

A Bakhtinian Investigation of the Gendered Space as a Dystopian Chronotope in Atwood's The Year of the Flood (2009)

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to investigate the possibility of regarding gendered spaces as dystopian chronotopes in Margaret Atwood's novel The Year of the Flood (2009). The current research attempts to examine the process through which spaces are stratified into gendered ones, characterized by a masculine supremacy and feminine inferiority. Following a geocritical approach, the spatial landmarks and references that are found in the novel are scrutinized in order to examine the process through which space is being categorized on a gender basis. The temporal indicators of the chosen work are studied interchangeably with their accompanying spatial presentations using Mikhail Bakhtin's views on the literary chronotope. This latter looks into how the configurations of time and space are represented through language and discourse. Finally, the present research concludes that gendered spaces presented in Atwood's novel constitute dystopian chronotopes because they epitomize one of the manifestations of dystopia.*

Keywords: Chronotope, Dystopia, Gendered space, Margaret Atwood, The Year of the Flood.

Résumé : *Cet article cherche à étudier la possibilité de considérer les espaces sexués comme des chronotopes dystopiques dans le roman de Margaret Atwood, The Year of the Flood (2009). La recherche actuelle tente d'examiner le processus par lequel les espaces sont stratifiés en espaces genrés, caractérisés par une suprématie masculine et une infériorité féminine. Suivant une approche géocritique, les repères spatiaux et les références qui se trouvent dans le roman sont passés au crible afin d'examiner le processus par lequel l'espace est catégorisé selon le genre. Les indicateurs temporels de l'œuvre choisie sont étudiés de manière interchangeable avec les présentations spatiales qui les accompagnent en utilisant les vues de Mikhaïl Bakhtine sur le chronotope littéraire. Ce dernier s'intéresse à la manière dont les configurations du temps et de l'espace sont représentées à travers le langage et le discours. Enfin, la présente recherche*

conclut que les espaces genrés présentés dans le roman d'Atwood constituent des chronotopes dystopiques car ils incarnent l'une des manifestations de la dystopie.

Mots clés: Chronotope, Dystopia, espace sexués, Margaret Atwood, *the Year of the Flood*.

1. Introduction

The interplay of space and gender results in the production of gendered spaces primarily characterized by a masculine supremacy which objectifies women and deems them inferiors. The representation of such gendered spaces have been commonly traced through a number of feminist writers such as Tony Morrison, Alice Walker, and Margaret Atwood whose works have blueprinted their dedicated struggle to empower women through revealing their sufferings under the tight grip of patriarchal societies and oppressive political systems. The inclusion of such spaces through the narrative has taken a dystopian tendency especially as far as postmodernist writers engage with issues related to gender.

Margaret Atwood a Canadian hallmark and a devoted feminist utilizes her fiction as a medium of a political critique and textual resistance by writing speculative novels that fictionalize futuristic events related to dystopian imagination. This latter offers an eerie vision of the future wherein societies are entrapped within the confines of a post apocalyptic world characterized by ruined environments, corrupt political systems and dehumanizing life conditions. Such societies are usually depicted as suffering from oppressive governments that delimit individual liberties and distort realities by the recreation of radical ideologies that are racist, sexist or oligarchic.

When dystopian fiction is coupled with feminist concerns, it tends to focus on articulating the female subjugation and inferiorization that is systematically conducted via relegating them to marginal spaces which are forcefully gendered. In fact, gendered spaces are the ones that require submission to specific gender paradigms based on restricting the liberties of the less powerful gender. They correspond to abstract notions that reflect power, control and acquiescence which constitute a pivotal concern for feminist dystopian novelists.

The spatio-temporal background of gendered spaces as dystopian setting calls into question Bakhtinian notion of the chronotope as this latter offers a significant tool for meaning generation. It works via combining temporal indicators with spatial references which eventually grant the story its significance. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine the gendered spaces as dystopian chronotopes relying on Bakhtinian views on the chronotope. The creation of the gendered spaces is scrutinized through Foucauldian theories of power relations and bio politics as well as Lefebvrian conception of production space. The case study of the present research is Atwood's novel *The year of the Flood*, a dystopian novel that lends a provisional expectation of a post apocalyptic world after an environmental collapse. Throughout the events, we travel back and forth in time to follow the adventure of Toby and Ren who managed to survive the waterless flood pandemic.

The representation of time and space in literature has always been a central interest for scholars. Many attempts were made in order to figure out how these two intrinsic notions tend to operate within literary texts especially through the narrative. One of the brilliant scholars concerned with the interplay of time and space in novels is the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin whose works bore fruit in his discovery of the chronotope which

can be utilized as an analytical tool to attain a speculative apprehension of the human action and attitude from an ethical perspective.

2. Apprehending *The Year of the Flood* as a Dystopian Novel

Dystopian fiction can be defined as the one that engages in speculative scenarios about imagined societies that survive in a post apocalyptic world. It depicts oppressed communities suffering under the shades of despotic tyrannical systems that loot and plunder people's liberties via distorted realities and propagandas. These communities are usually portrayed as groups of helpless individuals whose struggle to escape the dehumanizing conditions of their lives is often fruitless. The dystopian setting usually pictures barren places that hold the signs of destruction and doom due to natural catastrophes caused by scientific intervention that by a way or another alters the climax and causes an unexpected environmental adjust. In addition, in some dystopian works, we encounter a different description of the setting as it might be an abandoned land, a war zone, and regions of failed scientific experiments that may result in the production of a deadly radioactive or a virtual world with simulated realities.

The term dystopia was created as a reaction to utopia which is derived from Greek meaning a bad place. It arose as a reaction to Utopia, a term coined by Sir Thomas more in 1516 as a title to his work that fictionalizes a perfect society that is free from common social vices and flaws including crimes, violence and poverty. Writers who choose to utilize their fiction to portray such dystopian stories regard themselves as political activists that bear the responsibly of criticizing their governments and bringing to the fore the sufferings of distressed individuals via provisioning a warning conjectural storyline about what would happen if everything stayed the same.

Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* contains several elements of the dystopian fiction. The story depicts a futuristic vision about a world that is completely entrapped in capitalism with its extremist ideologies, precisely the consumerist nature of the capitalist culture. Even though it is a sequel to *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the novel at hand has taken a different direction to portray the journey of God Gardeners, a religious group that considers itself the representative of divine goodness in a dystopian society. This group is spiritually guided by Adam One who regards himself as an ascetic prophet whose message is to prepare his followers to what he calls a waterless a flood, a natural catastrophe that would bring everything into order. Throughout the novel, we follow the journey of two main female characters Toby and Ren. Toby was sheltered by the God Gardeners group after being sexually assaulted and Ren was given by her mother for protection. The interwoven narratives of the two main characters succeed to carefully provide detailed descriptions of the life in a post-pandemic world characterized by a divergent, dysfunctional and an eerie atmosphere.

Like other dystopian novels, *The Year of Flood* constitutes an embodiment of the most cardinal elements of the genre since “science fiction has controlled the scene for a long period, has changed to include a more diverse body of texts” (Djeddaï & Benabed, 2020) The epitome of the tyrant government and its agents is represented through the CorpSeCorpe whose main mission is to secretly assassinate, kidnap and keep an eye on the rebellious citizens who refuse to conform to their imposed ideologies. In addition, there are other facets of dystopian societies described in the novel: an eco- terrorist

organization named MaddAdam, a wicked pharmaceutical company called Helthwyzer Corp sells dangerous medicines, an underground secret organization named Peebmobs that works in drug dealings and organ trade and finally, the novel is full of various descriptions of genetically altered animals that mutilate the biological norms of the planet.

3. Bakhtinian Spatio-temporal Reflections on the Chronotope

The representation of time and space in literature has always been a central interest for scholars. Many attempts were made in order to figure out how these two intrinsic notions tend to operate within literary texts especially through the narrative. In this respect, “time is represented as cyclical since it offers a space in an explainable manner for the fusion of the past within the frames of the present in order to evaluate this latter from the perspective of the former.” (Aaid & Maoui, 2019). One of the brilliant scholars who were concerned with the interplay of time and space in novels is the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin whose works bore fruit in his discovery of the chronotope which can be utilized as an analytical tool to attain a speculative apprehension of the human action and attitude from an ethical perspective. Originally, the term chronotope is the combination of two words derived from Greek Cronos (time) and topos (space) and their infusion to create an understandable whole that investigates temporal as well as spatial indicators in literature. In fact, the chronotope, as a concept, looks into the interrelationship of time and space. For long, these two concepts have been studied separately from one another; it is only thanks to Bakhtin’s work that they started to be seen as inseparable and complementary entities. In literature, “it is impossible to imagine a shift of places or mutation of characters outside time” (Moulfi & Sarnou, 2014)

In his essay *Forms of Time and the Chronotope*, Bakhtin suggests that time and space are interlinked within the chronology of events forming an “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (Bakhtin, 1981). He further claims that the emotional experience of fictional texts operates on both levels of time well and space in order to create an expressive mirroring of the recounted events in any given fictional work. For Bakhtin, the significance of the chronotope lies in its ability to help mediate the ‘image’ of the character by reflecting its experience at specific moments and locations to create a meaning. He poetically describes the interrelationship between space and time that he labels as the chronotope by saying:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time as it were thickens, takes on flesh, [and] becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (ibid, p.84).

Indeed, as it is clarified in the quote above, the chronotope for Bakhtin is immensely crucial for attributing a meaning to literary texts. Its significance is seen through the realistic dimension it adds the events of the story because: “once a new item penetrates to the host language, a competition between old and new forms operates” (Ouahmiche, 2013). Albeit there is not a cutting edge definition for the chronotope provided by

Bakhtin, many scholars attempted to unveil this ambiguity by trying to provide definitions and interpretations to the term. Basically, the term Chronotope was borrowed by Bakhtin in order to describe the continuum of space and time within literary texts that is established on the basis of altered spatial and temporal traits as well as narrative potentials that resolve which events can happen and how.

4. Gendered Spaces in *The Year of the Flood*

Production of space theory by Henry Lefebvre has witnessed a significant renaissance due to its attractive content. Its importance appears especially in the fact that it methodically gathers and incorporates the categories of city and space in a single, comprehensive social theory allowing the perception and the analysis of spatial processes at different levels. (Social) space being conceived as a mere social product can be understood through breaking away with the prevalent concept of the space as being material reality existing in itself, the observation against which Lefebvre had used the concept of 'production of space'. This theory understands space as essentially bound up with social reality. It suggests that space in itself can never serve as an epistemological starting position. Thus, according to Lefebvre space does not exist by itself; it is produced. In his own conception, space and time are not purely material, they are understood in the context of spacial society. In this respect, space and time are not merely relational but crucially historical. This implies a call for a thorough analysis that would encompass the social constellation, power relations and conflicts relevant in each situation.

Social stratification, power relations as well as gender distinctions lead to the productions of various spaces that respond to the standards of any given society, depending predominantly on its economic, political and cultural backgrounds. As a result, public, private as well as gendered spaces start to be remarkably produced. The public spaces usually are the ones in which public practices and transactions take place. They also refer to spaces that are open and accessible to everyone regardless to their gender, race or social background. They are usually the ones owned by the state; among these spaces we mention: streets, roads, gardens, beaches and parks. On the other hand, there are other spaces which are private in the sense that there are limitations that restrict their accessibility. These private spaces are embodied in: houses, kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms.

Gendered space is the intersection of knowledge and action in the gender realm that is political, ideological and embedded in the existing code of production. Lefebvre's significant features of space are either political, ideological or included within the code of space production. He suggests that not only did socialism created gendered space, but these spaces that are manipulated by states and individuals are made in order to rewrite their public roles. The urge to divide spaces into male and female ones is widely connected to the roles and actions that take place in these spaces. In order to conceptualize the notion of gendered space, Lefebvre's views are of a great importance here. He believes that space is inherently political entity that is tightly linked to hegemony and power (Lefebvre, 1991).

The distinction between genders comes as a result of the powerful position that males occupy in society. Speaking about power takes us to the thoughtful Foucauldian conception that stresses on the tremendous influence of power which operates at all levels of society. For Foucault, "power is everywhere" (Foucault, 1976, p. 93). It strictly outlines

gender roles into what a man should do and a woman should make. This differentiation is frequently related to attributes holding “masculine” and “feminine” connotations respectively. Males are considered as superiors of females who are by force of patriarchal conventions deemed dependent and subservient. From a feminist standpoint, Foucault’s views of power are vividly embraced by feminists because, according to their convictions, the relationship between men and women is overwhelmed by the binaries of domination and submission, autonomy and subordination order and obedience.

The genderization of space in *The Year of the Flood* is manifested through the creation of spatial spheres that allude to male power. In fact, across the novel there are strict spatial barriers that are established in order to separate males and females or precisely to confine females. The two main characters of the novel Amanda and Toby represent the embodiment of the two faces of the coin as far as gender is concerned. While Amanda tends to be the epitome of the traditional feminine view, Toby tends to lean more towards masculinity as she appears to have masculine traits. Unlike other female characters especially the ones who joined the God Gardeners as Eves, Toby seems to be treated as genderless. Starting from her name that is applicable to females and males, her appearance and the amount of freedom she enjoys. She is allowed access to some spots in the garden that not all females in her group are allowed to. Nevertheless, no matter how hard she tries to transcend her physical appearance as a female she is still being reminded of her femininity and submission by the male characters in the novel as they try to sustain this sense of inferiority through the act of rape.

In the same token, Scholar Reeser contends that: “women are able to approach masculinity through these gendered traits, but in the end are not given the chance to reach it fully. Physical traits like the penis turn into proof, or reassurance, that the woman is unable to profit from masculinity in its fullness or totality” (Reeser, 2010). As Reeser describes, the difficulty of transcending bodily traits constitutes a major hindrance for females to move beyond the confines of the masculine supremacy. Thus, the garden is considered as a gendered space that limits female access to maintain their inferior position. Amanda is denied access because of her feminine appearance while Toby prevents herself from enjoying accessibility because of her fear of Blanco, a member of the Pleeblands and a rapist. Rape, in this case, formulates a medium of power that males utilize in order to marginalize females and uphold the sense of subordination and submission within their mindsets.

Another revelation of genderization of spaces in the novel is the virtual space. The virtual space in the novel has been created early in the first sequel entitled *Oryx and Crake*. The access o to this virtual world by Crake is attainable at anytime unlike his partner Oryx. He utilizes the picture of her naked body as web gateway to the virtual world of the Crakers. In fact, the objectification of the female body has been a major concern for feminist scholars. It has been long linked to sexuality and women’s worth is often equated with the beauty standards and the social expectations of how a woman is supposed to be and look like. The objectification of women bodies is clearly traced through the virtual space as Oryx’ body has been sexually exploited ever since she was a child through pornography. Crake uses her as a commodity void from feelings and dignity.

5. Dystopian Chronotopes in the *The Year of the Flood*

A chronotopic analysis of Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* offers a multidimensional view about its spatial and temporal setting. Through the use of a geocritical approach, the analysis of the dystopian setting reveals that there are multiple sites and multiple time domains that reflect dystopia. From a Bakhtinian lens, the chronotope when used as a literary technique to scrutinize any literary work's spatiality tends to strengthen its meaning and tighten the relationship of the work to its ascribed intellectual tendency. Dystopian fiction as a literary genre stands primarily on the way setting is artistically portrayed in order to provide a vivid depiction of what a dystopian world would look like. In this respect Bakhtin contends that the chronotope:

emerges as a centre for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250)

According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is what grants the literary work its viability as it tends to concretize the abstract ideas and philosophies regardless to “when talking about literary intertextuality or postmodern rewriting” (Otmani & Bouregbi, 2020) through the embedment of spatial references and temporal indicators. Along the same line, Tally argues that the importance of the chronotope lays in the fact that it “brings space, time, and genre together in a conceptually integrated way” (Tally, Robert T. Jr., 2013, p. 56). Thereby, the chronotope of dystopian literature plays an intrinsic role in consolidating its overarching message which is trying to launch a warning call about what would happen if our current world stayed the same.

In *The Year of the Flood*, the dystopian chronotope can be traced through the division of spaces into public/private, central/peripheral, Urban/suburban and finally accessible/restricted. To better excavate the gendered spaces in the novel, a geocritical turn is needed. In the translated book of Bertrand Westphal *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Tally explains that:

geocriticism attempts to understand the real and fictional spaces that we inhabit, cross through, imagine, survey, modify, celebrate, disparage, and on and on in an infinite variety. Geocriticism allows us to emphasize the ways that literature interacts with the world, but also to explore how all ways of dealing with the world are somewhat literary. (ibid, p. 11)

The categorization of spaces is chiefly held according to specific parameters related to political, cultural, religious and social conventions that delineate their accessibility. These divisions are traced in the novel via different spots. First of all the Sticky Zone which is a sealed-off room, exactly located in a fancy upscale strip club wherein the main character Ren is locked up. The room consists a restricted space that constraints and delimits Ren's freedom keeping her under constant oversight of Mordis. The aim behind confining them in that room is making sure that the girls working in the

club protected from any potential contagion of the waterloos flood pandemic. She describes her entrapment in the room by saying: “I can’t see out the window, its glass brick. I can’t get out the door, it’s locked on the outside. I still have air though, and water, as long as the solar doesn’t quit. I still have food” (Atwood, 2010, p. 2). Ren’s freedom costs her protection. In fact, the Sticky Zone constitutes a dystopian chronotope as its spatial reference (a locked room) and temporal indicator (a futuristic time span) provides a gloomy facet of a phantasmagorical world.

In addition to the Sticky Zone, the Rarity restaurant represents a dystopian chronotope. It serves as a spatial reference wherein one of the most hideous practices of dystopia is boldly exercised. Matching the unethical turn of post-pandemic environments, the restaurant works illegally by dividing its spheres into public and private ones. In the public sphere, the restaurant served legal animal meat and meals that were mostly made of Soya but look like other things; Toby describes: “The public dining rooms served steak and lamb and venison and buffalo, certified disease-free so it could be cooked rare — that was what “Rarity” pretended to mean.” (ibid, p. 7) It is important to highlight that what characterizes the setting in novel is the climate change as one of the consequences of the waterless flood. This change in the climate has caused a massive shortage in natural crops as large amounts of them ceased to exist. consequently, the private rooms of the restaurant served food made of endangered species as it is involved in an illegal animal slaughtering “But in the private banquet rooms — key-club entry, bouncer enforced— you could eat endangered species.” (ibid, p.7) Atwood’s detailed description of the spatial references and landmarks that characterize the post-apocalyptic world she imagines consist dystopian chronotopes that take on “flesh and blood” (Bakhtin , 1981, p. 250) to provide the reader a vivid portrayal of the novel’s setting.

6. Apprehending Gendered Spaces as Dystopian Chronotopes in the Novel

One of the pivotal characteristics of dystopian fiction is the manipulation of power through knowledge, culture or politics. In the novel, power operates through different forms; from the macroscopic level to microscopic one. As far as gender is concerned, power has always been linked to masculinity due to countless social considerations. The biological differences between males and females submit to Foucault’s “analysis of the body as the focal point for struggles over the shape of power” (King, 2004) for which “the cultivation of the body is essential to the establishment of one’s social role.” (ibid) Males are endowed with control over women because of the biological differences according to which societies regard males as more potent than their female counterparts. In addition, women have always been stuck in the dilemma of being defined, represented and apprehended in relation to men, labeling women as men’s “other”. In her article, *The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body*, scholar Angela King postulates that:

The idea of men and women as opposites is supported by polarized categories such as mind/body, culture/nature, spirit/matter that have been inflected with gender ideologies. In the mind/body dualism the body and mind are regarded as quite separate, the body is merely the crude container of the mind. Mind and reason are superior to the emotions and senses and divorced from one

another. Man is mind and represents culture: the rational, unified, thinking subject; woman is body and represents nature: irrational, emotional and driven by instinct and physical need. Mind/culture/man must harness and control this potentially unruly body/nature/woman through the application of knowledge and willpower. (ibid)

Likewise, the categorization of spaces into gendered ones in *The Year of the Flood* is among the manifestations of dystopia as it basically stands upon women's detention and abasement. In dystopias, women can suffer two times: first, because of political/authoritarian power, secondly through male/sexist oppression. For long, women have been objectified and sexualized as a way to sustain their inferiority and submission.

The foundation of Scales and Tails, a high class night club, represents a spatial tool of women's subjugation. Ren, a sex worker in the aforementioned club is an object for sexual desire that Mordis uses in order to make money. He restricts their mobility and locks her (like other women working for him) in rooms in order to make sure that they will stay safe from any potential contagion. He describes them as "a valuable asset" (Atwood, 2010). The Scales and Tails is considered as a gendered space that submits to the dystopian chronotopes since it objectifies women and links their value to their sexual potentialities. Women who age or lose their beauty become ill-treated as worthless and neglected assets. Mordis describes the situation of women after SeksMart took control "Anyone left outside the system was not only illegal but pathetic. A few wrecked, diseased old women wandering the alleyways, practically begging. No man with even a fraction of his brain left would go anywhere near them." (ibid) alluding to the women who lost their jobs as prostitutes. Thus, women's consideration as "a valuable asset" is only related to their sexuality. Besides hiring them as sex objects, they were also sexually assaulted as a way of reminding them of their inferior position vis-à-vis men.

7. Conclusion

In a nutshell, besides its interest in debunking the unethical turn that dominates the scientific spheres, the novel tends to stand in the same line with other Atwoodian works which can be classified as literature of protest. There are many instances in the novel that overtly articulate Atwood's feminism. She always links her uncanny futuristic visions about the world to the females' detention and oppression. She sheds light on one of the most dehumanizing acts that involves even child sexual exploitation. The style of narration, the themes and the way Atwood presents the characters shows her commitment to her feminist stands. She sets up female characters as strong and owning some traits that are commonly attributed to men and does the inverse to her male characters.

The writer aims at providing a spatio-temporal vision of women's suffering and detention by reflecting futuristic dystopian realities. The importance of the chronotope as a literary technique lies in its ability to draw a connection between the artistic work and the reader regardless spaces in the novel can be considered as dystopian chronotopes through which the to the discrepancies in fictional/factual space and time. In this vein, Atwood comments on her dystopian novels that contain bleak provisions about the future of our world by saying: "I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time." She continues "I did not wish

to be accused of dark, twisted inventions or of misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behavior” (Atwood, 2012).

Through the use of a geocritical approach and relying on descriptive and analytical methods, the gendered spaces found in the novel have been scrutinized in order to study the possibility of regarding them as chronotopes. The present paper concluded that time and space consist major elements as far as the dystopian genre is concerned. The reciprocal influence of space and time when studied as “chronotopes” take an essential part in strengthening the meaning and preserving the aesthetic dimensions of the work, adding pinches of credibility. As a matter of fact, *The Year of the Flood* contains many spatial references and temporal indicators that sustain the consideration of gendered spaces as dystopian chronotopes since they are used as tools of women’s subjugation and relegation.

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