

**DYSTOPIAN FICTION AS AN IDEOLOGICAL
BATTLEGROUND: A STUDY OF FEMALE
AUTHORSHIP IN THE POST-2016
SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT**

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**ASIA e UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

This study employs a qualitative feminist literary analysis, utilizing close reading and thematic coding of three post-2016 dystopian novels: *Vox*, *The Blue Ticket*, and *Red Clocks*. Guided by radical feminist and intersectional frameworks, the analysis identifies how literary devices and themes related to patriarchy, reproduction, and silencing are deployed as critique strategies. Data was gathered through a combination of scholarly study and thematic coding, with particular attention to how these texts were selected for their relevance to contemporary sociopolitical climates. In the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a notable revival of dystopian literature has emerged, predominantly written by female authors who utilize the genre to critique urgent societal issues. This research explores the ideological battleground presented by these novels, focusing on how they reflect and respond to themes such as patriarchy, religion, reproduction, and gender. The findings reveal that these authors effectively use dystopian settings not only to depict possible futures shaped by oppressive regimes but also to inspire activism and discourse surrounding women's rights and reproductive justice. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the pivotal role of female writers in shaping the contemporary dystopian landscape. Their narratives serve as ideological battlegrounds that challenge existing power structures and advocate for greater equity and justice, empowering a new generation of activists to engage in the fight for women's rights and freedoms.

Keywords: Gender roles, patriarchy, reproductive rights, religious oppression

APPROVAL

This is to certify that this thesis conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, for the fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Chairman, Examination Committee

[11 September 2025]

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

RO	Research Objectives
RQ	Research questions
FCDA	Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Dystopian novels represent a genre of literature that depicts fictional societies characterized by oppression, dehumanization, and authoritarian rule. These societies often feature strict social control, government surveillance, and limited personal freedoms, with protagonists struggling to challenge or escape them. As Booker (1994) notes, dystopian fiction typically "offers a vision of an undesirable society, warning readers of the dangers of unchecked power and social conformity" (p. 3). Dystopian literature serves not only as entertainment but also as a vehicle for social and political critique, with authors utilizing speculative worlds to examine contemporary issues and anxieties (Claeys, 2017).

The term Dystopia was initially coined by Philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1868, while criticizing Irish land policy, as the opposite of the term "eutopia," or an ideal society (Claeys, 2010). (OED, 2024). The genre is closely related to speculative fiction. It is characterized by its focus on imagined futures, which is an expression of contemporary criticism of dominant social patterns (Moylan, 2000).

Dystopian fiction has undergone several historical stages, starting with the early prophetic fiction like *We* and *1984* by Yevgeny Zamyatin and George Orwell, which cautioned against totalitarianism, to feminist writers, like Herland, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, that anticipated concerns about gendered oppression and reproductive control (Atwood, 2011; Gilman, 1915). Scholars have drawn a line between prophetic dystopias, where the future is warned about dangers, and satirical dystopias, where the present is criticized in the name of fantasy (Sargent,

1994), which cautioned against dictatorship to feminist interpositions like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which foreground issues of gendered oppression and reproductive control (Atwood, 2011; Gilman, 1915). Scholars have distinguished between prophetic dystopias, which caution against future calamities, and satirical dystopias, which critique current realities under the guise of fantasy (Sargent, 1994). Key elements of dystopian novels include Oppressive or authoritarian governments, dehumanization and loss of individual agency, inescapable surveillance and control, Protagonists who resist or subvert the system, and Thematic exploration of social fears and anxieties (Booker, 1994; Moylan, 2000).

1.1 Background of Study

Historically, dystopian literature has been predominantly written by male authors, with female perspectives often marginalized or relegated to passive roles (Quade, 2024). Women were often depicted as objects or plot devices, reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting female agency (Ladzekpo, 2024). In response, female authors began to reclaim the genre, using dystopian fiction as a space to critique oppression and reimagine women's roles in society. Dystopian fiction has undergone a significant transformation since its inception, reflecting and responding to the sociopolitical anxieties of various eras. The genre's roots can be traced to early prophetic works such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), which critiqued the dangers of collectivism and state control in post-revolutionary Russia, and George Orwell's *1984* (1949), which offered a chilling warning about the rise of authoritarian regimes, surveillance, and the manipulation of truth (Booker, 1994; Claeys, 2017). These novels established the

standard for dystopian societies, defined by oppressive governments, loss of individuality, and universal control, serving as cautionary tales for future generations.

As the twentieth century progressed, dystopian fiction began to incorporate feminist writers who challenged the genre's traditionally patriarchal focus. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) portrayed an all-female utopian society, aiming to critique traditional gender roles and propose alternatives to male-dominated social structures (Gilman, 1915; Moylan, 2000). Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) further advanced this feminist tradition by foregrounding issues of gendered oppression, reproductive control, and the commodification of women's bodies within a dystopia (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003). These works not only expanded the thematic scope of dystopian fiction but also provided new frameworks for exploring power, agency, and resistance from a distinctly female perspective.

Scholars have identified two major subgenres within dystopian literature: prophetic dystopias and satirical dystopias. Prophetic dystopias, exemplified by Zamyatin and Orwell, are characterized by their warnings about potential future disasters, often generalizing current trends to their most extreme and disastrous conclusions (Sargent, 1994; Claeys, 2010). Researchers have distinguished two great subgenres of dystopian literature: prophetic dystopia and satirical dystopia. Examples of prophetic dystopia include Zamyatin and Orwell. However, the warning of future catastrophes they may cause is also standard, often blowing out to their utmost, apocalyptic extremes, which is the existing trend (Sargent, 1994; Claeys, 2010). Satire, on the other hand, is exaggerated and ironic in satiric dystopia, as existing social realities are criticized and the absurdity and unfairness of life are revealed beneath the veil of fantasy or speculative fiction (Sargent, 1994; Booker, 1994). This difference is crucial for understanding how dystopian fiction simultaneously reflects society and

envisions alternative futures. The evolution from prophetic to feminist and satirical dystopias highlights the genre's adaptability and its capacity to address shifting cultural concerns.

While these foundational texts established a critical feminist lineage, the post-2016 era marks a radical transformation in dystopian fiction, driven by a new wave of female writers. The emergence of post-2016 feminist dystopian fiction cannot be fully understood without situating it within the dramatic political and cultural shifts that occurred in that year and its aftermath. The election of 2018, the rise of global right-wing populism, and the resurrection of restrictive policies on women's reproductive rights marked a profound turning point, intensifying anxieties around gender, autonomy, and democracy (Dillon, 2020). The rollback of abortion rights, symbolized by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States, alongside the propagation of anti-feminist rhetoric and the mainstreaming of misogynistic ideologies, created an environment in which women's bodies and voices were increasingly campaigned and contested (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003). The #MeToo movement further exposed the systemic nature of gendered violence and silencing, igniting a wave of literary responses that foregrounded female agency, resistance, and the urgent need for representation (Pozner, 2019). Within this context, post-2016 feminist dystopian novels such as Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018), Sophie Mackintosh's *The Blue Ticket* (2020), and Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018) do more than merely reflect contemporary sociopolitical realities; they actively question and critique the mechanisms of patriarchal control, reproductive governance, and the erasure of women's voices (Lupton, 2020). The genre has become an ideological battleground where women authors express their visions for justice, agency, and transformation.

Despite the longstanding tradition of dystopian literature, the majority of the genre, primarily created by male authors who had historically marginalized or silenced female perspectives by reducing women to symbolic roles, did not focus on women's experiences in oppressive regimes (Booker, 1994; Claey's, 2017). Earlier feminist writers, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Herland* and Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, began to focus on women's voices and critique patriarchal structures. However, a significant gap remains in knowledge about how these legacies persisted among modern female writers in the wake of new sociopolitical events (Edwards, 2020). In particular, the post-2016 wave of feminist dystopian fiction, emerging from current policies marked by the rollback of reproductive rights, the rise of populist politics, and movements like #MeToo, demands renewed critical attention for its explicit engagement with issues of silencing, bodily autonomy, and resistance (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003). Existing studies have tended to focus on classic or pre-2016 texts, leaving the exploration of how recent female-authored dystopias employ literary devices and thematic strategies to reclaim narrative authority and articulate contemporary gendered oppression (Vint, 2020; Dillon, 2020). This research addresses a research gap by conducting a systematic study of feminist dystopian novels published since 2016, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship among literature, gender, and sociopolitical crises.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although the dystopian genre has been recognized as a powerful tool for analyzing and addressing social anxieties, female writers have been repeatedly marginalized within it, especially when the author is male. (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003). The classic examples of dystopian literature, *1984* by George Orwell, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, are longstanding foundational

texts of the genre that are inexhaustibly studied as critiques of dictatorship, surveillance, and manipulation of truth (Claeys, 2017; Vieira, 2022). The analysis of these classic dystopian novels has been limited to political and philosophical observations; however, the stereotyped roles assigned to female characters have also been considered. They are mostly portrayed as passive, voiceless, or characterized by their associations with male protagonists (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003). These works remain the subject of ongoing research, particularly given their timeless relevance to debates on political control, censorship, and the erosion of personal freedoms in the twenty-first century (Vieira, 2022).

These classic dystopian novels have been extensively analyzed for their political and philosophical insights; however, these studies consistently overlook the limited and often stereotypical roles assigned to female characters, who are frequently depicted as passive, voiceless, or defined solely by their relationships with male protagonists (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003).

Scholars have carefully distinguished the philosophical foundations of these novels, examining how they construct dystopian societies to warn against the dangers of unchecked authority and the erosion of personal autonomy (Claeys, 2017). However, in such analyses, it is noted that female characters in these acknowledged texts are assigned to supporting roles or serve as narrative devices to advance the male protagonist's journey, rather than as fully developed characters with agency. (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003; Vieira, 2022). For example, Julia in *1984* is often interpreted primarily in relation to Winston's rebellion, while Lenina in *Brave New World* is depicted through her relationships with male characters, and Clarisse in *Fahrenheit 451* functions as an agent for Montag's transformation but is swiftly removed from the narrative (Vieira, 2022).

This trend of marginalization has prompted recent feminist critics to state that the genre's traditional focus on male experiences has restricted its ability to address the particular types of oppression that women experience (Lupton,2020) Although the genre has evolved to include innovative works by female authors, most notably Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the genre remains excessively centered on male-authored texts. (Edwards,2020). Contrarily, the wave of post-2016 female-authored dystopian fiction, which addresses the specifics of the current socio-political crisis that has directly encouraged it (e.g., the rollback of reproductive rights, the escalation of gender-based violence, etc.), has been studied comparatively less (Dillon, 2020). Consequently, it becomes urgent to research that not only challenges the literary approaches used by these modern feminist writers but also places their contributions into the context of feminist resistance and criticism. While works by women, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, have challenged these conventions by foregrounding women's agency and resistance, the current scholarship deals mainly with works before 2016 and has not dealt with the new wave of female-authored dystopian fiction that followed major socio-political shifts, including the rise of right-wing populism, the rollback of reproductive rights, and the #MeToo movement (Vint, 2020).

Another significant research gap persists in the lack of in-depth analysis of how post-2016 female dystopian writers employ literary devices, such as language, imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to expose and resist the systemic silencing and marginalization of women (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003) which directly aligns with Research Objective 1 (RO1) and Research Question 1 (RQ1), which investigate how contemporary female authors foreground female agency and resistance through narrative strategies in oppressive settings. Moreover, in dystopian novels, the focus on

the portrayal and influence of socio-political problems, including gender-based oppression, reproductive control, and religious subjugation, and their impact on the lives of female characters, is lacking (Edwards, 2020). These dimensions are the focus of Research Objective 2 (RO2) and Research Question 2 (RQ2), which aim to understand how dystopias written by women address contemporary issues faced by women worldwide. Although feminist dystopian fiction offers ideological depth and critical revaluation of the issues of patriarchy, religion, reproduction, and gender, the study of how post-2016 writers of the female gender directly approach the issues of Radical Feminism to confront and subvert the existing socio-political paradigms has not yet received significant scholarly attention (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003). The gap is addressed through Research Objective 3 (RO3) and Research Question 3 (RQ3), which aim to situate these literary interventions within the broader context of modern feminist discourse. Thus, this research portrays dystopian literature as an ideological battleground in which the post-2016 female author assumes control of the narrative, challenges the most deeply rooted forms of oppression, and redefines the genre as a powerful tool of feminist resistance, critique, and change.

1.3 Research Gap

While dystopian fiction has increasingly gained traction as a critical platform for socio-political commentary, most scholarship continues to privilege male-authored narratives, leaving the contributions of post-2016 female writers underexplored. Existing literature has primarily focused on canonical works by earlier feminist authors, such as Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler, with limited attention paid to the emerging wave of post-2016 female voices reshaping the genre through a distinct Radical Feminist lens. (De Sá, 2020).

More importantly, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding how contemporary writers employ literary devices, particularly metaphor, language, imagery, and symbols to represent the silencing and marginalization of women in dystopian societies. Although scholars have acknowledged the presence of feminist themes, few have investigated how specific narrative techniques are employed to challenge patriarchal oppression, as called for by RO1/RQ1. Although scholars have acknowledged the presence of feminist themes, few scholars have investigated how these specific narrative techniques are employed to challenge patriarchal oppression, as called for by RO1/RQ1. For example, while feminist dystopian fiction is widely recognized as a critique of gender-based oppression, detailed analyses of literary techniques remain limited in scope and depth (Lupton, 2020). Recent scholarship highlights that mechanisms of silencing and marginalization are depicted through literary devices; yet, comprehensive studies specifically addressing these techniques are scarce (Hemavathi, 2023). Furthermore, broader analyses of gender representation in dystopian literature tend to focus on themes rather than on the narrative techniques that articulate resistance and agency (Tripathi, 2024).

Similarly, there is an insufficient portrayal of socio-political issues such as reproductive rights, religious oppression, and state control over women's bodies in recent dystopian novels written by women. These themes have gained renewed urgency in light of global political movements, such as the #MeToo movement and the rollback of reproductive rights. (Winkler, 2025). Nevertheless, their literary representation and the effect they have on female characters have not been adequately examined, which directly justifies RO2/RQ2. Although there is some scholarly work that has acknowledged the portrayal of religious extremism and its impact on women's autonomy, there is not much research that has focused specifically on how

reproductive rights, religious oppression, and state control interact (Briscoe, 2022). Moreover, the theme of reproductive justice in feminist dystopian literature and its connection to contemporary political movements is a growing field that warrants further exploration by scholars (Ireland, 2024). Lastly, although scholars are increasingly focusing on feminist literary theories, there remains a lack of critical analysis of Radical Feminist frameworks regarding how dystopian texts respond to issues of patriarchy, gender norms, and institutionalized control in the present-day period. Although the feminist dystopian fiction is read through more general feminist or intersectional prisms, the particular concerns voiced by the Radical Feminist theory, especially the systemic aspects of the patriarchal oppression and the processes of institutional control, are seldom theorized in the current readings. Existing literature is more inclined to the ideas of resistance and agency without fully theorizing the impact of radical descriptions of the gender and power structure on the narrative and its feminist discourse (Gottlieb, 2020). Through this, the relevance of these themes in shaping feminist discourse in dystopian fiction remains largely untheorized. Accordingly, there are significant gaps in comprehending the literary and socio-political effects of the works (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The proposed study addresses these essential gaps by providing a thorough, theoretically informed analysis of how female dystopian authors writing since 2016 utilize the genre as a platform for feminist critique and social and political opposition.

1.4 Research Objectives

- i. **RO1:** To explore how post-2016 female writers in dystopian literature use literary devices like language, imagery, symbols, and metaphors to highlight the silence and marginalization of women in society in the selected dystopian works.