chronotope”) versus the wilderness (any form of subversive sub-chronotope), as depicted in all three paragons of dystopia. The city is seen as a perfect example of an arrested change, that is, a place and time that adheres to a strictly organized timetable obliterating private (potentially subversive) time and thoughts, and thus effectively preventing rebellion. Conversely, the wilderness is either depicted as a chronotope external to the city, or as an inherent, albeit likewise controlled integral part of it. However, although such a paradigm can be discerned from the discussed texts, the authors emphasize that there is the absolute possibility of writing dystopian societies outside the urban setting.

The sixth chapter provides a discussion on the issues of gender and sexuality in dystopian societies based on the example of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Once again, pointing to the specific context pertaining to this particular dystopian novel (the surge of the religious political right in America in the 1980s), Alihodžić and Veseljević Jerković extract from it the contradicting relationship between freedom and happiness as the defining characteristic of all dystopias. Albeit based on the text-specific notions of “freedom from and freedom to” (89) in regard to the state-controlled procreation and sexual relations, one can note yet another aspect indicative of the dystopian societies' development. Connected to the definition of dystopian worlds as those which show the likely horrific outcome following the realization of utopian ideals, this would be Atwood's warning against the society's consenting nature, which in fact accommodates such corrupted ideals and allows them to thrive.

The remaining two chapters focus on YA dystopian fiction and its relationship with the genre's classic forerunners. The popularity of YA dystopian literature, which is often frowned upon by the critics as well as popular literature in general, is suggested to result from the genre's favourable merging of the characteristics of the Bildungsroman and the dystopian novels' critical and change-seeking nature. In this light, the authors state that it is possible to discern the dystopian genre's contemporary nature from the modern examples. Those are: “environmental catastrophes” (*The Hunger Games*), “the reliance on technology” (*Uglies*), and “physical control and enslavement” (*Divergent*, *The Maze Runner*) (115-8).

As the main issues in YA dystopian fiction, Alihodžić and Veseljević Jerković point out the body and the romance. In regard to the issue of bodily representation, they claim that YA dystopias are not as focused on gender since, for example, all adolescents in the novel series *Uglies* and *The Hunger Games* are indiscriminately expected to undergo beautifying surgery or remake prior to becoming a full-fledged member of the society or participating in the competition, respectively. The emphasis put on the female body in both series results from the gender of its protagonists, which is simultaneously advocated as the harbinger of the strengthening social status of women in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, the romantic aspect of YA dystopias is still claimed to support the traditional patriarchy in that the female protagonists eventually succumb to

the ideal of “normative femininity” (157). Yet, while one might confirm such a claim concerning *The Hunger Games* (whose protagonist marries and gives birth to two children) and *Divergent* (ending with the protagonist sacrificing her life for the greater good instead of her brother), the authors themselves discuss *Delirium*, another YA dystopian series in which the female protagonist opposes such a norm. Despite the recurrent motif of the female protagonists’ “catalyst for self-discovery” (145) in the form of a male romantic interest, one should not forget that the same instigator – a member of the opposite sex – also leads to the awakening of male protagonists in *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984*. Also, there is an example of a YA dystopian series featuring a male protagonist (Neal Shusterman’s *Unwind*) who likewise transforms under the influence of a female companion; thus, this issue might need further reconsideration.

To conclude, there is an inevitable link between the established works of dystopian literature, such as Zamyatin’s, Orwell’s, and Huxley’s novels and contemporary (YA) dystopias. Consequently, Alihodžić and Veseljević Jerković argue that it is essential to reach a new, all-encompassing definition of dystopian literature from which both the past and modern dystopian texts would benefit. Ideally, this definition would be based on the notion that the characteristic, didactic element of fear in dystopias will and *must* inevitably follow the social and political changes in the world. In turn, such flexibility would allow for valuable contemporary works to be included in the dystopian canon, or at least be considered by the relevant body of criticism, as well as prevent the alleged dilution or the utter demise of the dystopian genre, as suggested by the present gap between classic dystopias and those of recent origin. In this way, dystopian literature would be able to warn contemporary society not only against issues we might not be aware of but also of those belonging to the past, for one can never be sure that they are definitely put to rest. After all, is it not the break in historical continuity that is a distinguished feature of dystopian societies?

Jelena PATAKI