

POSSIBILITIES OF FEMALE DISCOURSE IN DYSTOPIAN CONTEXT

Abstract: Female characters in dystopian novels tend to be restricted by different regulations and pre-determined behavioural patterns among which is the prohibition to have public speeches and use political discourse, which seems to be reserved for male speakers. The aim of this paper is to show examples of energetic, unexpected, and potentially subversive female discourse in the dystopian context, which certain female characters do not hesitate to use in order to question the values of the patriarchal structure, even though such an endeavour can turn them into social outcasts and political misfits. By analysing these female characters in dystopian works of Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin, relying on the theoretical concepts of Judith Butler, in this paper female discourse will be used to disclose gender relations, social conditions and female political interaction, constitutive of the dystopian environment in which the characters are placed. The aim of the paper is to stress the injustice done to the female participation in the public discourse of dystopian novels, with the intention to show how the female political communicative act has purposely been made marginal in order to keep the patriarchal social stability intact.

Key words: female discourse, dystopia, speech acts, verbal resistance, performative acts, collective awakening

1. Introduction

Well-established tradition of male dystopian authors does not need to be deeply scrutinized in order to reach a conclusion that such tradition has been inclined towards marginalization of female characters and silencing of female voices. One just needs to take a glimpse at renowned dystopian classics such as *Brave New World* or *1984* to understand that the destiny of heroines in these novels has been doomed to silence, suffering, abuse and mistreatment by the patriarchal systems they are part of, which are intentionally limiting their rights to education, pursuing career, performing public speech acts and practicing other rights which are given to their male counterparts. Although male authors or at least some of them criticized tyranny of patriarchal systems throughout their novels, hoping for the new, more perfect world order to rise, rarely did they believe that a heroine is capable of confronting the oppressive patriarchal regime or having any kind of political power to introduce changes in society she is trapped in. Such belief may be the result of patriarchal upbringing and principles that the male authors have internalized themselves through



their education, leading them to treat women in the mode of essentialism as weaker and intellectually incapable beings. But even if their background is to be taken aside, the truth is that their novels do impose patriarchal discourse as the dominant one inclining to overstep and speak over the voice of the feminine.

Heroines in the first dystopias are neither meant to criticize the governing structures nor empowered for such an ordeal which quite often creates an image of them as loyal, submissive, terrified and victimized subjects to the state order and nothing more than that. Accepting their silence, opting for passive existence, performing their pre-defined roles, these heroines propagate the regime by subduing to its repressive force only to maintain the patriarchal laws and preserve the patriarchal structure and prosperity. However, with the appearance of female dystopian writers, the situation concerning female characters in dystopia has dramatically changed. Authors such as Ursula Le Guin and Margaret Atwood have shown that the female speech is not amputated; on the contrary, they have indicated that the voice of the feminine is vibrant and potentially dangerous for the state apparatus. Female discourse, whether a written or a spoken one is alive in the novels of the afore mentioned female authors, which brings hope that their female characters can use the language to communicate among themselves, perform political acts, organize rebellions in order to find the way out of prisons they had been thrown into against their own will. In this new dystopian literature, speech is no longer a commodity of the “privileged”, that is the male figures, but a useful weapon of the females that are conscious of their unjustly subordinate position in the world they live in.

Ursula Le Guin and after her Margaret Atwood deserve to be qualified as precursors of the genuine female speech in dystopian context which combines the need for female awakening, through remembering the language of the pre-Oedipal mother, and the need for political activity which has the power to initiate rebellion and trigger the female survival mechanism, the two aspects of language that theorists and feminists Ellen Cixous and Judith Butler have respectively been dealing with in great detail. Works of these two remarkable theorists are used in this paper to explain both Leguin and Atwood’s female discourse for which purpose they need to be analysed more deeply.

2. Empowering the female voice-constituting the female discourse

Cixous, the French feminist theoretician revealed the importance of re-establishing the ties with the pre-Oedipal mother for the sake of continuation of the mother-daughter legacy in which language is the most valuable part, thus insisting on the female discourse which is shared, understood, and recognized by women. This language which is taught before the law of the father is deprived of all the restrictions which are imposed on the feminine by the dominant male discourse and thus is free, liberating, inspiring and life-saving, which makes it so important for the survival of the dystopian females. Symbolically transmitted through mother’s milk, this language is a powerful tool for uniting female beings and increasing their

awareness of themselves and the world they live in. In dystopian novels in which female characters are often secluded, placed behind the walls, restricted the freedom to communicate and socialize, language of the pre-Oedipal mother is crucial for sustenance/survival and essential in small-scale interactions among females which are endeavouring to plant a seed of treason in patriarchal society.

To detect the "white ink/mother's milk" which is a metaphor for Sixous' "female writing" or *écriture féminine* (Siksu 2006:77) is a skill to write, read, and communicate in this unique female language which is rarely overt, direct, and straight-forward since it is secret and potentially subversive. Once this skill is mastered, the chances for not only mental, but also physical survival can increase by standing on the firm grounds of female mutual confidence, trust and decisiveness to resist. In Mary Daly's theory, for instance, this re-discovery of the pre-Oedipal mother language can be seen as the product of the inward journey towards the Great Goddess in the female collective unconscious, which is at the same time a long process of self-awakening that eventually leads to ignition of the "divine spark in a woman" and opens the realm of autonomous and sovereign female language to her. Whether or not this language is divine, it certainly replenishes female characters in Leguin and Atwood's novels with new, creative energy that sets them free from the patriarchal barriers and testifies to their newly discovered mechanisms in the struggle to survive.

It becomes obvious that such subversive language operates not only as a communicative tool necessary for the exchange of information among females but rather as a strong foundation for political discourse which awakens female economic, social and ethical being, empowering females for political speech acts. Throughout the novels of Leguin and Atwood it has been shown on different examples that this subversive language can bring benefits to the female speakers primarily due to the fact that such a language leads to political bonding among the female characters who unite to shape a strong political body which is not to be tamed and subjugated as easily as an individual female body. The power of such language to evade language normatives in the patriarchal paradigm reflects to the sphere of actions as well in which female characters find the alternative ways for their functioning by evading the structures of control, proving that their utmost subversive attitude can reach its goals by means of wisely planned strategies that they employ.

The moment the female beings awaken their minds, they next need to figure out how to escape the routine of the patriarchal world order and abandon the modes of speech, prescribed roles and prospects imposed on them by the dominant patriarchal figures, that is they need to formulate sound modes of action which will make the fulfilment of their needs realistic. Judith Butler believes this to be possible, at least temporarily in totalitarian patriarchal paradigms, by skipping certain performative acts whether in language or in action by failing to repeat the patterns which are regulating gender roles and relations. Such risk-taking acts of untypical behaviour and provocative speech delivery would imply abandoning the position that a female being occupies in the patriarchal hierarchy and the search for freedom somewhere in some "blind spot" of the patriarchal mechanism.



Although it can be understood from Butler's theory that we are slaves to performative acts which we ceaselessly invoke into our lives, such sudden attempts to break the routine and change the practice may eventually lead to changes in the structure of the performative acts themselves, since they are nothing more than social constructs devised by humans and practiced by humans in the world that is constantly changing itself. This can eventually lead to "re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler 1999:178) hopefully weakening the binary oppositions and gender role connotations one day. The blind spot, so to call it, then can be at the same time a dangerous zone for female interference but also a life-saving oasis for the feminine escape, recovery, healing and strength building. It is in this oasis that the possibilities for and potentials of female beings flourish, bringing hope for their new beginning. These changes in the hierarchical structures as small and as insignificant they may seem can actually pave the way for more substantial changes to come and establish themselves. For that reason, even the minor attempts of female characters in dystopias to gain freedom of the oppressive regime and obtain the freedom to act, speak, function, think and feel the way they find it appropriate is one step forward towards their re-inventing themselves and achieving their more dignified existence.

2.1. Revolutionary discourse of dystopian heroines

Perhaps the best example of genuine female discourse being put into practice is to be found in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* published in 1985. Atwood here relies on the concept of white ink and the secret language to show that even under close surveillance and mind control the main character manages to retain her language and her process of thinking. A monologue of the heroine Offred who is telling the story about the patriarchal order from her own point of view and her secret way of documenting thoughts by using the white ink, or as it turns out—the audio recorder which helped her to keep her memories alive, is a breakthrough through the silence and obedience of the female dystopian heroines constructed up to that point. While previous female characters tended to be marginal, Offred takes a central place and the main role in the novel and the more she fortifies her identity which tended to be shaken by the rigorous training in the Red Center, the more her language as a constituent part of her identity becomes stronger, resonant and more dynamic.

Her narration/discourse is subversive, first and foremost because it is forbidden and second because it reveals her true subversive thoughts and aspirations. She uses her language to criticize the patriarchal regime in front of the authoritative figure of her Commander, express love to Nick who is one of the guardians in the "State garden" or negotiate with the Commander's wife Serena Joy, committing each time a "crime" in socially prescribed language, relying on an authentic one of her own, which is definitely not in line with the strict rules of the conservative patriarchal society. By breaking the language norms and the silence imposed on her, Offred goes beyond the established social regulations, proving that exceptions to the rules, no matter how strict they are, are possible. In her case, carefully selected tactics

for survival which asked for constant watchfulness and situation assessment on her part assisted her in successful combat with the manipulative and brain-washing patriarchal doctrine. Unlike her, Moira, another rebellious handmaid who directly and furiously attacked patriarchal values in her uncontrolled outbursts of protest speeches followed by two escapes from the entrapment, conspicuous as she had been, was an easier pray for the patriarchal authorities to track her down, capture her, control her and maybe even finally tame her and convert her to the patriarchal doctrine, a thesis which can be supported by Moira's indifference and inertness at the end of the novel. This only tells that Moira's strategy in opposing the authorities was not as carefully planned and as well-devised as Offred's.

Not only Offred but also other isolated handmaids find secret ways to communicate among themselves in the Red Centre, the bordel Jezbel, and during the walks outside of the Commanders' homes. It is precisely this female discourse that keeps them spiritually alive in society in which they are manipulated, physically/sexually and mentally abused, deprived of the right to get education, read books or perform jobs outside of the spectrum determined for them by the Commanders. Offred with her narration not only finds a formula for her spiritual survival but also finds the way of preserving her narration for the generations to come as a sort of testimony to the past events. Her narration as an historiographical account inscribes itself on the pages of history becoming part of the cultural legacy for the future generations who need to remember the monstrosities of the Commanders' era to internally condemn and judge the misdeeds committed at that time. By interfering with the flows of history, Offred transposes herself from the private into the public sphere from which she as other handmaids was secluded and earns more political space for herself and other women.

Even if it does not result in big scale collective awakening, the female discourse of individual heroines in this Atwood's book signifies to the individual self-awakening and increasing awareness to the negative effects of the totalitarian regime, which is one essential link in the chain of female political bonding and uprising in activism. The more revived female minds there are, the more it is likely that they will constitute themselves into a political body that can insist on changes and improvements in the social structure. This novel is illustrative in itself to show how it is possible to preserve the authentic self and the feminine voice even under a great pressure of the repressive patriarchal regime, which is already an added value to this novel in comparison to the novels, which muted the female characters.

Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood's second dystopia reveals the process of collective (female) awakening triggered by an individual female character. Sheron, a microbiologist, for instance, relies on the subversive power of her language to deliver her message to the public and the female collective in her altruistic attempt of a saviour. Sheron who takes after her rebellious mother does not surrender to the threats and accusations of the patriarchal authorities but continues to spread her female voice to organize protests against the government and enlighten other citizens who are struggling in the dark of industrialism and capitalism. First Sheron speaks openly against the abuse of science, experiments on



animals, use of dangerous drugs on humans starting from her family and confronting with her husband who is the epitome of the corrupted patriarchal society and then she starts acting in public sharing her beliefs with other people who are able to perceive the reality behind the curtains of the patriarchal theatre. The language she uses can be deciphered both as liberating and inspiring for the real acts of defiance, which follow her powerful verbal resistance. Her written language; however, is intentionally coded in contrast to her spoken language so that she cannot be so easily tracked by the state spies. Postcards that she signs as aunt Monica are her secret messages to her son to whom she hopes to bring a better future although she appears to abandon her traditional role of a mother according to the social norms.

Speech acts that Sheron uses are not simple performative acts in the light of Butler's theory that women like her are expected to practice in the state body, repeat, and invoke throughout their lives. Through her speech acts she breaks the norms, challenges patriarchal authorities and sends a very important political message that can be mind-awakening and life-saving. By failing to perform her stereotypical role that she is supposed to be cherishing in the Module of the greedy industrialists, she abandons the position of the submissive, terrified and loyal citizen to the state order, which qualifies her for the true rebel who is on her part ready to take risks and take responsibility for her own actions, starting and independent, autonomous existence of her own.

While Offred managed to live through the hard times and maintain her discourse through the oppressive era of Commanders, Sheron does not save herself or get saved, but her discourse resonates among her followers to testify further on to social evils as well as to oppose and challenge the pervert values of patriarchy. That is why the types of discourse that Atwood's heroines use cannot be perceived otherwise than being successful for interrupting female silence, illustrating female experience and reaching the public sphere through secret channels reserved for the powerful males thus proving that the patriarchal system is not perfect and without its flaws.

It is impossible to miss the similarity between Atwood's characters and the characters of her predecessor Ursula Leguin. Atwood's heroines resemble to a great extent the ones that Le Guin was writing about in the mid seventies in her science fiction novels. For instance, Takver from the novel *The Dispossessed* is also an example of a rebellious woman who protects the interests of the revolution and agitates for it even when she is labelled a traitor. Her open public discourse shows the strength of her political beliefs even though she is sabotaged by her opponents. As a mother, she is aware of the necessity to keep the world a safe place and humane enough for the future generations to come, which makes her struggle for maintaining the mother-daughter legacy alive, perpetuating, timeless and never ceasing. Her concern for preserving the environment and wildlife which she perceives as one living organism that she is strongly attached to only deepens her understanding of mother-daughter relationship in which mother also stands for the Mother Earth which nourishes us with her soil. It is exactly in this capacity to feel herself as an integrative part of the organic, inorganic and the cosmic realm that she manages to survive. The

intangible language she uses to communicate with nature instructs her on how to live through the harsh and inhospitable conditions in the natural environment profoundly damaged by human neglect. Her ability to recreate the Great Goddess, to read and follow the cycles in nature enables her to bring her children to life, feed them and nurture them bare-handed before she could rejoin with her husband, thus proving her independence and resourcefulness as a character. Takver even uses her language to invent a utopia of her own, which will form itself high up in the mountains, far away from the "civilized" world, revealing that her mind is still capable of creating and imagining new words, ideas and constructs even if it has been supposed to wither in the uniformity of the bureaucratic apparatus like the vast barren soil around her.

This is not; however, the most revolutionary character that Le Guin manages to construct. Her other novel *The Eye of the Heron* reveals an even more rebellious heroine who becomes the epitome of ultimate survival. Luz Marina, a daughter of a notorious Commander Falko, chooses the option of non-violent existence in harmony with the flows of nature turning her back on aggressive, dangerous and unjust discourse and policy of the citizen-soldiers. Luz Marina says "no" to the arranged marriage, she says "no" to the father who is controlling each her step and she finally says "no" to the prescribed social norms she is supposed to follow as a woman. From the moment she commits her first crime in the sphere of language there is no turning back just conquering new language areas that were not accessible to her in the past.

When she takes to read a book on First Aid which was forbidden for reading as all the other books, she symbolically gives herself first aid to recuperate and refresh her mind from systematic indoctrination she has been exposed to. That as well as the acquaintance with the revolutionary character Vera Adelson inspires her and gives her strength to break the walls surrounding her in her prison-like house to start existence on a different level. Neither her verbal resistance nor her concrete activities against the tyranny of her oppressors do not fail, and she manages to survive and escape the patriarchal construct to live peacefully in nature with her pacifist followers.

Her spoken acts of resistance are even fortified by her written discourse in the form of a letter which she sends to her father as a proof of her self-indulged need to abandon the dungeon of patriarchal norms, restraints and injustice, the act which disentangles her from the role of a humble daughter and transforms her into an independent woman. Following this road, Luz Marina turns from an object/victim into a creative subject who rejects conformism of society to embrace authentic existence in accordance with her own being and thus go far beyond the realm of "acceptable speech" as Buthler says (Butler 2002:21). The authoritative language that Luz Marina uses, so similar to the authoritative patriarchal discourse and yet so unconventional for one supposedly meek and calm woman, moves the boundaries for the female discourse previously unimagined to the mighty patriarchs who stay confused and caught by surprise by such outbreaks from the conventional female roles.

In Le Guin's dystopias it can be noticed that the heroines are not afraid of raising their voices in public even if such stepping out of the prescribed gender roles



brings the risk of condemnation, exile and punishment. Their speech acts are an overture to other modes of resistance pushing them to the limelight on the political stage of the mighty patriarchs. They are not invisible, pale or weak characters like most of male dystopian tradition heroines are but visionaries, revolutionists and the actors on the global scene, who undermine and usurp the political structure of the regime.

3. Conclusion

Although Atwood and Le Guin's female rebellious characters constitute the minority of female population in the novels and sometimes even seem to be too lonely in their thoughts, feelings and strivings, they unconditionally nourish their female discourse opposite to the violent, commanding and disrespecting discourse of the patriarchs. In the end, their discourse manages to reach their fellow-thinkers and believers. When these individual females resist, they become speakers for the other oppressed, manipulated and mistreated women and constitute themselves as the role-models of feminine bravery and righteousness inspiring the rest of the feminine world to rise to action. This kind of female activity was never imagined in the era of male dystopian traditionalism. What surely is a novelty in dystopian genre is the likeliness of turning the female collective into a political body which in Atwood and Le Guin's fiction proves to be standing very high chances and turns out to be possible as shown in many cases. This is what then makes them outstanding authors who themselves break the boundaries of the male dystopian tradition, showing their own subversiveness in the language of this literary form and the deeply-felt need to question gender roles in the patriarchal framework as well as the language which is constitutive of gender identity.

Both Atwood and Le Guin show that the female discourse is meant for connecting females, bonding them, making them stronger in the political sense and shaping them into real actors, who use explosive language of subversion and authenticity thus proving not to be part of the subaltern world of unbeings who are deprived of their right of speech. Relying on Fuko's idea that discourse does not exist *per se*, or in isolation, it can be stated that the female discourse in dystopias of Atwood and Le Guin is certainly not invented for the sake of being but rather for the sake of altering the reality of dystopia by reshaping it through the course of its actions.

The language that the female characters use in dystopian novels with such strong feminist connotation clearly labels these characters as subjects rather than passive objects or merely reproductive bodies easy to be manipulated, conquered and forced to speak the language that does not belong to them. In the novels of Margaret Atwood and Ursula Leguin, the female characters do not let themselves to be defined by the language of the patriarchal figures but use their bodies to defend themselves and write the language of their own which is authentic, free, and autonomous.

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Danica Milošević

MOGUĆNOSTI ŽENSKOG DISKURSA U DISTOPIJSKOM KONTEKSTU

Rezime

Ženski likovi u distopijskim romanima su često ograničeni različitim pravilima i unapred definisanim obrascima ponašanja među kojim je zabrana da javno izražavaju svoje mišljenje i koriste se političkim diskursom koji je rezervisan za muškarce. Cilj ovog rada je da pokaže primere energičnog, neočekivanog i potencijalno subverzivnog ženskog diskursa u distopijskom kontekstu, koji pojedine junakinje ne oklevaju da upotrebe kako bi ispitale vrednosti patrijarhalne kulture, čak iako ih takav napor može preobraziti u društvene izgnanike ili političke protivnike. Analizom ovih ženskih likova u distopijama Maragret Atvud i Ursule Legvin, oslanjanjem na teorijske koncepte Džudit Batler i Elen Siksu, u ovom radu ženski diskurs će biti upotrebljen da bi se ukazalo na rodne odnose, društvene uslove i političku interekciju među ženskim likovima u okvirima distopije. Cilj rada je da se naglasi nepravda koja se nanosi ženi tako što joj se onemogućava učešće u javnom diskursu unutar distopije, da bi se pokazalo kako je politički komunikativni čin žene smišljeno učinjen marginalnim kako bi se patrijarhalna društvena stabilnost održala neokrnjenom.

danicamil@yahoo.com

